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Grade Configurations

by Joyce A. Craig, REFP

It is essential that school administrators and school boards seek community input when making decisions to change the grade configurations for their school district

Grade configurations, also referred to as grade groupings, seem to be a moving target and have taken on a variety of arrangements in the public school arena in recent years.

In tracking schools from 1967-68 to 2001-02, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in the Digest of Education Statistics, 2003, shows junior high schools declined from seven percent in 1967 to three percent in 2001. This obviously correlates with the rise of the middle school (13 percent in 2001). NCES also shows the preference for either a three- or four-year high school in 2001. NCES also reveals that elementary schools of PK-5, K-5 or grades 1-5 comprised 36 percent of all schools in 2001.

How did the choices evolve? The pattern of K-6 (or 1-6), 7-9, 10-12 was prominent in the 1950s and 1960s as schools were built to accommodate the baby boom. Elementary schools may or may not have included kindergarten, the middle age group clearly functioned as a junior high school and high schools predominantly served students in grades 10-12. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, this gave way to a K-5 elementary school, 6-8 middle school and a 9-12 high school pattern. Of course, in smaller and more rural districts, the K-7, K-8 or K-12 schools that existed earlier are still a logical solution today.

Cluster Schools

Looking further into elementary school patterns, the concept of neighborhood K-5 schools has given way to "cluster schools" in some communities. Cluster schools are broken into arrangements such as K-2, 3-5 or other variations (K-1, 2-3, 4-5 and single grade schools, such as kindergarten centers). Advantages to this concept include consolidation of teachers and resources for the specific grade levels. Disadvantages include parents having children in more than one school, attending multiple PTA meetings, performances, etc. Parents who volunteer in their children's schools will also have decisions to make regarding their level of involvement. Depending on the location of the schools, children in the same family could be on separate buses and separate schedules. Another disadvantage is that older children are not able to participate as mentors to the younger children or to be role models. Cluster schools also involve more transitions that students must make. Students could easily attend four or five schools from the time they enter kindergarten until high school graduation.

Intermediate Schools

Another concept is the emergence of intermediate schools, sometimes referred to as "elemiddle" schools. These can take on a variety of grade configurations as well, including 4-6, 4-7, 4-8, 5-6, 5-7 or 5-8. Some districts desire to group the 5th and 6th grades, maintaining a middle school of grades 7-8. Sometimes the decision is simply based on overcrowding. If the middle schools and elementary schools are overcrowded, and if enrollments are projected to continue to rise, it is more economical to build an intermediate school for 5th and 6th grades to free up space at both the elementary and middle school levels.

Ninth Grade Centers

High schools have not escaped change as the concept of ninth grade centers or academies is growing. Ninth grade centers can be located on the same campus as the high school, on a separate campus or within the same building in a "school-within-a-school" organization. Ninth grade centers are often created to help bridge the transition from a middle school or junior high to the high school. However, the decision to build a separate center is sometimes prompted by overcrowding at the high school level.

Determining Factors

Realizing that no configuration will "fit" all school districts, it is imperative to consider certain factors to determine the one that will work best for your school community. Typically, these decisions are based on one or more of the following:

- demographics /population of community,
- preferred school size,
- site availability,
- impact on transportation costs,
- length of bus ride,
- desired number of transitions and/or
- parent involvement.

Demographics/Population

Smaller school districts often choose a K-7 or K-8 grade configuration for the lower grades to combine resources, saving operating and capital costs. Larger districts have more flexibility to plan the type, location and number of schools depending on desired school size, grade configuration, programs, etc.

Preferred School Size

School size has a major impact on the number of schools required and ultimately on the possible grade configurations. Districts are faced with the decision of having fewer large schools or a greater number of small schools. Some districts will choose to have a "standard" size for schools (e.g. all of their middle schools would be built for 750 students); others will have schools of various capacities (elementary schools of 300, 500, and 700 students might be found in the same school district).

Site Availability

Clustered schools (e.g. a K-2 and a 3-5 school) can often be located on the same site if enough land is available. This helps reduce parents' concerns of having their elementary-age children in separate locations. Likewise, middle schools and high schools can have adjoining campuses with separate traffic patterns if land is available.

Transportation

The number of schools, and their proximity to each other, will affect the transportation costs as this contributes to additional bus routes. If shared campuses can be used, transportation costs can be reduced. The amount of time students spend on the bus will also depend on the number of buses and the number and location of schools.

Desired Number of Transitions

School districts should clearly think about the desired number of transitions (or moves between schools) their students will make. In a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 (or similar) configuration, a student will have two transitions. Having clustered schools could mean three or more transitions.

Parent Involvement

Parents often volunteer in school activities, whether in the classrooms, media center, office or PTA, and also attend conferences and performances. Their willingness to be involved could be affected if their elementary age children attend different schools caused by clustering.

Making the Call

It is essential that school administrators and school boards seek community input when making decisions to change the grade configurations for their school district. Although this is not the only factor, with budgets obviously being critical, it is important to listen to the community to gain their preferences for issues such as school size, grade groupings, length of bus ride and the number of transitions involved. As school districts continue to grow (or decline), as enrollment shifts in the community, as buildings need to be modernized or replaced with new construction and as programs change, this is the time to plan for the future of the district — a future that could involve a change in the grade configuration.

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