

Notes from telephone conversations made by a parent to two K-8 schools in California in October, 2005. Because many communities, parents and teams have asked for specific answers to questions that only K-8 schools could provide, these notes are offered as another viewpoint from people currently implementing K-8 schools in districts more similar to ours.

Vista Verde (Irving, CA), Principal – Dr. Jean Mylen 949-936-6350:

- This school has been a K-8 for the past 9 years. It was built as a K-6 ten years ago, used as a K-6 for one year and then retrofitted to be a K-8. It currently has 750 students, but will have 850 at a new facility, which she helped design specifically for a K-8. About 100 children per grade level is the “magic” number – you can still have good student/teacher relationship, and you have good funding to offer maximum courses and to run an efficient school.
- The creation of the K-8 in this area was parent driven. They did not have a failing middle school. There is actually a traditional middle school right across the street from this school. Vista Verde is considered a “School of Choice” and parents opt to send their kids there. The new school, when built, will become more of a neighborhood school. Transfers between the middle school and the K-8 tend to go from the middle school to the K-8 and rarely the other way.
- Dr. Mylen was a traditional teacher for 8 years, then principal at a traditional school for 12 years, and now principal at this K-8 for the past 9 years.
- In addition to Vista Verde, the district has another K-8, Plaza Vista, and is planning on another one in 5-7 years. Both Vista Verde and Plaza Vista have waiting lists for people wanting to attend these schools.

Positive aspects of a K-8:

1. Decreased discipline problems (especially compared to the traditional school where she was a principal for 12 years). She has not had to suspend anyone at the K-8 yet.
2. Increased academic performance. API score (unique to California) = 914; Irvine Unified School District generally has higher test scores (in the 850 -875 range) compared to other districts in California and this K-8 consistently out performs the other schools in this district.
3. Increased leadership opportunities. (Student body, traffic control – older kids help younger kids out of their cars and escort them to the school as well as help with traffic flow, Club Viking, musical theater, academic pentathlon, tutoring of younger students. Dr. Mylen said that the principal of the high school has told her his best student leaders have come from the K-8. They are confident and experienced.
4. The students have a strong relationship with the staff. It’s more of a “we” feeling rather than an “us v. them” that is more prevalent at junior high. This helps with the transition to high school because they are not afraid to approach the teachers and ask questions. The principal at the high school has noticed that the K-8 kids are active and more willing to try new things because they get involved and feel

- more of a connection to the school. The freshmen in high school coming from the K-8 generally have higher G.P.A's than the other students in 9th grade.
5. It is hard to “fall through the cracks” at a K-8. Classroom assignments are made/tracked by teams of teachers rather than by a computer.
 6. Strong parental involvement. Parents help at the school, during PE, and on field trips.
 7. The dress and language are generally better at the K-8. It is repeatedly stressed to the older children that they are the role models for the younger children.
 8. Wonderful continuity of curriculum and staff development. They have weekly staff planning meetings which can go from 5 min. some weeks to hours other weeks.

Challenges of a K-8

- Providing consistent exploratory opportunities (electives). Sometimes too few students sign up for an elective and they cannot carry the class, so they've had to get creative. One year they offered a “zero” period and those who wanted Spanish paid for it. They offer 8 -10 “persevering electives” every year, including art, ceramics, speech/drama, applied technology, etc.
- Hiring a good balance of male/female staff and middle school/elementary teachers. You must get teachers who are willing to go the extra mile.
- Providing adequate space. You must have appropriately designated space for the middle school such as science labs with counters, sinks and hot water, art space and physical fitness areas that are built specifically for adolescents. For example, they do the Presidential Fitness Award every year and they have chin-up bars and a ¼ mi. jogging path.
- Lunch/recess issues. For them this has not been too problematic. Grades 1-3 eat and when they go to recess, grades 4-5 come in and eat. When they go out to recess, grades 6-8 eat and then go to their separate field/space.

Arroyo Vista (Capistrano, CA), Assistant Principal – Tim Brooks 949-234-5951

- Tim Brooks came from a traditional middle school with 1800 students. Arroyo Vista currently has 950 students and is a K-7. Next year they will be a K-8 as they complete the transition to a complete K-8. They will have 1050 and that is their max. Currently they have 280 6th and 7th graders. It is a neighborhood school where declining enrollment was a problem. The school used to have 1400 students and dropped to around 700 students.
- There is another traditional middle school nearby for those who want the traditional middle school experience.
- They currently have a waiting list of people who want to be in the school.
- He states they have increased achievement test scores.
- Their 6th grade consistently wins the 6th grade academic pentathlon.
- He reports high parent satisfaction.

- He reports a huge decrease in discipline problems compared to the traditional middle school where he worked before.
- Students have 6 periods a day (6, 7, and 8 grade) and an extra period called ISP (Independent Study Period). ISP is a 35 min. period which serves many purposes. For those who need intervention, daily intervention/help is provided. For those not needing intervention, they generally have silent reading 3 times a week and the other 2 days they rotate through college/career planning, art, cross-age tutoring, cartooning . . . whatever that ISP teacher wants to do.
- The cross-aged tutoring has been hugely successful and it seems that all of the students – older and younger love it. It is something they all look forward to.
- Each student has 5 core classes and is allowed to pick 1 additional elective each year. They have electives in technology, journalism, drama and music (both instrumental and choral)
- The teachers have weekly middle school team meetings. You **MUST** have a dynamic staff that is willing to do more than they are used to.