**In the Middle**

Kennedy Frank, 11, goes to Humboldt Park K-8 School, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Humboldt Park is one of the 54 kindergarten through eighth grade schools in the area. The school is part of a growing movement to change the way kids ages 10-15 are educated. More and more educators are turning away from middle schools for grades 6-8 in favor of k-8 schools.

**Learning from the Past**

Middle schools were created in the 1970s to fix flaws in traditional junior high schools, which housed grades seven through nine. Middle schools were supposed to ease kids into the rigors of high school with a curriculum tailored to fit their changing physical and emotional lives. The middle school model added sixth-graders, in part to help ease overcrowding in elementary schools.

Recent studies suggest that middle schools aren’t faring any better than junior highs were. Psychologist Janna Juvonen says that sixth grade is a poor time to switch schools. Kids’ minds and bodies are going through so many changes that they need “more stability in terms of relationships with teachers and their peers.”

The move to middle school also seems to have an effect on classroom performance. Between 1999 and 2004, the nation’s elementary school students saw increased test scores in reading and math. Middle school students make smaller gains in math but made no progress in reading. And in New York State, grade-by-grade testing in 2006 showed that students’ reading scores dropped between the fifth and sixth grades.

Still, some argue that test scores can’t tell the whole story. Barry Fein, principal of Seth Low Intermediate School in New York City, says that they move from elementary to middle school is “a very hard transition.” But the adjustment is well worth it, he adds, because middle schools offer students more classes, team sports, and clubs.

**No Easy Answers**

Education officials, teachers, and students have their reasons for favoring one kind of school over the other. But all agree that having the best-possible learning environment for each kid is most important.

In California’s Capistrano Unified School District, parents and students now have the option of choosing either a K-8 school or a middle school. “K-8 isn’t a (magic) bullet,” says Lois Anderson, a Capistrano assistant superintendent. “It won’t make other challenges go away.”