

Article 1

Grade Configuration

Where to locate the 7th and 8th grade is a perennial question. While there are many variations, three approaches are most often used--include them in a 7-12 secondary campus, maintain a separate middle grades campus, or include them as part of a K-8 program.

What the Research Says

The research on grade configuration is inconclusive at best and there is no research that shows one configuration is better at improving student learning. There is some evidence that each of the three approaches can positively, or negatively impact students. But reorganizing grades is merely a shifting of students, teachers and programs from one site to another. Research shows that there is greater impact on student learning when the emphasis is not on location of the students but on the educational experience students receive. Grade configuration is merely a tool that can create the potential to improve student learning. Here's a brief summary of what the research says.

- Grade configuration is not a predictor of student academic success (McKenzie et al., 2006).
- Students in K-8 settings have beneficial effects on achievement, attendance and behavior over students in separate middle grades programs (Abella, 2005).
- There is less achievement loss for rural and small-town students when they transitioned to high school from a K-8 setting rather than from a 6-8 middle school (Alspaugh, 1998).
- Middle grades students located in the same building or on the same campus as high school students had greater access to specialized teachers and more opportunities for advanced classes (Wren, 2003).
- More grade levels per building (i.e. fewer transitions to new schools) is related to higher achievement and improved behavior regardless of SES (Offenberg, 2001; Wren, 2003)
- When 7th and 8th graders are part of a K-8 school some studies found more individualized student attention and more personal student-teacher relationships (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006).
- A separate middle grades program has a greater impact on students from high SES settings than it does for students from low SES settings (Paglin & Fager, 1997).
- When middle grades students remain in an elementary setting there are fewer discipline problems (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin & Vigdor, 2007).
- School size is important. Larger schools were more likely to negatively impact student learning (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006).

Getting Started

Economic considerations are the most frequent reasons districts consider reorganizing grade levels. While important, economics should not be the only consideration. Districts that are most successful at reorganizing grades start with a clearly articulated vision for the education of middle grades students. Organizational changes are best when guided by clearly articulated, and accepted, goals. That means that the decision is best when not made in isolation but emerges as a result of a community discussion about goals. Without clear goals, the school organization is merely an administrative plan for organizing teachers and students. Simply changing the location of grades will not change the way teachers teach or result in major curricular and instructional change (Williamson, 2009).



Resources

Selected print and online resources about this topic are available on page 2.

Considerations

What should you consider when thinking about changing the grade configuration?

- The school or district's curricular and instructional needs and goals;
- The size and design of buildings and whether they require modification to accommodate additional students of a different age group;
- Opportunities for interaction among age groups and influence of older students on younger students;
- The size of current and forthcoming cohorts of students;
- Opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively in content or grade level groups;
- Strategies for assuring a caring and supportive relationship with students including peer relationships and relationships with adults.

Resources

Online Resources

Grade Configuration in K-12 Schools – A report from the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (<http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/poptopics/gradeconfig.html#wconf>)

Grade Configurations in Middle Grades Schools – This report from NASSP discusses the research around grade configuration. (<http://www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=57004>)

What the Research Says (or Doesn't Say) About K-8 Versus Middle school Grade Configurations – This report from Education Northwest provides additional data about grade configuration. (<http://educationnorthwest.org/news/1694>)

Research Brief: Middle Level Grade Configuration – This brief summarizes the research supporting appropriate middle grades programming as the most important consideration when determining a grade configuration. (http://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/advocacy/opinion_leaders/grade_configuration.pdf)

Research Brief: Most Effective Middle School Grade-Level Configuration – This report from the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement provides summary of recent research on grade configuration. It is clear that effective instruction outweighs the effects of any particular grade configuration. (http://www.centerforsri.org/questions/index.cgi?location=question&show_record=15)

Print Resources

Williamson, R. (2009). *Scheduling to Improve Student Learning*. Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education (www.amle.org).

E P I: Developing successful, long-lasting business and education partnerships with a positive impact on America's youth.

www.educationpartnerships.org

This brief prepared by Ronald Williamson, Eastern Michigan University, February 2012

The Fine Print

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Features

Figuring and Reconfiguring Grade Spans

While most remixes result from enrollment challenges, some changes start with academics in mind by Kimberly Reeves

In his 20 years as a superintendent in five school districts across a wide swath of New York state, Paul Doyle has seen just about every grade-level configuration under the sun when it comes to public schools.

In the 8,000-student Rome district where Doyle started as a superintendent back in 1985, campuses followed a K-6 configuration. Rome had an Air Force base at the time, and the town was still growing. When Doyle moved on to 6,800-student Fairport, a Rochester suburb, he recombined a long-overcrowded primary school with one serving grades 3-5 and created a stand-alone 9th-grade center, never knowing that the latter concept would one day become a favorite approach for some high school reformers.

When Doyle assumed the helm of the 2,000-student Saranac Lake district in the Adirondacks three years later, he inherited a district comprised of schools with K-1, 2-5, 6-8 and 9-12 grade spans. When he moved on to the rural 1,100-student Clyde-Savannah in the Finger Lakes region, the three campuses used K-4, 5-6, 7-12 configurations. And now in the Riverhead Central School District on the eastern half of Long Island, Doyle oversees a 5,000-student district with K-4 campuses, a single 5-6 campus and a 7-12 secondary school.

"There are pluses and minuses with every grade configuration. If I had my druthers, I probably would have an early childhood center like we had in Saranac Lake," says Doyle, who started his job in Riverhead last November. "I don't mind putting 5-6 and 7-8 together, but it's definitely better to have a lower school and an upper school. The lower school needs a lot more structure. The upper grades can be departmentalized. I also thought we got a lot out of the 9th-grade campus."

Once dominated by small common school systems, New York is a fertile ground for grade-span reconfigurations within districts. Grade configurations such as K-8, 6-12 and 7-12 are growing, according to the latest data from the New York Department of Education, which shows significant changes over the past decade.

Multiple Reasons

Often, the remixes of grade levels were forced by enrollment gains and space constraints. Other times, the rationale was based on academics. The 25,000-student Yonkers district, which operates 29 open-enrollment elementary schools, recently shifted its three Montessori schools from K-5 to K-6 and created five K-8 campuses.

Jeri Fierstein, the district's spokesperson, says the reasons for shifting campus grade levels were multi-faceted. The configuration would provide greater personalization, raise student test results and relieve overcrowded middle schools. The plan also was heavily favored by parents. In the end, the move was intended to give parents more choices in education.

In Rochester, the board of education in 2003 approved a shift over two years to 7-12 campuses, thereby phasing out the district's middle schools. Superintendent Manuel Rivera chose the new model as a way to reduce the number of transitions between grades and to provide students with more choices.

"I firmly believe that a change in the grade configuration of our schools was necessary for substantial academic improvement to occur," Rivera said. "This change alone will not improve student performance, but I firmly believe it is in the best interest of our students and will set the stage for substantial achievement."

And for some New York school districts, temporary grade-level solutions have become permanent. The 2,000-student Greenburgh Central Schools in Westchester County went to what is called the Princeton Plan, devised by the university 50 years ago to address desegregation issues in schools. Greenburgh used it to address the de facto segregation in its neighborhoods. The plan mixed students in schools with these spans: K-1, 2-3, 4-6, 7-8, 9-12.

Greenburgh today is no longer segregated by race. It is a majority African-American school district, says interim assistant superintendent Peter Lisi. The district has different pressure to reconfigure: the cost savings of one elementary school principal instead of three; greater administrative efficiency; and fewer transitions for children. But parents are resisting.

"We don't need the Princeton Plan for racial or economic reasons anymore. We could go back to a neighborhood school plan, but the community has rejected that twice over the last 10 years," Lisi says. "They value the schools that they have."

Necessary Shakeups

In some cases, new configurations are the sign of a general dissatisfaction with the results of the traditional middle school format of grades 6-8. The middle school movement, now three decades old, has been around long enough to have its own reform movement. As school districts deal with aging facilities, flattening enrollments and higher performance expectations of students, school leaders are stepping out to try new models.

In Cleveland, Ohio, the 68,000-student district shifted its junior highs to middle schools in the early 1990s under a desegregation order, but after seven years, school chief Barbara Byrd-Bennett called those campuses "too big and too unsafe." The district now is transforming all but eight middle schools into the K-8 configuration. Over the last four years, the district has converted 53 campuses.

Hayes Mizell, a distinguished senior fellow at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, has published extensively on grade-level configuration and middle school reform. He is not surprised, given the new pressure of high-stakes testing, that school districts are ready for drastic structural change.

"There are urban school systems that are in rather desperate straits in terms of student achievement, and they've finally hired people who are willing to shake up that system," Mizell says. "That new superintendent comes into that environment and looks at the fact that the school system is not performing in the grades 6-8 structure and is not getting good results. It's not unusual to think that person would say, 'There must be a better way,' and they see the certain advantages to shifting to the K-8 schools."

Whether these new spins on old configurations are a sign of a sophisticated movement to create optimal learning environments—or simply unavoidable moves to accommodate gains and losses in school-age population—is difficult to say. Federal statistics tend to lag three to five years behind the current school year data. Even the research on the effectiveness of grade-level configuration is sketchy. Not a great deal of money has been set aside to study the benefits of middle school, Mizell says.

What is apparent is how far school districts have moved away from the junior high-senior high school concept. The shift from the junior high of grades 7-9 to the middle school organization is a clear pattern over the last three decades. Ever since William Alexander, consider the father of the modern middle school, talked about "the bridge institution between elementary school and high school" in the early 1960s, the concept has been widely adopted in school districts in every state.

The number of middle schools doubled between 1970 and 1980, according to statistics provided by the National Center on Education Statistics. The traditional middle school still comprises almost 60 percent of the configurations in the grades between elementary school and high school. The traditional junior high school span now accounts for only 5 percent of schools.

Middle Years

Today, concepts such as interdisciplinary teaching, integrated curriculum, heterogeneous grouping, small-group advisory programs and block scheduling have all become part of the cyclical changes in education. Strategies such as the "active learning community" and the "individualization of instruction" are taken for granted in today's teacher lexicon.

But other trend lines are emerging, too. In the last decade, there has been a modest but surprising increase in the number of schools housing 5th through 8th graders. Even schools with just grades 7-8 have held their own in recent years. Those two configurations account for 27 percent of all schools nationwide.

Middle school supporters say there is no magic in a particular bricks-and-mortar configuration. Debby Kasak, who leads the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, says it's easy to get distracted by a 'middle school' vs. 'other school' debate.

"As advocates for this age group, we should focus our attention on middle-grades students and their learning," Kasak says. "Rather than simply reshuffling students and schools, we must support our educators and school leaders so they can implement proven practices to advance the learning of middle-grades students, regardless of a school's grade configuration."

Forced Choices

In most cases, a decision to reconfigure campuses is more pragmatic than philosophical. A rural school district with 250 students has little choice but to create one K-12 campus. In other places, some suburban communities are growing so fast that they are adding, literally, a high school and middle school full of children every year. The question is not how to configure but how to get schools on the ground fast enough to deal with the entree of thousands of new students.

In the Archuleta School District in Pagosa Springs, Colo., the problem hasn't been too much growth. It has been little or no new enrollment. The population of the town has been growing over the last decade, but it's primarily been empty nesters looking to settle in an ideal retirement community.

Superintendent Duanne Noggle knows the growth will eventually come back to Pagosa Springs, which relies on tourism for its economic sustenance, but for now he needs to think about the 1,580 students he has. With four campuses, Noggle has divided his students into K-4, 5-6, 7-8 and 9-12. The newest campus is the high school, which was built in 1998.

The campus configuration provides enough students on the intermediate and junior high campuses for each grade level to share a team of teachers, Noggle says. The two schools are located across the street from each other in downtown Pagosa Springs; each has 250 students. The elementary school has 550 students, and the high school has about 500 students.

"I think the fact that we have created a separate intermediate school has allowed us to focus on student achievement because it's such a small student population. There's such a sense of belonging," Noggle says. "That kind of size—with the 6th graders on the first floor and the 5th graders on the second floor—has created a very positive climate."

The result of the grade-level reconfiguration is that Noggle's campuses have topped the region on Colorado's standardized test scores. It's also "jump started," he says, the faculty's enthusiasm to attempt new instructional methods. That works well for Archuleta, which provides a half-day of in-service training each Friday. Faculty teams meet to take advantage of group planning and interdisciplinary units that thread subject curriculum across courses.

But the current setup won't last forever. The Pagosa Springs community, located four hours southwest of Denver, is talking about moving the intermediate and junior high campuses out of the middle of town and away from the main highway. Long term, the district is likely to build a junior high next door to the new high school on the south end of town. A middle school concept doesn't figure in any Archuleta plans.

"The community is somewhat opposed to the middle school concept," Noggle says. "The parents have a lot of concerns about putting 6th graders with 8th graders. If we did decide to make a change, it would probably be a K-3 primary school and a 4-5-6 intermediate school. That would require us to build two, and not three, schools."

Noggle's preferences are not just about academics. He's also concerned about diversity in his school district. If the next school is built where the growth is, it will be in a predominantly white affluent northwest suburb. The creation of two elementary schools would separate affluent whites and lower-income Hispanic residents in the district.

"The mix has been good for us, and I would hate to see that mix change if we created two elementary schools," Noggle says. "I'd rather be ready with a primary and an intermediate school when the growth does come."

Racial Mixes

Race and diversity has been the factor in some school configuration decisions. Court desegregation orders forced the Tuscaloosa, Ala., City School District to reconfigure its campuses in 1979. Dorothy Richardson, now assistant superintendent for general administration in Tuscaloosa, was a classroom teacher at the time.

To meet the requirements of the desegregation order, Tuscaloosa took its traditional K-6, 7-9, 10-12 campus system and pulled the school configurations apart. Elementary schools became K-5. Junior high schools were disbanded and single-grade campuses were established for 6th, 7th and 8th grades in order for black and white children to attend school side by side. And since the court order stipulated no separate identifiable high schools for blacks and whites in Tuscaloosa, the two existing high school campuses became the main Central High School with grades 9-12 and a satellite high school that covered grades 11-12. Teachers would travel back and forth, if necessary.

"You had very mixed reactions in the community," Richardson says. "You had parents who were very comfortable with the single-grade campus and you had parents who really wanted all three grades at one school. My children went through the system in that format, and they were very comfortable with it. They didn't know any other way."

To ease the transition to the new configuration, the school district made sure teachers used in-service days to articulate material between grade levels. The goal was to make sure the expectations remained consistent for the students as they moved from one campus to the next. The district also shifted the counselors with the students so that the students had one constant through what would have been the middle school grades.

The court eventually released Tuscaloosa from its desegregation order. Today, when Richardson's youngest daughter returns home, she finds the concept of three high schools—each with no more than 1,000 students—an odd concept. In her school experience, she knew most of the students in her district and attended high school with all of them.

Test Preparation

In many situations, the choice for a different school configuration is made easier by the fact that parents would prefer to hold their children back during those crucial transition years of 6th grade and 9th grade. The 4,000-student Shelton, Wash., Public Schools, faced with an overcrowded high school, found widespread support among parents to divide the middle years into 6-7 and 8-9 campuses last fall.

Under this arrangement, Olympic Middle School opened last fall with 524 students in grades 6 and 7. Across the street, Oakland Bay Junior High, the former middle school, began with grades 8 and 9. The Oakland Bay campus had 788 students, leaving Shelton High School with three grades and a more comfortable enrollment of 1,100.

Olympic Principal Eric Barkman says the two-year spread for his campus made sense in terms of space and academics. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning targets 7th-grade students so his teachers have two full years to work together and concentrate on raising the students' achievement levels.

"We're looking at new assessment tools right now that we intend to use to prepare the kids for the test," Barkman says. "We haven't had the chance to use those independent tracking tools in the past, and it's our hope that they're going to be useful to us, knowing that we have a chance to keep a closer eye on a smaller number of kids."

The teachers have had the hardest time adjusting to the change, Barkman says. Parents like the social aspects of keeping 6th- and 7th-grade students together. Students, given fewer distractions, are calmer. Teachers, however, have had to make a lot of changes to their schedules and spend additional time on course preparation.

"I think the teachers are feeling the stress," Barkman admits. "Because of the program changes, the internal needs and the fact we've gone from three grades to two, a lot of teachers are teaching additional subjects this year. That's a lot of anxiety, but I think it will be easier next year when they've gone through it at least one time."

Academic Rationale

The affluent Manhasset School District on Long Island, with only 2,800 students, is in the enviable position of holding enough financial resources to choose how to best configure its schools. For most of the district's history, the junior high and high school have co-existed on the same campus, but that was more from choice than any space or budget constraints. Second- and third-generation Manhasset residents, many who returned to the district to educate their own children, liked the idea of "that's the way we did it in my day."

Six years ago, the school district decided to make a choice to either maintain that configuration, create a middle school environment in one portion of the 1,200-student campus or go out and build a new facility for middle school students elsewhere in the district. Manhasset schools have grown in enrollment about 10 percent over the last three years, making a new campus possible but certainly not imminent.

Manhasset saw dividing the grades and curriculum more clearly to be a way to leverage the relationship between the schools, such as creating peer tutoring and mentoring programs between the middle school and high school. There was no pressing issue of tight classrooms or falling test scores. Deputy Superintendent Robert Feirsen calls it using the high school, just a stone's throw away, "purposefully" for the middle school's success.

Such a change, even if it was confined to one campus, required a shift in thinking from second- and third-generation Manhasset residents who believed the status quo worked fine. Feisen says the students accepted the 7th-8th campus idea more readily than parents.

Some campus facilities would overlap—the campuses have a burgeoning fine arts program and some common areas—but for the most part, the school district would create a separate identity for the middle school.

"The parents really felt the middle school needed more of a presence, even if they were on a single physical plant," Feisen says. "The schools will never be totally separate, but we can create an environment that is developmentally appropriate."

Eventually, enrollment may force Manhasset to consider separating the junior high and high school campuses. For now the campus has used the middle school configuration to leverage both schools. After 70 years on one site, Manhasset has discovered the concept of a middle school works for them.

Other school districts, such as 14,000-student Greece Central Schools outside Rochester, N.Y., have used enrollment fluctuations as a catalyst for new academic programs. Deputy Superintendent Margaret Keller-Cogan says the K-2 and 3-5 configuration used in Greece was intended to stabilize the student population during local plant layoffs eventually led to the creation of seven signature campuses in the district.

Greece has seven signature schools, each focusing on a particular curriculum area such as the arts, technology, wellness and mathematics. Today, Greece has a completely open enrollment system, allowing families to pick what suits their child best. Last year, block scheduling was added on some campuses that are larger than 400 students.

"I think by reconfiguring the grades we have seen some modest gains in scores," Keller-Cogan says. "Where we've really seen the change is in discipline. We have far fewer behavioral problems on the campuses, fewer behavioral problems in the halls. We can put more of our time into professional development."

Other school districts choose to reconfigure on a sheer dissatisfaction with middle school performance. As researcher Mizell told the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education in a speech in San Antonio last fall, the concept of finding new models to ease early adolescents through the transition years is now common philosophy among educators. Early adolescents are not "mini-adults" nor should they be going to a "mini-high school," he said.

Thirty years after the concept of middle schools was introduced, however, much of the research on the benefits of the concept is inconclusive. Larger urban districts want to take a second look at grade-level configuration to try other types of models, Mizell says. He calls it a failure to properly implement the initial research on middle school education.

"When urban school boards and superintendents embraced the middle school model during the 1970s and 1980s, they did so without developing a deep understanding of the purpose of middle schools or the support they required to be effective," Mizell says. "In many cases, school system leaders simply fell in line with the national movement for middle schools and responded to its advocates within their school system."

K-8 Attention

For the San Antonio Independent School District, the shift to K-8 academies that began two years ago started with a discussion about the success of the city's Catholic schools. After some review of the research and a visit to Philadelphia, the school district decided academies were a sound academic approach, says Deputy Superintendent Robert Alfaro. It provided continuity in schools and eased those transitional years for students.

"When we took all our kids into account, we decided this was the best approach for us," says Alfaro, who oversees the district's accountability programs. "If private schools could turn out good kids with high scores—many of them in Catholic schools—then we felt it was time for us to look at the model. What we found was that the model reduced discipline, capitalized on using older children in peer coaching and raised test scores."

But the K-8 configuration has not come without its price. The transition to academies had to be staggered because most schools were not equipped to handle more students. Middle school classes meant facilities like science labs, football and soccer fields, which will require a bond referendum. In some cases, extracurricular activities are shared. Middle school students, for instance, may commute to another campus for band or theater arts.

"What we've learned is that academies were not realistic for all of our schools," Alfaro says. "Some schools were not convinced it was the way to go. Some parents were not convinced. Where we did decide to move toward academies, we made sure the majority of the community wanted to move in that direction before we started."

And San Antonio may find that K-8 campuses do not work for the school district. In the latest survey of a wide sampling of K-8 schools, from rural one-school districts to the larger urban models, a surprising 84 percent of the K-8 administrators surveyed said they considered middle schools to be more effective. Researchers Kenneth McEwin, Thomas Dickinson and Michael Jacobson completed the study.

"You can put the middle school sign over the door. You can put the grade configuration in place, but that doesn't make it a middle school," says McEwin, a professor of curriculum and instruction at Appalachian State University. "I was an elementary and middle school principal, so I lived that K-8 life pretty personally. When you look at educating, it's not necessarily the grade configuration, it's what you're doing in the classroom that is developmentally appropriate."

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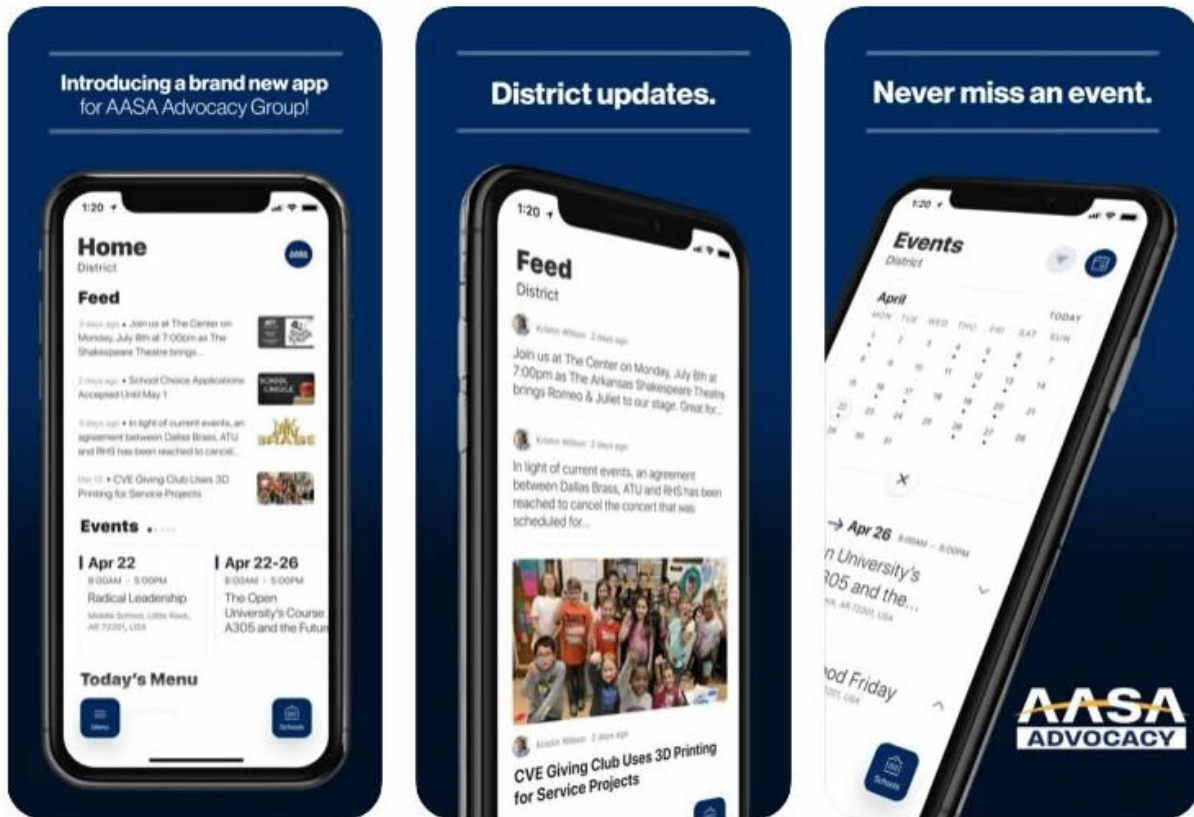


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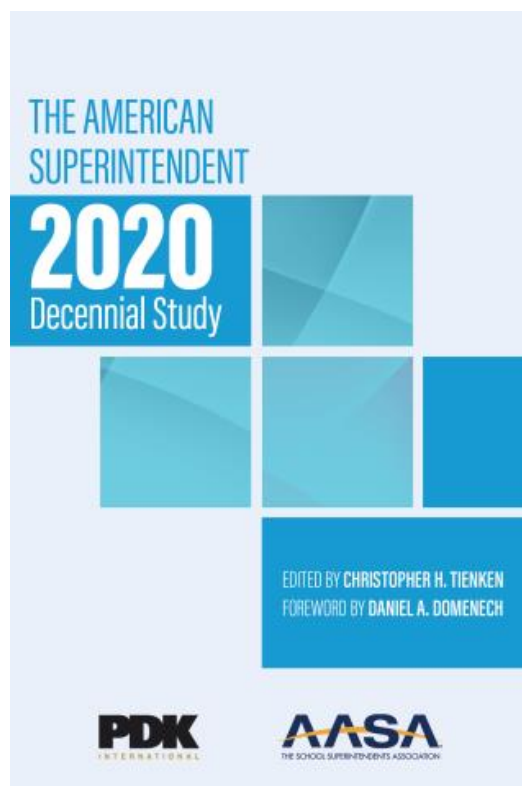
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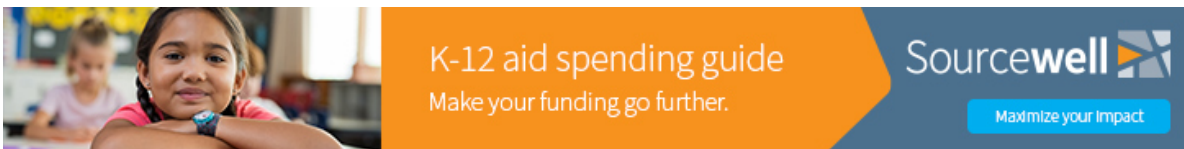
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Article 3

Tulsa Public Schools

Research Supporting a 7-12 School Configuration

I. Minimizing Transitions to Improve Academic Achievement:

A transition from one school to another brings a different facility, unfamiliar teachers and administrators, new groups of friendships and classmates, as well as different expectations. As detailed below, research reveals that school-to-school transitions negatively impact academic achievement. The fewer transitions, the better chance a student has of completing high school. If there is a transition into a new school for high school instruction, however, grade 7 is preferable to transitioning in later years. Schools with more grades, and fewer students per grade, are also related to improvements in academic achievement and the dropout rate.

- There is a decline in achievement during a student's transition year from elementary school to the next level. As the number of transitions experienced by a student increases, so does the high school dropout rate. Further, the higher the transition grade level (the later the student transitions into the high school), the higher the dropout rate, most significantly for boys. Specifically, of the high school configurations studied (7-12, 9-12, and 10-12), the lowest high school dropout rates were seen in high schools where students transitioned in at grade 7. The highest dropout levels were seen in 10-12 grade high schools. Alspaugh suggests that the link between higher dropout rates and later-grade transition years is most likely attributed to the academic achievement loss commonly experienced during the transition year and the fact that students transitioning at grade 7, as opposed to grade 9 or 10, have more time to acclimate to high school. In addition, he notes that schools with more grades (i.e., 7-12 schools) are usually smaller schools with fewer students per grade. Smaller high schools typically have lower dropout rates than larger schools. Consequently, his findings also supported previous research that with regard to minimizing dropout rates, it is optimal to structure schools with more grades and fewer students per grade. (Alspaugh, J. W. (1999). *The interaction effect of transition grade to high school with gender and grade level upon dropout rates*. (ED 431066). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association); (Alspaugh, J. W. and Harting R. D. (1995). *Transition effects of school grade-level organization on student achievement*. Journal of Research and Development in Education. 28(3), 145-49).
- In a study of eight different schools with seven different grade spans, researchers found that sixth-grade students in both elementary and combination K-12 schools outperformed sixth graders in middle schools or junior high schools and considered the number of transitions a significant factor. (Paglin, Catherine, & Fager, Jennifer. (1997). *Grade configuration: Who goes where*. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/464).
- A 2003 study of 232 schools in Michigan revealed that the reduction of school-to-school transitions is correlated with improvements in student achievement and that longer grade spans within schools is positively correlated with student achievement. The number of transitions was a significant predictor of student achievement. The study evaluated student performance on the state assessment administered in grades 4, 5, 7, 8 and 11.

(Wren, Stephanie (2003). *The Effect of Grade Span Configuration and School to School Transition on Student Achievement*). ED479332. 2003. <http://www.eric.ed.gov>).

- A researcher from Johns Hopkins revealed in a 1987 study that the positive impact of longer grade spans in schools teaching sixth graders was an advantage most evident among students of lower socio-economic status. (Becker, H. J. (1987). *Addressing the needs of different groups of early adolescents: Effects of varying school and classroom organizational practices on students from different social backgrounds and abilities*. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education).
- Some studies have found that schools with more grade levels per building (i.e., fewer number of transitions) evidenced not only higher academic achievement, but also better attendance rates, self-esteem and attitudes towards school, with fewer suspensions and behavior problems, regardless of socioeconomic status (Alspaugh, *supra*) (Offenberg, R.M. (2001). *The efficacy of Philadelphia's K-to-8 schools compared to middle grades schools*. Middle School Journal, 35(1)).
- A 1997 study of Connecticut elementary and middle schools found that sixth graders performed better on standardized tests when they were in K-6 configurations, as opposed to 6-8 middle school configurations. The researchers also determined that a K-6 configuration led to greater school accountability for sixth grade performance than that occurring in a 6-8th grade configuration. (Tucker, Charlene G., and Andrada, Gilbert N (1997). *Accountability Works: Analysis of Performance by Grade Span of School*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. ED 411 278. <http://www.eric.ed.gov>).

II. Other Benefits of the PK-6/7-12 Grade Configuration:

- In elementary schools, student environment is more nurturing with fewer stressors than a middle school. The stressors of a middle or high school—navigating through the school, forming peer relations, organizational instructional adjustments—are so critical that they neutralize or even diminish the achievement gains made in elementary school. (Wren, *supra*).
- Schools with a broad span of grade levels present opportunities that do not exist in middle schools. There is more opportunity for cross-age activities such as tutoring and older role model programs like “kindergarten buddies.” Parents are more involved in a school in which their children are more likely to be in the same building. (Paglin & Fager, *supra*).
- The shift to longer grade span elementary schools allows students to stay in their neighborhood schools for a longer period of time. (George, P.S. (2005). *K-8 or Not? Reconfiguring the Middle Grades*. Middle School Journal. 37(1)).
- Having schools with longer grade spans allows for more collaboration among teachers across grade levels as well as better alignment of curriculum across grades. With regard

to a K-7 school, it can become a place where subject matter depth and expertise is more highly valued and leveraged than before the reconfiguration, and its secondary students and teachers can benefit from the “whole child” perspective of education more commonly found in elementary schools. (George, *supra*).

III. Challenges and Criticisms of Middle Schools

A significant number of districts across the nation are transitioning away from the use of middle schools. The use of middle schools peaked in 2005 with just over 9,000 across the United States, and as of 2007-2008, the National Center for Education Statistics reported 500 fewer middle schools. David Hough, the dean of Missouri State’s education school and a former editor with the Research in Middle Level Education recently reported that “the trend is definitely away from stand-alone middle schools” and estimated there will be fewer than 7,950 when the 2010 data are in. (*The Middle School Mess*, Education Next, Winter 2011). Many in the education reform community believe that the reconfiguration of schools is a response to the evidence showing that middle schools have failed to serve the academic and developmental needs of 6-8th grade students. *Id.* Studies critical of the middle school configuration include the following studies.

- In an award winning study by researchers from Duke and the University of California, researchers studied and compared sixth graders in North Carolina in the 2000-2001 school year who were in middle schools serving grades 6-8 and sixth graders who were kept within the elementary school. The researchers found that students who attended middle school in sixth grade were twice as likely to be disciplined relative to their counterparts in elementary school. They found that the behavioral problems of these middle-school sixth graders persisted beyond the sixth grade year through the ninth grade and that exposing sixth graders to older peers had persistent negative consequences on their academic trajectories. The authors note that their results complement the recent findings by other researchers that school systems that move sixth graders from elementary to middle school experience a 1-3 percent decline in on-time graduation rates. As such, the authors explained, “Based on our results, we suggest that there is a strong argument for separating sixth graders from older adolescents (Philip Cook, Robert MacCoun, Clara Muschkin, and Jacob Vigdor (2008). *The negative impacts of starting middle school in sixth grade*. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 27, 104-121).
- The 2010 study by Columbia Business School researchers Jonah Rockoff and Benjamin Lockwood concluded that “middle schools are not the best way to educate students” in urban districts. These researchers compared academic achievement of New York City’s middle schools (6-8) to the city’s K-8 schools. Data revealed that students who enter public middle schools in New York City fall behind their peers in K-8 schools. The effects are large, present for both math and English, and evident for girls as well as boys. The academic achievement lag persists at least through 8th grade, the highest grade for which we could obtain test scores. The most notable lag by students in middle school as compared to a K-8 school was experienced by children with lower initial levels of academic achievement. The researchers also found evidence that student absence rates increased when students entered middle schools as compared to their counterparts in a

K-8 school. Further, parents' perception of schools declined more in the 6th to 8th grade years when the students attended a middle school than when they attended a K-6 or K-8 school. Finally, sixth grade students reported less academic rigor, less mature social behavior among students, that the schools are less safe and that the school provides lower quality education than do sixth graders in K-6 or K-8 schools.

Rockoff and Lockwood explain that the grade size (cohort size) has a pronounced influence on student achievement in the 6th to 8th grade years. Though they could not find evidence to support any particular cause, they speculate that it is harder to educate middle-school aged students in large groups because of their developmental stage, which is characterized in part by negativity, low self-esteem, and an inability to judge the risks and consequences of actions. They also suggest that some of the difficulty is a result of the combining of students from multiple elementary schools, which disrupts students' immediate peer group.

(Benjamin Lockwood, Jonah Rockoff (2010, December). *Stuck in the Middle: Impacts of Grade Configuration in Public Schools*, Journal of Public Economics). (Offenberg, *supra*.)

- Several studies on grade configuration have reported middle schools to be less effective in terms of test scores than K-8 schools in the same district. The evidence is especially strong for students in high-poverty schools. (Offenberg, *supra*).
- An analysis and comparison of middle schools with various configurations revealed that each time students switch schools, their feelings of anonymity increase. Further, the researchers found that sixth-grade students in both elementary and combination K-12 schools outperformed students in middle schools or junior high schools and considered the number of transitions a significant factor. (Paglin & Fager, *supra*).
- Authors of a book regarding the interaction of puberty and school context report that upon transition into middle school or junior high school, girls in early adolescence frequently suffered from a drop in self-esteem, extracurricular participation, and leadership behaviors, but not if they remained in an elementary school setting. The effects of this transition persisted throughout the school years. For boys transitioning into middle and high school, there were similar negative effects in extracurricular participation and grades, but not in self-esteem. The authors concluded that the relatively protected elementary school setting made the entry into adolescence less stressful for both boys and girls. Moreover, the authors state that the students who had not had the stress of the earlier transition seemed to cope better with the transition into high school than did other students (Simmons & Blyth (1987). *Moving Into Adolescence: The Impact of Pubertal Change and School Context*).
- In a study undertaken in rural Louisiana schools that examined the relationship between grade configuration and student behavior, researchers concluded that longer grade spans were linked better behavior. Specifically, they found that sixth-grade boys experienced more suspensions in middle schools or junior high schools than in elementary schools, possibly related to the effects of the transition, the school organization, or school size.

(Franklin, B., Glascock, C. (1996). *The relationship between grade configuration and student performance in rural schools*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Rural Education Association).

IV. Recommendations and Caveats Relating to School Configuration

- While research suggests that the absence of school-to-school transitions may be one factor that contributes to higher academic achievement in longer-spanning elementary schools, the programming and practices within those schools resulting from the longer grade span configuration are also likely drivers in the schools' improved achievement. As some educators and researchers explain: "Effective programs and practices, not grade configuration, determine the quality of schools." and "Grade configuration per se may not make the difference, but it does make a difference." (Coladarci, T. & Hancock, J. (2002). *Grade-Span Configurations: The (Limited) Evidence Regarding Effects of Academic Achievement*. ED467714, 8/2002. <http://www.eric.ed.gov>) quoting a finding of the National Middle School Association Research Summary.) (Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (2010). *Reference Desk Response No. 431: School Grade Configurations K-8*. Newton, MA).
- When school-to-school transitions must occur, regardless of the grade, there should be articulation and transition activities that ensure the alignment of curriculum and the smooth transition of students into a new school. "Teachers and students alike should have an informed view of the instructional and social world of the next school in line." (Coladarci, T. & Hancock, J. (2002). *Grade-Span Configurations: The (Limited) Evidence Regarding Effects of Academic Achievement*. ED467714, 8/2002. <http://www.eric.ed.gov>).
- When making decisions regarding grade configurations and adapting to new grade configurations, schools should consider and address the following:
 - The cost and length of student travel
 - That parent involvement typically decreases in the higher-level schools, but parent involvement is greater in elementary schools.
 - Combining schools into separate grade centers may affect whether neighborhood schools close or remain open.
 - Current buildings may have a design more suitable for several grade levels.
 - School population may increase or decrease substantially as configurations change.

(Clearinghouse on Early Ed. and Parenting. <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/poptopics/gradeconfig.html>).

Article 4

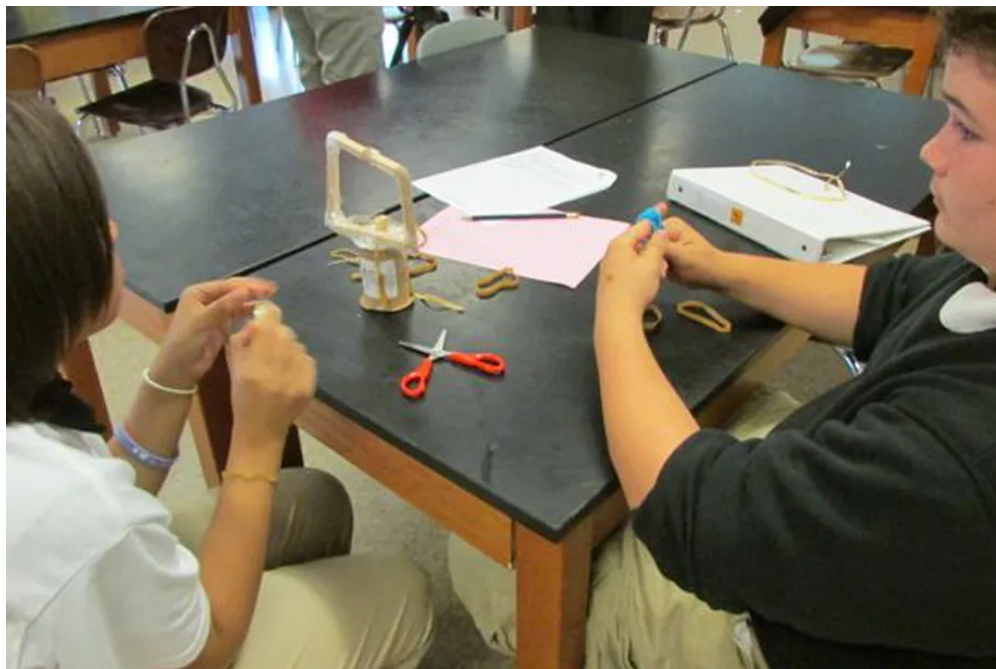
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IPS board to Ferebee: Discontinue 7-12 high schools

By Hayleigh Colombo | Jun 5, 2015, 8:03am EDT



Students at Harshman Middle School, where Jack Hesser is a teacher, work on science projects. | Scott Elliott

The end could be near for Indianapolis Public Schools' combined middle and high schools.

The Indianapolis Public School Board directed Superintendent Lewis Ferebee at a board retreat last Friday to develop a plan to phase out school designs that result in 7th and 8th graders sharing space, schedules and sometimes even teachers with

high school students, a controversial legacy from former superintendent Eugene White's tenure.

"We've got clear direction that we have to explore options that would move us away from that model," Ferebee said. "We'll get it vetted and get community input."

Instead, board members said they want to see well-developed middle grades programs at elementary schools and to expand successful magnet programs, which they hope will help increase student safety and bolster grades and test scores.

Middle schoolers have some of the lowest test scores in the district: Seven IPS high schools serve grades 6 to 12 or 7 to 12. In many of those schools, high school test scores are on the rise while middle school students' ISTEP scores last year made little growth or even fell farther behind.

Nothing is expected to change next year but the district could start the transition toward more K to 8 elementary schools as early as the 2016-17 school year. Ferebee has said since he arrived at IPS in 2012 that the district's 12 grade configurations scattered among more than 60 schools is "convoluted" at best and unsafe at worst.

"When you have students going through that phase in life, it's not appropriate to have them with high school students who are in a different phase in their lives," Ferebee said. "It's best that those experiences be separate for a lot of different reasons, but primarily safety and social and emotional (development)."

Ferebee said combined middle and high schools also present instructional challenges. In some schools he's seen 11th-grade Advanced Placement Calculus teachers be simultaneously responsible for teaching 7th-grade Pre-Algebra, a very different challenge.

"That's a very unique skill set," Ferebee said. "What happens is we have teachers who really enjoy one group and not so much the other. When I talk to the students, they don't like being around each other. The middle grade students aren't too fond of the high school students. It's a real challenge for staff to manage."

He said he's exploring a new approach to organizing staff to avoid those situations next year.

Switching to more K to 8 schools may also help IPS compete with neighboring township and charter schools. The district often loses students as they approach middle and high schools. IPS has more than twice as many students in its elementary schools as it does in its middle and high schools.

Board member Kelly Bentley said she consistently hears from parents that they want their kids in K to 8 schools. She said IPS should expand its existing successful magnet programs such as the Center for Inquiry schools.

“We’ve got to respond to the market,” Bentley said. “A lot of these people are just walking.”

Board member Gayle Cosby said she wants to make sure IPS expands its successful programs in vulnerable neighborhoods as well as in places where parents are vocal.

“What’s great about Center for Inquiry 84, we need to make that available on other sides of town,” Cosby said.

The combined middle and high schools, called “community high schools,” were a major initiative of former superintendent White, who said the retooled schools would help reduce dropouts in the district and increase graduation rates. And graduation rates did rise dramatically after they were instituted.

But some of those gains were fueled by the use of graduation waivers, where students are allowed to graduate even if they have failed state tests.

School board President Diane Arnold said she supported the community school concept initially, especially at George Washington High School. She said she saw wayward middle schoolers blossom when they were able to participate in high quality high school athletics and music programs.

“It rescued some of those kids,” Arnold said. “I know there’s times it hasn’t worked well at Washington. I did see a few snippets of where it worked well for some kids.”

But Washington’s middle schoolers have continued to struggle. A new principal there this year created a separate program for older middle schoolers to try to get them back on track and reduce behavioral issues.

Unfortunately, said Butler University researcher Flo Barnes, there is “no magic bullet” when it comes to grade configuration. There are pros and cons to each model, she said. But she said the fewer transitions a student has between schools, the better they seem to do on a social and emotional level.

One benefit to having a K to 8 school is that elementary and middle school teachers may be better able to collaborate, Barnes said.

“I liked the thought that if you are in a K-8 setting, you can really enrich professional development,” said Barnes, a former Spanish teacher and instructional coach. “Having your elementary school teachers thinking on that middle school playing field. On the contrary, your secondary teachers ... really see the value of (teaching) the whole child.”