



Grade Level Configurations

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Introduction

How to group students across buildings is one of the most basic organizational decisions district leaders face. A variety of grade configurations exist, and leaders report diverse rationale for selecting certain configurations over others, including cost, class size, equity and student/community needs [1], [2].

This summary aims to unpack the research literature on these configurations by answering two questions:

- What are the most popular grade configurations in the United States?
- What are the benefits and challenges of these configurations?

Key Findings

Most students begin their schooling in an elementary building and make a transition to middle school (MS) in grade 6 or 7 before entering high school at grade 9 [3]. However, many other configurations exist. For example, K-8 and K-12 configurations are popular in the private sector [4]. Some larger districts utilize a K-3, 4-6, junior high, and high school configuration. Others isolate 9th grade students at a freshman campus. Despite this variety,

most of the research has focused on only two configurations: the traditional middle school model and the K-8 model.

The Middle School (MS) Model

The MS model emerged in the 1960s and 70s as a way to address school overcrowding. Around that same time, desegregation was a national priority, so eliminating neighborhood schools provided the additional benefit of reducing racial inequality [5]. Pedagogically, proponents of the MS model argued that separating middle-aged children from younger students allowed for more targeted, developmentally-appropriate practice [5], [6].

More recent research quantifies their advantages and challenges. Researchers in favor of the MS model argue that the transition to MS gives struggling students a fresh start [7]. Opposing researchers argue that the MS model leads to poorer academic achievement and declines in attendance and behavior.

Two of the most well-known, large-scale studies on grade configurations concluded that moving students from elementary to middle schools caused a significant drop in academic achievement (between 0.086 and 0.221 standard deviations in math and English, an effect classified as “medium to large”) [8], [3],

[9]. This drop was found to persist through at least grade 10. The transition to MS was also associated with increased absences and a 20% greater risk of dropping out compared to students who remained in K-8 buildings.

Additional studies examining the performance of students in 6-8 schools with comparable peers in K-8 centers corroborate these findings [10], [11] [12], [13], adding that the MS model is associated with an increased rate of discipline referrals [14].

While transitioning to a new environment is often difficult for students, developmental researchers note that the MS transition occurs at a challenging age. Biological changes in early adolescence potentially exacerbate the difficulty of acclimating to a new building [15].

The K-8 Center Model

As the name would suggest, K-8 centers educate all children in kindergarten through grade 8, eliminating the need for a transition to MS. As mentioned above, grade 6-8 students in K-8 buildings tend to outperform their peers in middle schools. While K-8 students *do* make a transition to high school at grade 9, the academic and social declines affiliated with this transition are not as dramatic, and they don't persist as long as the declines in MS [7], [3].

K-8 buildings do, however, present a unique set of challenges. It can be difficult to recruit teachers with the proper certifications and content knowledge to sustain this type of model. Additionally, building principals must understand the developmental needs of a wide age range of students and provide appropriate professional development to a diverse staff [2].

While the research on outcomes for older K-8 students is positive, there is no research to evaluate the impact of keeping younger students with older peers [14], [4], [5], making it unclear whether exposure to older peers is helpful or harmful to the youngest learners.

Finally, some researchers note that the K-8 advantage is hard to replicate. Districts that have recently converted middle schools into K-8 buildings see fewer advantages than long-established K-8 centers [11], [2].

Conclusion

While most of the data supports the belief that students in K-8 buildings outperform those in traditional middle schools, the problem is nuanced. Changing a district's grade configuration is difficult and expensive [1]. Plus, if instructional practices are not developmentally appropriate, the grade configuration matters little [16].

Given these challenges, several researchers recommend reframing the debate. Rather than focusing on grade configurations, they advise a renewed focus on classroom quality and school community [16].

What does this mean for schools?

- Regardless of the grade configuration used, ensure all instructional practices are developmentally appropriate.
- If a building transition is necessary, support student needs by fostering strong school communities [15], [6]. Prepare students in advance for the increased rigor, and have a transition plan that involves families/communities [17].
- Identify groups of students most likely to struggle with a transition, such as students with disabilities. Provide extra support to ensure a smooth transition [17].
- If districts need to restructure their grade configurations, select configurations that reflect community values and student needs [6]. Weigh all factors, including transportation costs, school size, equity, and staffing. Structure configuration changes in a way that minimize disruptions for students.

Resources

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