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***FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION OF THE
K-8 CENTERS PROGRAM***

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A K-8 Center combines grades in one single location that are usually assigned to separate elementary and middle schools. In recent years many school districts throughout the country have changed middle school grade configurations in part because research has shown that K-8 schools have a beneficial effect on student performance. In 1998, The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida approved a pilot program to adopt the K-8 Centers model. Miami-Dade County Public Schools currently operates seven K-8 Centers.

An evaluation of the K-8 Centers Model was requested by Curriculum Support and Innovative Programs to examine student performance and to gauge the reactions of concerned parties to the program. In 2000, the results of the initial phase of the evaluation were reported to the School Board. The results indicated that after one year of K-8 Center attendance: 1) K-8 students exhibited better school performance than students attending traditional middle schools and, 2) students, parents and school personnel held favorable attitudes toward the K-8 Centers.

The present report constitutes the second phase of the K-8 Centers Evaluation. A total of 362 K-8 students and 4,112 comparison students attending traditional middle schools were tracked from the 6th grade through the 9th grade. The objective of the evaluation was to examine whether the two groups differed in school performance and to see whether any effects of attending a K-8 Center were carried over into high school. The areas of school performance explored were: 1) reading and mathematics, as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test, 2) attendance and 3) discipline, as measured by school suspensions. The results are as follow:

- ? K-8 students exhibit greater gains in mathematics scores throughout the middle school years than Comparison students and the difference carries over into high school.
- ? K-8 students exhibit greater gains in reading performance during the first two years of middle school than Comparison students, but the effect does not carry over into high school.
- ? K-8 students exhibit a more positive change in attendance than Comparison students, an effect which carries over into high school.
- ? K-8 students' increase in the number of outdoor suspensions received is less than that of Comparison students, an effect which carries over into high school.

K-8 students draw the most benefit from attending K-8 Centers during the first two years of middle school. During subsequent years, in the 8th and 9th grades, the school performance gains made by K-8 students, relative to students attending traditional middle schools, tend to diminish but, in most cases, do not disappear. In summary, the present evaluation confirms the positive short-term effects of the K-8 Centers. Furthermore, the results establish that the K-8 Centers can have a positive, long-term academic effect on students' school performance.

On the basis of the present findings the following recommendations are made:

1. Consider the expansion of K-8 Centers to a wider range of schools in the district.
2. Evaluate the K-8 Centers Model after it has been in operation for an additional number of years.

INTRODUCTION

A K-8 Center combines grades in one single location or school that are usually assigned to a separate elementary (K-5) and middle school (6-8). In 1998, The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida approved a pilot program to introduce to the District the concept of K-8 Centers. Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) initiated two K-8 Centers during the 1998-99 school year. Three additional K-8 Centers opened the following year in 1999-2000. In 2001-02, two additional K-8 centers were opened.

In recent years many large and small school districts have moved to adopt the K-8 Center Model. The school systems in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Baltimore and Oklahoma City, to name a few, have changed, or are in the process of changing, all or most of their middle schools to the K-8 Model. Other school districts, such as Chicago, have always used the K-8 Model. Even so, most schools in the country (89%) continue to serve students through grades 5 or 6, while only a small percentage of schools (11%) top out at grade 8, according to 1999-2000 school year data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Pardini, 2002).

School districts' motivation to change grade configurations at the middle school level is fueled in part by research showing the K-8 Model as having beneficial effects. In Philadelphia, a district study found 8th graders in K-8 schools scoring significantly higher than those in middle schools on standardized achievement tests, even after controlling for poverty and race (Offenberg, 2001). In Connecticut, a study found that 6th graders at K-8 and K-6 schools made greater gains on the state achievement test than 6th grade students moving to a middle school (Tucker & Andrada, 1997). Some researchers have found that there is a detrimental effect on student performance when students make the transition from one school to the next, regardless of grade level (Alspaugh, 1999). Educators and researchers also believe that the beneficial effects of K-8 schools can be attributed to smaller student populations at the schools and to staff being more familiar with students and their parents, as compared to traditional middle schools. Overall, reports from districts utilizing K-8 Centers indicate that K-8 Centers help improve student performance in the areas of academic achievement, attendance and discipline (Pardini, 2002).

During the first year that the initial five MDCPS K-8 Centers were operational, a preliminary study was conducted by the Office of Evaluation and Research to examine the effects of K-8 Centers on student performance. The results of that investigation, which were presented to the Board in December 2000, were supportive of previous research findings in the literature. In the study, the performance of K-8 students attending 6th grade during the 1999-2000 school year were compared to that of students attending 6th grade at nearby middle schools. Parents, teachers and principals were surveyed and the climate survey results of K-8 and regular middle school students were contrasted. After one year of exposure to the K-8 Centers model, results show K-8 students academically outperforming comparable students attending traditional middle schools. K-8 students also had better attendance and fewer outdoor suspensions. Survey results indicated that the vast majority of the parents of K-8 students favored the K-8 Centers over the traditional middle schools. Furthermore, students and school personnel also expressed favorable opinions of the K-8 Centers (Abella, 2000).

The initial phase of the K-8 Centers evaluation was requested by Curriculum Support and Innovative Programs to investigate the Centers' short term effect on student performance and also to gauge the reactions of concerned parties, such as staff, students and parents, to the program. The present report constitutes the second phase of the K-8 Centers Evaluation. The second phase of the K-8 evaluation represents the ultimate objective of the evaluation request, which is to track K-8 students to high school to examine the long term effects of the K-8 Centers on student performance. Specifically, this evaluation follows 6th graders who attended K-8 and neighboring schools during the 1999-2000 school year and who in 2002-03 completed the 9th grade. The evaluation questions explored in this study are the following:

Evaluation Question 1. How does the academic performance of K-8 students compare to that of students who attend traditional middle schools once they reach high school?

Evaluation Question 2. How does the attendance of K-8 students compare to that of students who attend traditional middle schools once they reach high school?

Evaluation Question 3. How does the disciplinary behavior of K-8 students compare to that of students who attend traditional middle schools once they reach high school?

EVALUATION DESIGN

K-8 Student Selection. Students attending 5th grade at any of the initial five K-8 Centers during the 1998-1999 school year were targeted for inclusion in the evaluation. From these, only students enrolled consecutively at the same K-8 school in the 5th through 8th grades were selected for inclusion in the K-8 sample. K-8 students were selected in the 5th grade to ensure that they had not changed schools prior to entering the 6th grade, as students entering traditional middle schools would have done. To facilitate assessing testing gains, students who had been retained during the period being assessed, 1999-2000 through 2002-2003, were not included in the sample. Therefore, all students in the K-8 sample were in 9th grade, attending a senior high school, during the 2002-2003 school year. A total of 362 students comprise the K-8 sample. Students enrolled in the two newest District K-8 schools, which began operation in 2001-02 with a 6th grade class, have not yet reached senior high school and therefore are not included in the study.

Comparison Schools/Student Selection. Each K-8 Center was paired with three middle schools. The comparison schools selected were those geographically closest to the K-8 schools from among District middle schools in the same feeder pattern and usually within three miles of the K-8 Center. The comparison schools represent the middle schools that the K-8 students would have attended had they gone to a traditional middle school. In total 15 traditional middle schools were selected as comparison schools for the K-8 Centers. The K-8 Centers and the corresponding comparison middle schools are listed in Table 1.

Students enrolled in 6th grade at any of the 15 Comparison Schools during the 1999-2000 school year were targeted for inclusion in the evaluation. From this group, students enrolled consecutively at the same middle school in the 6th through 8th grades were selected for inclusion in the Student Comparison sample. Comparison students also had to have attended MDCPS during 1998-99, while in the 5th grade. Comparison students who had been retained during the period being assessed, 1999-2000 through 2002-2003, were not included in the sample. Therefore, all students in the Comparison Sample were in 9th grade, attending a senior high school, during the 2002-2003 school year. A total of 4,114 students comprise the Comparison Sample.

TABLE 1. Middle Schools Selected to Compare with K-8 Schools

K-8 School	Comparison Sample Middle Schools		
Everglades	Rockway	W. Miami	R. Dario
Key Biscayne	Ponce de Leon	Shenandoah	G. Carver
Leisure City	Campbell Drive	Redland	Homestead
M.A. Milam	J. Marti	Palm Springs	Hialeah
J. S. Roberts	W.R. Thomas	Mc. Millan	Hammocks

Characteristics of the K-8 and Comparison Students Samples. Students attending K-8 Centers and Comparison middle schools come from the same neighborhoods therefore it is not surprising that they are similar in their background characteristics and academic performance. As shown in Table 2, the same percentage of K-8 Center students and comparison students receive free or reduced lunches (F/R Lunch), which is considered a general measure of socioeconomic status. The two groups are also similar in ethnicity. The K-8 Center sample had slightly larger percentages of students classified as either needing exceptional student education (ESE) or as limited English proficient (LEP).

TABLE 2. Characteristics of K-8 and Comparison Students, in Percentages

	Ethnicity				F/R Lunch	ESE	LEP
	Black	Hisp.	White	Other	Yes	Yes	Yes
K-8 Centers	5	85	9	1	64	18	11
Comparison	9	78	11	2	64	13	8

* All classifications and figures as of Fall 1999 (6th grade). ESE excludes Gifted students. K-8 Centers, n =362 and Comparison Sample, n = 4,114 students.

As shown in Table 3, the two groups of students had identical mean scale scores on the reading and mathematics sections of the Stanford Achievement Test administered while they were in the 5th grade. The only students included in this analysis are those who had complete test scores for all evaluation years, grades 6 through 9. All analyses of test performance will be conducted on this subset of the sample.

TABLE 3. Mean 1999 Stanford Achievement Test Scale Scores*

	Reading Comprehension	Mathematics Computations
K-8 Center Students	643	665
Comparison Students	643	665

* NRT administered in Spring of 1999 (5th grade). K-8 Centers, n =251 and Comparison Sample, n = 3,016 students.

Data Collection. All student data and information was collected from the MDCPS student data base. In addition to demographic and test data, records concerning student attendance and disciplinary behavior was also collected for each year of the evaluation period, grades 6 through 9. It should be noted that by the time the students reached 9th grade, at least one Comparison student was enrolled in every high school in the District. K-8 students were enrolled in 25 different high schools, about two-thirds of the high schools in the District.

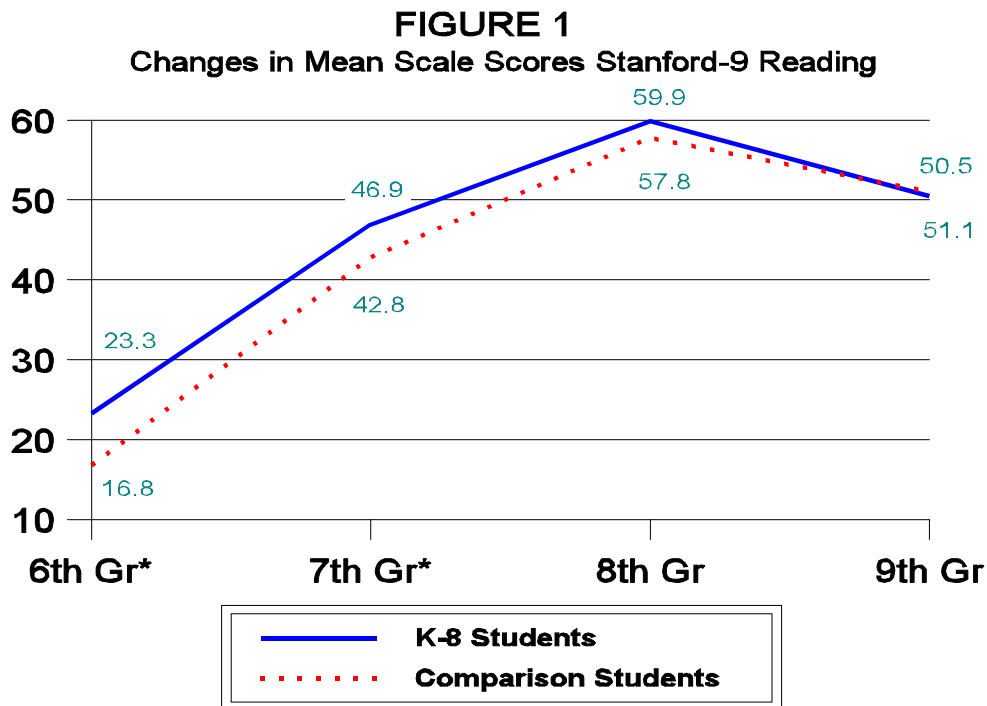
RESULTS

Evaluation Question 1. How does the academic performance of K-8 students compare to that of students who attend traditional middle schools once they reach high school?

Reading Comprehension. Figure 1 displays the cumulative changes in reading performance, relative to 5th grade, for every middle school year, and through the first year of high school, for both the K-8 and Comparison groups. For example, the 9th grade figures represent the groups' changes in mean scale scores on the Reading Comprehension component of the Stanford 9 since the fifth grade.

In grade 6, the first year of middle school, K-8 students improved their reading comprehension scale scores an average of 23 points while Comparison students improved their scores approximately 17 points. The reading gains of the two groups at the end of one year of middle school attendance proved to be significantly different when statistically tested (independent samples t-test, 2-tailed).

By grade 7, after two years of attending middle school grades, K-8 students had improved their reading comprehension scores close to 47 points. The Comparison students had improved their scores approximately 43 points since the 5th grade. The reading gains of the two groups at the end of grade 7 also proved to be significantly different, with K-8 students outperforming the Comparison group.



Note. *6th grade, $p < .001$. * 7th grade, $p < .01$.

By grade 8, the differences in the mean scores of the two groups narrowed. At that point, K-8 reading scores had increased by 60 points while the Comparison group had improved 58 points. The difference in gain scores through grade 8 was not statistically significant.

In 9th grade, the first year of high school, the scores converged with both groups showing a change in their mean scale scores of approximately 51 points. The reading scores of both groups were lower as compared to 8th grade. The mean reading scale score of K-8 students decreased approximately 9 points between the 8th and 9th grades, while the score of Comparison students decreased by roughly 7 points.

Summary. Both K-8 and Comparison students began the 6th grade with identical Stanford reading comprehension mean scale scores (643). The two groups still had identical reading scores (694) upon reaching the 9th grade (Appendix A1). But, through the first two years of middle school, K-8 student showed greater improvement in reading scores than their student counterparts attending traditional middle schools. It is possible to speculate that traditional middle school students are adversely affected by the physical transition from elementary to middle school but that they eventually catch up to the K-8 students in reading as they acclimate to their new surroundings .

It does appear, as suggested by researchers, that the act of making the transition from one school building/level to another has an adverse effect on the reading performance of students. For example, the reading performance of both K-8 and Comparison students seemed to be adversely affected by the transition from middle school to senior high school, with the reading scores of both groups declining upon making the transition.

Mathematics. Figure 2 displays cumulative changes in Stanford mathematics mean scale scores, relative to 5th grade, for every middle school year, and through the first year of high school, for both K-8 and Comparison students. As can be seen, in grade 6, the first year of middle school, both K-8 and Comparison students exhibited decreases in their mathematics test scores. After one year, the mathematics scores of K-8 students decreased approximately 3 points while the scores of Comparison students decreased close to 10 points. The decrease in the mean scale score of the Comparison group at the end of one year of middle school attendance proved to be greater, at a statistically significant level, than that of K-8 students. That is, the mathematics skills of K-8 students did not decline as much after one year of K-8 Center attendance as did those of the Comparison students.

By grade 7, after two years of middle school, K-8 students had improved their mathematics mean scale scores by about 20 points while Comparison students improved their scores approximately 15 points. The difference in mathematics gains for the two groups at the end of grade 7 proved to be statistically significant, with the K-8 group outperforming the Comparison group.

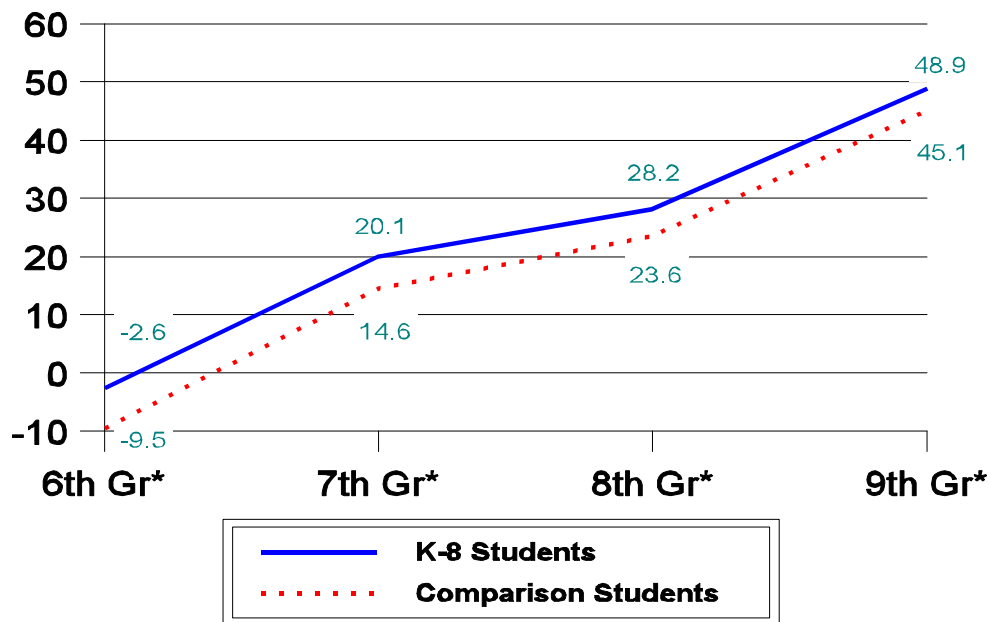
By grade 8, K-8 students had improved their math scores by approximately 28 points and the Comparison group by roughly 24 points. The difference in math gains between the two groups in grade 8 was statistically significant. Therefore, after three years of middle school, K-8 students exhibited greater gains in math performance than students in the comparison group.

Once students reached the 9th grade, upon making the transition to senior high school, the difference in math gains made by the two groups diminished but did not disappear. By the 9th grade, K-8 students' math scores had improved by approximately 49 points while Comparison students improved 45 points. The difference in math gains made by the two groups by the 9th grade approached statistical significance. Based on the trend of results, it is possible to conclude that K-8 students maintain a higher level of math performance, relative to the comparison group, once they reach high school.

Summary. As was the case with reading comprehension scores, K-8 and Comparison students began the 6th grade with identical mean scale scores in the Stanford 9 mathematics component of the test (665). By the time they reach 9th grade, K-8 students had a higher mean scale score in math (714) than Comparison students (710). It was also observed that K-8 students significantly outperformed comparison students in math throughout the three years of middle school (Appendix A2).

The math and reading comprehension results are similar in that K-8 students outperform Comparison students most decidedly in the 6th grade, with differences between the groups steadily declining in the grades that follow. Nevertheless, unlike the reading results, K-8 students continue to outperform Comparison students after the 7th grade, into the 8th and 9th grades. Overall, K-8 students showed greater improvement in math than similar students attending traditional middle schools. Additionally, the difference in math performance between the two groups carried over into senior high school.

FIGURE 2
Changes in Mean Scale Scores Stanford-9 Mathematics



Note. *6th grade, $p < .001$. * 7th grade, $p < .01$. *8th grade $p < .05$. *9th grade $p < .07$.

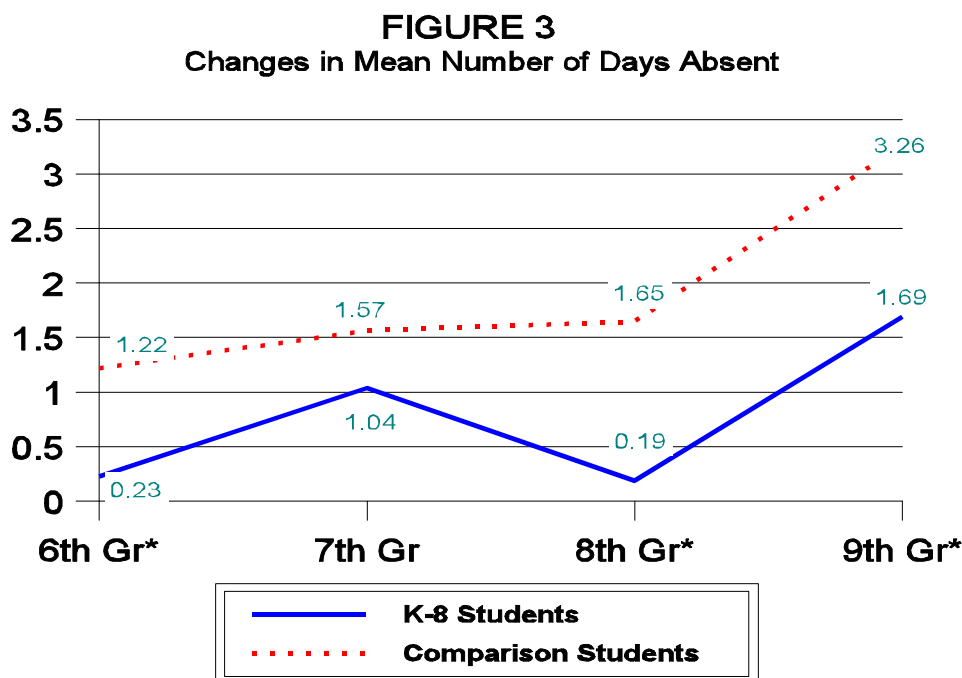
Evaluation Question 2. How does the attendance of K-8 students compare to that of students who attend traditional middle schools once they reach high school?

Figure 3 displays the cumulative changes in the mean number of annual absences per student, relative to 5th grade, for every middle school year, and through the first year of high school, for both the K-8 and Comparison groups. For example, the 9th grade figures represent the increase in the mean number of absences since the 5th grade.

In grade 6, the K-8 group increased their absences a marginal amount, 1/4 of a day, while the number of absences of the Comparison group increased by more than 1 day. The difference in the groups' changes in attendance was statistically significant.

By grade 7, after two years of middle school, the K-8 group had increased their mean absences by approximately 1 day while the Comparison group increased their mean absences by about 1 1/2 days. The two groups did not differ significantly in the 7th grade with regard to changes in attendance.

By grade 8, after three years attending middle school, K-8 students had increased their mean absences by only 1/5 of a day while Comparison students had increased their absences by over 1 1/2 days. During the 8th grade, the mean number of absences of K-8 students actually declined to a level similar to that observed in 5th grade. Comparison students' mean absences, on the other hand, continued to increase. Therefore, by the end of middle school, the change in the K-8 students' attendance was more favorable than that of Comparison students.



Note. *6th grade, $p < .005$. * 8th grade, $p < .001$. *9th grade $p < .001$.

In grade 9, in the first year of high school, comparison students had increased their mean number of absences, relative to the 5th grade, by about 1 ½ days. The Comparison group, at this point in time, had increased their mean number of absences by approximately 3 ¼ days. The changes in absentee rates of the two groups differed at a statistically significant level.

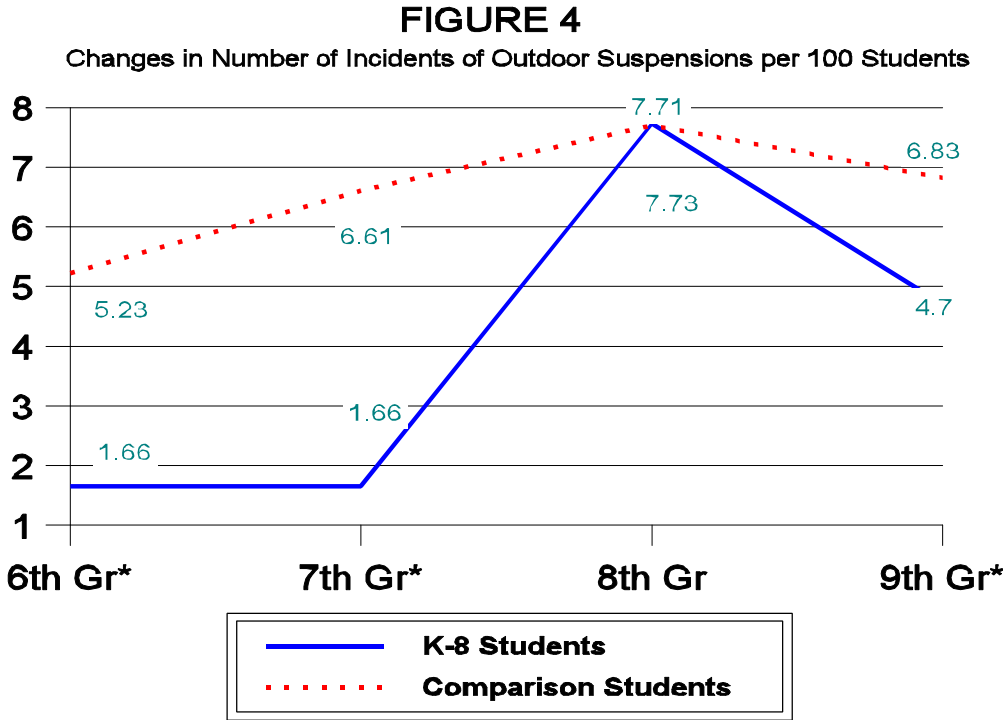
Summary. A look at the absentee rates across a 4 year period shows that K-8 students are less likely than Comparison students to increase their level of absenteeism. In 5th grade, the average number of absences of K-8 students was a fraction over 7 days (7.3) while Comparison students had an average absentee rate of a little under 7 days (6.7). By the time they reached 9th grade K-8 students had an absentee rate of 9 days (9.0) while Comparison students had one of almost 10 days (9.9). Overall the results show that, even though attendance tends to decline as student age, the attendance of K-8 students declines at a significantly slower rate than that of Comparison students. Additionally, the effect carries over into senior high school.

Evaluation Question 3. How does the disciplinary behavior of K-8 students compare to that of students who attend traditional middle schools once they reach high school?

Figure 4 displays the cumulative changes in the number of incidents of outdoor suspensions per 100 students, relative to 5th grade, for every middle school year, and through the first year of high school, for both the K-8 and Comparison groups. For example, the 9th grade figures represent the increase in the number of incidents of outdoor suspensions since the 5th grade.

In grade 6, K-8 students exhibited an increase of less than 2 incidents of outdoor suspensions per 100 students. At the same time, the annual outdoor suspension rate of the Comparison students increased by a little more than 5 incidents per 100 students. That is, for every 100 students there was an increase of either 2 or 5 suspension incidents, depending on which of the two groups is considered, beyond the rate that existed in 5th grade. The difference in the groups' changes in suspension rates was statistically significant, with the Comparison group having the higher increase in suspensions.

In grade 7, after two years of middle school, the K-8 group maintained their increase in outdoor suspensions to less than 2 while the Comparison group further increased their number of outdoor suspensions to approximately 7. A statistical test showed that the two groups differed significantly in the 7th grade with regard to changes in suspension rates.



Note. *6th grade, p < .001. *7th grade, p < .001. *9th grade, p < .09

In the 8th grade, the change in the number of incidents of outdoor suspension were similar for both groups. At that point, the outdoor suspension rate had increased for both groups by approximately 8 outdoor suspensions, relative to the 5th grade totals. The groups' changes did not differ at a statistically significant level.

In 9th grade, upon reaching senior high, the changes in outdoor suspension rates of both groups declined relative to the 8th grade. That is, students were less likely to receive an outdoor suspension in 9th grade than in the 8th grade. By the time they reached 9th grade, the number of incidents of outdoor suspension for K-8 students had risen by about 5 over what existed in the 5th grade. In the 9th grade, the Comparison group exhibited an increased of approximately 7 incidents of outdoor suspensions. A contrast of the groups' changes approached statistical significance. The difference in the groups', changes in suspensions rates did have practical significance, since in the 9th grade Comparison students were on average suspended 2 more times per year, per 100 students, as compared to K-8 students.

Summary. The results show that in grade 5, both the K-8 (1.4) and the Comparison group (0.8) received an average of about 1 outdoor suspension per 100 students. By the time the students reached 9th grade, the K-8 group had increased their suspension rate to approximately 6 (6.1) and the Comparison group to about 8 (7.7). As was the case in previous findings, the difference in suspension rates between the two groups is greatest in the 6th and 7th grades and diminishes in subsequent grades. Overall the results show that, even though the outdoor suspension rates tend to increase as the students age, the suspension rates of K-8 students increase at a significantly slower rate than that of Comparison students. The effect appears to carry over into senior high school.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study tracked students in K-8 Centers and compared their school performance to that of students who had attended traditional middle schools. The chosen students in both groups, K-8 and Comparison, attended only one school throughout the middle school years. Therefore, the students' 9th grade performance can be attributed to attending a specific type of middle school. The traditional middle schools attended by comparison students were the same ones that K-8 students would have attended had the K-8 Centers not been in existence. Probably for this reason, the two student groups were found to be similar in demographic makeup and school performance at the outset of data collection.

The objective of the evaluation was to compare the groups' school performance just prior to beginning middle school, i.e., 5th grade, to their school performance upon reaching high school, i.e., 9th grade; more specifically, to examine whether the two groups differed in school performance across the time period in question, the middle school years, and to see whether the effects carried over into high school. The areas of school performance explored were: 1) academic achievement, as measured by reading and mathematics standardized achievement tests, 2) attendance, assessed by the number of annual absences from school, and 3) discipline, measured by the number of times students were suspended from school.

The results show that K-8 students made greater gains in school performance than similar students attending traditional middle schools. Specifically, K-8 students exhibited greater gains in mathematics scores throughout the middle school years and the effect carried over into high school. Additionally, K-8 students showed better attendance and disciplinary behavior, as compared to Comparison students, an effect which also carried over into senior high. The one area of school performance where the groups' progress was similar was in reading. K-8 students did outperform Comparison students in reading performance during the first two years of middle school, but the effect did not carry over into high school. Therefore, it seems that K-8 students draw the most benefit from attending K-8 Centers during the first two years of middle school. During subsequent years, in the 8th and 9th grades, the school performance gains made by K-8 students, relative to students attending traditional middle school, diminish but, in most cases, do not disappear.

The above results address two general questions associated with the K-8 model, which are: 1) will the model have beneficial effects, and 2) will the effects be long lasting. An argument can be made that students attending traditional middle schools have an advantage upon reaching high school because they have previously changed schools, from elementary to middle school, and also because they have been exposed to more complex middle school environments, such as are found in traditional middle schools. On this basis, one could expect traditional middle school students to make the transition from middle to senior high school with greater ease than K-8 students, which in turn would be reflected in their school performance. The results indicate that this is not the case. The school performance of K-8 students does not seem to be disproportionately affected when making the transition from middle to senior high school. On the other hand, the transition from elementary to middle school does appear to have negative consequences for students attending traditional middle schools. K-8 students seem to benefit from not having to make this transition. That is, they benefit by staying in the familiar school environment of the K-8 Centers. Furthermore, the relative gains in school performance that K-8 students make early on in the middle school years are, for the most part, carried over into high school.

In summary, a previous evaluation had shown that K-8 Centers produce significant short-term academic benefits (Abella, 2000). The present evaluation confirms the short-term effects of the Centers and establishes that K-8 Centers produce long-term positive academic effects as well. In conjunction the evaluations of the K-8 Centers have revealed that K-8 Centers generally exert a positive influence on student performance. Additionally, the evaluation results have shown the K-8 Centers to be favored by parents and staff. Nevertheless, the evaluations' findings should be interpreted in light of their limitations. At the present time, the number of K-8 Centers operating are few as are the number of students who have been fully exposed to them. Additionally, the K-8 Centers currently in existence reside in academically average to above average schools. Finally, the concept of the K-8 Centers is new and the schools have not been in operation for a long time. Therefore, it would be interesting to know whether K-8 Centers can exhibit positive academic effects when taking into account: a) greater numbers of students, b) lower performing schools, and c) Centers that have been in operation for an extended number of years.

On the basis of the present findings the following recommendations are made:

1. Consider the expansion of K-8 Centers to a wider range of schools in the district.
2. Evaluate the K-8 Centers Model after it has been in operation for an additional number of years.

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FIGURE A1
Mean Scale Scores Stanford-9 Reading

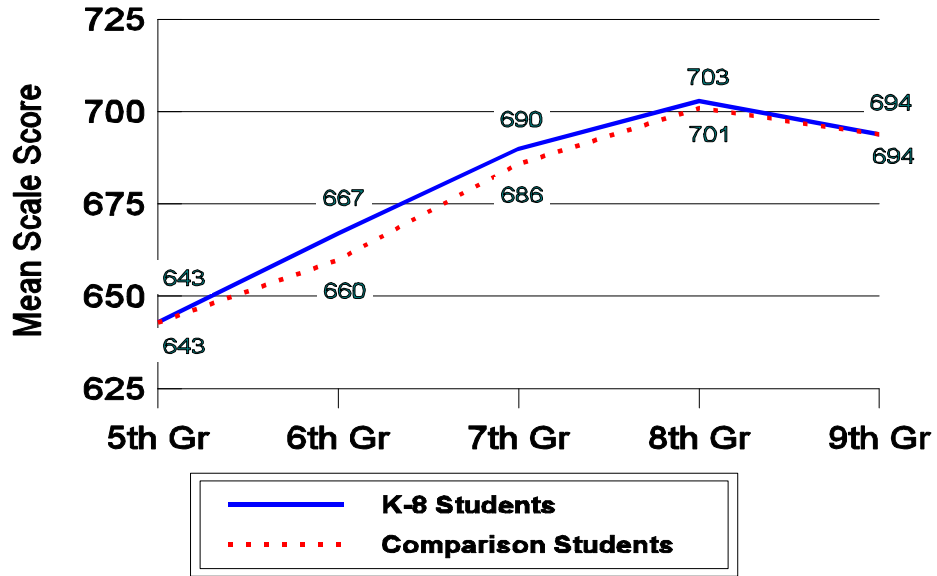


FIGURE A2
Mean Scale Scores Stanford-9 Mathematics

