

# *Getting an Early Start*

## *Access to Success in the Urban High School: The Middle College Movement*

by Harold S. Wechsler, Teachers College Press,  
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*Reviewed by Kathleen Abrams*

**I**n *Access to Success in the Urban High School*, author Harold S. Wechsler documents the development of Middle College High School (MCHS), an integrated 10-14 school within a school at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York. Designed to serve as a bridge from high school to college for at-risk, secondary students, MCHS evolved as a model for alternative approaches to educating at-risk students across the United States. In his carefully researched narrative, Wechsler shows how innovative educators adapted a variety of educational strategies specifically for this late-adolescent school population. Educators concerned about the viability of our high schools will find encouragement in Wechsler's realistic portrayal of LaGuardia's MCHS. The resources for helping students succeed are known to us, he shows; we need only adapt them to meet the needs of our diverse student population.

The Middle College High School story begins in 1971 when Janet Lieberman, the school's principal designer, and Joseph Shenker, LaGuardia's president, initiated discussion of a plan to connect the last two years of high school with coursework at their community college. In this way, the designers of MCHS hoped to provide a smooth transition from the students' familiar high school environment to the unfamiliar college campus. LaGuardia Community College was especially qualified to accommodate such a project. The last of nine community colleges

developed in the CUNY system, LaGuardia opened its doors in 1971 with cooperative education as a key component of its curriculum. This commitment to connecting work experience and academics as well as the newness of the college, itself, helped LaGuardia provide a receptive atmosphere for the middle college initiative.

Building on LaGuardia's cooperative education program and believing that "16-year-olds had more in common with 20-year-olds than with younger adolescents," MCHS designers developed a curriculum of interdisciplinary studies synthesizing academics with apprenticeships, internships, and other work experiences connected to specific programs. Their vision was to "provide a closed loop between the job and the classroom," but without becoming a "narrow vocational school." Like educators everywhere, they wanted to encourage their students to think and be able to adapt to a changing work world. The target population for MCHS was potential high school dropouts with a reading level of at least sixth grade who were not benefiting from their current high school environment. The plan called for enrolling high school students in college classes appropriate to their abilities and interests as a way of ensuring their transition from high school to college. With this mission in mind, MCHS welcomed its first students in 1974.

Wechsler is able to convey the enthusiasm dedicated educators brought to this project, while acknowledging the struggles inherent in integrating high school students with the college community. Scheduling issues such as the length of class periods and allotment of teaching space, for example, needed to be coordinated between the high school and college. Ways of integrating the high school and college faculties had to be developed. Most importantly, the responses of the individual student populations needed to be addressed.

The high school students had difficulty organizing their time in school without bells and daily class meetings. Their absenteeism and subsequent disruptions on campus presented problems. For their part, LaGuardia's college students objected to the noisy halls and immature behavior of the younger students. As educators reading this account might anticipate, a smooth transition from high school to college for reluctant learners is a challenge even in a specially orchestrated environment such as the middle college.

Wechsler's description of these challenges and how they were resolved is one of the strengths of his discussion. A peer-counseling program combined with less unrestricted time in the middle college's curriculum helped students stay focused on coursework. As the middle college developed, staff from both high school and college worked to keep communication channels open and faced each new issue with a spirit of cooperation. Their resilience in meeting their mission is conveyed by Wechsler's

thorough discussion. As educators, we learn from this history that barriers to college access for at-risk students can be overcome.

Wechsler has written a credible account of MCHS's evolution from a revolutionary design at LaGuardia Community College to the replication of that design in schools across the United States. Originally commissioned by the Ford Foundation, a supporter of the middle college concept, and based, in part, on the files of and interviews with MCHS's principal designer, Janet Lieberman, this book is a carefully documented and readable description of educational policy in action. As such, the story is told primarily from the perspective of the policy makers. Although occasional quotes from students and parents enhance the discussion, classroom practitioners might wish to hear more about the teachers and students involved in the project. What did the students think of this close connection between college and high school? How did the faculty view this initiative? Wechsler's primary focus is on delineating for the reader the ways in which policies related to the organizational structure of schools impact student success.


At first reading, therefore, the book appears slanted toward policy makers interested in replicating MCHS. Details of curriculum design, class scheduling, and high school/college faculty relations serve as a guide to administering the facility. Missing are the classroom stories of student/teacher interaction and insights related to classroom management central to a teacher's world. Reflection, however, reveals that this book serves the practitioner as well as the policy maker. Wechsler's knowledgeable discussion of the historical connection between the community college and the high school serves to increase teachers' understanding of their schools' individual missions. His focus on the details of communication between community college and public school administrations during the startup of MCHS reminds teachers of connections beyond their classrooms.

Wechsler sets out to answer two questions: "Could a 'middle college'... increase the college-going rate for an at-risk population?" and "Could such a school transcend the many academic and administrative boundaries between compulsory and secondary education and volitional higher education?" By the book's end, he seems to have answered those questions affirmatively.

But one issue of interest to both practitioners and policy makers not addressed by Wechsler is the question of why at-risk students seem to be best served by a transitional high school integrated within a community college. Why can't they be served within the traditional high school environment? What problems inherent in the high school structure or in the larger society necessitate this transitional school?

Perhaps these questions fall outside Wechsler's purpose here, but they

are questions worth asking—and answering.

In advocating the middle college concept, Wechsler references Leon Botstein, president of Simon's Rock and Bard College, who asserts that a more mature high school population needs an accelerated curriculum related to their real-life experiences. Perhaps Botstein's observation combined with Wechsler's description of the middle college at LaGuardia Community College will serve as a beginning for further discussion surrounding the necessity for alternative high schools. 

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