

Confirmation as bridge

By [John W. Vest](#)

April 8, 2013

Like the majority of Presbyterians—and perhaps the majority of all mainline Protestants—our church offers confirmation for youth who are in eighth grade. The church I served previously did confirmation in ninth grade, so I’ve always reflected on the difference between the two. At first, my thinking mostly involved differences in maturity. Having done five classes of high school freshman and seven classes of eighth graders, I’m not sure that the maturity difference is that significant. Honestly, neither age is probably ready for the kind of life decision we associate with confirmation—though offering it to them is part of the wider transition into adulthood that is adolescence.

Lately, though, I’ve been thinking more about this in terms of the significant attrition we experience between confirmation and high school, a phenomenon which is also shared by many other churches. While much of this attrition is due to post-Christendom realities beyond our control—[which is why we must be proactive about developing new forms of high school ministry](#)—I wonder how much locating confirmation in 8th grade sets us up for trouble.

In our church—like in many other churches—confirmation is perceived by youth and families as a “graduation” from Sunday School and often marks the end of active participation in youth ministry. I know of some churches that offer confirmation in high school precisely in order to address this issue. Confirmation is understood as a high school activity and it is believed that more youth will stay involved in youth ministry during high school because they have made this association and have recognized the value of a high school youth group.

I brought this issue to our youth ministry committee and a very generative conversation resulted. There were valid points raised about the importance of an identity forming activity like confirmation happening in 8th grade *before* high school begins and equally valid points raised about doing this *in the midst* of the critical first year of high school. What became clear in our discussion is that the transition from 8th grade to 9th grade is a crucial time in the lives of our youth and the church

serves a vital role during that time. Confirmation clearly functions for us as an important bridge between childhood and adolescence.

This concept was highlighted in a third option that emerged in our discussion. Instead of offering confirmation in 8th or 9th grade, what if confirmation literally bridged the two years and covered the second half of 8th grade and the first half of 9th grade, with a summer mission trip in between? This model might be too unwieldy to implement, but it puts front and center the idea that confirmation serves this bridge role.

We'll keep talking about these ideas and options, and if anything changes I'll be sure to write about it [at my blog](#). In the meantime, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the best time to offer confirmation and why.

Originally posted at [Vest's blog](#)