

Appendix A

Optimum Grade Groupings

OPTIMUM GRADE GROUPINGS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Without fail, researchers agree that the quality of the program is more important than its grade level organization. In addition, there is a wide variation in grade arrangements that have been successful for a number of reasons. Three statements are consistent in school organizational research:

1. effective grade level groupings depend on the school district;
2. decisions of this nature are generally made on the basis of single issues;
3. finally, at least three grades per campus are warranted to achieve maximum parental involvement and student identification with the school.

School district economics, educational equity for minority children, philosophical positions regarding the nature of schooling children, and state standards are factors that spawn different grade-grouping plans.

In trying to make a decision about optimum grade groupings, there are hundreds of factors that could be considered. However, most factors will fall into one of three categories: the student, the program, and the support systems. When considering these categories, the resulting optimum grade grouping would be a PreK-5, 6-8, and 9-12 arrangement. This does not, however, mean that other grade groupings are not viable options for certain districts. The merits of several different plans are described below.

Most literature in school organization focuses first on the grade-grouping arrangement of either middle school, junior high school, or high school grades. Even more specifically, most concerns have to do with the effects of a middle school grouping on the placement of the ninth grade in junior high school or high school. Consistently, the results indicate the negative consequences of placing the ninth grade in a unitary grade environment, i.e., in a satellite campus isolated from other grades. There tends to be a lack of identification with a school housing only one grade level, and less consistency in programming. For example, ninth grade students have a lessened realization of the academic impact of their grades in the ninth grade (as being critical for college planning), and there is less parental involvement, since the students are perceived to be at

the school only a short period, i.e., one year. Isolating the ninth grade tends to increase the at-risk student population. Conversely, placing the ninth grade into pods, wings, or even stand-alone buildings of high school campuses that are oriented to grades 9-12 is ideal. But these multi-nucleated campuses need to keep one administration and be considered as one school operationally.

This same set of criteria applies to the isolation of the sixth graders into a single-grade campus, and also to keeping Kingergarten students apart from other elementary grades. Both these grades need to be a part of the academic programs and the necessary steps taken for optimum TAKS testing of elementary students.

Of particular significance, for several reasons, is the grouping of the PreK-5th grades. The six or seven continuous years in attendance at one school provides continuity for the children and allows access to one support team of faculty and staff, provides teachers an opportunity to provide curriculum sequences to optimize learning, and allows for close monitoring of student academic and emotional progress. This arrangement also provides greater opportunity for parental involvement due to extended time at one school. Finally, the PreK-5 grade grouping supports child development theories that recognize a distinct stage of development beginning at the age of 10 or 11.

Many school district superintendents in Texas during the past two years have been striving for the maximum number of grades per school to raise TAKS test scores. It is felt that academic programs are partitioned out in negative ways if the students are not affiliated with a single set of teachers and staff over a prolonged period; this makes the teachers and administration of each school more accountable for the test scores of individual students. In other words, even when TAKS testing has been completed for the year, there should be immediate interest in preparing for the next wave of TAKS tests, rather than a "rest" period due to the fact that the teachers and principal are not accountable for the current students' next round of TAKS tests.

The conclusions drawn above are supported in the current literature and the readings in the area of school organization and effective schools research, reports from other school districts across the state of Texas, contacts with the Texas Education Agency, the National Office of Education, university faculty in Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University, and university faculty in other states.

However, the Texas Education Agency, the National Office of Education, and other credible entities can offer no widely recognized and highly rigorous studies or data that would support one grade level grouping over another. Furthermore, after consolidating information from the readings, reviews, and discussions, from other school districts, and from the overall research in

education, there is no final answer to the question of optimum grade groupings based on educational philosophies and principles.

There is no clear evidence that one plan is universally better than others, and thus, many plans could be recommended with confidence depending on the unique circumstances within a given district. However, most districts that have single-grade or two-grade campuses have such a configuration due to maximizing the use of school facilities, rather than a focus on programmatic concerns and academic excellence for students. A school district should make grade-grouping decisions on the basis of what is optimum for that district in providing a quality educational program.

To summarize, evidence exists at the middle school level of the need for at least three grades per school, in that parental involvement is the key predictor of academic success and parental involvement is lessened with only one or two grades per school. The at-risk student population is impacted with less than three grades per campus. Thus, the middle school should typically contain grades 6-8. Similarly, the optimum grade grouping for elementary schools would typically be Early Learning through fifth grades.

Tables 1-5 on ensuing pages have been prepared to assist the reader in understanding the advantages and disadvantages of five different grade level structures. In addition, in an effort to provide complete information to the reader of this report, a research bibliography is included. The reader is encouraged to study these documents, particularly if additional detail is desired on the subject of optimum grade level structure based on —

- educational philosophies and principles,
- the desired social and psychological impacts on children, and
- considerations of ethnic or socioeconomic balance (achieved through small grade-groups or unitary grades per school) or other rationales for grade grouping -- that allow a greater geographic area to be encompassed per attendance zone if the grade groupings are such that there are only one or two grades.

Section

1

Alternative No.1 – PreK-5, 6-8, 9-12

The most compelling justifications for the PreK-5, 6-8, 9-12 arrangement follows. For the PreK-5 portion, the six years continuous attendance at on school facility during the early elementary years is significant. A plan that allows children to be on one campus and with one support team of faculty and staff, without interruption for several years, provides the time needed to produce an optimum learning situation.

The time span offered in the PreK-5 arrangement permits greater continuity of teacher-student and principal/administration-student relationships, as well as curriculum sequences so that the school could provide an optimum situation for the learners. The student's academic progress can be closely monitored so that there is less opportunity to overlook needed learning programs of important curriculum sequences necessary for individual academic and emotional development. This arrangement also allows fifth graders more leadership opportunities, and subsequently more student participation, that helps to foster greater self-esteem.

This arrangement also has a positive effect on parental involvement. It is recognized that increased parental participation in school events and activities increases the academic achievement of the students. The single elementary unit of six years offered in the PreK-5 arrangement provides the extended time to develop and larger number of parents available to provide support for school events and activities.

Furthermore, the PreK-5 arrangement supports child development theories that recognize a distinct stage of development beginning around the ages of 10 and 11. This age has been associated with a wide range of individual differences among the students that includes physical, social, and emotional variances. Although evidence of these changes can be observed in the fifth grade or even the fourth grade, child development theorists will often identify the year in the sixth grade as a time of change.

However, the placement of fifth graders is open to much debate among educators. Some recent studies seem to conclude that fifth graders in the intermediate or middle school unit is producing neutral to favorable results. It has been argued that this placement results in an increase in self-esteem and provides for an easier transition from elementary to middle schools. However,

there is a concern that most nine and ten year olds have not reached puberty and would be out of place in units that focus on students in emotional and transition stages. Being placed in a situation of transition of would be difficult for the immature fifth grader, while the more mature fifth grade students would probably be less affected by the behavior of younger elementary students.

A disadvantage of the PreK-5 arrangement is that while age and developmental specialists could be more concentrated in school units more effectively, the content specialists (art, music, physical education, science, etc.) might be more diffused and therefore unavailable to the fifth graders and other primary school students that are grouped together. The school district may not supply as many content specialists to an elementary grade arrangement focusing on older students where the content is presented more in depth. This would ultimately affect the presentation of content and special programs to the fifth graders who may currently benefit from special programs and contents specialists.

The PreK-5 arrangement recommendation necessitates a secondary endorsement--that of grades 6-8 in middle school. This arrangement, in conjunction with the 5-8 middle school arrangement, has come to replace junior high schools (grades 7-9) in many districts nationally.

Much of the recent middle schools literature and research supports the 6-8 grade configuration arrangement for the middle school years in highly positive terms. In addition, most administrators identify this arrangement as the most effective in terms of developing programs. In sum, while there is evidence of many organizational plans across grades 4-9 that are labeled as middle schools, most of the literature defines middle schools as a 6-8 configuration.

The most positive factor in the middle school organization is the opportunity for gradual change from the self-contained classroom of elementary schools to the complete departmentalization of secondary schools. This arrangement facilitates the organization of staffing to provide teachers competent for middle school development and content.

A second positive feature of the 6-8 arrangement includes the recognition that the ages 10-14 are a different developmental stage from the elementary years and from the high school years. It is the diversity of adolescents that calls for special programs and a separate institution. Their lack of similarity is what they have in common. The middle school arrangement recognizes and supports this child development theory and provides a program especially designed for the child going through the unique "transecent" period of growth and development (Wiles & Bondi, 1981). The 6-8 grade arrangement, as well as the 5-8 grade grouping, facilitates these types of programs more effectively than other middle school arrangements. Also, more favorable attitudes towards school and higher self-esteem of the students can be evidenced.

Finally, if the optimum arrangements herein discussed were established in a district, ninth grade students would be part of the high school. Many Texas districts place the ninth grade with the high school and most literature reviews supported this arrangement.

Foremost, this arrangement would place the 9th graders with the 10th graders who are most like them in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Additional arguments for placing the ninth grade in the high school setting include: increased student maturity levels, readiness for advanced instruction, readiness for social activities, competition, and an added year for school staff to focus on college-bound students (Lounsbury & Vars, 1978). This physical unification of grades 9-12 also permits better coordination of courses for the senior high school and easier record maintenance.

Finally, the ninth grade should not be split out as a separate campus. This isolation appears to significantly increase the drop-out rate, primarily due to a lack of identification with the campus or with administrators and teachers, either by the students or by the parents. Parental involvement is substantially lower with any unitary grade campus. Thus, it is important to keep the ninth grade as an integral part of a multi-grade environment.

A primary consideration for the selection of optimum grade-groupings is to retain at least three grades on any one campus in order—

- to maintain a high level of parental involvement;

- to encourage students to have a strong identity with the school;

- to allow faculty/administrators to gain a working knowledge of individual students.

Section 2

Alternative No. 2 – PreK-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12

In terms of developmental appropriateness and suitability, the research shows that children ages 5-8 are developmentally similar. Thus, a PreK-3 arrangement would provide the appropriate structure for maturation and development of children in this age grouping.

Likewise, in grades 4-6, students are developmentally similar and are progressing at a different level from the younger students. Their conceptual base has been formed and they are able to achieve differently, at different rates, and in a different environment. Students in grades 4-6 need more opportunity for independent learning and are able to function and learn in a more independent educational environment.

The PreK-3, 4-6 organization still provides for at least three years on one campus. For enhanced success of this arrangement, a paired or feeder school concept is desirable. This allows for support of parent/teacher groups to be established, as well as the development of student role models. Such continuity is essential for optimization and is a vital link between home and school. As with the first recommended arrangement, this link can assist in the establishment of cooperative programs using volunteers that benefit students, teachers, and parents. In addition, successful articulation across the curriculum (between administrative units) is enhanced with the arrangement when feeder or paired schools are utilized.

The PreK-3, 4-6 arrangement, as with the first recommended arrangement, can provide the primary students with the needed security of having one teacher all day long and the intermediate students with the needed orderly transition between the nurturing environment of their primary years and the subject-centered environment of secondary school.

With the PreK-3, 4-6 structure, grade 7-12 would typically be divided into a junior high (7-9) and senior high (10-12) arrangement. This maintains the basic philosophy and principle that a minimum of three years on each campus is educationally desirable. Furthermore, the arrangement recognizes the grades seven through nine as a special group and keeps them together.

This overall structuring provides maximum opportunities to develop student leadership roles (four different levels) while maintaining three years at

each campus. In addition, successful articulation across the curriculum (between administrative units) is enhanced with the arrangement when feeder or paired schools are utilized. The structure also provides excellent opportunities for stronger special program areas in the middle and junior high grades.

A primary disadvantage of the structure is its failure to fully recognize the developmental stages of children and adolescents, evident in the separation of grade nine from grade ten and also from the separation of grade six from grade seven. This organization also lessens the extra-curricular opportunities of 9th graders by placing them as an exit grade in one of the intermediate schools.

The requirement for three transitions in the school career lessens opportunities to monitor the learning needs of students and lessens the continuity of student- teacher relationships. In addition, this arrangement fosters a complicated record management for grades 9-12.

Section

3

Alternative No. 3 – PreK-6, 7-9, 10-12

In terms of student development, this arrangement does not have any significant merit over the other plans. However, continuous progress is a definite strength, as the students would remain at the same campus through the full range of elementary grades.

The greatest advantage in a PreK-6 structure is in the area of program development. This arrangement permits a maximum continuity in content and full opportunity for the administrators/teachers and students to develop strong relationships. The arrangement allows for students to feel more secure while they mature on one campus. They feel they know their teachers before entering their classrooms on the first day of school. This grade configuration also allows six graders another year to mature while giving younger students leadership and role models of students above them to emulate. Teachers have the benefit of seeing students longitudinally, which enables them to better meet their long term needs.

Support systems are less well served in terms of the provision for content specialists in the curriculum than with other plans; i.e., teachers with strong backgrounds in a single subject area are not as readily available. On the other hand, parental involvement is the greatest with the PreK-6 of all the alternatives considered. Regular faculty and the staff support could be reasonably well provided in this grade arrangement.

As with the second-ranked alternative, this grade level structure divides grades 7-12 into a junior high (7-9) and senior high (10-12) arrangement. This is a viable grouping, in that at least three years on each campus is possible.

As discussed for the previous alternative, this overall structuring provides opportunities to develop student leadership roles (three different levels) and maintains at least three years at each campus. The structure also provides excellent opportunities for stronger special program areas in the middle and junior high grades.

A primary disadvantage of the structure is its failure to fully recognize the developmental stages of children and adolescents, evident in the separation of grade nine from grade ten and also from the separation of grade six from grade

seven. This, combined with the fact that most junior highs adopt a high school program arrangement that emphasizes subject matter, makes the transition between elementary and high school more difficult. Furthermore, the record management for grades 9-12 is more complicated with this arrangement and extra-curricular opportunities for 9th graders are limited.

Section

4

Alternative No. 4 – PreK-4, 5-6, 7-9, 10-12

This grade level grouping is perhaps the least desirable structure discussed. However, one advantages of this organizational structure include opportunities for student leadership opportunities at four different levels.

A primary educational disadvantage is the failure to recognize the developmental stages of students. This includes the inclusion of fourth graders in elementary school while excluding fourth graders from contact with students in the fifth grade, despite their greater similarity to the fifth graders. This configuration also separates the developmentally similar ninth grade from the tenth and, likewise, the sixth grade from the seventh.

This arrangement also utilizes a two-year campuses, which decreases parental and student involvement and cohesiveness due to a rapid turnover. This campus structure also does not foster a secure and long standing teacher-student relationship nor does it provide older students as role models for the forth graders.

Another disadvantage is the three transitions over the school career which further lessens the continuity of teacher- student relationships, lessens the opportunities to monitor the learning needs of the students, and provides less support for the transition from elementary and middle schools. This structure also creates complications of articulation across the curriculum, complications in record management for grades 9-12, and also lessens extra-curricular activities for 9th graders by placing them as the exit grade in one of the intermediate schools.

Section 5

Alternative No. 5 – Unitary Grade Grouping

In some cases an adjunct or a satellite campus for students, most commonly for the sixth grade or ninth grade students, is discussed as an alternative grade-grouping. There is very little research that supports any form of unitary grade grouping. A separate campus for sixth or ninth graders does not maintain the basic philosophy and principle that a minimum of three years on each campus is educationally desirable.

The disadvantages of unitary grade grouping abound. In particular, unitary grade grouping lacks the continuity required to fully monitor the students' academic and emotional progress. Cooperative and special programs suffer. At the ninth grade level, drop-out rates are increased and even in lower grades, the percent of at-risk children rises.

Because the students do not spend an extended time at one school, parental involvement remains minimal. In addition, unitary grade grouping typically requires the students to deal with four or more transitional periods during their school career. Typically, the choice to put the ninth or sixth graders on the satellite campus would be used only as an interim tool by which to implement a more desirable group grouping.

It is possible, and quite commonly used in Texas, to place a ninth grade pod or wing onto high schools. Likewise, a similar pod concept has been utilized for the sixth graders at the elementary school, particularly if elementary space is available at one or more campuses, and middle school space is not available, i.e., it is less costly to build elementary facilities than to maintain adequate middle school space in high growth districts, for example.

In sum, it is ideal to keep students in a multi-grade environment, to maintain identification with the facility and its faculty and staff, to encourage parental involvement, maintain continuity in curriculum and programs that benefit specific grade-groups, and to allow students to become an integral part of, and take on leadership roles, as they matriculate through a multi-grade school.

Section

6

Anticipated Impacts of Grade-Grouping Changes

Any one of the following may occur as a result of changing grade groupings:

1. Achieving the desired level of ethnic or socioeconomic balance may be difficult under one or more of the ranked alternatives. With fewer grades involved, such as with a PreK-3 facility, the “catchment area” is larger, and, thus, there is an ability to attain greater diversity per school, with a smaller range of grades involved.
2. Facilities may not be currently available to accomplish any given alternative and facilities may be under-utilized or over-utilized under the other alternatives. For example, a multi-purpose room (for physical exercise) or other indoor or outdoor facility is often required if the fifth grade is located in elementary schools. Often, districts make the decision regarding grade groupings based on availability of classrooms in specific school settings.
3. Staffing costs may increase under one or more of the alternatives. There may be a need for more specialized staffing based on grade-group arrangements.
4. Transportation will be directly affected by all the alternatives, due primarily to the size of catchment areas involved in various grade-groupings.
5. Total costs of operation will be directly affected in all alternatives.

Section

7

Summary of Five Grade Groupings in Tabular Form

Table 1

Summary: PreK-5, 6-8, 9-12 Grade Level Structuring

Advantages:

- Provides a minimum of three years at each campus
- Requires fewest transitions between campuses during school year
- Encourages continuity of teacher- student relationships
- Contributes to successful articulation between administrative units
- Extends opportunities to monitor learning needs of students
- Extends time and opportunities for parental involvement
- Supports a neighborhood concept
- Provide a developmentally appropriate setting for each age group
- Provides a focus of grade level and content area specialists
- Permits sixth-graders with an opportunity for more specialized facilities
- Supports transition (middle school) between self-contained elementary and departmentalized secondary school
- Recognizes the trend towards four year high school arrangements
- Places ninth graders with tenth graders who more closely match them based on physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development
- Provides an extra year in the high school setting for development and strengthening of extra-curricular activities
- Provides more staff to focus on classes for the college bound
- Provides coordination of all high school curricula under one umbrella
- Provides the best grouping for recognizing accepted student social, emotional, and intellectual development theories
- Permits easier coordination of high school records
- Greater leadership opportunities for fifth graders

Disadvantages:

- Focuses content area specialists in upper grades
- Diminishes some opportunities in special program areas for fifth grade students

Table 2

Summary: PreK-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12 Grade Level Structuring

Advantages:

- Provides developmentally appropriate setting for PreK-3 students
- Provides a minimum of three years at each of the campuses
- Contributes to parental involvement
- Provides opportunities to develop student leadership roles at four different levels
- Establishes smaller elementary campuses
- Supports a neighborhood concept
- Contributes to successful articulation between administrative units
- Permits opportunities for special stronger science programs in the middle grade (4-6)
- Permits opportunities for special program areas in the middle grade (4-6)

Disadvantages:

- Fails to recognize developmental stages of children and adolescents
- Recognizes three transitions
- Does not necessarily provide for a concentration of content area specialists and facilities at the middle school level
- Ignores the trends toward four year high school arrangements
- Complicates record management for grades 9-12
- Lessens continuity of student-teacher relationships
- Lessens opportunities to monitor learning needs of students
- Lessens the provision of specialized facilities for 6th graders
- Does not place 9th graders with 10th graders, with whom they are more closely match in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development
- Lessens extra-curricular opportunities for 9th graders
- Does not facilitate coordination of four- year high school program

Table 3

Summary: PreK-6, 7-9, 10-12 Grade Level Structuring

Advantages:

- Provides a minimum of three years at each of the campuses
- Encourages continuity of teacher-student relationships
- Contributes to successful articulation between administrative units
- Extends opportunities to monitor learning needs of students
- Extends time and opportunities for parental involvement
- Supports a neighborhood concept
- Provides a developmentally appropriate setting for each age group

Disadvantages:

- Diffuses age specialists
- Does not provide for organization according to adolescent development theories
- Reduces the possibility of access by middle school arrangements
- Ignores the trend towards four year high school arrangements
- Complicates record management for grades 9-12
- Does not place 9th graders with 10th graders with whom they more closely match in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development
- Lessens extra-curricular opportunities for 9th graders
- Does not facilitate coordination of four- year high school program
- Results in a more difficult transition from elementary to high school

Table 4

Summary: PreK-4, 5-6, 7-9, 10-12 Grade Level Structuring

Advantages:

- Contributes to parental involvement during primary school years
- Provides opportunities for student leadership at four levels

Disadvantages:

- Does not recognize developmental stages of children
- Utilizes a two-year campus
- Requires three transitions
- Complicates articulation between administrative units
- Does not necessarily provide for a concentration of content area specialists and facilities at middle school levels
- Ignores the trend towards four year high school arrangements
- Complicates record management for grade 9-12 and coordination of four-year high school programs
- Lessens continuity of teacher-student relationships
- Lessens opportunities to monitor learning needs of students
- Does not promote a neighborhood concept
- Less support for the transition from elementary to middle school
- Does not place 9th graders with 10th graders with whom they more closely match in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development
- Lessens extra-curricular opportunities for 9th graders
- Older student role models for fourth graders absent

Table 5

Unitary Grade Level Structuring

Advantages:

Disadvantages:

- Lessens continuity of teacher-student relationships
- Lessens opportunities to monitor learning needs of students
- Requires three or more transitions
- Utilizes a single year campus
- Lessens extra-curricular opportunities for students
- Lessens cooperative and special programs
- Lessens parental involvement

Section

8

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