

EDUCATION/MIDDLE SCHOOL

# A K–8 Learning Environment Can Help Students Thrive

Students develop leaderships skills and a sense of  
responsibility

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PHOTO: courtesy St. Thomas School

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The German word kindergarten, which literally translates to “child garden,” is an apt metaphor for elementary education, where young minds are cultivated as little five-year-olds grow up to become big fifth graders. But if the early years of education are like a protected garden, transplanting students into the wilds of middle school may not be the best way to help

them thrive. A growing body of evidence indicates that keeping tweens and younger students together in a shared community provides very real advantages for both age groups.

In theory, having separate middle schools makes sense.

“It has its roots in good intentions of folks realizing that middle schoolers are at very different developmental stages than elementary school students and high schoolers,” explains Kirk Wheeler, head of school at the independent, secular St. Thomas School in Medina. “Developmentally, middle school is a little messy. You’re a little more emotional, you’re trying to find yourself in your peer group.”

At K–8 schools, or a pre-K–8 school such as St. Thomas School, the structure helps to guide students as they find a healthy place for themselves in the community.



*Students of all ages play on the playground. Photo: courtesy St. Thomas School*

“At St. Thomas School, you are now also the leaders of the school. You are the oldest students, and you have more responsibilities toward the younger students. We create an environment in which you are allowed to find your way through that quirky developmental stage, but we’re wrapping it in opportunities to be a strong leader,” says Wheeler.

Research indicates (<https://www.aera.net/Newsroom/Recent-AERA-Research/Do-Top-Dogs-Rule-in-Middle-School-Evidence-on-Bullying-Safety-and-Belonging>) that students in K–8 schools feel safer and have a stronger sense of belonging. Wheeler believes this is a result of the continuity of education provided by the K–8 configuration.

“When you arrive at middle school here, we know where you are academically, social-emotionally and we can keep building on that,” says Wheeler.

In K-8 schools, middle school teachers are familiar with students through years of shared experiences and integrated activities across grade levels. Specialists, such as physical education and foreign language teachers, have already taught students for several years, allowing for a deep understanding of each child's development. This continuity fosters a seamless transition into middle school, where students feel known and supported as they navigate these important years.

"Having it all in one school we're building on that knowledge of who each student is as an individual, which I think is really important. At a time when there's significant developmental growth, you want to know your students. You want to know when their behavior is out of character or when they're struggling with something that they normally do well with," says Wheeler.

Studies show (<https://edexcellence.net/articles/should-districts-get-rid-of-middle-schools>) students' scores in writing, social studies, math and reading are higher when they are enrolled in K–8 schools. Because teachers already know their students' learning styles and even interests, "We get to kick off September with an individualized focus with the teacher tailoring their approach to each child. We can get right to it really early, first week of school."

Of course, that kind of individualization is easier to achieve at a small school such as St. Thomas School, and even in a small school, simply throwing all ages together on one campus isn't enough to build a community.



*An older student shakes hands with a kindergarten buddy. Photo: courtesy St. Thomas School*

"By design and philosophically, our preschool through eighth is very well integrated. Both in terms of the physical building where students are, they're constantly crossing paths with each other. But also programmatically – we have programs designed where older students work with younger students," says Wheeler.

It's through those programmatic connections that older students learn how to see themselves as leaders and develop a sense of responsibility toward the smaller students. Middle school students are paired with kindergarten and first grade students as reading and writing buddies, and work with classrooms of younger kids on projects and events.

"We have a leadership lab in middle school that actually teaches our middle schoolers about child development, so they have a better understanding of how a six-year-old sees the world. Then they go into those classrooms, and they observe, and actually teach lessons to the younger children. That helps those middle schoolers to go, 'Oh. I'm a role model. My five-year-old buddy looks up to me and is watching how I behave,'" says Wheeler.

Teachers coach students through these activities. Wheeler laughs, "Because they are interacting across grade levels, they have a genuine care for each other. They know each other so a middle schooler isn't just experiencing a random five-year-old. They develop relationships with each other. And you know, kids really are good. If you set them up for success and help them know how to interact, they take really good care of each other."

For the younger students, having a buddy among the big kids helps them feel known and feel that they are an important part of a larger community.

"It creates a sense of safety and security and gives them role models in terms of how they want to be. They see these older students presenting, they see them in musicals, involved in athletics, and I think it helps our younger students to say, 'I could be doing that. I want to be like that sixth grader,'" says Wheeler.

Following the example of their middle school role models, St. Thomas School's kindergarteners stand in front of the whole school to ring the bell calling everyone to attention at morning meeting. And they continue to grow in the community until they find themselves in the position of responsibility they once looked up to.

At least one study indicates that K-8 students make a smoother [transition to high school \(https://educationnorthwest.org/insights/what-research-says-about-k-8-versus-middle-school-grade-configurations\)](https://educationnorthwest.org/insights/what-research-says-about-k-8-versus-middle-school-grade-configurations) than students from separated middle schools. Wheeler's experience bears that out.

"I've learned that the preschool through eight model really sets up our students well for high school. They go to bigger schools and yet when they land there, they have a voice, they are confident leaders, they are well prepared academically."

When students are branching out into the world, it helps if they've already grown deep roots.

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