

### Grade Configuration

Where to locate the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> 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](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](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](http://www.amle.org)).

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