

Background on Proposed Grade Alignment

After extensive review, the administrative team has reached the following conclusions regarding the proposed grade configuration. The recommendation is for the following alignment:

Six PK-3 schools of 350-450 students

Four 4-8 schools of 650 students

Instructional practices are the most important factor.

K-3 schools were highly effective because the staff can focus intensively on the developmental needs of the young child. Teaching strategies and student interests are more similar with this age group. This configuration saw significant increases in student scores. Research has also generally concluded that students in K-8 schools perform better than middle schools, but mostly based on the student-centered instruction that is similar to what students experience at elementary schools. We did not find specific research to say that one grade level configuration always outperforms another grade level configuration. There are suggestions that configurations that include lower grades in many cases outperform traditional middle schools (6-8 or 7-8), usually because these configurations are more student-centered.

Reducing transitions is also important.

Transitions are stressful and interrupt relationships. Fewer transitions are connected to higher achievement (NREL, 1997). This new configuration will reduce the transitions from three to one in grades PK-8.

New evidence for 4-8 groupings

Brain development research suggests that cognitive changes peak during grades 4-8/9. Apart from the first five years of life, at no other time does the capacity and functioning of the brain undergo such an overhaul (For a complete review, see *Education Leadership, April 2011*). By grouping these students together in manageable sized groups, staff can focus on meeting these needs.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL) suggests that districts need to look at their own configuration to meet the social, academic and developmental needs of students in their district. In order to get the benefits of fewer transitions, and make the best use of our financial resources, yet keep schools small enough, we believe PK-3 and 4-8 schools would best fit our district. The research from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL), and other sources (see below) suggests that districts consider the following:

- School system goals for student achievement

- Good instruction is more important to student achievement than configuration. However, the configurations will help our teachers be able to collaborate across grade levels and with teachers who teach at similar developmental levels. It also allows us to use our resources more efficiently. For example, Our reading and math resources can be shared in a building more easily when similar needs are placed together.
- Number of transitions for affected students
 - The district would have only one transition Pre-K through 8. This reduces our transitions from three to one. The problems with transitions can be helped by having good alignment between buildings and transition activities for students, but fewer transitions are correlated with higher achievement. We will be able to get to know our students and families well because students will be in each building for five years. We believe that one transition will not have as big of a negative impact as three transitions. We choose this over a K-8 school because of the opportunities for more teachers to collaborate at grade levels and because it allows us to be more fiscally responsible in aligning and purchasing resources.
- School building layout/design
 - The NREL research suggests that to make the 4-8 configurations successful, younger students should be separated from older students in different sections of the building. Having students in this configuration minimizes negative behavior often seen in older students because of the opportunities for leadership. The number of students in grades 6-8 will also be cut in half because of the students going to four buildings instead of two.
 - K-3 (or PK-3) buildings were found to be very beneficial in order to allow the staff to focus intensively on the developmental needs of the young child. Teaching strategies and student interests are more similar with this age group. This configuration saw significant increases in student scores.
- Number of students
 - Our current Middle schools are 750 students and our 4-8 schools would have 660 students. Our current elementary schools are between 275 and 400 students. Our new elementary schools would be about 440 students.
 - Schools with larger grade spans and fewer transitions have more opportunities for cross-age activities, teacher collaboration across grade levels and higher parent involvement. This configuration would give us 5 year spans to get to know our students and families and help to address their individual needs.
- Effects on parent involvement
 - The larger time span of students in a building helps to maximize parent and family involvement.
- Socioeconomic status of the student population
 - The socioeconomic status of students in the Beloit School District is low. Fewer transitions and better alignment of grade levels and resources will help our low socioeconomic students.
 - In addition to fewer transitions and alignment, the best help for students in low socioeconomic households is good instruction.
- Effects on costs and other schools

- We would close two schools, reconfiguring our staff to save money and create situations where we would be able to reduce some administrative staff, secretaries, support staff and possibly teaching staff. As in the past, we would use attrition for the reconfiguration of staff. Our goal is not to lose our current staff.
- Specialists would be able to better serve students because their time would be spent in buildings rather than spending time traveling between buildings.
- Transportation costs
 - We would be reducing our number of buildings by two, therefore reducing our transportation costs. This will also reduce the number of students going from building to building throughout the year because there will be fewer buildings.

The summary of the research from NREL says that “no particular sequence of grade spans is perfect or in itself guarantees student achievement and social adjustment.” After considering social, emotional and academic achievement as well as economic factors, we believe that the PK-3 and 4-8 configurations best fit the needs of the Beloit School District.

http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues006.shtml (summary of the second link)

http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/464

<http://educationnorthwest.org/print/1694>

<http://education.missouristate.edu/assets/isi/GradeSpanPB2004.pdf>