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Grade-Span Configurations

Essentials on education data and analysis from research authority AEL

By District Administration
March 2005

If you've read many research reports, you're familiar with the statement Further research on this topic is needed. You may have thought it a self-serving statement, coming from a researcher who no doubt dreams of additional funding. But when it comes to answering questions about what grade-span configurations are best, nearly everyone agrees: Further research is needed. Existing research does, however, offer some direction—and food for thought.

Much of this research involves grades 6-9, where the merits of middle schools vs. other configurations are debated. When Ted Coladarci and Julie Hancock examined the research on the effects of grade span on academic achievement, they found few studies that used statistical procedures in an effort to yield a clearer picture of the cause-and-effect between grade-span configuration and student achievement. Researchers say the results of these studies should be "treated with considerable caution" because they are few in number, but they call the consistency of results "noteworthy."

The studies suggest "achievement in the middle grades is higher in schools with an elementary-wide configuration than a middle-grades configuration."

Specifically, a study of 700 rural Louisiana schools showed that sixth and seventh graders in K-6, K-7 and K-12 schools "performed significantly higher on the state achievement test than students in 6-8 and 7-9 schools." A study with 163 Maine schools found 8th-grade achievement on the state test was higher in K-8, K-9 and 3-8 schools than it was in middle school and junior high configurations.

A study of sixth-grade achievement in 330 Pennsylvania schools found an advantage to "locating sixth graders in an elementary versus a middle school." This advantage was "most evident" among students low in socioeconomic status.

One possible explanation for these results is that a K-8 configuration reduces the number of school-to-school transitions. A study by John Alspaugh also found that as the number of transitions increased, "there was an associated increase in the high school dropout rates." Citing the potentially negative effects of multiple transitions, researchers Catherine Paglin and Jennifer Fager recommend that districts with multiple grade spans establish "articulation and transition activities" that involve teachers and students.

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Defining the Term Grade-span configuration: the number and range of grade levels that a school comprises

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Nine Factors to Consider

Student achievement is, of course, only one factor districts must consider in making decisions about school configurations. Fiscal constraints, projected enrollments, political tensions, school size, school and community goals, and geographic realities also come into play. When Paglin and Fager examined eight schools with seven different grade-span configurations, they identified nine factors that district leaders should consider in determining the grade-span configurations of individual schools:

Cost and length of student travel

Possible increase or decrease in parent involvement, which can be affected by the distance between home and school as well as the number of schools a family's children attend

Number of students at each grade level, which may affect class groupings and courses offered

Effect of school setting on achievement, particularly for grades 6-9

Effect on whether the neighborhood schools close or remain open

Number of school transitions for students

Opportunities for interaction between age groups

Influence of older students on younger students

Building design and how well it suits current or desired grade levels

Coladarci and Hancock predict additional research will support the position of the National Middle School Association:

"Effective programs and practices, not grade configurations, determine the quality of schools." Wayne Seller's recent review

of the literature suggests that making wise decisions about grade configuration means "finding a balance between the needs of the students, the needs of the school system, and the expectations of the community."

View citation of the references used in this article.

Number of U.S. Regular Public Schools by Grade Span, For Selected Grades (1989-2000)

Schools with Grade 6			Schools with Grade 8			Schools with Grade 12		
Grade Span	Number	Percent	Grade Span	Number	Percent	Grade Span	Number	Percent
PK-6	13,729	41.6	6-8	8,381	35.2	9-12	11,218	88.5
6-8	8,381	25.3	PK-8	4,351	18.1	7-12	2,776	18.5
PK-8	4,351	13.8	7-12	2,776	11.7	PK-12	1,318	9.8
5-8	1,383	4.1	7-8	2,773	11.7			
			5-8	1,383	5.7			
Other	3,858	11.2	Other	2,548	10.9	Other	1,558	9.2
Total	33,074	100	Total	23,792	100	Total	19,878	100

NOTE: "PK" includes all grade spans that begin with either pre-kindergarten or kindergarten. Source: NCES, Condition of Schools 2004

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