

Grade span or grade configuration is the range of grades that a school comprises. Trying to determine which grade configuration is best has proven to be a difficult task. This issue has been debated for decades. Districts who have found themselves involved in discussions about the possibility of changing grade configurations have discovered that such dialogue can be highly contentious. “Grade organization remains a controversial topic in American education as it has for at least 80 years” (Jenkins and McEwin, 1992, page 8). All stakeholder groups (e.g., patrons, parents, educators, and even children) have a vested interest in this decision, and opinions are often strong.

The problem, quite simply, is that this issue is quite complex. “A multitude of factors (e.g., cost, physical facilities, enrollment trends, educational philosophies) has made it difficult for researchers to adequately study the issue and to make clear-cut recommendations based on their research” (Education Research Service, 2004, page 1). As such, numerous grade span alternatives exist in American schools today.

I. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the first half of the 20th century, the majority of schools in the United States were one room schools. “Most districts enrolled too few students to require several buildings with different grade configurations” (Education Research Service, 2004, page 1). In 1940, for example, there were approximately 117,000 school districts serving about 25 million children. Almost 114,000 one room schools were reported in that year (Snyder and Hoffman, 2003). A typical school served a small rural community and enrolled about 30 children.

It was during this same time period that a teacher's college professor named Ellwood Cubberly proposed that large schools in central locations could provide a better education. Gradually, educational leaders began to accelerate the merging of one room schools into larger graded buildings. Initially, the K-8 configuration became the most popular plan. This later gave way to K-12 schools as more children attended school through their high school years (Howley, 2002).

By the mid-20th century, the country's infrastructure had dramatically improved and significantly impacted how schools were organized. "Better transportation, rural economic decline, and a focus on efficiency of educational management drove consolidations across larger geographic areas" (Howley, 2002, page 2). This resulted in the unification of many small schools and districts.

Today, there are approximately 14,000 school districts in the country. There are nearly 69,000 elementary schools and 23,000 secondary buildings serving over 48 million children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Various grade level configurations have emerged over the years. A summary of the grade spans for elementary and secondary schools across the country is included (see Attachments 1 and 2); these tables were taken from the National Center for Education Statistics (2006). While grade patterns do vary, today the most common grade span configurations are K-5 or K-6 for elementary, 6-8 or 7-9 for middle levels, and 9-12 for high school (Howley, 2002).

II. GRADE SPAN RESEARCH

The question remains, “Which grade span configuration is best?” Unfortunately, “...existing research on the best grade configuration is inconclusive” (Education Research Service, 2004, page 2). Paglin and Fager reported in 1997, “Research has not provided definitive answers to the myriad possible questions about grade span, but the questions have never gone away. There are questions which arise whenever school reform, increasing or decreasing enrollment, or financial considerations bring about a reorganization of existing schools, the building of new schools, or consolidation of district” (page 1). Not much has changed in the last decade in terms of the amount of research. According to McEwin, Dickinson, and Jacobson (2005), no empirical, large-scale studies have examined the relationship between grade configuration and student achievement as measured by standardized assessments.

Others in the educational field echo these observations. Coladarci and Hancock (2002) noted the following as it relates to the effects of grade span on academic achievement.

Unfortunately, research bearing on this question is limited. Many accounts of grade span effects are, in fact, descriptive cases of a particular school that changes its grade configuration for one reason or another...But as provocative as case studies may be, they are not designed to suggest the causal effects of something like grade span. More technical methods are required, such as statistical procedures that attempt to take into account, or control for, important confounding factors (page 1).

Alspaugh and Harting (1995) concluded, “It is not possible to isolate the effects of grade level organizations or grade span from many other educational issues that tend to be associated with it” (page 145).

While it is true that the cause-and-effect relationship between grade configuration and academic achievement is limited, one should not conclude that decisions related to grade span are not important. There are a growing number of correlational studies that offer suggestive findings (Klump, 2006). Coladarci and Hancock (2002) note, “One should not infer that grade configuration ultimately may not matter—that this structural feature of schools in and of itself may not affect academic outcomes...The configuration of grades, in and of itself, probably does matter. The challenge for us is to become smarter about why” (page 2).

Some interesting trends have emerged in recent years. Most of the research on grade spans focuses on the middle grades. One of the major changes in grade organization has been the decline of the junior high (i.e., grades 7-9) and the rise of the middle school (i.e., grades 6-8). “Today, the middle school is the dominant form of middle grades education in terms of numbers of students enrolled” (Paglin and Fager, 1997, page 2).

Additionally, a review of the public education statistics reveals obvious preferences for certain configuration patterns across the country. Most elementary schools are now configured as K-5 or K-6 buildings, and grades 9-12 now dominate the vast majority of high schools. Interestingly, many urban districts are embracing the K-8 model, and there has also been a resurgence of the K-12 model (DeJong and Craig, 2002). Why is it that certain grade span configuration patterns have emerged in the

absence of an abundance of casual research on grade configurations? The answer lies not in a review of research on grade spans but on the research related to student transitions.

III. STUDENT TRANSITIONS

While the research on the ideal configuration pattern is waning, there is ample evidence to suggest that handling transitions for students is critically important to their success. Researchers have determined that transitions can be stressful for children (Paglin and Fager, 1997). Additionally, research findings suggest that transition effects are largely negative (Coladarci and Hancock, 2002). Highlighted below are some of the conclusions that have been reached by experts in the field.

A. Student Achievement

- ▶ Declines in performance, motivation, and self-esteem often follow transitions from one school to another (Simmons and Blyth, 1987).
- ▶ Transitions have a negative impact on course grades and self-image (Crockett et al., 1989).
- ▶ School grade level achievement declines during transition years for all grade levels. Students who make fewer transitions need fewer years to make up for achievement losses caused by transitions (Alspaugh, 1999).
- ▶ Numerous school transitions over time have a negative effect on academic achievement and result in more high school drop-outs and lower attendance rates once children reach high school (Alspaugh, 1998).

- ▶ Students perform less well during their first year in a new school building, taking two to three years to get test scores back up to where they were before the transition (Alspaugh and Harting, 1995).
- ▶ Students in schools with multiple grade levels have higher academic achievement, attendance rates, self-esteem, and attitudes toward school (Franklin and Glascock, 1998).

B. Socialization

- ▶ Every transition from one narrowly configured school to another disrupts the social structure in which learning takes place, lowering achievement and participation for many students (Howley, 2002).
- ▶ Children who do not make effective transitions will be less successful in school and have difficulties making friends (Akos, 2005).
- ▶ Major transitions (i.e., home to school, elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to college) are fraught with stumbling blocks for children. Students become anxious and distraught over the uncertainties of abrupt changes in buildings, teachers, classmates, and programs. Such needless anxiety and apprehension interferes with learning and impairs confidence and self-esteem (Weldy, 1991).
- ▶ Each time students switch schools, their feelings of anonymity increase (Paglin and Fager, 1997).

C. Parent-School Relationship

- ▶ Students and parents who remain in buildings with many grade levels are more likely to maintain more positive relationships with teachers and higher levels of parent involvement (George, 2005).
- ▶ Schools with narrow configurations have a negative impact on family-school partnerships (Moffit, 1996).
- ▶ Parent involvement decreases in single grade configuration schools (Hopkins, 1997).

D. Student Discipline

- ▶ Discipline problems increase upon school transitions (Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman, 2008).
- ▶ There are fewer suspensions and behavioral problems in schools with many grade levels (Franklin and Glascock, 1998).

E. Other Significant Findings

- ▶ Students placed in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time experience more desirable outcomes (Alspaugh, 1998).
- ▶ Special education students at all levels experience academic and social difficulties in adjustment as they make transitions throughout their educational careers (Akos, 2005).
- ▶ School transitions impose stress on students and negatively influence schools' identity and sense of community (Renchler, 2000).
- ▶ The cost and length of student travel time increases in single grade configuration schools (Hopkins, 1997).

School transitions play a critical role in children's development as learners (Wigfield et al., 2006). There are other factors that one should consider when determining grade configurations (e.g., relieving overcrowding, decreasing transportation costs, planning for projected enrollment increases). While these are significant issues, they pale in comparison to the impact transitions have on students.

This matter is complicated further when one realizes that students are required to make an increased number of school transitions in single grade configurations (Hopkins, 1997). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the tendency to create narrow grade span configurations reinforces building larger schools which, in turn, damages educational equity for everyone. "Large, narrowly configured schools seem like a bad investment if school reform is the objective" (Howley, 2002, page 7).

The literature affirms there are numerous disadvantages associated with transitions. Some may argue that children are resilient and, as a result, are impervious to the issues that have been cited herein. However, research would suggest otherwise. Students do not appear to get used to transitioning over time. According to Alspaugh (1998), previous experience with making transitions does not moderate the achievement loss of the new transition. As such, it is imperative that educators do all we can to minimize the transitions in a child's life (i.e., transitions between buildings and, ultimately, within buildings).

IV. REPUBLIC INITIATIVE

The issues outlined herein have been at the focal point of many discussions in the district (i.e., either internally or externally) for nearly three years. Formal discussions

have transpired in various venues, including the following: parents' meetings during the fall of 2007 (see Attachment 3), facility master planning committee meetings (i.e., spring of 2008), and various public board of education meetings. A large article highlighting many issues related to reconfiguration was included in a spring issue of the Republic Monitor.

During the 2008-2009 school year the administrative team read numerous articles and held lengthy discussions on reconfiguration. Team members deliberated on several key issues (see the upper half of Attachment 4 for the top six criteria). In the end the desire to create fewer major transitions for children surfaced as the primary consideration for the team. The team supports the adoption of the following grade spans: K-5, 6-8, and 9-12. However, transitioning from where we currently are to such a configuration can take many forms (see Attachment 6 for a brainstormed list of possibilities).

The compounding variable (i.e., the one issue that prevents the district from moving to this configuration in one fell swoop) centers on what to do with the Early Childhood (EC) center. EC is not capable of housing a K-5 grade span at this time. For one, the building is too small. An examination of each building's capacity (see Attachment 5) reveals that EC is roughly 2/3 the size of the other elementary buildings. Additional classrooms are needed. However, the bigger issues related to the facility are two-fold: (1) the cafeteria is too small; and (2) a gymnasium does not exist. In order for EC to function as a viable K-5 building, additional construction is necessary.

Having said this, the administrative team is still strongly supportive of reducing transitions. The team believes that single grade span buildings or double grade span buildings create tremendous learning challenges for children. An examination of the

transition proposals (i.e., Attachment 5) reveals one of two choices for EC in the immediate future: (1) leave pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes there (with overflow to the other elementary buildings) and disperse them to the other buildings once renovations to EC have occurred; or (2) move kindergarten to the other elementary buildings now and make EC a pre-kindergarten site and home to central office.

V. CONCLUSION

The administrative team understands that a change of this magnitude will meet with some resistance. While the Republic School District has had numerous other grade configurations in the past, the current grade spans have been in place for some time. Individuals who have been reared here and not lived elsewhere do not recognize that the district's configuration is atypical. Change of any kind is difficult for organizations; changes that directly impact children are particularly challenging.

Furthermore, as noted herein, the administrative team recognizes that there is limited causal research on grade configurations. Paglin and Fager (1997) noted, "No particular sequence of grade spans is perfect or in itself guarantees student achievement and social adjustment" (page 12). The challenges facing our district in the area of student achievement are great. The district has not made Adequate Yearly Progress for seven years; recently, the district was given the designation of "District Improvement Level 3: Corrective Action." Remedying this situation will take more than moving children to different buildings. Numerous systems must be addressed over a period of many years before significant student gains will be realized.

Having said this, the administrative team also acknowledges the wealth of information which suggests that excessive transitions in children's lives impact student achievement negatively (and a host of other issues). An opportunity to address student learning in a significant way has presented itself to the community. The administrative team believes we should take advantage of this opportunity and reconfigure the district.

One observation should be shared before closing. "Interest in grade span configuration rests on the dubious assumption that segregating students by age is a natural law of schooling" (Howley, 2002, page 7). Age segregation is certainly embedded in American public schools; however, educators and parents must keep in mind that there is nothing sacred about such a creation. If learning is a function of time and opportunity, are there not some students who could complete a high school equivalent education in 10 years? Many others might profit from staying in school 14-15 years. While the American public is probably not ready for such an overhaul of our education system, it would be to our benefit to keep this in the forefront of our thinking as we deliberate on this matter.

Finally, there will be other considerations that will influence the district's decision regarding grade configuration patterns (e.g., fiscal constraints, capacity of buildings, transportation challenges, political tensions, geographic realities). While these issues are all relevant to the discussion, they are peripheral and should not dictate the course of action that is taken. "What ultimately matters—or should matter—to educators, policymakers, business persons, and the general public is how much students learn" (Coladarci and Hancock, page 1). As long as we keep student learning as our primary driving force, we will make the right decision for children.

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