

# Staying at elementary school for longer associated with higher student attainment

September 20 2019

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A new study has discovered that U.S. students achieve better results in reading and mathematics tests when they stay in elementary school for grades six (age 11–12) and seven (age 12–13), rather than transfer to

middle school. In contrast, students in grade eight (age 13–14) achieve better results in middle school than high school.

"The current study adds to the growing body of research that experiencing a [school](#) transition during [early adolescence](#) is associated with detrimental outcomes," said lead researcher Marisa Malone from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Malone and her colleagues report their findings in *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*.

In the U.S., there are various ways that students can transfer between schools as they age, with the span of grades covered by different schools known as grade configuration. One of the most common configurations is to go to [elementary school](#) up to grade five, and then to [middle school](#) from grades six to eight, and then to [high school](#) from grade nine onwards. But several studies have found that academic motivation and achievement tend to fall in middle school, with sixth-grade students in middle schools more likely to exhibit lower academic competency, more disciplinary problems and poorer attendance than those who stay in elementary schools.

Most of these studies focused on [student performance](#), but to gain a slightly [different perspective](#) on the issue, Malone and her colleagues decided to focus on school performance. This also allowed them to take account of various school-level factors that can affect academic performance, including school size, racial composition, socioeconomic status, and whether the school is in an urban, suburban or rural location. They also considered sixth, seventh and eighth grade students, whereas most studies only focus on sixth and seventh grade students.

They conducted their study on 573 public schools in Virginia, which adopts various grade configurations. Most students transfer to middle school for grades six, seven and eight, but in some areas, students stay in elementary school until grade six or seven and then transfer straight to

high school, missing out middle school.

All schools in Virginia conduct mandatory tests of reading and mathematics from grade three onwards. Malone and her colleagues recorded the pass rates for these tests in [grades](#) six, seven and eight for each school over three years, and then compared the pass rates between the different configurations. They found that the pass rates for these tests were significantly higher for sixth and seventh grade students at elementary schools when compared to middle schools, although the effect was more pronounced for sixth grade students than seventh grade. For eighth grade students, the pass rate was higher in middle schools than high schools.

Together, these results suggest that students struggle with the transfer between schools, especially in early adolescence, adversely affecting their academic achievement. Malone and her colleagues therefore recommend that eliminating middle schools should be considered as an option, in order to limit the number of school transfers.

Although this study looked solely at U.S. schools, Malone says transferring between schools may well affect the academic achievement of students in other countries. "Early adolescence is a challenging time for youth; these individuals are experiencing a host of physiological, psychological and social-emotional changes. At the same time, they experience the transition to middle school, which is structured very differently than elementary schools. For example, students in American middle schools have many teachers throughout the day, which means that they need to learn the rules and expectations for multiple classrooms, versus just one. Class and school sizes also tend to be larger in middle schools. If these structural changes are similar in other countries, then we may suspect that students in other countries may experience similar challenges adjusting to the new school environment."

**More information:** *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*,  
[DOI: 10.1080/09243453.2019.1654526](https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2019.1654526)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

Citation: Staying at elementary school for longer associated with higher student attainment (2019, September 20) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-09-elementary-school-longer-higher-student.html>

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