

## **To: District and State Collaborative Network for Developing Comprehensive Systems for Learning Support**

From Howard Adelman & Linda Taylor

January 4, 2012

*Re: Using the lens of learning supports in deciding about grade configuration.*

We received this question from a superintendent who is part of the collaborative network:

“Our district is considering a move from the grades 7-8 junior high configuration to a grades 6-8 middle school model. Can you point me to research that describes pros and cons of each configuration? Some of our own very informal "research" (looking at California Standards Test scores) seems to indicate that higher performing sixth graders tend to be part of a 6-8 school. That prompted us to look at the potential of changing our grade-span configuration, but we need more formal research before moving forward. The idea of having three years together instead of just two seems as if it would be positive as far as developing relationships and connectedness--which would, hopefully, translate into higher academic achievement. If you find anything along those lines (either supporting or not), it would be appreciated.”

We sent the request to the other superintendents and the principals in the collaborative network.

Here is a sample of what we have received so far:

(1) “Please check out research conducted in North Carolina two-three years ago that indicated sixth grade students perform better academically in a K-6 configuration than in a 6-8 school [cited below]. Although I have not yet read the article, Education Week two weeks ago reported a recent study relative to sixth graders that the Superintendent might find relevant. Although I am in the minority, I favor the 7-8 configuration. In the 60s many districts adopted a 6-8 arrangement with very little or no research to support the change.”

(2) “We simply put our eggs in two baskets. Some 6-8 schools and some K-8 schools. Parents wanted smaller settings. We wanted to reduce transitions, knowing the research shows that transitions interfere with academic progress. Our data this spring will be exciting as we plan to disaggregate the 6<sup>th</sup> grade scores at k-8s from our other 6th grade middle schoolers - and then we may have something to share.”

(3) “The middle school model usually includes grade 6. My experience is that, regardless of what grade a student moves to middle school, it will be a transition that must be addressed. In Georgia, most middle schools are grades 6-8, and some districts are re-structuring to have K-8 schools and then to high school. The research I know that supports middle school in grades 6 says that it is an advantage for the student to have the additional exploratory classes, like world language, and subject area specialists. My view is that it is situational – a community can decide what is best for their children.”

(4) “We have a traditional grade configuration of K-6; 7-9; and 10-12. Anecdotally, we have found some students who benefit from the academic rigor and challenge offered at the next level. So, we have started moving ‘some’ students from 6th grade to 7th for some classes (not a full schedule). We believe there are advantages for our students, and if our facilities could accommodate it, I believe our district would move to a 6-8 model. That said, the research we did when considering this change did not necessarily support our desire to move in that direction.” [They note that they asked the CAREI institute at the University of Minnesota and think the information may find helpful – see [http://www.cehd.umn.edu/carei/reports/carei-um\\_grade\\_configuration\\_literature\\_review.pdf](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/carei/reports/carei-um_grade_configuration_literature_review.pdf) ]

(5) "I do not have any research except for personal experience. 6th grade needs to be the elementary grades. They need the stability of fewer teachers and more one-on-one attention. The research I have found on departmentalization indicates that below the 6th grade its only purpose is to make the teacher's job easier. If the Middle School Model is considered, make sure the professional development for the entire staff is job embedded and continuous. The school culture will have to change to meet the needs of the students."

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***Here is some relevant research:***

(1) “The negative impacts of starting middle school in sixth grade” (2008) – P. Cook, et al *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 27 (1) 104-121. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.20309/pdf>

Abstract: “Using administrative data on public school students in North Carolina, we find that sixth grade students attending middle schools are much more likely to be cited for discipline problems than those attending elementary school. That difference remains after adjusting for the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the students and their schools. Furthermore, the higher infraction rates recorded by sixth graders who are placed in middle school persist at least through ninth grade. An analysis of end-of-grade test scores provides complementary findings. A plausible explanation is that sixth graders are at an especially impressionable age; in middle school, the exposure to older peers and the relative freedom from supervision have deleterious consequences. These findings are relevant to the current debate over the best school configuration for incorporating the middle grades. Based on our results, we suggest that there is a strong argument for separating sixth graders from older adolescents.”

- (2) “Relationship Between Grade Span Configuration and Academic Achievement” (2010) – M. Dove, L.C. Pearson, & H. Hooper, *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 21, 272-292.

<http://journals.prufrock.com/IJP/c.abs/journal-of-advanced-academics/volume21/issue2/article1003>

Abstract: “In an effort to address the NCLB-mandated testing process, one of the issues to be considered is how best to configure student populations to maximize all aspects of the educational setting while simultaneously maximizing student achievement; one aspect is grade span configuration. We examined the relationship between the grade span configuration of all schools in Arkansas attended by sixth-grade students and the academic achievement of the combined population of students as measured by the Arkansas Benchmark Examination. We found no relationship between grade span configuration and academic achievement as measured by the Arkansas Benchmark Examination for sixth-grade students. However, the nonsignificant findings do not negate the importance of the study. The results imply that there are other factors that are affecting scores in the middle grades. The results of the study also revealed that over the time span examined, mathematics Benchmark achievement rose but the results for literacy were stagnant. These results suggest that newly implemented practices or other factors may have improved mathematics achievement, but not achievement in literacy. Grade span configuration alone does not account for sixth-grade students’ academic achievement as measured by the Arkansas Benchmark Examination. Decisions about campus configurations include other factors such as projected enrollments, transportation costs, size of schools, school goals, fiscal constraints, political tensions, geographic realities, and financial accountability. As student populations shift, educational leaders can look for grade span configurations that best fit their community culture and current facilities, focusing financial resources on other means of improving academic achievement.”

- (3) “Are Middle Schools Harmful? The Role of Transition Timing, Classroom Quality and School Characteristics” (2011) – I. Holan & A.C. Huston. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22143392>

Abstract: “Are middle schools ill-suited for early adolescents, or can school characteristics account for any differences in student functioning? Achievement, school engagement, and perceived competence of children starting middle schools in 5th and 6th grades were compared to those of their same-grade peers in elementary schools in a national, longitudinal sample (NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development,  $n = 855$ ; 52% Female, 82% White). Classroom quality (observed and teacher-reported) and school characteristics (composition and size) were considered as explanations for any relationships between school-level and student functioning. Fifth grade middle school students did not differ from those in elementary school, but students entering middle school in 6th grade, compared to those in elementary school, experienced lower classroom quality, which in turn predicted slightly lower achievement. They also had lower school engagement, explained by larger school size. Classroom quality and school characteristics predicted youth functioning regardless of school type. We suggest reshaping the research and policy debate with renewed focus on classroom quality and school size instead of grade organization.”

**Also see:**

> “Organizing schools to improve student achievement: Start times, grade configuration and teacher assignments”  
[http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/09\\_organization\\_jacob\\_rockoff.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/09_organization_jacob_rockoff.aspx)

> “Where does sixth grade belong?”  
[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin060.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin060.shtml)

> “Grade configuration: who goes where?”  
[http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm\\_send/464](http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/464)

>From the California Dept of Ed website:

“The RAND Corporation’s report, *Focus on the Wonder Years*, was one of the publications that examined how schools address the middle-grade configuration. Like others, RAND criticized middle schools because the configuration moves students from a K-5 elementary to a 6-8 middle and then on to a 9-12 high school. Research indicates that student performance suffers after transitions; therefore, RAND and others suggested that a K-8 or 7-12 system might be better because those structures reduce the number of student transitions....Other variables contribute to the success or failure of schools, such as school size, socioeconomic challenges, and how the middle grades are organized to deliver instruction. Poorly orchestrated transitions from one school to another can be traumatic and negatively affect student learning. However, moving from a small intimate environment to a large impersonal environment has more to do with the environment than the transition between the two. The best transition plans or instructional models take young adolescent needs into account.

A 2005 issue of the *Middle School Journal* focused on the following question: K-8 Settings or Separate Schools: Is There a Best Way to Educate Young Adolescents? In that issue, Vincent Anfara, Jr., and Alison Buehler review the research evidence against middle schools and find that it is sparse and rarely takes into account whether grades 6-8 schools are faithfully implementing the basic tenets of effective middle schools. They suggest that a district answer the following questions before abandoning middle schools:

- Will the grade configuration increase or decrease parental involvement?
- How many students will be at each grade level, and what implications will this have for course offerings and instructional grouping?
- How will the presence or absence of older students affect younger students?
  
- What are the opportunities for interaction between age groups?
- Is the design of the school building suited to this grade configuration
- What is the cost and length of student travel?
- How will grade configuration affect the continuity and articulation of the curriculum?

Researchers found that when schools faithfully implement middle school philosophy, the advantages between one grade configuration over another

disappear. In short, a high-impact middle grades program -regardless of school configuration -will respond to the developmental needs of adolescents through caring relationships, high expectations and support to reach them, enrichment and exploratory options, and socially relevant learning opportunities. In developmentally responsive middle schools, educators go out of their way to help students handle new pressures, including new perceptions of gender, changing roles in their communities, and the conflicting messages they receive through popular culture. Successful middle grades educators make sure students feel that they belong.”

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**For more on Transitions, a key content area of a comprehensive system of learning supports, see**

>*Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitions/transitions.pdf>

>*Transitions to and from Elementary, Middle, and High School*

Last spring we asked several school districts we work with what they had in place to assist students as they moved from one level of schooling to the next. The focus of this document is on:

- sharing their responses, answering a couple of questions, and highlighting some relevant resources
- clarifying where this subset of transition interventions fit with respect to the full range of Support for Transitions
- delineating where Support for Transitions fit in a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitionstoandfrom.pdf>

***What can you share about this:***

- What you think about the initial question (6-8 or 7-8 configuration)?
- Any references to share?
- Anything to share about what is done to support students and families in making transitions to the next level of schooling?
- How are such supports for transitions integrated into school improvement policy and practice? (e.g., part of a comprehensive system of learning supports?)

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