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## Middle schools too disruptive for weak students, studies show

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Bridget Carter-Whitney, a Grade 7 student at Winona Drive Senior Public School, thinks there are advantages to being able to make the transition to high school in two smaller steps. But research suggests that for weak students, having to adjust to a new environment in middle school may be a factor in driving down grades.

DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

Louise Brown  
Education Reporter

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Bridget Carter-Whitney sums up the debate about middle schools in the breezy lingo of someone who goes to one.

"I feel like you're not so exposed to some of the bad stuff like drugs so early if you stay in the same school from kindergarten to Grade 8 — it's a bit more kid-ish," mused the Grade 7 student at Toronto's [Winona Drive Senior Public School](#).

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"But a middle school is funner and it's better because you make the change to high school in two small steps instead of one big one."

Yet that extra step may prove a stumbling block for weaker students, and may be one more reason why the middle school seems doomed.

As school boards across North America move to convert these hotbeds of hormones into what many see as more emotionally tempered "K-to-8s," new research shows weak students do better, especially in math, if they stay at the same elementary school right through.

The upheaval of moving to a middle school may be academically jarring to a weaker pupil.

"We're finding huge negative effects in math and reading for students at the bottom half of the achievement ladder who go to middle schools," warned [University of Toronto](#) economics professor [Elizabeth Dhuey](#). Her landmark study of 190,000 students in British Columbia, where tracking students is easier than in Ontario, found struggling Grade 7 students at a middle school scored worse on standardized math tests than their counterparts in K-to-8 schools — by 5 to 9 per cent. They also performed worse in English, and continued to lag behind in Grade 10.

"We're not sure why, but the worry is that at age 13 and 14 — often not a great time of life — to add a structural break at school can be bad for students who struggle."

Once hailed as a bridge to the independence of high school, middle schools have been falling out of favor as cash-strapped school boards with fewer students — Toronto, Ottawa, Philadelphia, New York City — began to phase them out, partly to cut costs.

Despite fierce loyalty from many who see them as a specialized oasis for the turbulent tweens, middle schools are under fresh attack in studies that question their academic benefits. A study last week from the C.D. Howe Institute showed Ontario Grade 6 students who attend middle schools score about 5 per cent lower on standardized tests than those who attend K-8 schools.

It's a trend also noticed at the [Toronto District School Board](#), which has decided to move away from middle schools (Grades 6 to 8) and junior high schools (Grades 7 and 8) where possible in the next few years.

"We know students who write the (province-wide) Grade 6 test at the same school they attended for Grade 3 do better than those who are now at a different school — especially in high-poverty areas," said superintendent of research Roula Anastasakos, although she stressed that a "great teacher" can trump almost any obstacle.

"But we do know the fewer transitions they face, the better off kids are."

The [Peel District School Board](#) is moving to a K-to-8 model for all new schools it builds. The [Durham District School Board](#) hasn't had middle schools in some 20 years.

Yet Lorraine Cowley, whose daughter Anne is in Grade 7 at Winona, believes there is value in having an entire school focused on serving this highly formative age.

"I get the feeling teachers who teach at middle schools are really committed to this age group — they're not people who'd rather be teaching kindergarten but got put there by a principal who was scrambling to fill spots."

Winona's parent council recently had a speaker on the mental-health issues facing this age group, "something we could do because all our kids are on the threshold of adolescence," said Cowley. "I'd be sorry to lose that focus."

Winona student Chantal Andrusevich believes a middle school also helps foster social skills.

"You learn how to talk to new people and be nice to them," she said, "something you haven't had to do since, well, Grade 1."

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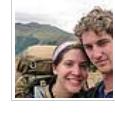
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