

EARLY GRADES RECONFIGURATION ANALYSIS

Prepared for Attleboro Public Schools

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In the following report, Hanover Research provides an overview of scholarly literature on grade level configurations and an analysis of two in-depth interviews with school Superintendents who have recent experience with a reconfiguration of early grade levels. The report explores the drivers, challenges, and perceived impact of the decision to reconfigure early grade levels.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

In the following report, Hanover Research (Hanover) examines the configuration of early elementary grades through a review of scholarly literature and an analysis of two in-depth interviews with superintendents whose districts have recently undergone a reconfiguration. Specifically, this report explores past research on early childhood education and grade level configurations, as well as the drivers, processes, and impact of early grade reconfigurations.

This report comprises four sections:

- **Section I: Literature Review** examines scholarly research on successful grade configurations and the impact of frequent school transitions, as well as considerations for implementing PreK within an elementary school.
- **Section II: District Profiles** presents a brief case study of the two districts interviewed, including the chosen reconfiguration, impetus for the reconfiguration, key stakeholders, and the perceived impact of the reconfiguration.
- **Section III: Primary Challenges in Grade Reconfiguration** outlines some of the difficulties—both logistical and cultural—encountered by districts during the reconfiguration process.
- **Section IV: Strategies for Successful Implementation** presents advice from participants on best practices for a smooth transition and efficacious reconfiguration.

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 on-going 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 for 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.

- **The proposed Pre-K-Grade 1 configuration 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.

SECTION I: LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a total of 373 public schools in the U.S. use a Pre-K to Grade 1 configuration. Many schools with this configuration are clustered in Texas (n=56) and Illinois (n=45); however Massachusetts has the third highest number of Pre-K-1 schools in the U.S. (n=24).¹

Given that this is a unique school configuration, literature and research on Pre-K -1 schools is extremely limited. Much of the existing research on grade reconfigurations relates to either middle schools or rural communities with a K-12 school. However, there is some relevant research related to early childhood and elementary school organizations, as well as examples of how other districts have considered elementary school grade reconfigurations. This section provides secondary information to enhance interview findings, and focuses on three themes:

- Past research related to grade configurations,
- Examples of how other districts approach grade reconfiguration, and
- Considerations for implementing a new grade configuration.

PAST RESEARCH

Current research does not identify or support one grade configuration as the most effective.

A 2010 literature review of research on the relationship between school grade spans and academic achievement found that there is “minimal empirical information” in this area.² In a frequently cited 1997 report on grade spans from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Paglin and Fager conclude that “Research has not provided definitive answers to the myriad possible questions about grade spans.”³

Studies that do exist are often inconclusive, with results that are difficult to generalize to other districts. Some studies suggest that the larger the range of grades served in a single school, the better students perform.⁴ However, many of these studies focus on differences between a merged K-8 school and more traditional K-5 and 6-8 organization. For example, one 2008 study shows that students enrolled in K-8 schools had “significant short-term beneficial effects on achievement, attendance, and suspension rates” compared to students enrolled in 6-8 middle schools.⁵ However, the study did not consider other factors that may

¹ “Elementary/Secondary Information System.” National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/>

² Dove, M.J., L. C. Pearson, and H. Hooper. “Relationship Between Grade Span Configuration and Academic Achievement.” *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 21:2, 2010. p. 273. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ880581.pdf>

³ Paglin, C. and J. Fager. “Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?” Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, 1997. p. 4. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED432033.pdf>

⁴ Wren, S. “The Effect of Grade Span Configuration and School-to-School Transition on Student Achievement.” ERIC, 2003. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED479332.pdf>

⁵ “What the Research Says (or Doesn't Say) About K-8 Versus Middle School Grade Configurations.” Education Northwest, 2011. <http://educationnorthwest.org/news/what-research-says-or-doesnt-say-about-k-8-versus-middle-school-grade-configurations>

influence these results, such as school size and performance. Other studies reached similar conclusions.⁶

Despite an extended debate over ideal K-12 grade configurations, there is little consensus among researchers on the extent to which grade configuration influences student achievement.⁷ For example, a 2010 study published in the *Journal of Advanced Academics* found that grade configuration alone did not account for differences in academic achievement.⁸ Multiple studies ultimately conclude that the most effective grade configuration will vary by district and should take into account factors such as projected enrollment, transportation costs, school facilities, and community support.⁹

SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

Much of the research on grade configurations relates to school-to-school transitions, and specifically focuses on the potential impact that such transitions have on student achievement. This is also a common concern cited by districts considering changes to their schools' grade spans.¹⁰ Researchers generally find that a higher number of school transitions may result in decreased student achievement and "affect instructional continuity and communication across grades."¹¹

Multiple research studies in the 1990s by John Alspaugh conclude that academic loss across all content areas should be expected during transition years between elementary and intermediate grades, regardless of the grade level. Achievement typically rebounds in the second year after a school transition. Alspaugh also found that high school dropout risk increases with the number of school-to-school transitions. However, this risk is greatest when transitions occur in higher grade levels.¹²

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Policy Statement of Grade Configuration." The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2008. http://www.ncmle.org/docs/grade_configuration.pdf

⁸ Dove, Op. cit.

⁹ [1] Paglin and Fager, Op. cit. [2] Dove, Op. cit.

¹⁰ [1] "Grade-Span Configurations." *District Administration*, 2005. <https://www.districtadministration.com/article/grade-span-configurations> [2] Craig, J.A. "Grade Configurations." *School Planning & Management*, 2006. <https://webspm.com/Articles/2006/03/01/Grade-Configurations.aspx?Page=1>

¹¹ Burkam, D.T., D.L. Michaels, and V.E. Lee. "School Grade Span and Kindergarten Learning." *The Elementary School Journal*, 107:3, 2007. p. 290.

http://www.academia.edu/6657104/School_Grade_Span_and_Kindergarten_Learning
¹² [1] Alspaugh, J. W. and Harting, R. D. "Transition effects of school grade level organization on student achievement." *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 28:3, 1995. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ505828>
[2] Alspaugh, J.W. "The Interaction Effect of Transition Grade to High School with Gender and Grade Level upon Dropout Rates." Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 1999. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED431066.pdf> [3] Alspaugh, J. W. "The Effect of Transition Grade to High School, Gender, and Grade Level Upon Dropout Rates." *American Secondary Education*, 29:1, 2000. <https://www.wantagschools.org/cms/lib05/NY01001016/Centricity/Domain/5/Alspaugh2.pdf>

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The literature on early childhood and elementary education suggest that schools should align instruction for students as they transition between preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school;¹³ however, there is very limited empirical research on the impact on grouping or not grouping these grade levels within the same physical location.

SchoolFirst, an initiative of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's (UNC) Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, argues that a consolidated curricular approach for students in Pre-K-3 is important to provide a foundation for future academic success. The Pre-K-3 approach incorporates 3- and 4-year olds into the larger elementary school learning experience, arguing that this "seamless education" provides the best opportunity for supporting students as they gain foundational knowledge in literacy, math, and other content areas.¹⁴ While the SchoolFirst approach does not require consolidation of Pre-K-3 into one school, at least one SchoolFirst school with a Pre-K-3 grade span did find that "the impact [of early learning] is maximized if the pre-kindergarten classrooms are completely integrated into the K-3 program."¹⁵

One study argues that there is some connection between grade span configurations and learning gains for kindergarteners. A 2007 study published in *The Elementary School Journal* compared mathematics and reading learning gains of kindergarteners enrolled in "pre-primary" schools, or those with only pre-school, Pre-K, and/or kindergarten classrooms, primary schools (e.g., K-2), elementary schools (e.g., K-5) and combined schools (e.g., K-8). While kindergartners in pre-primary schools started the year with the highest achievement in mathematics and reading, their learning gains were lower than kindergartners in primary, elementary, and combined schools. The study found no differences in kindergartners' learning gains between primary, elementary, and combined schools.¹⁶ The researchers suggest "that any effect of grade-span configuration on student learning is likely to be mediated by differential instructional practices, school-wide goals, and opportunities for kindergartners to interact with older children and for kindergarten teachers to align their instruction and curriculum with first-grade teachers' expectations."¹⁷ As with other studies on this topic, the researchers note the need for additional research on the relationship between grade span and student achievement.¹⁸

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Hanover's review of the literature revealed additional considerations to ensure a successful reconfiguration of schools and grade levels. Specifically, this section discusses potential challenges that districts should plan for and work to mitigate. Additional implementation

¹³ "FirstSchool and Pre-K-3." Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.
<http://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/firstschool-and-prek-3>

¹⁴ [1] Ibid. [2] "Seamless education." Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.
<http://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/seamless-education>

¹⁵ <https://www.naesp.org/principal-septemberoctober-2013-early-learning/power-pre-k>

¹⁶ Burkam, Op. cit., p. 287, 293-296.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 301.

¹⁸ Ibid.

findings and recommendations from the two interviewed districts are discussed later in the report.

INTEGRATING PRE-K CLASSROOMS

One potential consideration that may be particularly important for Attleboro 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.¹⁹ As discussed below, the experience of one Michigan school district suggests that special planning should occur around the integration of Pre-K classrooms into an elementary school setting.

Grier Park Elementary School in Lansing, MI, added a Pre-K classroom to the existing K-3 school in 2011. While school and district administrators valued a Pre-K-3 structure, the school found that integrating Pre-K teachers, students, and parents was one of the biggest implementation challenges. The school found that “differences in schedules, professional development, and financial compensation for teachers create a chasm between Pre-K and the rest of the K-3 staff.”²⁰ After the initial reconfiguration, it became apparent that the Pre-K classrooms had “no real connection” to the K-3 classes. The school used several strategies to bring about meaningful integration across the Pre-K-3 classrooms, including:²¹

- 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.

UNC’s FirstSchool approach, which provides research and professional development support to districts with large minority or low-income student populations, outlines “critical features” of a Pre-K-3 program, some which are particularly relevant to Pre-K integration. These recommendations include:²²

¹⁹ “Integration Between Pre-K and K-3 Programs Needs to be Strengthened, Princeton-Brookings Journal Finds.” Woodrow Wilson School of Public & International Affairs, Princeton University, October 26, 2016. <http://www.princeton.edu/news-and-events/news/item/integration-between-pre-k-and-k-3-programs-needs-be-strengthened-princeton>

²⁰ Stephens, R. “The Power of Pre-K.” *Principal*, September/October, 2013. <https://www.naesp.org/principal-septemberoctober-2013-early-learning/power-pre-k>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bullet points adapted from: [1] “Seamless education.” Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. <http://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/node/120> [2] “Teacher preparation and professional development.” Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. <http://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/node/118> [3] “Indoor and outdoor environments that support child and adult learning and maximize communication.” Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. <http://firstschool.fpg.unc.edu/node/124>

- 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

As discussed above, 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 on-going 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.²³ 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:²⁴

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

²³ Gilewski, C.D. and M.L. Nunn. “Transitioning Young Adolescents from Elementary to Middle School.”

²⁴ Bullet points taken from: “Supporting Students in Their Transition to Middle School – Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE).” National Middle School Association and the National Association of Elementary School Principals. p. 3. <http://www.nppsd.org/vimages/shared/vnews/stories/525d81ba96ee9/Tr%20-%20Supporting%20Students%20in%20Their%20Transition%20to%20Middle%20School.pdf>

The position paper goes on to suggest several specific actions that schools, teachers and counselors, and parents should take to ease school transitions, including the following:²⁵

- 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

In addition to the topics described above, Hanover also identified a number of other potential challenges frequently cited in the literature that may result from grade clustering. These challenges relate to parent involvement, student opportunities, transportation, and facilities:²⁶

- **Parent engagement** – Parent volunteers may be spread thinner across multiple schools and PTA 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.

²⁵ Bullet points taken with slight variation from: Ibid., p. 3-4.

²⁶ [1] Craig, Op. cit. [2] "Grade-Span Configurations," Op. cit. [3] Paglin and Fager, Op. cit.

SECTION II: INTERVIEWED DISTRICT PROFILES

In this section, Hanover presents a brief case study of each of the districts interviewed, including the chosen reconfiguration, impetus for the reconfiguration, key stakeholders in the process, and the perceived impact of the reconfiguration. Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section was obtained through telephone interviews.

Each participant works as a school superintendent or administrator and has knowledge and experience with early grade reconfiguration. Participant details are listed below.

- **Dr. Gary R. Mazzola**, Superintendent of Schools, Ashburnham Westminster Regional School District
- **Anonymous Respondent**, Superintendent of Schools, Anonymous School District, New England
- **Anonymous Respondent**, Anonymous School District, Midwestern US

ASHBURNHAM WESTMINSTER REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Dr. Mazzola has been involved in several early grade reconfigurations over the course of his career. He describes the most recent configuration of moving from a K-5 school to a K-1/2-5 configuration. In his interview, however, he focuses primarily on an earlier reconfiguration in which the district moved from a K-3/4-6/7-9/10-12 configuration to a K-2/3-5/6-8/9-12 configuration (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 2.1 Reconfiguration Model, G. Mazzola



DRIVERS TO RECONFIGURATION

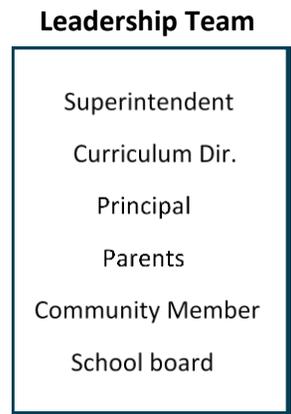
Dr. Mazzola lists two primary triggers to the district-wide reconfiguration. First, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) had notified his district that upon the next accreditation cycle, they would not accredit a three-year high school. In building a new

four-year high school to meet accreditation requirements and moving to a 9-12 configuration, all other grade levels had to shift as well.

Secondly, Dr. Mazzola notes that the state of Massachusetts was implementing a new comprehensive assessment system in which the core curriculum was spread over specific grade spans. Once a reconfiguration was necessary due to the building of the new high school, the district chose to organize schools in a way that aligned with the state testing system.

THE RECONFIGURATION PROCESS

Dr. Mazzola describes the reconfiguration as “a lot of meetings.” He describes a leadership team tasked with managing the process, which consisted of the superintendent and assistant superintendent, curriculum directors, and school principals. In addition to school leaders, parents from the PTA and impacted neighborhoods were included on the team, as well as a community member and a school board member.



Every meeting about the reconfiguration was advertised as a public meeting, with minutes posted afterwards. In addition to emails and backpack mail, a comprehensive monthly report was distributed throughout the district.

IMPACT OF RECONFIGURATION

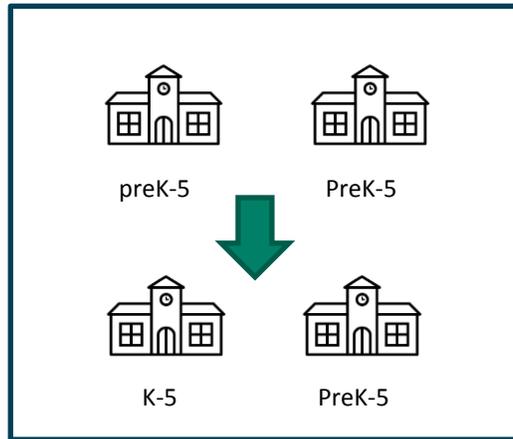
Separating out the primary grades from the rest of elementary, Dr. Mazzola suggests, has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. He explained that “Sometimes... it’s a good thing because they focus on primary skills,” and that the school can focus on “making [students] love love love school, so they become lifetime learners.”

Mazzola observes, however, that when students transition to another school, student achievement will “take a hit.” He attributes this to young students lacking the exposure of older learners, as well as a lack of teacher collaboration between the two levels to discuss students and set appropriate expectations. Mazzola explains that oftentimes, “an academic expectation is not ever stated and they stay in this primary world of play... everything is so wonderful and the expectation level really is ‘I have no idea what a third grader learns or what a fourth grader learns, because I do [not] associate myself with those people.’” As a result, young children remain in a play mindset for too long and are ill-equipped to transition into academics. Mazzola observed that when early grades teachers did not know what was expected of students in older elementary grades, it was hard to prepare students appropriately, leading to “shock” and a dip in student achievement. While measures can be taken to preempt the issues caused by school transitions, Dr. Mazzola avows that “the less transition, the better,” and advocates for a K-5 school when possible.

ANONYMOUS SCHOOL DISTRICT 1

The Superintendent of Schools at Anonymous School District 1 describes a recent reconfiguration involving moving all Pre-K programs into the same building. The district considered other models, including a Pre-K-3/ 3-5 configuration or moving Grade 5 to the middle school. Ultimately, the district decided that the Pre-K consolidation plan was the simplest option.

Figure 2.2 Reconfiguration Model, Anonymous School District 1



DRIVERS TO RECONFIGURATION

The Superintendent highlights the practical needs of budget and space as the drivers of his district’s decision to reconfigure the elementary schools. In addition to an overall district “[focus] on saving money,” he describes the geography of the town leading to an imbalance in school density. “Sometimes decisions are driven by research, and then other times it is driven by just a need...So it came down to practicality in this particular case,” as the district needed to create space in one elementary school, and there was space in the other elementary school.

While noting the benefits of this decision on teaching and learning (discussed in the ‘impact’ section below), the Superintendent classified these as “extra positives that came out of the space issue that really drove the problem.”

THE RECONFIGURATION PROCESS

Three key players led the reconfiguration project in the district: the Superintendent, the Director of Curriculum, and the Director of Special Education, working in consult with school principals. The Superintendent indicates that the small number of individuals involved in the process was due in part to the small size of the district, asserting, “Being a smaller district, we do not have these huge teams of people.” He does, however, note that the board of education has been involved in other, larger grade reconfiguration plans in the district.

Leadership Team

Superintendent
Curriculum Dir.
Special
Education Dir.

As Superintendent, he describes his role in identifying “the big issues” with his team, including what needed to be purchased and constructed. He describes the Director of Curriculum taking the lead in working with the school principal and ensuring all instructional pieces came together. The Director of Special Education took responsibility for communication with families to notify them about the new school location.

IMPACT OF RECONFIGURATION

The district deems their reconfiguration a great success. While unable to attribute a recent trend of improving reading scores directly to the new school configuration, the Superintendent notes that it may have been a contributing factor. One reason for this, he explains, is the collaboration between Pre-K teachers and the kindergarten teachers. He notes:

The collaboration between the Pre-K teachers and the Kindergarten teachers has been really good. They are pretty much right next door to each other, so the Kindergarten teachers can talk to the Pre-K teachers in terms what they are seeing [that is] missing in the Kindergarteners in terms of standards that may not be getting hit.

Additionally, the Superintendent highlights the benefits of concentrating all Pre-K into one school for professional development and assessment. He explains that “Just having all of [the teachers] in one spot, we can do more for concentrated professional development, so I do not need to bring a trainer over to the other elementary school.” When administrators come to observe classroom instruction, he notes, “they can go into one hallway of one building... [and] see how coherent the program is being offered, and what level of fidelity is being accomplished.”



Easier Assessment of a Coherent Program

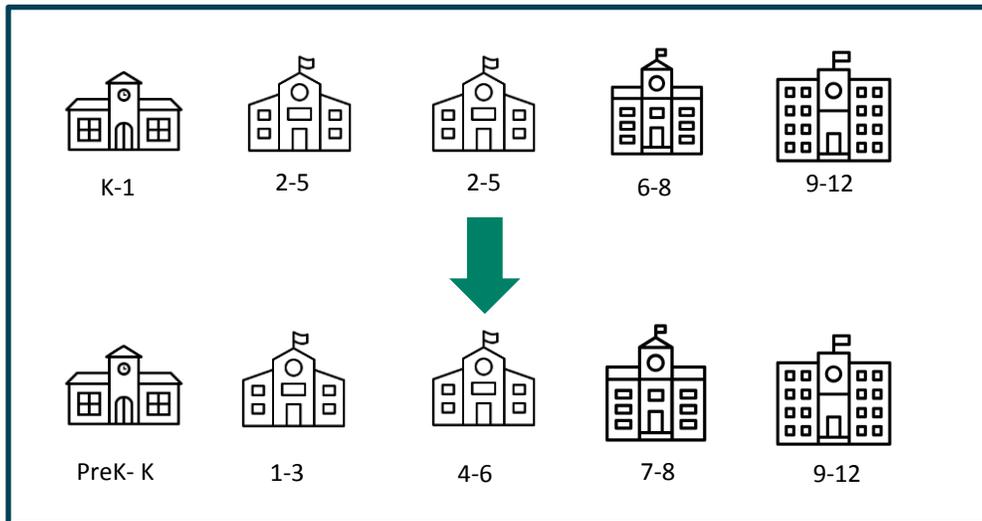
“[Observers] can go into one hallway of one building [and] see... what level of fidelity is being accomplished.”

Lastly, the Superintendent reports that teacher satisfaction at the elementary school is high, and the district has not received any complaints from parents affected by the reconfiguration.

ANONYMOUS SCHOOL DISTRICT 2

An administrator at Anonymous School District 2 describes several reconfigurations in the past few years. Initially motivated by enrollment growth, the district constructed a new building directly next door to its Grades 2-5 elementary school, designating this a second Grades 2-5 building. Soon after this, however, the district reconfigured again. With the addition of a PreK program, the early grades shifted to PreK-K, and neighboring elementary (Grades 1-3) and intermediate (Grades 4-6) schools.

Figure 2.3 Reconfiguration Model, Anonymous School District 2



DRIVERS TO RECONFIGURATION

After creating a second Grades 2-5 elementary building to hold its growing number of students, the district soon realized that this configuration created confusion and tension within the district. “That created this sense of divisiveness in the community,” explains the administrator, “that some students were being placed in the brand-new school, but other students were being placed in the old school for no rhyme or reason.” Furthermore, having multiple Grade 2-5 schools inhibited teacher collaboration in these grades.

When the district welcomed a new superintendent, he prompted called for a reconfiguration to address the issues caused by the split elementary grades. The administrator asserts that, “even though there are benefits for educational reasons, this was largely, I think, done to clean up a very confusing structure to the community.”

THE RECONFIGURATION PROCESS

While the district superintendent first called for a reconfiguration of the early grades, the task of deciding the new configuration fell to a district leadership team, consisting of the central office staff, along with all building principals. This process began through consideration of existing building capacity. “We started by looking at the number of students each facility could serve, so we could figure out what total number of children within how many classrooms each building could really maintain,” explains the district administrator, who insists, “we did not want to offer any options to the community that we truly could not implement.” After assessing school capacity, the team held conversations with school staff to determine the most desirable configurations and then “whittle it down to what we thought was realistic, what was educationally sound, and honestly, what would be politically palatable to the community.”

Leadership Team



The district administrator also describes conducting research, noting the use of his state’s Department of Education website to identify similar districts as well as high performing districts, “and then I just started looking and doing research on how did they band their grade levels so I could reach out to some different schools to find out how it works for them.” Once the district team decided on a configuration, this model was presented to the wider community for feedback. Community members were welcome to provide input and submit their own ideas, but the configuration ultimately was received favorably.

IMPACT OF RECONFIGURATION

The administrator from Anonymous School District 2 notes that while this was one of the most challenging initiatives the district has undertaken in recent years, the reconfiguration has also been the “the most rewarding.” He **notes** that having grade-level staff under one roof leads to ‘tighter’ and more beneficial collaboration. Furthermore, the new configuration has made programming between the primary and intermediate schools “a lot more targeted



Targeted Programming

“It’s sometimes hard to find authors and visitors that really can speak to what the kids’ interests are from the age of 6 up to the age of 12”

and age-appropriate.” As an example, the administrator explains a district program in which schools bring in a national children’s author to work with students each year, and notes that the district can now select authors who will resonate more with older and younger students, respectively. “When we were in these bands that covered anywhere from five to six grades, it is sometimes hard to find authors and visitors that really can speak to what the kids’ interests are from the age of 6 up to the age of 12.”

Similarly, the district has found that PBIS supports and interventions can be more targeted to specific age groups. The administrator notes, “Now that we are only dealing with three years of ages within any building, it can really be right on point, and make sense for those kids.”

Because the reconfiguration was implemented recently, the district is still waiting to determine the impact on staff satisfaction, as measured through a staff survey. District administrators acknowledge that transitions can be difficult, as teachers are distanced from longstanding relationships, but are hopeful that the new configuration will foster new and productive relationships.

The effect on student outcomes is also yet to be determined, though administrators predict that having Grades 4 and 5 together in the same building will help to boost performance on exams. Because these grades take a significant number of state exams, the hope is that more shared resources and time together will result in improved student outcomes.

SECTION III: PRIMARY CHALLENGES IN RECONFIGURATION

In this section, Hanover outlines some of the logistical and cultural challenges faced by schools when reconfiguring grade levels. At the end of the section, considerations specifically for the early grades are highlighted. Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section was obtained through telephone interviews.

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

Participants describe the challenge of managing the ‘moving pieces’ involved in reconfiguring schools and relocating classrooms. The primary logistical issues addressed by interviewees include transportation and access, building and moving, staff redistribution, and parent traffic, each of which is discussed in further detail below.



TRANSPORTATION AND ACCESS

One of the biggest challenges involved in grade reconfiguration is adjusting the bus schedule accordingly. In order to accommodate different start times, bus schedules need to be modified and bus routes may also need updating due to new locations for students. Dr. Mazzola highlights the importance of considering transportation, noting that this issue is often overlooked in the planning process. He explains that sometimes, district administrators realize after the transition that they have to change the bus schedules because some students will have new school locations or start times.

In Anonymous School District 2, backlash against a plan for three different school start times, combined with limited transportation resources, led to the new intermediate school running on two different start times. When asked what he would do differently in implementing the reconfiguration, the administrator answers, “we should have fleshed [out the plan for school start times] before we did reconfiguration... I would have made sure that there were not any technical issues, such as bell schedules or bus availability that would have hindered our ability to open up the school on the same schedule.”

While busing was not a concern for Anonymous School District 1 because they do not provide transportation to Pre-K students in most cases, the Superintendent admits that access to the Pre-K programs posed a challenge. Because the new Pre-K program was located in the more affluent side of town, there was concern that some of the less-fortunate children would not have the opportunity to attend the Pre-K program if their parents did not have a car and the school was now too far to walk. After implementing the change, however, he reports that the program is at full capacity.

Splitting up elementary grades into different buildings may upset parents who want their children to attend a local school for a longer time. While this did not present a challenge in Anonymous School District 2 given the proximity of the primary and intermediate schools, the administrator from this district acknowledges that “parents...can get upset that their

neighborhood school is no longer going to be where their child can go K-6, but instead can only go for half as many years.”



BUILDING AND MOVING

In the case of Anonymous School District 1, the Superintendent describes the need for “a pretty big build-out” in order to create a Pre-K classroom that met the standards of a grant the district had received for Pre-K instruction. He reports that he directed the principal and the director of curriculum “to make sure they had all the materials they needed and stayed on budget...They worked with the facilities director to make sure the room was built up to specification.” In preparing to move teachers to another school and classroom, the administrator from Anonymous School District 2 highlights the extra time needed to address a variety of unforeseen details. “It just took a lot of time to just sit and look at all the things we did not see coming,” he says, “everything from as small as chair height, or chemical cabinets, or access to suitable sinks for art teachers.”

While construction and remodeling are the responsibility of the project team and the facilities department, Dr. Mazzola highlights the challenges of staff moving their own classroom materials. Districts are faced with numerous questions around who, how, and when classroom items will be moved. Dr. Mazzola echoes common concerns from teachers: “Am I going to get paid for this? Who’s going to pack this stuff up? When am I going to pack it? Am I going to get paid for the day to pack it? Who’s going to move it? When is it going to be moved? When can I get my classroom set up?” In particular, teachers express concern over compensation for the time and effort of relocating, and want to be able to receive boxes early to start packing as soon as possible. The administrator from Anonymous School District 2 adds additional questions, such as, “Where could we stage all the stuff that needed to be moved in order for the custodial staff to clean?”

Mazzola stresses that staff prefer to move early, in order to have enough time to set up their classrooms and get accustomed to the new space. This, however, is not always possible and depends on when occupancy permits become available.



STAFF REDISTRIBUTION

In addition to concerns about culture change, described in the following section, Dr. Mazzola highlights the logistical issues of reassigning teachers to new schools. He notes that teacher unions can cause problems in the process of deciding how teachers will be assigned to schools, and, “unless there is language in their contract about that, a lot of teachers rebel toward school administrators...with their union about whether or not they have to shift grades or grade levels of buildings.”

While the one Pre-K teacher who was relocated in Anonymous School District 1 volunteered to make the move, the Superintendent admits that relocating staff can be uncomfortable. By reconfiguring schools to house all grade-level teachers in one building, however, districts can avoid the burdensome task of having to redistribute staff to adjust for changing class sizes. The administrator from Anonymous School District 2 notes, “It helps too with staffing...you

are always trying to figure out where to place new kids as they moved in to balance out class sizes...Now as new kids enroll, it just is very simple to know all my teachers that serve that grade level are all together.”



PARENT TRAFFIC

One unexpected challenge encountered by the Superintendent of Anonymous School District 1 was the increase in parents coming to the school at different times of the day, as a result of the different start times of the various Pre-K programs. “When you have Pre-K programs that start and end at different times,” he explains, “you have a lot of parents coming into the front door, so you have to deal with the issue of dealing parents in, and making sure you are protecting the safety of your overall building.” In this case, the increase in parent traffic became too much for one office staff member to handle on her own, and the district worked with the other Pre-K programs in the building to find additional staff to support her.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES

In addition to the logistical issues noted above, participants highlight the challenges encountered when school culture changes. In discussing the alternative configurations his district considered, the Superintendent of Anonymous School District 1 notes that the district rejected the Pre-K-2/3-5 configuration because there was “no reason to throw the culture into a tizzy, which is what some people thought would happen.”

BREAKING UP SCHOOL ‘FAMILIES’

Dr. Mazzola describes school staff as “creatures of habit” who may put up a fight when faced with the proposition of relocating to another school. He explains that bringing in teachers and staff from different campuses creates a new culture, and that teachers often want to stay with their friends at their former campus. “They want to stay with all their teacher friends [that] they have taught with for a number of years...it’s like breaking up a family.”

“[Teachers] want to stay with all their teacher friends...it’s like breaking up a family”

The Superintendent of Anonymous School District 1 also concedes that making new connections for teachers who have relocated can be a challenge, and schools must make sure these teachers are connecting to other staff.

PARENT PUSHBACK

When hearing news of a grade reconfiguration, Mazzola explains that “parents rebel.” He attributes this behavior to concern that the protected environment of younger students will be threatened by the addition of older grades. He maintains, “Whenever you take smaller earlier grades and they are used to being in their own little world or environment, parents get very apprehensive...they want to keep them young and innocent and protected and not exposed to a lot of the elements that society prevents for as long as they can.”

Conversely, in describing the parent response to splitting up elementary grades into primary and intermediate grade levels, the administrator from Anonymous School District 2 notes that, “from a parent and public point of view, this decision was lauded and greatly appreciated.”

LOSS OF PARENT SUPPORT

While parents may feel anxious about their children being in the same school as older students, Dr. Mazzola points out that in his experience in reconfigured schools, parents are actually less involved. When elementary grades are split up, he argues, parents will be involved in the first few years of their child’s schooling, but will drop off when their child transitions to the upper elementary school. He explains:

When you do not have a K-5 school and you do an early grades configuration ... all those parents that serve the schools as community partners, whether they ran a book fair...or they raised money through fundraising [...] all of those parents leave. They think their job is done, cause [they] did that PTA in that first school...I always had problems attracting parents because they’re like, ‘I’m done! I did that for three years I’m not going anymore.’

COMPETITION BETWEEN PROGRAMS

In concentrating all of Pre-K within one elementary school, Anonymous School District 1 combined several programs run by different organizations, including the district Pre-K, family resource Pre-K, and Head Start Pre-K. The Superintendent comments that having these different programs in the same school led to growing tensions and competition between them.

EARLY GRADE CONSIDERATIONS

In discussing grade reconfiguration, participants highlight several areas in which rearranging the early grades poses an additional and distinct challenge.

MORE TIME FOR SET-UP

Dr. Mazzola draws a distinction between primary teachers and others when describing teacher needs and demands during the moving process. He notes that teachers of younger students tend to have more physical materials and therefore require more time to relocate to a new classroom. He explains, “the primary people [set up] a lot more student centered classrooms versus when classroom teaching is a little more formalized as they get into the older grades. The primary people get very anxious about having to get into their classrooms and set up bulletin boards and learning centers.”

“ The primary people get very anxious about having to get into their classrooms and set up bulletin boards and learning centers”

SUITABILITY OF PHYSICAL SPACES

When deciding which grades would be placed in an older school and newer school building, the administrator from Anonymous School District 2 highlights the layout of the older building

as more fitting for younger students. He explains, “[Parents liked] the very traditional structure of [the older building], with just four very long hallways with traditional classrooms, that was very appealing.” Newer constructions, with more open layouts, are thought to be better suited to older elementary grade levels.

IMPACT OF TRANSITIONS ON YOUNG CHILDREN

While change can be difficult at any age, Dr. Mazzola emphasizes the particular strain that a new environment has on primary school-aged children. He notes, “change is always traumatic for primary early grades. They have a real hard time transitioning.” When splitting up the K-5 grades across several schools, students are forced to “learn a whole new set of rules over, a whole new set of routines, a whole new set of procedures,” says Mazzola. He clarifies that this goes beyond individual classrooms, and includes “building-wide movements” of schedules and locations of specific classes. This in turn creates an obstacle for student learning, since the shock of learning a new school system means, as Mazzola explains, “they lose instructional and achievement times because they spend more time trying to find out where to bring their tray up in the cafeteria.”

INCREASE IN CHRONIC ABSENCES

The Superintendent of Anonymous School District 1 describes the challenge of convincing parents of Pre-K students that the program is a daily requirement. He explains that parents “do not necessarily all see it as a year-long experience where you should not miss out on certain things.” For this reason, the number of children who have missed more than 18 days of school is much higher than other grade levels. He indicates that moving all Pre-K programs to one school has negatively affected the overall data for that elementary school, noting, “it almost doubled the percentage of kids who were considered chronically absent.”

SECTION IV: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, Hanover presents advice from participants on best practices for a smooth transition and efficacious reconfiguration. The three primary areas which lead to success are: planning, communication, and collaboration. Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section was obtained through telephone interviews.

PLANNING

Both interviewed administrators emphasize the need for thorough planning before moving ahead with a grade reconfiguration. Districts should establish schedules and communication plans far ahead of time. As the administrator from Anonymous School District 2 explains, “There is just so much more to it than what people think, which is packing up a bunch of boxes on the last day of school, and having to move to a new room. It is so much more in-depth than that. So that is why you have to start in the year as early as possible.”

CONSIDER ALL EFFECTS

Participants advise districts to step back and consider the ‘big picture.’ Considering the undertaking from every angle, including the district calendar and logistics like transportation, can avoid pitfalls further down the line. The Superintendent of Anonymous School District 1 explains:

I always ask my people to think about all the unintended consequences that can happen. Let’s really think about them and solve for them. In this case, since school got out late last year, we knew that we had to do [several building projects] right from the beginning...just in case something happened that slowed things down.

CLEARLY DEFINE ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

The administrator from Anonymous School District 2 urges other districts to be explicit when outlining the roles and responsibilities of key players and departments throughout the reconfiguration process, and communicating this early. He notes, “Building principals [and] district office staff are pretty busy, but they need to be told what their responsibility is. The district facilities guys... the district technology coordinator, all these people have things that are impacted by reconfiguration. They need to be brought in at the beginning, so you are not caught off guard.”

TALK WITH CONSTITUENTS

As part of the planning process, all participants stress the importance of getting input from the community. Hearing others’ concerns can broaden a district’s ability to anticipate and preempt any issues that arise. As the Superintendent of Anonymous School District 1 suggests, “you want to make sure you talk to as many constituents as possible in advance of making the decision. As much as you want to understand all the unintended consequences, you do [not] know them all.”

However, the administrator from Anonymous School District 2 urges districts to curate potential options and configurations before opening the topic for discussion with the larger community. He stresses the need to first think through what is feasible for the district, offering, “Ultimately you should not be putting forth things to your community that you do not have the capacity to carry out, or else you are just going to create a lot of frustration and mistrust in your leadership's ability to carry through initiatives.”

Furthermore, districts should prepare before holding public meetings, and should have a sense of the questions and concerns that may arise. The Superintendent of Anonymous



Hold Public Forums
“As much as you want to understand all the unintended consequences, you do not know them all.”

School District 1 explains that “We did [not] just go in front of a bunch of parents, unprepared for what they might say... We could probably anticipate about 80-90 percent of their concerns, but I would suggest you should be ready for those concerns and be able to answer them.” Similarly, Dr. Mazzola recommends that the individuals representing the district at parent forums should be “well-versed in what is going to happen.”

Lastly, the anonymous Superintendent notes that districts should be able to provide research on the efficacy and outcomes of early grade reconfiguration. Even in cases where a reconfiguration is driven by budgetary or space concerns, the presentation of research can help validate the decisions.

ALLOCATE AMPLE TIME

In addition to letting teachers and the community know about plans to reconfigure early in the process, and leaving plenty of time for staff and community feedback, Dr. Mazzola notes that moving should be done as early as possible. Teachers want assurance that they will have enough time to pack up their classroom materials and set things up at a new school. Providing staff with packing materials early allows teachers to pack up their classrooms in a timely and relaxed manner. Dr. Mazzola explains, “[if] boxes and tape were available, they could box things as they taught them and were [done using] them...the sting was not so bad in June.”

Dr. Mazzola also describes renting storage containers where teachers could leave boxes as they packed. This staggering of work over the regular workday, he claims, saves the district money and manpower. Furthermore, this proactivity saves the district money in honorariums since teachers require fewer days at the end of the school year to pack and move.



Move Gradually
“I did not have to have a huge moving crew, because half of the materials were already moved as the year went on”

COMMUNICATION

Along with planning, communicating about grade level reconfigurations is critical for a smooth transition. The anonymous Superintendent explains that “If people know what is happening and they understand why we are doing it, as long as it does not affect their lives too greatly, you will be in pretty good shape.” Dr. Mazzola agrees that, “If you keep [stakeholders] informed along the way...people are better able to receive it.”

All interviewed administrators note frequent and multi-channel means of communicating plans across the district. These include sending out circulars, communication from school principals through emails and backpack mail, posting an FAQ page on the website, holding public meetings and information nights, and posting the minutes for meetings. The administrator from Anonymous School District 2 describes sending regular updates to district employees to avoid any surprises or pushback:

Every two weeks I would send out these long updates alerting everybody to what was happening within the next two-week band, like what decisions were coming, what decisions had been recently made. I just felt like I constantly needed to communicate with them so they felt in the loop, and to stay ahead of rumors that might arise, which sometimes happens when you have a lot of change.

SECURE TEACHER BUY-IN

The administrator from Anonymous School District 2 echoes other districts in highlighting staff pushback as a challenge. In supporting teachers through this transition, he notes the importance of creating “different avenues for teachers to post questions and concerns,” and to ensure that teachers know the district is listening to their feedback. Additionally, this administrator suggests that communicating a promise of long-term stability can help to reassure teachers and staff who are concerned about moving away from their established school ‘families:’

We told them that if we reconfigured into these bands, grade level bands, that based on enrollment projections we did not need to see making any changes for 10 years. So I think they are always seeking stability, so they knew long-term that there would be stability.

Lastly, this administrator indicates the importance of communicating with teachers that the ultimate goal of the reconfiguration is to benefit students.

To support staff during a move, Dr. Mazzola recommends negotiating with staff when possible to arrange for some level of compensation for moving days. A district should offer honorariums or per diem payments for time spent relocating. Furthermore, districts should consider that primary teachers have more materials to move and should be given more time.

In terms of helping staff feel more comfortable in a new location, the anonymous Superintendent says that school principals should check in on teachers and ensure they have the support—both social and instructional—that they need.

SECURE PARENT AND STUDENT BUY-IN

All administrators describe holding evening or late afternoon information sessions for parents to learn about the grade level reconfiguration. Additionally, Dr. Mazzola and the administrator from Anonymous School District 2 describe additional opportunities for students to acclimate to a new school setting and to eliminate anxiety on the first day of school. These events are described below.

Parent-Child Orientation

“The school can lessen the tears and the anxiety...if you have some sort of orientation, but include it to be like a scavenger hunt type of activity where kids have a little scavenger hunt with 15-20 tasks that they have to find with their mom or dad and they mark it on their scavenger sheet...It can be fun things that they can do and they get a little map of the school and they get to explore with somebody that they are familiar with.” (Mazzola)

School Day Visit / Open Houses

“I used to do building tours...We put the future students on the bus with their classroom teacher and they came to the new school and they all got into the auditorium or the cafeteria and the principal welcomes them...But we want you to be familiar with the teachers and the classrooms, so what we did is we break the kids up into groups of 20-22 kids and we would assign them to one of the teachers in the building and they would take them to their classroom and show them around. Then they would take them on a tour of the building...it's an awesome opportunity.” (Mazzola)

“Our principals knew it's important to form new relationships with all the people...so we had several weeks of open houses at each of the schools so families and the kids could come in the evening and just get a tour from the building leadership...people seemed to appreciate that, and putting faces to the names and looking at each of the different schools.” (Anon School District 2)

COLLABORATION

SHARE BETWEEN TEACHERS

In cases of grade level reconfiguration that divide the elementary grades, participants note the need for opportunities in which teachers from older grades can share with teachers of younger grades what they are teaching and observing in their classrooms. Dr. Mazzola suggests that as part of teachers' professional development, districts create common meetings, cross-grade meetings, and team meetings for special education groups in order to set accurate expectations for academics at other grade levels. He believes that this collaboration helps teachers in lower grades understand the expectations of upper elementary classes, and allows the teachers to actively prepare students for these standards. Dr. Mazzola also recommends regular meetings for staff to create a smooth academic transition for students. He argues that it is critical to ensure constant communication about

expectations from upper grades when younger elementary school teachers are not regularly in that environment.

EXPOSURE TO OLDER CHILDREN

Dr. Mazzola argues that having older children in the same school setting can help rather than hinder the younger grades. Exposure to older students can, he suggests, help younger students transition from their 'play window' to a more academic framework, and not having these role models present can negatively impact maturity and academic performance. For example, he explains that "Even when the kids walk from the music room back to their homeroom when they are in 1st grade, they see how the 4th and 5th graders are working in their room and I think it makes an impact." In schools where young children do not have older role models, Dr. Mazzola suggests bringing in volunteer high school students to help with reading and math, as well as to act as a positive influence for young students to emulate.

COMMON GOALS

In cases of competition between teachers or programs, the inclusion of all staff in an early education council can unify them around common education goals can help eliminate this tension. The anonymous Superintendent notes that, in addition to conversations with the school principal, working together in the early education council "brought the other PreK programs into the same room...[and] helped people better understand that we are all in the same boat, and our ultimate goal is to help kids be prepared for kindergarten and have a successful start to their education."

Lastly, the administrator from Anonymous School District 2 notes that schools simply need time and patience to grow into new relationships and cultivate a comfortable and supportive culture. He notes, "In my old district, it took me probably three years to even start getting the culture at the reconfigured school [where it needed to be] ...it just takes time to form shared experiences and relationships where you feel like people are... collaborating, and not holding back ideas or still being in a competitive place."

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