Grade Configuration Research Team
Research Summary

Articles were submitted for consideration by the facilitator as well as research team members. Each article brought forward for consideration was discussed and key findings were recorded. The following comprehensive list summarizes these key findings.

Grade Configuration Findings:

- Transitioning to a new building in grades 6-7 is more detrimental academically than transitioning in grade 9 (noted in two different studies)
- K-8 buildings have more consistent academic achievement
- Building transitions are more disruptive for younger students than older students
- Grade configuration has no significant impact on student achievement (study which included all public schools in Arkansas)
- More transition = less connection = more dropouts
- Transitioning in 6th grade → more behavior & academic decline in first year
- Right size school = 300 students
- Academic achievement higher at K-5 building as compared to 5-6 building
- Grade configuration should support academic and developmental needs
- Misconception that transitions negatively impact achievement
- Fewer transitions are less stressful for students which results in greater academic achievement
- Research inconclusive → look for configurations that best meet students' needs
- Move to neighborhood schools with larger grade spans/serve more grade levels
- Older students exhibit better academic performance in schools with larger grade spans
- Small schools benefit adolescents due to the relationships built
- Discipline referrals are more frequent in MS as compared to K-8 schools
- One researcher suggested considering "Elem-Middle" concept although the research was inconclusive

From this research, the team generated additional search words for continued research. The second collection of research articles focused on the themes of the number of building transitions and student safety/belongingness needs.

Building Transitions and Safety/Belongingness Findings:

- Benefits to K-8 grade configuration include fewer transitions, safety, parent satisfaction, and variety of programs that can be offered
- Social capital (respect, engagement, connections) increases in neighborhood schools

- Violence/bullying decrease in frequency in neighborhood schools
- Right size school = 500 max for elem.; 1000 max for sec.; benefits include:
    - Fewer class sections per grade
    - Higher graduation rates
    - Better attendance
    - Better social behavior
- Middle school transitions are most difficult resulting in academic performance decline; "Middle School Model" helps with these transitions
- Connections & relationships most important to academic achievement
- Quality transition programs lead to more resilience and coping skills
- Fewer transition = fewer dropouts
- Small school size → fewer dropouts
- Highest dropout rate when last school transition occurs at grade 10
- Difference in student/teacher relationships in middle school could lead to decreased academic achievement
- Pyramid transition (multiple elementary buildings feeding into one middle school) is more problematic for students
- Belonging/trust/connection to others is important to student success
- Transitioning to a new school provides a chance for a fresh start
- Transition = coping skills; learning to cope is necessary
- Transitions should be accompanied by a quality transition program which emphasizes a connection between student, staff and community
- When students remain in one place longer, they build continuity with norms & relationships (peers & staff)
- Keeping students in the same school (ie. reducing number of building changes) alleviates some of the issues middle school students deal with
- Building transitions are even more detrimental for disadvantaged students due to lack of relationships
- All types of building transitions are associated with lower achievement during that year
- Fewer building transitions benefit students

From this body of research, each team member individually recorded three priorities as we continue our analysis of options. From this comprehensive list, each team member cast 10 votes. An individual could use all 10 votes on one priority, or he/she could vote on multiple priorities. At the conclusion of this activity, two primary priorities and two secondary priorities were evident.

Primary Priorities:

1. establish a plan with fewer building transitions for our students
2. determine a grade configuration that promotes connectedness with peers and school staff

Secondary Priorities:

1. determine the best grade configuration for our community (what works elsewhere may not be what we need)
2. maintain a unified district (we're all Warriors - let's keep it that way)

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