

## Research Brief

### Philosophy behind and Pros & Cons of Various Grade Configurations

**Question:** What is the philosophy behind and the pros and cons of: a separate 9<sup>th</sup> grade campus; an 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> grade campus; a 9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> grade campus; and an 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> grade campus?

#### Summary of Findings:

The most common configuration for the middle level is for grades 6-8 to be housed together. Although not a common configuration, there are some ninth grade only campuses sprinkled throughout the United States. Many of these schools were designed to address overcrowding issues either at the middle or high school while some were designed to help encourage a higher retention rate. The most common high school configuration is for grades 9-12 to be together. Schools for 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> grades seem to be mostly vocational.

Although solid data on student achievement and its relationship to which configurations are thought to be the best is sparse, the research does cite areas for consideration when a district is examining various grade configurations. Cited below are the areas for general consideration; the philosophy of meeting the needs of students in the middle grades according to the National Middle School Association and for high school according to *Breaking Ranks*; and some pros and cons for an 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> grade campus and a 9<sup>th</sup> grade only campus.

#### Major Findings and Conclusions:

General considerations: Because each district is unique, their programs must meet the particular needs of their clients.

- How will the configuration affect solid educational practices?
- How will staff be recruited and hired?
- How many transitions will a student need to make while in the system?
- How will the students be eased into and through each transition?
- How will the given configuration allow for a breadth of subjects and electives to be offered?
- How will the curriculum be coordinated with the sending and receiving schools?
- How will the configuration affect extra activities such as sports and clubs?
- How will the presence or absence of older students affect the students?
- How will the configuration support the values of the district and its stakeholders?
- How long will students need to commute?

- Will the configuration be a loss of a community school? If so, how will the stakeholders respond to and accept it?
- How will the configuration affect parental and community involvement in the school?
- Is the physical facility designed to meet the needs of the students and the instructional program?
- What will the fiscal costs be to run the program?

#### Middle Grades Philosophy

According to the National Middle School Association in their publication of *Turning Points, 2000*, the philosophy for meeting the needs of every student aged 10-14 in a developmentally appropriate environment

should include:

- a challenging and stimulating curriculum that relates to the students and their lives and interests;
- different teaching and learning strategies;
- professionals who want to work with and are trained in the area of young adolescents;
- students being known well by at least one adult;
- flexible organizational structures; and
- support programs in health, wellness, and guidance.

#### Breaking Ranks Philosophy

According to the publication, *Breaking Ranks*, high schools must have personalized programs that are stimulating and rigorous. "...High school is above all else, a learning community and each school must commit itself to expecting demonstrated academic achievement for every student in accord with standards that can stand up to national scrutiny" (*Breaking Ranks: A Framework for Secondary Reform Project*).

#### 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> Grade Configuration

PROS:

- Effects size of the middle school, will give it a smaller population
- Full facility utilization

CONS:

- Depending on the grade level configuration of the previous school, (i.e. K-6), the 7<sup>th</sup> grade student would attend a middle school for one year, then need to transition again in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- For some students, travel time might be extensive
- Could take away community school

#### 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Only Configuration

PROS:

- Alleviate some concerns from parents about the vast differences in maturity levels from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades.

- There could be a strong focus on the fact that the 9<sup>th</sup> grade academic marks begin to count towards college. A whole school emphasis could be placed on study skills and transition to high school.
- High School numbers could be lowered to allow more individualized work at that level.
- Higher retention rates to stay in high school
- Ease transition into the high school setting
- Can become acquainted well with the faculty

**CONS:**

- Students would only be together for a year. That may not be enough time for them to gain an adequate comfort level in the school.
- Would there be staff who were trained in and wanted to work with students in this specific age group?
- There could be a lack of breadth of course offerings and students might need to go to the high school to pick up appropriate courses
- Would there be enough extra curricular activities (i.e. sports, clubs)?
- There would be a lack of range in age levels, how would this influence their maturity levels?
- The middle school could still be the same size

**Online Resources:**

- **Breaking Ranks: A Framework for Secondary Reform Project, Vermont**  
This is a brief description of the Breaking Ranks process and ways in which to use data in guiding programmatic decisions.  
[http://www.lab.brown.edu/programs/lab2000/secondary\\_breaking.shtml](http://www.lab.brown.edu/programs/lab2000/secondary_breaking.shtml)
- **Considering a 9<sup>th</sup> grade campus in Issaquah**  
A summary on a district's options for reconfiguration to a 9<sup>th</sup> grade campus is presented in this piece. Additional reconfigurations examined were for grade 6-8 and 8-9.  
[www.issaquah.wednet.edu/documents/9thgradecampus.pdf](http://www.issaquah.wednet.edu/documents/9thgradecampus.pdf)
- **Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?**  
This provides an overview of issues that should be examined and questions that should be answered when considering grade reconfigurations. This includes a sampler of schools in different configurations, including a 9<sup>th</sup> grade only setting.  
<http://www.nwrel.org/request/july97/textonly.html>
- **NMSA Research Summary #1 Grade Configuration**  
This article states that the most important quality of any program, regardless of the configuration, is how it will meet the needs of young adolescents.  
<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/>

<http://www.vla.com/idesign/GradeConfiguration.html>

- No Two Schools Alike  
This briefly describes why no two schools are alike and cites how the Coalition of Essential Schools' philosophy supports this.  
[http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/about/phil/no\\_schools\\_alike.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/about/phil/no_schools_alike.html)
- The Common Principles  
A list of the 10 guiding principles of the Coalition of Essential Skills is listed here, along with a brief description of each.  
[http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/about/phil/10cps/10cps.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/about/phil/10cps/10cps.html)
- The School Administrator-March 2003  
The entire magazine's theme for this issue is on grade level reconfigurations. There are articles on middle level and 9<sup>th</sup> grade schools.  
[http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2002\\_03/howley.htm](http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2002_03/howley.htm)
- Trends & Issues: School Organization. Grade Span  
Research completed that attempted to correlate test scores and grade spans in schools was compiled. The outcome was that "no particular sequence of grade spans is perfect or in itself guarantees student achievement and social adjustment."  
[http://eric.uoregon.edu/trends\\_issues/organization/grade\\_span.html](http://eric.uoregon.edu/trends_issues/organization/grade_span.html)
- Turning Points: A Decade Later  
The guidelines in Turning Points 2000 are compared to the original publication and how the new ones have matured and grown with time and experience.  
<http://www.middleweb.com/MWLresources/tp2000excrpt.html>

### School

- 9<sup>th</sup> grade Academy, NY  
<http://www.rhnet.org/schools.cfm?subpage=61&menu=11>

Submitted By: Dr. Karen Walker, University of Maine, Farmington

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