

Waverly-Shell Rock Grade Level Configuration

A Report and Recommendations
Submitted by

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Waverly-Shell Rock School District recognizes the importance of providing students with the most effective structure for learning. In order to achieve a successful environment for all students, W-SR requested technical assistance from McREL to investigate national literature and research, as well as to gather data from the W-SR community on K-12 grade level configuration. Specifically, the district set the following goal for the project:

Goal: Based on analysis of local data and national literature review, provide information and recommendations that will assist Waverly-Shell Rock School District in making a decision about K-12 grade configuration.

Grade configuration refers to the grouping of grades for a specific level (e.g., grades K-4 for elementary, grades 5-6 for intermediate, grades 7-8 for junior high, and grades 9-12 for high school). The current grade configuration for the Waverly-Shell Rock schools is K-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-12.

To achieve this goal, the following process and timeline for McREL's work was designed and executed from May through October, 2008:

- May 19 – Learn about the district and community
 - Visit all Waverly-Shell Rock schools
 - Interview each principal
 - Meet with Central Office staff
 - Present to the Board of Education
- June – October – Analyze national research/literature on grade configuration, transition from one school to the next, school size, class size, and ratio of special education students to general education students within a building
- September 29 & 30 – Collect local data
 - Meet with:
 - Community Groups
 - Teachers
 - Community Leaders
 - School Leaders
 - Central Office Staff
- October 3 – 10 – Complete an open-ended survey for all stakeholders
- October 13 – 30 - Compile data and write report
- October 30 - Provide report of findings, options, and recommendations

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) is uniquely suited to address this request. McREL staff has extensive experience and expertise in the fields of research and analysis, technical assistance for change management, and organizational development for school improvement. The organization is known for its ability to draw upon and contribute to the education research base.

Research and Literature Findings

Middle level adolescents are at a crucial time in their educational career. They are between the structured, contained classroom of the elementary school and the independent, departmentalization of the high school. Middle school students are also at diverse cognitive maturity – some are concrete thinkers while others think conceptually. These unique developmental needs are often forgotten in school districts

Deciding on the right grade configuration for adolescent involves examining the research practices; however it should also include the beliefs and value of the school community and the community at large about the needs of their middle school students.

Through this project, the Waverly-Shell Rock administration, staff, community, and Board of Education have been provided researched best-practices for middle level education students, specifically focused on grade level configuration. This research is intended to support the Waverly-Shell Rock School Board on upcoming decisions to realize the district mission of *creating a passion for learning that will sustain students for a lifetime.*

National Research and Literature Review

“Any school in the United States can operate at advanced levels of effectiveness – if it is willing to implement what is known about effective schooling.”
(Marzano, 2003)

Grade Level Configuration

The research and literature in the area of grade level configuration indicates that the focus of a school should be on what is actually happening in the classroom and the procedures in place to provide a supportive learning environment.

The research reveals that grade level configurations have little impact on student achievement (Hooper, 2002; Howley, 2002; Kinney, 2008; Klump, 2006; Renchler, 2000). Grade configuration refers to the grouping of grades for a specific level (e.g., grades K-5 for elementary, grades 5-6 for intermediate, grades 7-8 for junior high, and grades 9-12 for high school). In other words, it does not matter which grades are grouped together in a building." More important than the physical or structural setup is the appropriate selection and sequencing of curriculum, effective teaching practices and alignment of the written, taught and tested curriculum (Hooper, 2002). "When these are done well throughout the district, it does not matter which grades are housed in which building; students will achieve. While grade level configuration does not affect student achievement, the number of transitions (moving from one school to another) a student makes does have a significant impact. This research will be discussed in the next section

Transition

Transitions for students from one school to the next are a primary factor for influencing student success in school.

Research has demonstrated that when students transition from one school to another, their achievement declines. "It didn't make any difference at which grade the transition occurred – 4th, 5th, 6th or 7th, that first year there was always a loss in achievement (Pardini, 2002)." Additionally the number of transitions a student makes is correlated with the likelihood that he or she will drop out of school (Pardini, 2002). Thus, many advocate for K-8 schools. They argue that since students stay in one school for a longer time, they are able to develop stronger relationships with adults in the building. These relationships provide a support structure for students and increase their chances for success (Pardini, 2002). Others maintain that the transition between elementary school and middle school, regardless of the grade, can be mitigated if it occurs in a thoughtful, well-planned, and supportive way (Cromwell, 2006; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Leah, 2003). According to Shoffner and Williamson (2000), a successful transition between schools can help students form their identity as successful students. One component of such a program recognizes the important social needs of adolescents and helps to create a sense of belonging in the new school (Cromwell, 2006; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Leah, 2003; Shumacher, 1998; Eccles, 1999).

School Size

The literature and research on school size primarily focuses on the size of high schools. No research was found on elementary or middle schools' effective size. Though a variety of positive effects of small high schools exist, the most current research does not indicate small high schools increase student achievement.

The evidence to support the small-schools movement is mixed. While the average citizen tends to see small schools as beneficial in terms of class size and teacher attention (Johnson, 2002), the verdict is still out. One study demonstrated that keeping small rural schools open resulted in higher statewide student achievement; it also showed that achievement gaps based on income and gender were narrower in small rural schools (Black, 2006). Nathan and Thao (2007) find that small schools should be schools of choice rather than just fewer numbers of students. These schools tend to have better attendance, behavior, achievement and graduation rates (Nathan & Thao, 2007; Klonsky, 2002). Hoff (2008), on the other hand, argues that small schools have not resulted in increases in student achievement; however, his data did show that more students from small schools attend college. Until there is more evidence, it is perhaps most important to keep in mind that a small school does not necessarily result in a good school (Vander Ark, 2002).

Class Size

Class size research and literature indicates that small class size is most important in the early grades. As with school size, the focus of increasing student achievement should be placed on the instructional skills of the teachers, curriculum, and procedures in the classroom and school.

The research on class size indicates that smaller class sizes have a significant impact on student achievement in the early grades particularly when classes have fewer than twenty students (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Unfortunately the evidence for smaller class sizes in the upper grades is inconclusive, but students who benefited from small class sizes in the early grades retain their gains in regular-sized secondary classes (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). The evidence for the benefit of smaller class sizes on low-achieving students is mixed. Biddle and Berliner (2002) found that most substantial gains were among those students who were behind (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Another study found that "low attaining students were nearly twice as likely to be disengaged in classes of 30 students as they were in classes of 15 (Viadero, 2008)." However, Jacobsen (2008) argues that while smaller class sizes result in higher test scores overall, they might not necessary reduce the achievement gap between students in an individual class (Jacobsen, 2008). Again, it is important to recall that smaller class sizes will not automatically produce improvement." Research seems to indicate that schools and school districts considering a class size reduction program should provide teachers with the pedagogical skills, tools, and guidance that they need to make better use of the teaching and learning opportunities that reduced-size classes present (Holloway, 2002)."

Ratio of Special Education students to general education students

At this point, no research or literature exists related to an optimum ratio of regular education students to Special Education students within a school.

Community, Staff, and Student Input

Community Group Sessions

On September 29 and 30, 2008, a McREL consultant held input sessions with Waverly-Shell Rock administrators, schools, W-SR high school students, and community members. The purpose for the community group sessions was to gather input for the Waverly-Shell Rock grade configuration proposal. During the two days, 12 community sessions were held:

- 7 - voluntary meetings with each school staff, plus an opportunity at 3:30 pm on September 29, 2008, for any W-SR employee
- 1 – a meeting with high school student representatives
- 1 – a community luncheon with community leaders
- 2 – evening community meetings

Number of participants:

The number of participants for the administrative, staff, student, and community sessions consisted of the following:

- 51 staff member
- 10 high school students
- 32 Community luncheon
 - 23 non-educators
 - 9 educators
- 88 total participants at community group sessions
 - 3 School Board members each evening session
 - 7 administrators each session
 - 48 participants related to or a spouse of an educational agency
 - 30 participants not related to an educational agency

The questions for each of these group sessions were:

1. What do you value in the Waverly-Shell Rock schools?
2. What are the priorities for how W-SR kids are grouped to learn?
3. What should be the criteria for deciding the K-12 grade configuration for W-SR School District (e.g., fewer transitions, crowded schools, Special Education/GenEducation enrollment balance)?
4. Considering the impact of the flood and recommendations from the previous Facilities Task Force, how important is it that we address immediate and long-term facility needs?
5. What other questions do you need answered before we can move forward together?

Community Online Survey Results

An online survey was developed to receive input from all community members, particularly those unable to attend any of the September 29th and 30th sessions. The purpose of this online survey was to provide more extensive data from the Waverly-Shell Rock community on the preference of grade level configuration for the school district.

The online survey was made available to all staff, parents, and community members on the Waverly-Shell Rock website from October 3, 2008 to October 10, 2008. During this time period, the same survey was available at the district office to community members who did not have access to the internet.

Number of participants completing the Online Survey:

The number of participants for the online survey consisted of the following:

- 496 total respondents
- 285 (57.5%) respondents had PreK-6 grade children
- 264 (53.2%) respondents had a child/children at either or both the junior high school and High school children
- 240 (48.5%) respondents were in employed by an educational agency
- 255 (51.5%) respondents were not employed by an educational agency
- The age range of participants were
 - 22-35: 110 (22.3%)
 - 36-45: 216 (43.7%)
 - 46-55: 106 (21.5%)
 - over 55: 57 (11.5%)

The questions for Online Survey were:

1. Did you participate in a discussion group during one of the K-12 Facility Needs public meetings held on September 29 or 30?
Yes/No
2. Have you reviewed the Power Point presentation and the handouts summarizing related research findings available at the public meetings or found on the district's website?
Yes/No
3. My child/children currently attend/s: (please check all that apply)
 - i. W-SR High school
 - ii. W-SR Junior high
 - iii. Washington Irving
 - iv. Carey Elementary
 - v. Shell Rock Elementary
 - vi. West Cedar Elementary
 - vii. Southeast Elementary
 - viii. St. Paul Elementary
4. One or more members of my household are employed by an educational agency in the area.
Yes/No
5. Please select your age group:
 - i. 21 or under
 - ii. 22 – 35
 - iii. 36 – 45
 - iv. 46 – 55
 - v. Over 55

6. Due to the impact of the flooding on our community, the temporary location of Irving Elementary School, and the age, suitability, and repair costs of the junior high, I would support the construction of a new 5-8 facility.

Yes/No

7. Due to inadequate classroom space and future needs, I would support the construction of additional classrooms at the High school.

Yes/No

8. I understand a referendum (bond issue) may be necessary to support a portion of new construction addressing facility needs .

Yes/No

9. The district is using the services of an educational consultant (McREL) to develop recommendations for the W-SR School Board. What else would you like to share or for this consultant to know before these recommendations are developed?

The primary data from the Online Survey indicated:

| | Support construction of 5-8 facility | Support construction of additional high school classrooms | Understand that a referendum (bond issue) may be necessary |
|---|---|--|---|
| All Respondents | 91.7% | 77.7% | 94.9% |
| Respondents with high school students | 88.6% | 79.1% | 91.7% |
| Respondents with junior high students | 92.4% | 83% | 92.4% |
| Respondents with PreK-6 grade students | 91.6% | 80% | 95.4% |
| Respondents with no W-SR students | 93% | 74.1% | 97.9% |
| Employed by educational agency | 93.7% | 84.1% | 96.2% |
| Not employed by educational agency | 90.9% | 72.5% | 93.7% |

The following were the collective comment themes from all of the above mentioned sessions, as well as the district Online Survey:

- Support of W-SR education system, schools, and leadership
- W-SR schools display excellence in a number of areas – well established
 - Athletics
 - Arts – music, speech, dramas
 - Three language
 - Industrial tech
- W-SR offers variety of extracurricular opportunities

- Facility comments
 - Support of a new building
 - Solve current issues (Irving)
 - 5-8 building
 - 5/6 students separate from 7/8 students
 - 5-8 building issues need to be addressed before the HS concerns
 - Support of K-4 neighborhood schools
 - Concern for the existing junior high building use
 - Facility needs of all schools
 - Frustration with emphasis on Waverly and not Shell Rock building needs
 - Minimum transitions needed
- Financial comment
 - Concern about the effect of the state and national economy on a bond election
- Future projection comments
 - Long-term planning needed (e.g., future enrollment, space for expansion)
 - Frustration with lack of future planning needs for HS needed space with the last addition
 - Efficient use of resources and funds for previous building projects
 - Appropriate space and facility for programming
- Equal access to all resources and services comments
 - Integrate academics as well as meet the functional needs for the students
 - Space available to meet curriculum, learning, and technology needs
 - Need of adequate fine arts and performing arts facilities to replace JrHigh auditorium
 - Balance between SPED and Regular Ed students and socio-economic population – issues at Shell Rock
 - Balance of SPED students to General Education students

Recommendation

Based on the data results of three sources – researched-based practices and national literature review; administrative, staff, student, and community input; and a community online survey, McREL makes the following recommendations for consideration by the Waverly-Shell Rock School Board:

- The grade configuration for the Waverly-Shell Rock School District should change to PreK-4, 5-8, 9-12.
 - This recommendation is based on the national transition literature and research. The research demonstrates that the fewer transitions a student makes results in increased academic achievement during the transition year and higher graduation rate. This proposal decreases the number of transitions for Waverly-Shell Rock students from three to two.
- A new 5-8 building should be built as soon as possible to meet the facility needs of the school district and to prevent future loss due to flooding at both Irving and the junior high school
 - This recommendation is based on three pieces of data:
 - 86.8% and above of respondents to the online survey support building a new 5-8 facility,
 - Many of the community comment themes from the community sessions and the online survey indicate support of building a 5-8 facility, and .
 - A 5-8 facility will efficiently and effectively meet the first recommendation.
- The Waverly-Shell Rock District should provide detailed specific needs for the high school classroom issues. Further analysis is needed for including the Waverly-Shell Rock High school classroom space issues on the upcoming bond ballot.
 - This recommendation is based on two data sets:
 - While respondents rated this question fairly high, they rated it significantly lower (9.4% or greater) than their support for building a 5-8 facility,.
 - The comments from both the online survey and the community sessions indicate concern about and lack of support for building additional high school classrooms at this time.
- The district should continue its PreK-12 long-range planning for facility needs and projected future growth by using the process implemented by the Facilities Task Force. The planning of the 5-8 school should take into account the long-range future needs for Waverly-Shell Rock school district.
 - This recommendation is based on:
 - Participant comments from the community sessions and the online survey indicate a need for the district to do long-term facility planning for future growth and needs.

- The district should continue to balance the Special Education and general education enrollment numbers and programs throughout the Waverly-Shell Rock PreK-4 buildings.
 - This recommendation is based on the following:
 - Participants in the online survey and community sessions expressed the need to balance Special Education student numbers and programs throughout the PreK-4 district schools.

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