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Providence experimenting with 14-year schools

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Three schools here are about to embark on a first-of-its kind experiment - to create an urban campus where children enter as 4-year-olds and graduate 14 years later.

The impetus for the shift was demographic: the bulge in middle- and high-school enrollment. But Fran Rotella, principal of one of the schools, saw this as an opportunity to try something new.

"The philosophy is to create a community where children enter in pre-K and leave (14) years later," said Rotella. "The hope is that we can create the same kind of warm relationships in middle and high school that we have here."

Nationally, the move to create smaller, more personal learning environments has taken off in recent years, but it has focused mostly on breaking sprawling, factorylike high schools into more manageable pieces.

A more popular model than K-12 is the K-8 school, something that is gaining popularity in Chicago, Cleveland and New York. Although the research is scant, a couple of studies have suggested that K-8 schools improve academic performance, reduce discipline problems and enhance parent involvement.

But the trend has its share of skeptics, including Kathy Christie, vice president of the Education Commission of the States Clearinghouse, a national research organization based in Denver.

"The evidence isn't strong to warrant moving to a K-8 model," she said. "The major reason districts are doing this is because they're frustrated with middle-school performance."

A stubborn problem

Middle-school performance has been a particularly stubborn problem in Providence, where all nine middle schools are classified by the state as low-performing, nonimproving schools.

Schools have been struggling to figure out how to help students bridge the gap between cozy elementary schools, where children spend the entire day with one teacher, and large, often impersonal middle schools, where students switch classes every 50 minutes. The K-12 model may be one way to smooth that often-rocky transition.

Why ask children to change schools at a time when they are going through the considerable physical and emotional upheaval associated with puberty?

Rotella said she has seen how intimidating it is for sixth-graders to share the hallways with their much bigger schoolmates. It's not uncommon, she said, for one of her former students to rush back into the building because an older student is bothering him.

"In sixth grade, they're still little kids," she said. "We'd like to keep these kids under our wing a little longer. They need it."

Although the principals and staff haven't figured out all the details, she envisions a seamless system in which teachers from each grade level routinely collaborate on everything from curriculum to assessments. She can imagine offering workshops in, for example, adolescent psychology, for middle- and high-school teachers.

And during a period of diminished resources, Rotella hopes this model will enable all three "schools" to share guidance counselors and art and music teachers.

A K-12 campus, she said, will give older students a chance to mentor younger schoolmates. High-school students

might be asked to read to younger students after school. Building relationships between younger and older students might be a way to reduce the teasing that takes place between sixth-graders and eighth-graders.

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