



National Middle School Association

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September 23, 2005

Dr. Chester Finn
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
1627 K St. NW Suite 600
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Dr. Finn:

As members of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) Board of Trustees we are writing to share with you our disappointment and concerns regarding the Fordham Foundation's report on middle level education that bases its comments and recommendations on references that are 20-30 years out of date. National policy groups, such as Fordham, must be held to the highest standards regarding the quality and accuracy of information when they release a position paper expected to impact education. *Mayhem in the Middle* does not rise to the standards of excellence warranted for such an important topic as the education of our nation's young adolescents, ages 10 through 14.

Regrettably, Dr. Yecke fabricates a definition of the middle school concept in the report, ignoring National Middle School Association's widely distributed definition found in many publications, most particularly our major position paper, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. In this document NMSA identifies academic achievement, high expectations, and the active support of family and community among its goals. A copy of this position paper and its companion publication, *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe* are enclosed with this letter.

In your foreword to *Mayhem in the Middle*, you cite Dr. Yecke's book, *The War Against Excellence*, and claim "NMSA avoided the unpleasant task of addressing Yecke's substantive arguments and voluminous evidence." NMSA **did** compile and distribute a very detailed and well-documented response that refuted the unfounded charges and insinuations contained in her book. It has been available to anyone through our Web site (www.nmsa.org). A copy of the response is enclosed with this letter. It should be reviewed by anyone considering the continued claims found in Dr. Yecke's recent report.

There are various other statements in this report that are inaccurate and misleading, but we believe the time for debates and negative "sound-bite" reports is over. As stated in *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*, "There is indeed, a promising and expanding body of research that demonstrates positive results when schools fully implement the recommended tenets of the middle school philosophy." With that in mind, it is important that we find new ways to work together to implement high-performing middle level schools that focus on the learning and healthy growth of every student. Data and research should drive our policies—not the bias of one individual.

We agree that the grade configuration of a school is not the issue, but rather it's what we do with young adolescents while they are in our schools that matters. High-performing middle schools can be identified, and programs and practices that support high performance have been documented. It will take all of us working together to address the challenge of fully implementing these practices, something that has not yet occurred in our nation.

National Middle School Association is committed to the implementation of successful middle level schools that focus on the learning and achievement of every student while responding to the unique characteristics and needs of young adolescent learners. We urge the Fordham Foundation to examine all the literature that describes the middle school concept, not just the parts that demonstrate a particular point of view. Rather than vilify some middle level leaders who have national reputations as respected educators, and misrepresent the mission and work of National Middle School Association, we invite the Fordham Foundation to join middle

level educators, policymakers, and communities in the substantive and meaningful work that sheds light on the real needs and creates policies that enable all schools to:

- Engage every student in a relevant and challenging curriculum in an environment that fosters respectful and supportive relationships among students, faculty, families, and the community.
- Provide teachers and administrators who are specifically prepared and committed to teaching this age level.
- Offer ongoing professional development for all faculty and staff.
- Make decisions based on data that guides student learning and instructional practice.
- Build strong, two-way partnerships between schools and families.

Finally, we invite you to visit any of the schools that we are associated with and experience the excitement of working with young adolescents and middle level educators as well as learn more about their daily challenges. We urge you to meet with our executive director, Sue Swaim, to learn more about NMSA's work in helping middle level educators, policymakers, and communities implement successful schools for young adolescents.

It is time to make middle grades reform a national priority so that high performing middle level schools are the norm throughout our nation. We hope you will take this opportunity to become better acquainted with our association, its vision, resources, and ongoing work.

Sincerely,

National Middle School Association Board of Trustees

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cc: Cheri Pierson Yecke