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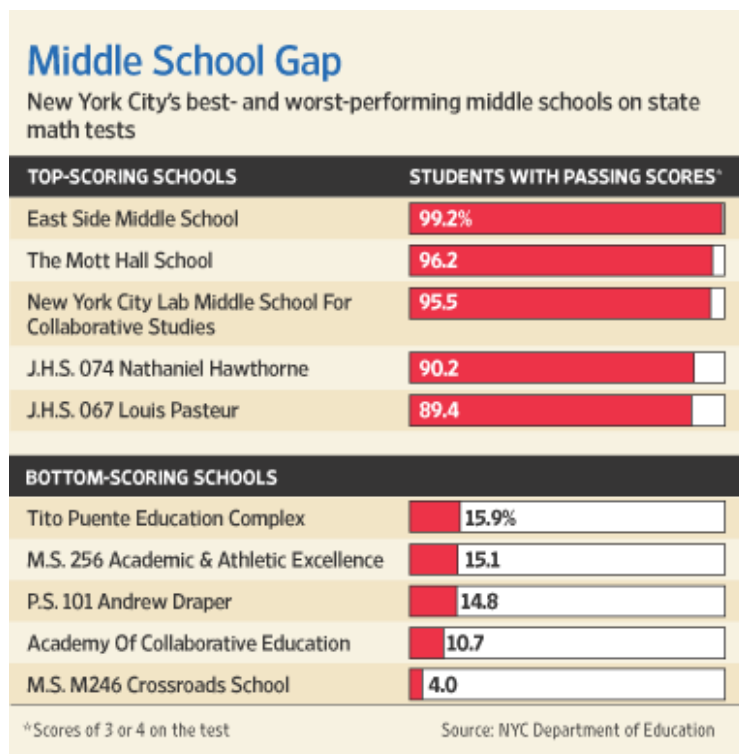
NY SCHOOLS | SEPTEMBER 1, 2010

# Middle Schools Fail Kids, Study Says

By SHELLY BANJO

New York City's standalone middle schools do a worse job educating students than schools that offer kindergarten through eighth grade under one roof, according to a new study to be released Wednesday by researchers at Columbia University.

On average, children who move up to middle school from a traditional city elementary school, which typically goes up to fifth grade, score about seven percentiles lower on standardized math tests in eighth grade than those who attend a K-8 school, says Jonah Rockoff, an associate professor at the Columbia Graduate School of Business who co-authored the study.



The disparity stems from the toll that changing to a new school takes on adolescents and differences in the sizes of grades, the study says. Typically, K-8 schools can fit fewer children in each grade than standalone middle schools.

"What we found bolsters the case for middle-school reform," says Mr. Rockoff, noting that there aren't significant differences in financial resources or single class sizes between the two types of schools. Standalone "middle schools, where kids are educated in larger groups, are not the best way to educate students in New York City."

The research culls data for city school children who started in grades three through eight during the 1998-99 school year and tracks them through the 2007-2008 school year, comparing test scores, attendance rates and parent evaluations. Of the student sample, 15,000 students

attended a K-8 school versus 177,000 who attended a standalone middle school.

Fewer children attend K-8 schools than standalone middle schools: Of New York City's total 1,680 schools, there are 275 standalone public middle schools versus 128 K-8 public schools, excluding charter schools.

In the year when students move to a middle school or junior high, the data show student achievement falls

substantially in both math and English, relative to that of their counterparts who continue to attend a K-8 elementary school. However, instead of bouncing back after an initial transition year, achievement continues to decline throughout middle school.

New York City school officials say the study backs up attempts to bolster the K-8 model. "The Columbia study highlights some of the important challenges facing standalone middle schools, though we don't support its proposal to 'do away' with middle schools altogether," Shael Suransky, the New York City Department of Education's deputy chancellor for performance and accountability, said in an email. "Since 2002, we've increased the number of K-8 schools by nearly 85 percent, while committing ourselves to a small school strategy—both approaches strongly endorsed by this study."

Principals and education experts maintain that the problem has less to do with the number of grades and more to do with how a school is organized.

"The problem of the old model of middle schools is that you treat kids like high-schoolers and kids get lost," says Clara Hemphill, who wrote a guidebook to city middle schools. She compared a good organizational structure to hospital care: "In elementary school, children need the bedside manner of a general practitioner. In high school, you want the specialization of a surgeon. In middle school, you want the combination of the two."

Middle schools are trying to ease the transition. Last year, East Side Middle School, which houses grades six through eight on the Upper East Side, began requiring incoming sixth graders to eat lunch in the school's cafeteria during the month of September, instead of allowing them to go outside or off campus.

"We essentially forced them to sit next to each other and make friends, reducing a lot of anxiety of choosing which friends to go out to lunch with," says David Getz, the principal of the school, which earned the highest math scores among standalone middle schools. "This is just one thing we do. Transition is dramatic; we spend the whole year working on it."

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