

ISD 110 - WACONIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

ELEMENTARY GRADES RECONFIGURATION

RESEARCH & INFORMATION

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Link: [Guiding Change - Elementary Grades Reconfiguration](#)

Link: [Guiding Change - 2024 Elementary Model](#)

OVERVIEW

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Section II: Interview Highlights: ISD 318 Grand Rapids Area Schools - Sean Martinson, Principal of West Rapids Elementary School

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SECTION I: RESEARCH

KEY FINDINGS

- ❖ Current research does not identify or support one grade configuration as the most effective. Research into the potential impact of grade configurations is generally inconclusive, with results that are difficult to generalize to other districts. However, some studies suggest that students perform better at schools with a larger number of grade levels. Another frequent finding is that the most effective grade configuration will vary by district, based on internal factors such as projected enrollment, transportation costs, school facilities, and community support.

The decision to reconfigure the early grades is typically driven by practical needs such as budget, space, and school accreditation. While schools may see additional benefits as a result of reconfiguration, these are not cited as a driver in the decision to implement the change.

- ❖ Critics of configurations that cluster students into schools with smaller grade spans often cite the increased number of school-to-school transitions as a negative consequence. Research on school transitions finds that academic loss across all content areas should be expected during transition years, though most studies focus on the elementary-to-middle or middle-to-high school transitions. *To address concerns and mitigate the impact of changing schools, districts should implement ongoing and comprehensive transition plans that engage students, teachers, and parents.*

- ❖ Proponents of configurations that cluster students into smaller grade spans highlight the ability to create more targeted programming for students. Districts with distinct elementary and intermediate grade-level buildings note the *benefits of being able to tailor both academic and student behavioral programs to a narrower range of student interests and needs.*
- ❖ Districts are faced with both logistical and cultural challenges when implementing a grade-level reconfiguration. **Administrators must consider student transportation, moving schedules and plans, staff contracts and distribution, and effects on school traffic.** *Additionally, teachers and parents must be reassured and encouraged about a new school culture. In cases of early grades reconfiguration, additional care should be taken when scheduling classroom set-up time and guiding students through a transition.*
- ❖ The critical success factors for a grade level reconfiguration are:



Planning



Communication



Collaboration

- ❖ Districts should plan well in advance and work to anticipate any challenges or consequences of a reconfiguration. Districts should develop project schedules and communication plans early in the process. Administrators should hold public forums or community questions and input, and be sure to be prepared with information and answers to common questions. Schools can ask teachers to box materials as they teach them, so that they can begin the moving process during the regular school day and save time and money.
- ❖ Districts should ensure reconfiguration plans are feasible before introducing them to the community for input. Logistical details such as building capacity, transportation resources, and school schedules should be considered and used to narrow down options for grade configurations. *Introducing configurations without proper vetting can lead to frustration and mistrust from the community.*
- ❖ To secure buy-in from teachers, parents, and students, district leaders should communicate about the plan early, often, and through multiple channels (e.g. emails, website, circulars). Schools should hold parent information nights in the evening, as well as student orientation events, to ease the anxiety over the transition.
- ❖ Districts must ensure that teachers across grade levels are communicating and sharing information around academic expectations. Teachers of younger grades should participate in regular meetings with teachers from upper elementary schools, so that they are familiar with the increased academic rigor and expectations of these grades.

- ❖ The division of elementary grades is viewed as a challenging transition with cultural implications. Many stakeholders believe that transitioning to a new school and a lack of exposure to older grades may delay the academic progress of students in the primary grades. Young students who are separated from older grades should be exposed to older students through other means, such as high school volunteer programs.
- ❖ Including Preschool in the reconfiguration may also require special planning and consideration to integrate Pre-K classrooms into an elementary school setting. Differences between Pre-K and K-3 instructional practices, teacher professional development, and daily schedules may create a disconnect within the school. Schools should develop specific goals for Pre-K integration and strategies that support integration. *Additionally, school leaders should support opportunities for meaningful interaction between both teachers and students in Pre-K and elementary grade levels, such as through professional learning communities, paired classrooms, and professional development.*

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

The following are potential challenges that districts should plan for and work to mitigate:

INTEGRATING PRE-K CLASSROOMS

One potential consideration that may be particularly important is the incorporation of Pre-K classrooms into an elementary school. As public Pre-K programs grow in popularity, researchers find that there is often little integration between Pre-K and K-3 programs.

- Using professional learning communities to create opportunities for staff across grade levels to collaborate and explore commonalities and differences;
- Discussing Pre-K integration goals during staff meetings;
- Partnering Pre-K and K-3 classrooms for projects to create relationships between both students and teachers across grade levels;
- Providing strong professional development for Pre-K teachers to match that of K-3 teachers; and
- Planning for the Pre-K to Kindergarten transition.
- Provide a coordinated continuum of education and care in a smooth, uninterrupted flow from Pre-K through Grade 3.
- Offer preparation and professional development for PreK-3 educators that blends sound elementary education teaching strategies focused on content knowledge with the child development pedagogies of early childhood education.
- Ensure that changes to a student's physical environment, instruction, and expectations occur gradually and seamlessly. In doing so, children can focus on attaining fundamental knowledge in language, literacy, math, science, social studies, and the arts, developing social competence, and developing the physical strength and coordination to engage in regular activity.
- Create indoor and outdoor physical environments that offer a variety of settings for different learning opportunities that support each child's unique needs and challenges. A broader repertoire of experiences and instructional approaches must be made available to children. The spaces in which children learn and develop should promote and provide for expanding approaches to education.

SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

The number of school-to-school transitions is often cited as a potential negative impact of clustering grade levels. Changes to school grade configurations may also result in additional short-term shifting of students between schools. Districts should include a plan for addressing school transitions in any grade reconfiguration as a way to assuage potential concerns. There is limited research on school-to-school transitions within elementary grade levels; much of the literature focuses on transitions to Pre-K/K, middle school, and high school. However, some best practices in these areas may still be relevant to elementary school transitions. Research on elementary-to-middle school transitions recommends that school districts create ongoing and comprehensive transition plans that engage students, teachers, and parents in the process. Transition activities should occur before, during, and after a school change takes place and should support students and create opportunities for learning about and integrating into their new school environment.

A joint position paper from the National Middle School Association and the National Association of Elementary School Principals identifies **three key attributes of a successful school transition** program, including:

1. A sensitivity to the anxieties accompanying a move to a new school setting;
2. The importance of parents and teachers as partners in this effort; and
3. The recognition that becoming comfortable in a new school setting is an ongoing process, not a single event.

Recommendations to ease school transitions include:

- Make the planning, implementation, and evaluation of transition activities an annual focus, beginning in the intermediate grades of the elementary school.
- Become knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of young adolescents in transition.
- Engage in collaborative planning with teachers at the elementary and middle levels to ensure a smooth academic transition that recognizes and accommodates variations in curricula across feeder schools.
- Keep parents informed, help them become skilled in dealing with issues related to transition, and welcome their participation in their children's education.
- Provide programs, activities, and curricula to help students understand and cope successfully with the challenges of transition.

OTHER POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Here are other potential challenges that may result from grade clustering. These challenges relate to parent involvement, student opportunities, transportation, and facilities:

Parent engagement – Parent volunteers may be spread thinner across multiple schools and PTO groups and could be further limited if distances between home and school increase.

Student mentorship – Opportunities for older students to mentor and tutor younger students may be limited if fewer grade levels are housed at the same school.

Transportation - Costs and complexity may increase due to the need for multiple bus runs and separate bus pick-ups for children in the same family.

Facilities - Building design and infrastructure may not support additional same-grade classrooms or may require renovations.

Neighborhood schools – Consolidating grade levels into one school may result in the loss of a neighborhood's school or shifting of historic school boundaries; community members and parents may resist these changes.

SECTION II: INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Two phone interviews with ISD 318 Grand Rapids Area Schools - Sean Martinson, Principal of West Rapids Elementary School highlighted the following:

ISD 318 in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, implemented a reconfiguration plan, which included changes to East and West elementary schools to grade-level buildings, with:

- East Elementary housing preschool through second grade
- West Elementary housing third through fifth grade

This change was intended to facilitate more equitable distribution of students if future adjustments to classroom needs are made.

Key Components of the Reconfiguration Plan:

- **Grade-Level Elementary Schools:** East and West Elementary Schools would be reorganized, with one focusing on preschool through second grade and the other on third through fifth grade.
- **Improved Class Size Management:** This reconfiguration aims to make it easier to distribute students more evenly across classrooms if adjustments to classroom needs are necessary in the future, [says Megan Buffington of KAXE](#).
- **Teacher Collaboration:** The new structure is expected to allow for greater collaboration among teachers within the same grade level.
- **Financial Considerations:** The reconfiguration itself is not intended to save money but rather to optimize resource allocation in the face of potential budget cuts.

SHIFTS IN PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL YEAR:

TOPIC	1-2 YEARS PRIOR	FALL	WINTER	SPRING
Communication				
Perspectives				
Allocating Resources				
Culture of the Building				
Transitioning Students				
Transportation				
Class Sizes				
Events/Field Trips				
Special Education Center-Based Programming				

SECTION III: COST ANALYSIS & SPACE ANALYSIS

- Comments noted in the presentation

SECTION IV: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

- Clear and timely communication is critical throughout the process.
- Be alert to changing perspectives. Parent and Teacher perspectives of the transition shifted throughout the school year: FALL/WINTER/SPRING
- Allocating Resources according to need is important: Counselor, Title 1, Reading Specialist, Gifted/High Achiever
- Extra support for Kindergarten
- Culture of the building - bringing teachers/staff together
- Transitioning students: Special Education Transition Meetings
- Manageable class sizes
- Customize Specialist Choices for the grade configuration
- Social/Emotional Focus - Mental Health Support
- Customize events for the grade configuration
- No construction/remodel
- Moving classrooms/materials needed a comprehensive plan
- Intermediate grades - independence- programming
- Customize Student Experience for the grade configuration
- Special Education: What about transitioning students? Relationships? Intentional Conversations
- Community Education:
 - Early Childhood Classes? Full Day Preschool? What about all our other classes?
 - Kid's Co.? Space
- Do you lose the small community feel? 4 sections vs. 8-10 sections?
- Students benefit from consistency and relationships; hence:
 - Primary Recommendation: PreK - Grade 3
 - Intermediate Recommendation: Grades 4, 5, 6

SECTION V: NEXT STEPS

Develop a timeline that includes the following:

- Collect data from other school districts
- Positive impact on the students.
- Cost analysis of a variety of options
- Space analysis of a variety of options
- What are optimal section numbers? Range of grades?
- Define PLC structures?
- What are the pros/cons of SPED Programming, specifically center-based programming?
- Begin discussion with expanded Admin. Team
- Provide School Board with Information Meeting that we are considering this change
- Provide staff with Information Meeting that we are considering this change
- Provide parents with Information Meeting that we are considering this change
- Collect input and have focus group meetings
- Share out opportunities that are beneficial for the change
- Other steps we need to take?