Preface

For the third time in a century, the upper grades of the elementary school are being retooled. In 1909, the first junior high school appeared. In 1965, the junior high school was replaced by the American middle school. And, now, the new K–8 school is emerging in cities, the suburbs, and the countryside schools of the United States. The transition to the K–8 model, which is just starting, represents a major change in the way we educate our young people. It is particularly interesting that this movement has begun without legislation, significant discussion, or even much media fanfare.

Most educators know that this isn't the first time we have tried the eight-grade elementary school. Before the turn of the 20th century, virtually all elementary schools included grades 1–8. In fact, four out of five students who had graduated high school before 1920 had attended a K–8 school. Those schools were abandoned during the 20th century, for a variety of reasons, but now they're back. What is causing this return to yesteryear?

There are many forces working to reintroduce the eight-year-plus-kindergarten school (K–8) to our educational system. First and foremost is the fact that there is strong research evidence that leaving students in an elementary school through the eighth grade results in better standardized test scores (see Resource A). Also, it is clear that parents want a smaller neighborhood elementary school where their child is close by and known by teachers. Finally, there seem to be fewer problems with truancy, discipline referrals, suspensions, and student attitudes in K–8 schools. In fact, there are a surprisingly large number of reasons why the new K–8 school makes good common sense.

Unfortunately, the good news about K–8 education seems to stop there. Many new K–8 schools, like middle schools before them, are being created for the wrong reasons. Some districts have too many facilities and want to consolidate their small schools. Some districts are looking for a way to lower the high school dropout problem by cutting out one student transition between schools. Still other districts are willing to try the K–8 model

to increase student performance on state tests of educational standards. Finally, some schools and districts are just getting on the K–8 bandwagon. All of these constitute a less-than-adequate reason for making this change.

Overall, there doesn't seem to be a sound curriculum prescription available for developing a new K–8 program in many schools, whether they are of the conversion variety or a brand-new program. Unless the question of mission is addressed, now, the K–8 school is bound to experience the same decline in the future as did the junior high school and the middle school. This book, *Developing Successful K–8 Schools,* seeks to fill that void by offering experienced guidance and suggestions to communities developing these new programs.

On the face of it, existing elementary schools and middle schools can be combined fairly easily because they share many of the same values. Both programs have a philosophy focusing on children's development. Both programs espouse "general education" instead of simple academic specialization. Both programs have teachers used to flexible organization and diverse methodologies to meet the individual differences of K–8 students.

But, despite these areas of agreement, there has always been an enormous problem with the role of subject matter in the intermediate grades. Both the junior high school and the middle school failed to clearly define the academic curriculum of the upper elementary grades, and the new K–8 model will certainly fail also unless it clearly defines this foundational program variable. Administrators who are leading their schools into the K–8 model must pay particular attention to the instructional design of the upper grades (Grades 5–8), an area referred to as an "educational wasteland" by some critics. There are many new ideas in this book about how the K–8 school should be structured. The author, a veteran educator of 30 years in elementary and intermediate schools, suggests a four-tier developmental curriculum model along the lines of human developmental stages. Content, in the form of state learning standards, can be used to define the "what" of the program. Skills for thinking and learning, universally prescribed for life in the 21st century, can constitute the common denominator for all students. Ten instructional methods, found in effective elementary and middle schools for meeting student needs, can help us implement the instructional program at the building level.

PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The reader of this book will find all of the ingredients necessary for developing an exemplary K–8 program: everything from a rationale, curriculum design, instructional organization, planning steps, and assessment technique. In

Chapter 1, the author provides a historical context that explains and rationalizes the evolution of the K–8 school. In Chapter 2, the new K–8 program is connected to mandated state curriculum standards, showing how those standards can be more effectively applied in K–8 schools. Chapter 3 develops the notion of a seamless grade-to-grade K–8 program, one that will solve articulation problems and increase student achievement. Chapter 4 introduces a novel four-tier instructional program based on sound human development studies and designed to negate traditional academic issues. In Chapter 5, the author discusses the return-on-investment for parents, students, teachers, and administrators who support the K–8 school. Chapter 6 provides the reader with step-by-step processes (facilities, curriculum, instruction, resource uses, technology, and parent–community relations) for developing this program at the building level. Finally, in Chapter 7, the author outlines the assessment processes needed to guide and to validate the new K–8 school.

SPECIAL FEATURES DESIGNED TO HELP PRACTITIONERS IN THEIR WORK

Resources found at the conclusion of this book include a comprehensive research survey of K–8 programs (Resource A), content standards organizations (Resource B), sample designs for using the Internet in K–8 classrooms (Resource C), a full glossary of terms relating to K–8 education for community members (Resource D), K–8 instructional resources for implementing the K–8 program found on the Internet (Resource E), and suggested reading for those seeking further information about the new K–8 program (Resource F). This book also contains a variety of practical tools such as chapter summaries, questions for study groups, detailed references, and boxed summaries of important chapter features.

These prescriptions and resources are presented to the reader as a kind of tool kit for developing possible solutions to the problems and issues faced by educators at this level of education for over a century. Although there is no absolute formula for the new K–8 school, there are extensive and ready-to-use resources for developing the K–8 school. Using this book, *Developing Successful K–8 Schools,* each faculty and community can both set and activate priorities and preferred patterns in a new K–8 program for their students.