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L.A. elementary school adds a year to keep students on track

Eastside's Murchison campus opens this week with about 100 sixth-graders. A survey finds that 70% of the city middle schools serving low-income students are failing federal education standards.

By Mitchell Landsberg
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Armando Sosa's elementary school is just a quick scramble up a steep dirt path and over a crosswalk from his home in Ramona Gardens, an Eastside housing project known for its crime and violence. If he's late, he can hear the school bell from his bedroom.

His mother, Liliana Martinez, loves Murchison Elementary but worries that Armando's zeal for learning will wither in middle school. She has seen too many children from the projects nose dive in sixth grade and begin gravitating toward the gang life that has devoured the youth of Ramona Gardens for generations.

So, along with other mothers, most of them Mexican immigrants struggling for a foothold in U.S. society, Martinez helped start a movement to keep children at Murchison at least through sixth grade. That is typically the first year of middle school.

Goal achieved.

When the new school year starts Wednesday, about 100 sixth-graders will be staying at Murchison, instead of being bused across the tracks to El Sereno Middle School, where parents and teachers say they face teasing and bullying because they are poor and come from a housing project.

"As parents, we want to have the kids close," said Martinez, who sells tacos in the neighborhood and does volunteer work at Murchison. "We know that if parents are involved in their kids' education, the kids will be successful in life. They'll go on to college, have a better future and eventually leave the projects."

The parents' longer-term goal is for Murchison to add seventh and eighth grades so that children like Armando, who is heading into fifth grade, will be able to stay until they are ready for high school.

"This is a tremendous story about a community organizing and demanding more quality service," said Monica Garcia, the Los Angeles Unified School District board member who represents the Murchison area. Garcia, who supported the addition of sixth grade at the school, said she wasn't sure it was a good idea to include seventh and eighth grades. But, she said, "I'm interested in that conversation."

The Murchison parents are part of a small but influential movement. School districts nationwide are taking a hard look at middle schools, acknowledging that they have become the weakest link in the educational system. Some districts are scrapping them.

Philadelphia's school district, the eighth largest in the nation, is converting to a system of kindergarten-to-eighth-grade schools. Last year, the Stockton Unified School District completed a similar transition. All students in Stockton now stay in elementary school through eighth grade, then go straight to high school for ninth through 12th.

The Los Angeles school board asked Supt. David Brewer in July 2007 to deliver a report within four months that would assess "the appropriateness and feasibility of transforming elementary and middle schools into K-8 schools." School officials did not respond last week to requests for a copy of any such report, but said that in the last year, 14 elementary schools have decided to add sixth grade.

The middle grades have always been a difficult time, educators say. Students are just reaching puberty, and sometimes seem to rock their classrooms with physical and emotional earthquakes.

Junior high schools were a creation of the early 20th century, offering specialized instruction similar to high school classes to children in grades seven through nine. Beginning in the 1950s, school districts began adopting the idea of "middle school" for grades six to eight, saying those grades more neatly coincided with students' emotional and intellectual transition.

Yet many people now believe that middle schools aren't working. In a recent report on the "serious crisis in our middle schools," the United Way of Greater Los Angeles found that 70% of L.A. middle schools that serve high numbers of low-income students are failing federal education standards, compared with 44% of high schools and 32% of elementary schools.

One solution has been the K-8 school. Stockton educators figured that keeping students on elementary campuses "kept them in the family, so to speak," said district spokesman Rick Brewer. In middle schools, he said, teachers saw "lots of dumb behavior by those early teenagers, which doesn't seem to happen as much now at the K-8 level." When students do get unruly, teachers who have known them for most of their lives "can squelch that pretty quickly," he said.

Research is sketchy on the benefits of K-8 schools. The studies that have been done suggest that students behave better but that academic improvements are likely to be relatively modest.

"There's no body of research at the present time that says what type of configuration delivers the best results," said Al Summers, director of professional development for the National Middle School Assn. He dismissed the K-8 movement as the "reform du jour," and asserted that middle schools are uniquely able to meet the needs of adolescents through, among other things, separate classes in music, art and physical education.

Elise Bulk, president and chief executive officer of the United Way in Los Angeles, which supports middle school reform, said both kinds of schools can succeed, but that it makes more sense to stick to the existing configuration. "I think that the time and energy it would take to get us to K-8 . . . could divert us from some very concrete things we can be doing right here and right now."

At Murchison, for the first time in more than a decade, the principal and staff are focusing on how to teach sixth-graders. At a recent staff meeting, three new sixth-grade teachers grappled with such issues as who would teach physical education -- a class that doesn't exist at the elementary level.

Still, Principal Margarita Gutierrez said the transition shouldn't be too difficult, partly because several teachers at the school have taught sixth grade in the past. At a school that has had difficulty achieving success with English-language learners, she said she welcomes the opportunity to have one more year to improve students' English.

If, that is, they are sent to middle school. Middle school "is when we start to lose a lot of the kids," said Lourdes Renteria, one of the mothers who worked with a community organizing group, LA Voice-PICO, to lobby for the change. "That's when they get into fights, start thinking about drugs and start joining gangs." Keeping them at Murchison, she said, could steer them clear of those shoals.

Because of demographic changes in the area, the school has plenty of room to keep its students through eighth grade, Gutierrez said. But she questions whether it's wise to add new challenges to a school that is still struggling to bring its elementary students up to state standards. Still, she said, if that's what the parents want, she's willing to consider it.

Armando Sosa is quite certain that he wants to stay at Murchison as long as he can. He said he's proud of his mother for helping to bring about change at his school.

"My mom says that since they're our parents and guardians, it's their responsibility to let us live our dreams," he said.

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