BEST PRACTICES IN SCHOOL DISTRICT CONFIGURATION (UPDATED)

Prepared for Williamson County Schools

July 2016

In the following report, Hanover Research presents findings from in-depth interviews with contacts at peer K12 school districts. Through these interviews, we identify practices and challenges in school district configuration. Specific topics include start times and scheduling, class size, and grade configuration.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In the following report, Hanover Research examines practices and challenges in school district configuration. Specific topics include start times and scheduling, class size, and grade configuration. We present findings from scholarly literature, as well as in-depth interviews with contacts at 12 peer K12 school districts (see Figure ES.1 below), including two districts that chose to remain anonymous. In addition to this report, the accompanying **Data Supplement** (Excel spreadsheet) summarizes key information for each of the 10 specified peer districts.[1]

Figure ES.1: Interview Participants

DISTRICT	PEER LIST	CONTACT NAME	CONTACT TITLE
Blue Valley Schools (Blue Valley/Kansas Unified School District 229), Kansas	National	Dr. Al Hanna	Interim Superintendent
Calvert County Public Schools, Maryland	National	Dr. Dan Curry	Superintendent of Schools
Franklin Special School District, Tennessee	Local	Dr. David Snowden	Director of Schools
Olentangy Local School District, Ohio	National	Mr. Jack Fette	Chief Academic Officer
South Washington County Schools/Independent School District 883, Minnesota	National	Dr. Keith Jacobus	Superintendent of Schools
Tipton County Schools, Tennessee	Local	Ms. Leisa Bennett	Middle School Supervisor of Instruction
Wilson County Schools, Tennessee	Local	Dr. Donna Wright	Director of Schools
Eagle Mountain-Saginaw Independent School District, Texas	National	David Priddy	Executive Director of Educational Services
Mansfield Independent School District, Texas	National	Jim Vaszauskas	Superintendent

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[1] Note: The Data Supplement excludes the two anonymous school district contacts in order to protect identifying information.

DISTRICT	PEER LIST	CONTACT NAME	CONTACT TITLE
Gregory-Portland Independent School District, Texas	National	Paul Clore and Crystal Matern	Superintendent; Coordinator of Communications and Education Foundation (respectively)
School District A (Anonymous), Texas	National	Anonymous Respondent	--
School District B (Anonymous), Texas	National	Anonymous Respondent	--

KEY FINDINGS

- **Districts appear to be more concerned about getting new sites funded than about directly managing school size.** District leaders often noted difficulties related to lack of state or federal funds and the need to seek school bonds and community support to invest in new or expanded school sites. In particular, district leaders expressed concern about the logistical pressures of district growth while waiting for new sites, especially support staffing but also managing pressures on teachers and students and offering sufficient, quality elective coursework. However, where new school sites are possible, district leaders may use the increased capacity as an opportunity to maintain small school sizes or adjust grade configurations. Research points to a nonlinear relationship between school size and student outcomes, in that both small schools and very large schools have demonstrated positive effects for engaging and educating students. One district leader described a "sweet spot" of high school enrollment at 1,600 to balance operational efficiencies and student opportunities.

- **Changing start times is extremely challenging due principally to busing and staffing, although expansion presents opportunities for considering larger changes**. Specifically, most districts included in this report use either two or three tiers of start times with high schools starting first, most often between 7:20 and 7:45, middle schools second between 7:30 and 8:30, and elementary schools last (with a wide range of start times) between 7:15 and 9:20. Several school districts, including Wilson County Schools, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD and School District B, operate a reversed schedule, where elementary schools begin first, followed by middle and/or intermediate schools, with high schools starting later, often between 8:15 and 9:00. Though prominent organizations have urged later start times, particularly in recent years, research is inconclusive about the benefits. Districts face significant challenges in terms of funding the transportation for start time changes, and implementing later start times for one school level (such as high school) often means assigning the early time slot to another school level (such as elementary school).

- **Most districts have a standard grade configuration (K-5, 6-8, 9-12) that they are not interested in changing**, with a few exceptions. Districts noted in this report with irregular grade configurations tend to offer alternative middle grade structures, such

as intermediate schools for students in Grades 5-6. One district (School District A) houses Grade 9 students at separate campuses, largely due to lack of capacity at current high school campuses. Notably, those districts with irregular configurations often report efforts to transition to the standard structure identified above. Contacts report that the standard structure is beneficial for improving budgetary efficiency, reducing the number of school transitions for students throughout their school careers, providing consistent academics, and offering more elective opportunities for secondary students.

- **Interest around grade configuration typically focused on middle grades, with some district leaders emphasizing the importance of "specializing" in the transitional years.** However, the research is again inconclusive about benefits of any particular configuration on student outcomes. As previously noted, intermediate schools that specialize in Grades 5-6 often exist because of a lack of capacity to take on additional enrollment within existing elementary or middle school facilities. Some districts offer varying middle grades configuration to ease pressure on elementary enrollment or to specialize instruction and service at the middle grades level. Others may offer unique opportunities, such as a K-8 magnet school or high school academy, that offer a select group of students a modified experience.

- **Overall, research suggests that school quality and other contextual factors are more important than school configuration to improve student outcomes.** District leaders mentioned a variety of topics that they felt more passionate about than school size, start time, or grade configuration, including: unique academic offerings like unified arts or career pathways programming; secondary school scheduling design to offer the best possible opportunities to older students; the impacts of standardization on building-level leadership models; staffing expenses as influenced by population change; balancing site equity; and communicating effectively with the community.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section summarizes findings from the 12 interviews conducted with national and local peers of Williamson County Schools on school district configuration topics.

OVERVIEW

District leaders placed the greatest emphasis on managing enrollment or population growth and funding issues; two districts (Tipton County Schools and Mansfield ISD) said that grade level configuration was most important of the major topics of interest.[2] However, some districts did not necessarily connect with any of the three topics of greatest interest to Williamson — that is, school size, start time, and grade configuration. Franklin Special School District's Snowden said, for example, "We're not overly concerned with those [topics]."[3] Thus, the findings present ideas and considerations that extend beyond Williamson's initial interests.

Furthermore, while these subsections explore individual themes in detail, **most district leaders see these topics as interconnected and interdependent**. For example, South Washington County Schools' Keith Jacobus emphasized that changes to middle grades configuration were not possible until it had the capacity to reorganize students and staff – a new high school was constructed.[4] Likewise, the anonymous contact from School District A indicated that grade configurations could not be adjusted to the district's ideal set-up until new sites could be built and existing sites expanded to accommodate increasing enrollment.[5] Therefore, readers should not consider any particular idea described herein in isolation of the full range of factors at play.

MANAGING POPULATION CHANGE

Population change is very important for many districts, in terms of enrollment decline, stabilization, or growth. Some, like Wilson County Schools, are currently experiencing "astronomical" growth[6] while others, like Blue Valley, are seeing easement after a lengthier period of fast growth.[7] Likewise, anonymous School District A, in Texas, reports changing

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[2] [1] Unless otherwise specified, information on Tipton County Schools derives from: Bennett, L. Middle School Supervisor of Instruction, Tipton County Schools. Telephone interview. March 14, 2016.

  [2] Unless otherwise specified, information on Mansfield Independent School District derives from: Vaszauskas, J. Superintendent, Mansfield ISD. Telephone interview. May 25, 2016.

[3] Unless otherwise specified, information on Franklin Special School District derives from: Snowden, D. Director of Schools, Franklin Special School District. Telephone interview. March 10, 2016.

[4] Unless otherwise specified, information on South Washington County Schools derives from: Jacobus, K. Superintendent of Schools, South Washington County Schools. Telephone interview. March 11, 2016.

[5] Unless otherwise specified, information on School District A derives from: Anonymous Contact, School District A. Telephone interview. May 27, 2016.

[6] Unless otherwise specified, information on Wilson County Schools derives from: Wright, D. Director of Schools, Wilson County Schools. Telephone interview. March 15, 2016.

[7] Unless otherwise specified, information on Blue Valley Schools derives from: Hanna, A. Interim Superintendent, Blue Valley Schools. Telephone interview. March 10, 2016.

enrollments following the "boom and bust" of local industry, while anonymous School District B indicated steady enrollment over the last several years.[8]

The intensity and suddenness of change also has varied within and across districts. One, Calvert County Public Schools, is now concerned about enrollment decline.[9] To contrast, South Washington and Mansfield ISD have experienced steady growth over the past decade, while Olentangy Local School District must manage a boom.[10] Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD reports relatively fast enrollment growth due to urban sprawl,[11] and Gregory-Portland ISD is projected to experience rapid growth in the coming years due to changes in local industry and employment.[12]

Regardless of their moment in time, district leaders identified a number of concerns related to enrollment change including:

- Real estate available for school site expansion within the district, impacting the ways it can respond to population change

- Real estate available for continued population expansion within the district

- The benefits and drawbacks of attracting new families to the district because of certain characteristics (e.g., academic excellence), impacting the potential for both continued growth and the diversity of new families the district might welcome

- Balancing school opening (or closure) and its attendant staffing costs (or savings) with providing equal opportunities for all students

- Benefits and drawbacks related to building new schools versus adding "portable" classroom space to existing schools

- Managing diversity changes in either a fixed or growing population

Diversity was not an explicit concern of most of the interviewed district leaders, nor was it a focus of the interview schedule. But some introduced experiences of diversity during discussions of demographic and population change. For instance, Priddy of Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD noted that an increase in Spanish-speaking students required the district to recruit additional bilingual and ESL staff. Similarly, concerning the experiences of Franklin Special, though overall enrollment is stable, the Hispanic population has increased. The district adjusted zoning to further encourage equity across school sites as these demographics

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[8] Unless otherwise specified, information on School District B derives from: Anonymous Contact, School District B. Telephone interview. June 27, 2016.

[9] Unless otherwise specified, information on Calvert County Public Schools derives from: Curry, D. Superintendent of Schools, Calvert County Public Schools. Telephone interview. March 9, 2016.

[10] Unless otherwise specified, information on Olentangy Local School District derives from: Fette, J. Chief Academic Officer, Olentangy Local School District. Telephone interview. March 9, 2016.

[11] Unless otherwise specified, information on Eagle Mountain-Saginaw Independent School District derives from: Priddy, D. Executive Director of Educational Services, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD. Telephone interview. May 24, 2016.

[12] Unless otherwise specified, information on Gregory-Portland Independent School District derives from: Clore, P. Superintendent, Gregory-Portland ISD. Telephone interview. June 14, 2016.

shifted. Furthermore, Blue Valley has had more apartments built in the area to accommodate population growth, which Hanna mentioned brought a certain diversity. However, he emphasized that "most of our district is not diverse: it's a suburban environment."

A NOTE ON FUNDING CHALLENGES

Most districts struggle to prioritize and optimize possible changes within restrictive funding schemes. Several district leaders commented on facing further budget cuts from the state level, or on the risks of asking local taxpayers for more funding. For instance, the contact from School District A noted that while the district needed new buildings to accommodate a growing student population at certain levels and to consolidate students in Grade 9 from a separate building into the main high school campuses, restricted funding and a limited likelihood of local school bond approval seriously limits district ability to plan for optimal school configuration structures.

At the same time, district leaders interviewed for this report acknowledged that many of the ideas for managing school district configuration during growth periods require proactive investment of new funds to attract support staff, to retain quality teachers, to change school schedules, or to build new sites. This is an important caveat to which many leaders returned as we discussed various school configuration options related to managing population change.

SCHOOL SIZE

In the 1930s and 1940s, Harvard University president James Conant "argued that large schools allow more diversity of courses such as Latin, Greek, and vocational preparation." At this time, the large-school model was widely favored by a range of educational experts, with economists and policymakers contending that large schools allowed for more efficient administrative structures. Beginning in the 1980s, however, experts began criticizing large schools for being "impersonal, departmentalized, and bureaucratic."[13]

Indeed, a *District Administration* publication touts a variety of safety, security, and connectedness benefits of small schools, explaining that "students need to feel a sense of belonging to the school community, that they are known, that they matter, that they're not insignificant members of a nameless, faceless herd."[14] The article cites an abundance of research supporting the notion that small schools lead to greater connectedness and improved social behavior among students, noting that students who feel connected to school are less likely to exhibit negative behaviors, including disruptive behaviors, school violence, substance abuse, emotional distress, and sexual activity at an early age.[15] To this end, prominent districts such as Chicago Public Schools are "committed to creating and sustaining small schools as a district-wide school improvement strategy."[16]

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[13] Walberg, H. J. "Smaller Schools, Better Performance." *New York Times*, March 11, 2010.
   http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/11/does-the-size-of-a-school-matter/?_r=0
[14] Kinnaman, D. "Small Schools, Big Benefits." *District Administration,* November 2007.
   http://www.districtadministration.com/article/small-schools-big-benefits
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

Despite the fact that educational experts increasingly favor the small-school model, the average size of public schools in the United States has been gradually increasing over the past few decades. Figure 1.2 shows the average enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States from 1990 through 2014, demonstrating that the average secondary school enrollment climbed from 689 in 1990 to 788 in 2014 (14.4 percent increase), while the average elementary school enrollment increased from 441 to 483 (9.5 percent increase) over this period.[17]

Figure 1.1: Average Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, 1990-2014
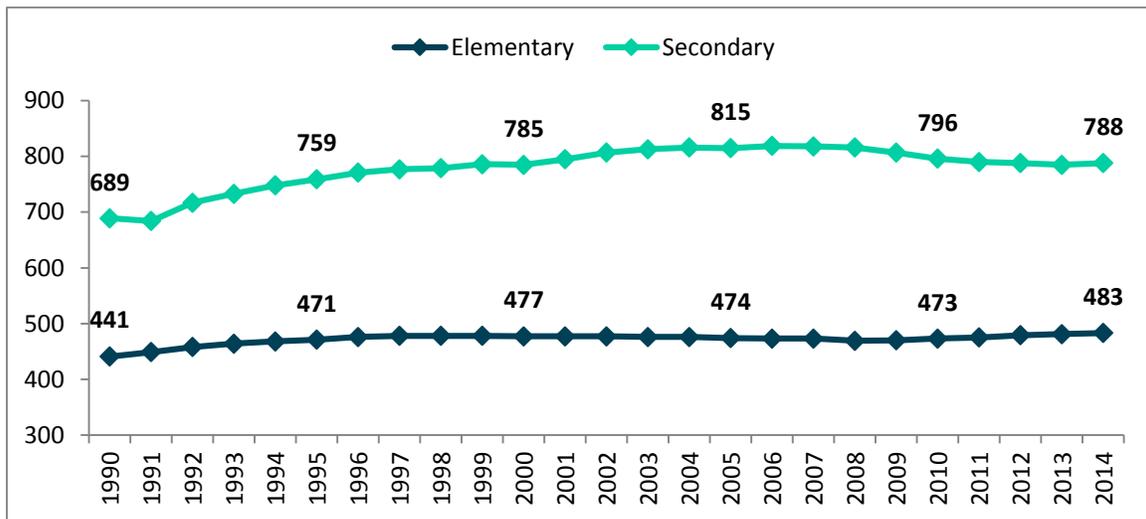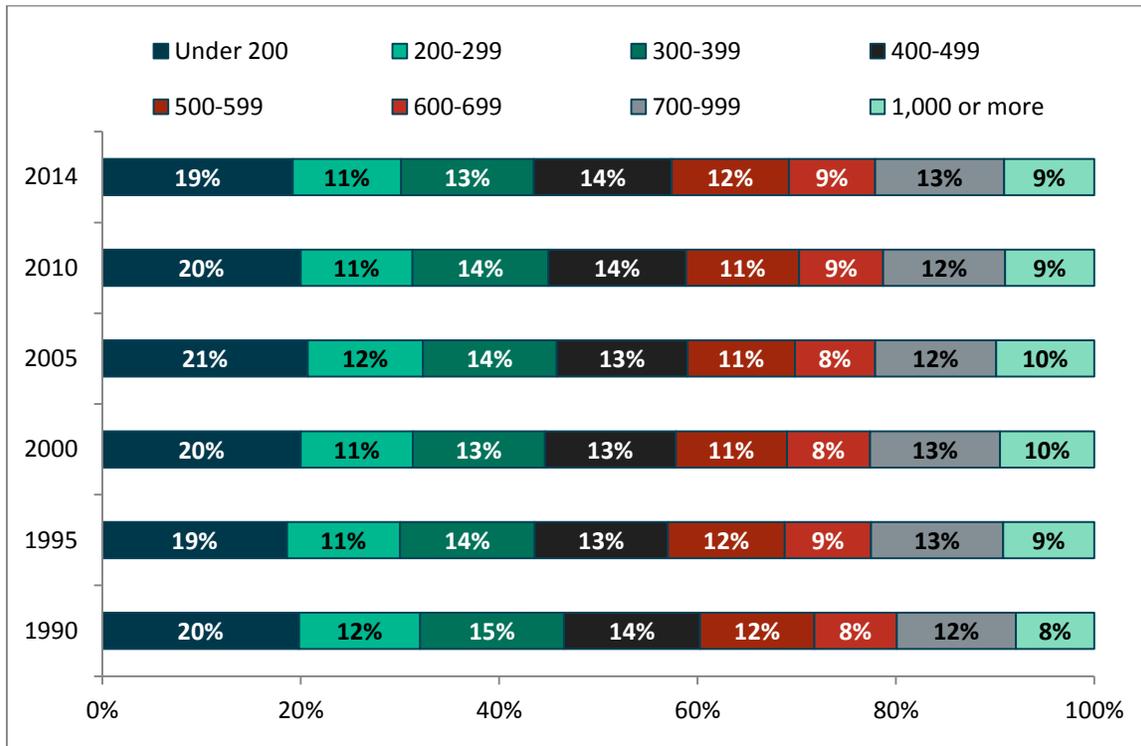

Source: National Center for Education Statistics[18]
Note: This figure excludes special education schools, vocational schools, and alternative schools at the secondary level.

Figure 1.2 shows the percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary schools by enrollment size over this same time period. Despite the gradual growth in enrollment among both elementary and secondary schools, this figure suggests that the proportion of schools within each size category has generally remained stable over time.

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[17] Elementary includes schools beginning with Grade 6 or below and with no grade higher than 8; secondary includes schools with no grade lower than 7.

[18] "Table 216.45. Average enrollment and percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary schools, by level, type, and enrollment size: Selected years, 1982-83 through 2013-14." National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_216.45.asp

Figure 1.2: Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools by Enrollment Size, 1990-2014

	Under 200	200-299	300-399	400-499	500-599	600-699	700-999	1,000 or more
2014	19%	11%	13%	14%	12%	9%	13%	9%
2010	20%	11%	14%	14%	11%	9%	12%	9%
2005	21%	12%	14%	13%	11%	8%	12%	10%
2000	20%	11%	13%	13%	11%	8%	13%	10%
1995	19%	11%	14%	13%	12%	9%	13%	9%
1990	20%	12%	15%	14%	12%	8%	12%	8%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics[19]

Throughout Hanover's interviews, school size was not a topic that most district leaders were most passionate about, with a few notable exceptions. The contact from School District A commented that small elementary school sizes of less than 800 students per campus were deliberately designed based on community preferences; however, the contact also noted that maintaining small school sizes can be challenging for the district budget, stating: "The problem in a really conservative 'no tax' kind of attitude community is they want these smaller schools but then they don't process that they do in fact cost more. Certainly our school district thinks it's best, the best thing for students so we are happy to accommodate that." At School District B, leaders maintain similar enrollment levels and demographic make-up across the district's two high schools (approximately 2,400 students in each) by splitting up feeder elementary and middle schools as needed, thus maintaining an equitable environment and creating "a unifying impact on the community."

Some district leaders commented on the challenges of population growth and its impact on school-level enrollments. Tipton's Bennett noted that the district must follow "the BEP formula"[20] by state mandate since 1992, with teacher-to-student ratios of "1:20, middle is 1:30, high school is 1:35." Wilson struggles to match population growth, with Wright noting:

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[19] Ibid.

[20] *BEP* is shorthand for the Basic Education Program, Tennessee's funding formula. See: "The Basic Education Program." Tennessee State Board of Education. https://www.tn.gov/sbe/topic/bep

"I have four high schools, [and] we're going to need two more in five years, but three of the four schools have over 2,000 students and the oldest building is just 14 years old. We have beautiful facilities but we're at capacity." Blue Valley's Hanna expressed that they had found "the sweet spot" in terms of balancing school-level enrollments with both operational efficiencies and student opportunity: 1,600 high schoolers per campus.

Thoughtful planning is key to any expansion project or configuration change. For example, Gregory-Portland ISD strives to plan for future trends in a systematic way by conducting frequent demographic studies and ensuring community involvement and communication at each step of planning. Clore explains further:

> … the first thing we had to do was to go out and do a comprehensive study of what was taking place in our community, particularly in regards to economic development, and have that project to impact the local school district. Without that, all of the rest of the time that we might do would be speculative on our part. **But by starting with the business and economic community, and building from there, we were able to assemble pretty reliable information that we have turned into a roadmap that we are following pretty carefully.**

Wright had more to say about the pressures of rapid district growth than did any other participating district leader. She seemed less concerned with the enrollment size of a school, and **more concerned with the attendant logistical pressures**:

> Growth is explosive: where do you get to the point where your buildings become too large? We almost have that expectation for high schools, that they're going to be large, but elementary schools too: **you push on the quality of what takes place there when you maximize size and stress on the teachers**. […] The staffing ratio, you want to see at 20:1 ratio. As you move up, ideally, in middle and secondary, ideally 25:1. But you're seeing high school classes with 30:1 or core areas with 35:1 and that's not acceptable, for that teacher or child.

Other district leaders explored similar logistical challenges. Olentangy, for example, also **struggles to attract adequate support staff** and must manage the hiring of "100-200 new teachers a year" to manage growth.

However, interviewed district leaders also refer to the anecdotal benefits of district expansion, including opportunities for efficiencies and personalization as well as for larger-scale changes in grade configuration and start time. Hanna explained that there is a balancing act in deciding when to expand and how big to make new sites: "It's cheaper to build them bigger, but you can only have five boys start on the basketball team. There's more opportunity for students at a small school." Conversely, Curry explained that in his declining-enrollment district, "for a while I tried to maintain the same course offerings at each high school, but […] sometimes it's the electives that take a hit" when demand is not there. Figure 1.3

"Small size creates the conditions to carry out student work that is active and collaborative. However, small size is not an end in itself."

below summarizes some benefits and challenges of site building as conveyed by participating district leaders.

Figure 1.3: Summary of Site Building Considerations at Peer Districts (n=8)

Benefits	Challenges
• Optimal size creates efficiencies and opportunities for personalization • Creating new sites introduces options for larger-scale changes (e.g., grade configuration, start time) • Less stress on teachers and students • May allow districts to achieve desired grade configurations	• Districts may struggle with attracting support staff • Requires significant funding support from state/federal level, or asking local taxpayers • While new site is under construction, district must manage logistics of growth within existing space

Research is unclear about a link between school size and student outcomes. Some research indicates a range of benefits for students in smaller schools, including: higher engagement in extracurricular activities; greater attachment to school; higher attendance; lower rates of misbehavior, violence, and vandalism; and higher graduation rates.[21] Similarly, some research has found that students in smaller schools have higher grades, higher scores on standardized tests, higher graduation rates, and lower drop-out rates.[22] Yet research often shows a nonlinear effect, whereby the largest high schools actually observe positive student outcomes that are similar to student outcomes at the smallest high schools.[23]

Diana Oxley of the University of Oregon explains, "small is not enough […] small size creates the conditions to carry out student work that is active and collaborative. However, small size

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[21] Darling-Hammond, L., Milliken, M. and Ross, P. "High School Size, Structure, and Content: What Matters for Student Success?" Brooking Papers on Education Policy, 2006-2007. p. 8.
http://www.brookings.edu/GS/brown/bpepconference/Harris_Presentation.pdf

[22] [1] Bangser, G. et. al. "Urban Education that Works: Moving Past School-Type Debates and Embracing Choice." Princeton University: The Woodrow Wilson School's Graduate Policy Workshop, January 2012, pp. 8-9.
http://civilsocietyinitiative.org/media/princeton-Urban-Education-that-Works_email.pdf
[2] Darling-Hammond, L., Ancess, J., and Ort, S. W. "Reinventing High School: Outcomes of the Coalition Campus Project." *American Educational Research Journal* 39, 3 *(*Fall 2002): p. 639.
https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/reinventing-high-school-outcomes-coalition-campus-schools-project.pdf

[23] Lee, V. E. and Burkam, D. T. "Dropping Out of High School: The Role of School Organization and Structure." Prepared for Conference: *Dropouts in America: How Severe is the Problem? What do we know about Intervention and Prevention?* Harvard Graduate School of Education, January 13, 2001, p. 2.
http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/school-dropouts/dropping-out-of-high-school-the-role-of-school-organization-and-structure/lee-role-school-organization-2001.pdf

is not an end in itself."[24] An *Education World* article concurs, putting forward the following small school considerations:

- Small schools need support from within and outside the system to flourish. All the schools in the Chicago study had outside partners that supported the school. The central administration also needs to support the creation of small schools.

- Small schools succeed only when teachers and administrators have enough time to plan the vision and mission of the school. They must act as a unified team to build the school's structure, rules, and consequences for parents and students.

- School systems must supply ongoing staff development to help teachers identify and use best practices. Schools do better if they rely on data rather than educational trends.

- Being small isn't enough to improve student achievement. Small schools are a key ingredient, not a panacea for improvement. Understand that small schools are fragile and need commitment from staff members to hang in there when times get tough.[25]

Perhaps the most important takeaway is that schools of any size can facilitate high student achievement and factors like teacher quality, school climate, and others are of utmost importance.

START TIME

Most districts stagger start times across campuses to optimize the costs of busing and the challenges of staffing bus drivers. Specifically, **most districts use either two or three tiers of start times with high schools first between 7:15 and 7:45, middle schools second between 7:30 and 8:30, and elementary schools last** (with a wide range of start times) **between 7:30 and 9:20**. Intermediate schools (Grades 5-6) and middle schools (Grades 7-8) at Mansfield ISD begin within a 15-minute window at 8:15 and 8:00 a.m., respectively, while high schools start earlier and elementary schools later. Notably, Wilson, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw, and School District B take an opposite approach to scheduling. All Wilson elementary schools start first at 7:15 a.m., and middle and high school start times are staggered at 7:20, 7:30, 8:20, or 8:30. The unification of all Wilson elementary school start times to 7:15 was motivated in part by concerns about "making sure elementary children don't ride the bus with middle and high school students."

Similarly, most Eagle Mountain-Saginaw elementary schools begin at 7:40, with a planned shift to 7:35 in the upcoming school year. Selected elementary schools and all middle schools begin at 8:25, while high schools begin at 9:05.[26] These staggered start times allow for an efficient three-tiered bus schedule. However, Priddy commented that the costs and benefits

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[24] As cited in: "How Important Is School Size?" GreatKids. http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/school-size/
[25] Bullet points reproduced verbatim from: "Are Smaller Schools Better Schools?" *Education World,* July 2000. http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues108.shtml
[26] Additional information drawn from: "Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD Schools." Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD. http://www.emsisd.com/site/Default.aspx?PageID=86

of starting elementary school earlier and high school later were difficult to assess. "What does the research say about the impact on learning, on getting little babies that are six, seven years old into a school at 7:40 in the morning?" he mused. "…. if we flipped it and we made the high schoolers take the early route, the research is clear on that, that those kids don't do well at all when you bring them in early."

School District B also begins elementary schools at the earliest time (7:40 a.m.), followed by middle schools (approximately 8:15 a.m.) and high schools (approximately 8:40 a.m.). The contact noted: "The staggered start time is directly related to bus transportation because they run the elementary routes, then they run the middle routes, then they run the high school routes. And that's been in place for quite some time in our district, and so it's just kind of the way things are."

Start times by district are reported in the Data Supplement, but the figure below illustrates these start time frames for which interview contacts provided sufficient information.

Figure 1.4: Reported Start Time Frames at Peer Districts by Level (n=10)

| LEVEL	7:15	7:30	7:45	8:00	8:15	8:30	8:45	9:00	9:15
Elementary									
Middle									
High									

Note: Darker color within each school level indicates higher concentration of districts

Moreover, Figure 1.5 reports the percentage distribution of school start times of public primary, middle, and high schools across the entire United States.[27] The National Center for Education Statistics' most recent Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), reporting data from the 2011-12 academic year, concluded that the average school start time was 8:19 for primary schools, 8:04 for middle schools, and 7:59 for high schools. Less than half of primary schools (38.7 percent), and an even smaller minority of middle and high schools (19.0 percent and 13.9 percent, respectively) started school at 8:30 or later.

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[27] Note: Primary schools include any schools with at least one grade lower than 5 and no grade higher than 8. Middle schools include any schools that have no grade lower than 5 and no grade higher than 8. High schools include any schools where the lowest grade is any of grades 7-12 and the highest grade is any of grades 9-12.

Figure 1.5: Percentage Distribution of Start Times of Public Primary, Middle, and High Schools, 2011-2012
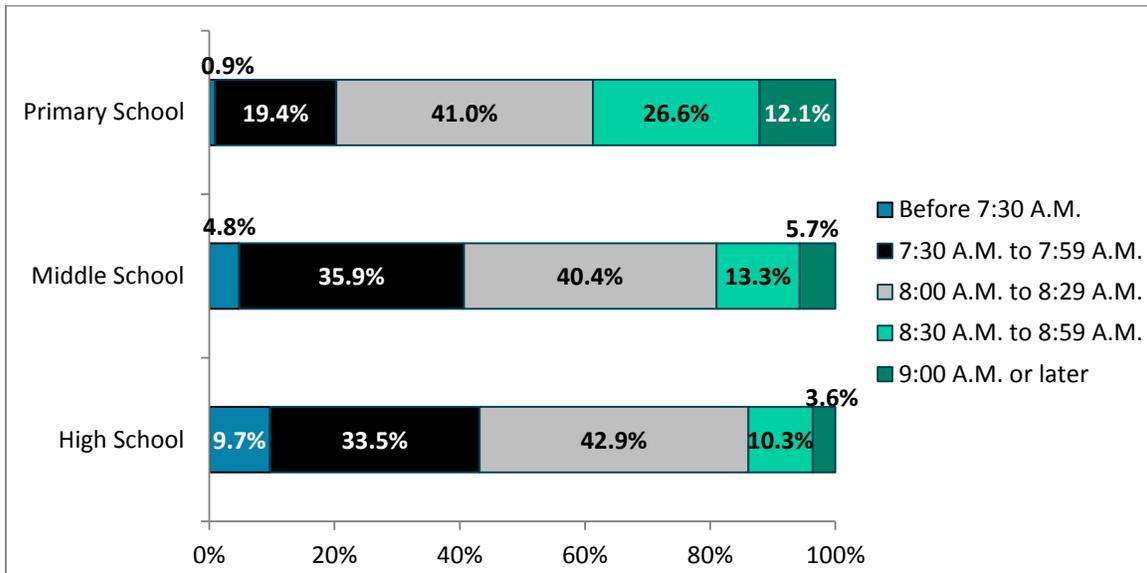
Source: National Center for Education Statistics[28]
Note: Only traditional public high schools (not charter schools) are included in the high school data.

Optimal school start times have been debated at the national and local levels for more than a decade. In August 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released a policy statement that heightened the national attention paid to the issue. In the policy statement, AAP identified insufficient sleep in adolescents as a public health issue, recognizing early school start times as "a key modifiable contributor" to chronic sleep loss. The AAP recommended that districts delay school start times for adolescents to 8:30 a.m. or later in order to improve students' health, safety, and academic outcomes.[29] As the organization explained, insufficient sleep takes a major toll on academic performance:

> In [a National Sleep Foundation poll], 28 percent of students reported falling asleep in school at least once a week, and more than one in five fell asleep doing homework with similar frequency. Many studies show an association between decreased sleep duration and lower academic achievement at the middle school, high school, and college levels, as well as higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness and decreased readiness to learn.[30]

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[28] [1] "Average start time for public primary schools and percentage distribution of start times in public primary schools, by state: 2011-12." National Center for Education Statistics.
https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_505_s1s.asp

[2] "Average start time for public middle schools and percentage distribution of start times in public middle schools, by state: 2011-12." National Center for Education Statistics.
https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_506_s1s.asp

[3] "Average start time for public high schools and percentage distribution of start times in public high schools, by selected school characteristics: 2011-12." National Center for Education Statistics.
https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_201381_s1n.asp

[29] "School Start Times for Adolescents." American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014. p. 647.
http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2014/08/19/peds.2014-1697.full.pdf

[30] Ibid.

More recently, Wheaton, Ferro, and Croft's 2015 supplementary report, published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), supported the AAP recommendation for later school start times, agreeing that widespread lack of sleep among adolescent students constitutes a "substantial public health concern."[31] Specifically, the CDC indicated that adolescents who do not get an adequate amount of sleep each night are more likely to:

- Be overweight;
- Not engage in daily physical activity;
- Suffer from depressive symptoms;
- Engage in unhealthy risk behaviors such as drinking, smoking tobacco, and using illicit drugs; and
- Perform poorly in school.[32]

In line with the increasing focus on the importance of sleep for adolescents, *Healthy People 2020* also added an objective for adolescents to "increase the proportion of students in Grades 9 through 12 who get sufficient sleep (defined as eight or more hours of sleep on an average school night."[33]

Despite these important calls to increase adolescents' sleep time by changing school start times, **extant literature is inconclusive regarding a relationship between school start times and academic achievement**.[34] Many of the studies included in this analysis reveal potentially positive academic effects resulting from delayed school start times, as measured through grades and standardized test scores.[35] Alternately, these studies demonstrate negative effects of starting too early.[36] However, there is a lack of causative evidence to suggest that later school start times improve student academic achievement. Indeed, several articles reviewed for this report determined no significant link between school start times and student achievement.[37] Also note that the majority of research examines school start times

[31] Wheaton, A.G., G. A. Ferro, and J. B. Croft. "School Start Times for Middle School and High School Students- United States, 2011-12 School Year." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 2015. http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6430a1.htm?s_cid=mm6430a1_w

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Carrell, S.E., T. Maghakian, and J.E. West. "A's from Zzzz's? The Causal Effect of School Start Time on the Academic Achievement of Adolescents." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 3, 3 (2011): p. 63. http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/aea/aejep/2011/00000003/00000003/art00003

[35] [1] Edwards, F. "Early to Rise? The Effect of Daily Start Times on Academic Performance." *Economics of Education Review*, 31, 2012. http://teensneedsleep.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/edwards-early-to-rise-the-effect-of-daily-starttimes-on-academic-performance-published-version.pdf
[2] "Impact of 2001 Adjustments to High School and Middle School Start Times." Arlington Public Schools. 2005. http://www.fcps.edu/fts/taskforce07/documents/arlington605.pdf

[36] Carrell, Maghakian, and West, "A's for Zzzz's?," Op. cit.

[37] [1] Hinrichs, P. "When the Bell Tolls: The Effects of School Starting Times on Academic Achievement." *Education*, 6, 4 (2011). http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/EDFP_a_00045
[2] Wahlstrom, K. et al. "Examining the Impact of Later High School Start Times on the Health and Academic Performance of High School Students: A Multi-Site Study." 2014. http://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/162769/Impact?sequence=1

at the middle and high school level, making it difficult to extrapolate results to elementary school students.[38]

Considering attendance as a metric, research is similarly inconclusive. Some studies found that earlier school start times were correlated with higher numbers of student absences, with one study of high school students in Chicago Public Schools reporting that students were absent more during first period than any other time of day.[39] Some studies found no effect on overall attendance, but improvements in attendance-on-time (i.e., decreased tardiness).[40] However, other publications found either no relationship between start time and attendance or both negative and positive effects.[41]

MANY OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

Districts are aware of the perceived and potentially positive value of later secondary-level start times, but most treat it as an impossible dream. There are many obstacles to changing start times in a district, these leaders noted. **Busing in particular makes it difficult to act on any research demonstrating the importance of or expressions of community interest in changing start times**. In most districts this change would also require "trading" the start time at one building or level for the start time at another. As previously noted, later start times for high school students at Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD results in early start times for elementary school students (7:35-7:40 a.m.). Fette, for example, commented that "everything after 8 a.m. would be ideal, [and] would make a lot of parents happy [but…] there's a million limiting factors." Like many districts, his district already operates "double and triple route buses," which means that a bus picks up students attending one school, then immediately upon delivering them goes out again to pick up another site's students, and potentially repeats this for a third site's students. Several districts, including Calvert County and Eagle Mountain-Saginaw noted that three-tiered bus schedules were the most cost-efficient for their district needs. Curry was more explicit about the complicated logistics of changing school start times:

> None of us would really mind if we could start high school classes at 9 o'clock, but if we're not going to get more money for transportation we would need to flip our three tiered schedules so [another level] starts at 7:20. When you have those conversations, 'I don't think anyone should start at 7:20,' then you need a two tier. **How many more buses and bus drivers would it take and what would that cost?**

Fette also noted that teacher union contracts may limit alterations to school start time: "none of our schools can operate past 4:05 p.m." Or, as Curry commented, the community would

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[3] Cortes, K.E., J. Bricker, and C. Rohlfs. "The Role of Specific Subjects in Education Production Functions: Evidence from Morning Classes in Chicago Public High Schools." *The BE Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, 12, 1 (2010). http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/bejeap.2012.12.issue-1/1935-1682.2749/1935-1682.2749.xml

[38] A notable exception: Keller, P., et al. "Earlier School Start Times as a Risk Factor for Poor School Performance: An Examination of Public Elementary Schools in the Commonwealth of Kentucky." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, June 16, 2014. p. 237. http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/edu-a0037195.pdf

[39] Cortes, Bricker, and Rohlfs, "The Role of Specific Subjects," Op. cit.

[40] Wolfson, A., et al. "Middle School Start Times: The Importance of a Good Night's Sleep for Young Adolescents." Behavioral Sleep Medicine, 2007. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17680731

[41] [1] Wahlstrom et al., "Examining the Impact," Op. cit. [2] Hinrichs, "When the Bell Tolls," Op. cit.

have more issues with the implications of later high school start times on opportunities for after-school activities: "Everyone would like the idea of high schools starting later but they don't like the idea of student activities starting late." Vasvauskas of Mansfield ISD concurred with these sentiments, stating "I would like to have our high schools start at a later time, but there's some challenges there with secondary athletic practices, band practices after school, and we decided not to tackle it just yet."

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES

Despite the aforementioned difficulties and obstacles to changing school start times, School Start Later – a coalition of health professionals, sleep scientists, and educators – provides a number of resources to districts who are working towards later school start times. In a report titled "SLEEP in Fairfax: Successful Practices and Approaches to Changing School Start Times," the organization describes how successful districts have rescheduled elementary, middle, and high school start times:

> The Transportation Task Force found jurisdictions that had shifted to a later high school start time generally moved high schools to the middle tier: Minneapolis (8:40) and Edina (8:30), Minnesota, Arlington (8:19), Virginia and Brevard (8:30), Florida. Middle schools were usually moved to the first (7:45/7:50) or the last tier (9:15/9:30/9:40). Elementary schools were sometimes placed in the first tier (7:30-8:00), sometimes spread over a range of tiers (Arlington/Minneapolis) and, less often, placed entirely in the last tier (9:20 in Edina, MN).[42]

In addressing the challenge of transportation, the organization found that most districts still use traditional school buses. However, one district "decided to offer flexible scheduling for high school students allowing them to choose an early (7:30) or a later schedule," and provided transit bus passes to some of these students. Meanwhile, the district's elementary, middle, and special needs students still used traditional school buses.[43]

Finally, the organization speaks to another frequent obstacle related to changing school start times: the question of when sports and other after-school activities will be scheduled. The districts included in the study shared many different solutions to this obstacle:

- Adding a 0 period to increase scheduling flexibility, with periods used in different ways: sometimes for remediation, enrichment, teacher conference periods, testing, or to provide additional options for students with specialized curricular needs;
- Taping athletes on the bus ride to the competition to save time;
- Adding lights to the fields and tennis courts (some used mobile lights that could be moved depending on season and venue);

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[42] Payne, P. "Report from SLEEP in Fairfax: Successful Practices and Approaches to Changing School Start Times." Start School Later. http://www.startschoollater.net/successful-approaches-thanks-to-sleepinfairfax.html
[43] Ibid.

- Holding some practices before school (especially popular in Texas, where many high schools start at 9:00);

- Scheduling athletes in a PE class at the end of the day, and releasing them early to go to competitions and games;

- Releasing students early on game days; and

- Replacing after-school remediation with during school (e.g., lunch) or before school help, so athletes could proceed directly to practice instead of having a gap between dismissal and practice.[44]

Additionally, a recent report published by the Children's National Medical Center's Blueprint for Change Team provides an in-depth examination of additional school districts that have successfully changed their school start times. On the following page, Figure 1.6 provides a summary table of several school districts' change strategies and methods for shifting school start times. In this summary table, Hanover includes school districts that are located within the same region as Williamson County Schools. However, information about all school districts in the study can be found in the original report, cited on the following page.

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[44] Bullet points reproduced nearly verbatim from: Ibid.

Figure 1.6: Change Strategies Employed by Regional School Districts

SCHOOL DISTRICT	YEAR	ORIGINAL BELL TIMES	CURRENT BELL TIMES	# STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS	CHANGE STRATEGY	ADDITIONAL STRATEGY	COMMENTS
Beaufort County School District, South Carolina	2014	HS: 7:45-2:30 MS: n/a ES: n/a	HS: 8:35-3:25 MS: 7:15-2:30 ES: 8:30-3:30	20,000 students; 36 schools	Pilot one HS first	HS principal led pilot based on sleep science provided by the Superintendent. Students gave feedback.	Evaluation is expected following the one-year pilot period.
Bentonville School District, Arkansas	2007	HS: 7:45-2:45 MS: 8:00-3:00 ES: 8:00-3:00	HS: 8:45-3:45 MS: 7:40-2:40 ES: 7:30-2:30	11,100 students; 14 schools	Flip HS with MS and ES	HS uses A/B block schedule.	Change due to address sleep health and growing traffic issues. Cost savings.
Fayette County Public Schools, Kentucky	1996	HS: 7:30-2:20 MS: 8:00-2:50 ES: About 8:30	HS: 8:25-3:15 MS: 9:05-3:55 ES: 7:45-2:35	40,000 students; 66 schools	HS/ES flip	Parents went to School Board after *earlier* HS times were first proposed. Pre- and post-studies were conducted. Plan was announced 10 months ahead of change.	Pre- and post-study one year after showed improved sleep and reduced auto crashes. Increased sleep across all grades. District reported better attendance and a decrease in tardiness in 1999.
Hattiesburg Public School District, Mississippi	2013	HS: 7:20-2:45 MS: 8:30-3:50 ES: n/a	HS: 8:30-3:50 MS: 7:30-2:45 ES: 8:00-3:00	4,528 students; 10 schools	MS/HS flip	Superintendent implemented in the last few days of the previous school year as an experiment.	Changed based on sleep science.
Jessamine County Schools, Kentucky	Prior to 2005	HS: 7:30-2:15 MS: 7:40-2:25 ES: 8:30-3:15	HS: 8:40-3:25 MS: 8:50-3:35 ES: 8:00-2:45	7,000 students; 11 schools	MS/HS shift; ES 30 minutes earlier	Superintendent led. Community and student engagement was key.	Changed based on sleep health. District reported lower tardiness and increased attendance.
Moore County Schools, North Carolina	2012	HS: 8:00-3:00 MS: n/a ES: 8:00	HS: 9:00-4:00 MS: 8:00-3:00 ES: 7:45/7:30	12,491 students; 23 schools	HS shift	Implemented 2-tiered bus system.	Saved $700,000 in transportation costs.
Pulaski County Special School District, Arkansas	2012	HS: 7:30-2:40 MS: 7:30-2:40 ES: 7:20-2:20	HS: 8:35-3:45 MS: 8:20-3:40 ES: 7:20-2:20; 7:50-2:35	17,501 students; 38 schools	Flip ES with HS and MS	Announced change in January to allow parents to make changes.	State's second largest district – change done to improve sleep health and savings on buses.

Source: The Children's National Medical Center's Blueprint for Change Team[45]

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[45] Text in figure reproduced verbatim from: "School Start Time Change: An In-Depth Examination of School Districts in the United States." The Children's National Medical Center's Blueprint for Change Team, April 2014. pp. 6-10. http://www.fcps.edu/supt/update/1415/Blueprint-Change-School-Start-Time-Change-ReportFinal4-14-14.pdf

GRADE CONFIGURATION

Almost all of the districts represented in this interview series use a **common grade configuration**: elementary consists of preschool or kindergarten through Grade 5; middle consists of Grades 6-8; high consists of Grades 9-12. There are a few exceptions. For example, the K-8 school district Franklin Special operates two levels of middle grades education: a Grades 5-6 transition from elementary school, and a Grades 6-8 level that completes the district's offerings. Mansfield ISD offers elementary schools for Grades PreK-4, intermediate schools for Grades 5-6, middle schools for Grades 7-8, and traditionally-configured high schools (Grades 9-12). Tipton offers a K-8 performing arts magnet school in addition to its typical elementary and middle schools. Gregory-Portland is currently in the process of transitioning to the common grade configuration (K-5, 6-8, and 9-12) from a model that originally included an intermediate school for students in Grades 5-6.

Anonymous School District A reports K-6 elementary schools, 7-8 middle schools, separate campuses for students in Grade 9, and high schools that serve Grades 10-12. This configuration is largely designed based on the need for space as enrollment increased over the last several years. While the district would ultimately like to place all students in traditional middle schools (Grades 6-8) and high schools (Grades 9-12), there is currently insufficient space on these campuses, and new construction would need to be completed in order to make these transitions.

Most district leaders do not view grade configuration as a pressing concern. Fette, for example, said that reviewing middle school start times was an alternative to changing grade configuration. "The 6-8 grade configuration is just the accepted norm in the district," he said. "It's important to maintain that. […] We've looked at K-6 schools, but it doesn't do anything for us beside changing the structure." Indeed, the Grades 6-8 middle school model emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to low academic achievement and high rates of risky behavior among young adolescents, and has remained largely unchanged since.[46]

However, **some districts acknowledged the challenges that accompany irregular grade configurations.** For instance, Vaszauskas of Mansfield ISD reports that students are expected to take a standardized science test in Grade 5, just after transitioning from elementary school to intermediate school. This has presented a challenge for the district because students typically don't study science intensively in Grades PreK-4, and thus may be unprepared for the material they must learn in Grade 5. "Our fifth grade science scores are typically very poor because of the lack of science instruction at the earlier ages. That creates a real challenge for us," Vaszauskas explained. In order to combat this issue, the district now requires that science be taught in Grades 2 through 4, but implementation has been somewhat challenging. Furthermore, the contact from School District A noted that having Grade 9 students on a separate campus posed challenges for specialized electives, including the districts' STEM

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[46] [1] Juvonen, J. et al. "Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School." RAND Education, 2004. p. 4. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG139.pdf
[2] Barton, R. and Klump, J. "Figuring Out Grade Configurations." *Principal's Research Review,* 7, 3 (May 2012,): p. 1. http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/PRR-Figuring-Out-Grade-Configurations.pdf

program. The district will need to earn a school bond from the local community in order to build out its middle and high schools to accommodate Grade 6 and Grade 9 students, respectively.

Yet there is little consensus about "optimal" grade configuration. Some studies suggest that the larger the range of grades served in a single school, the better students perform. [47] Conversely, a study in Arkansas published in the *Journal of Advanced Academics* (2010) found that grade span configuration alone did not account for differences in academic achievement. [48] Effective schools come in a variety of grade-level configurations, with common US grade configurations illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 1.7: Common Grade Level Configurations in the United States (2013)
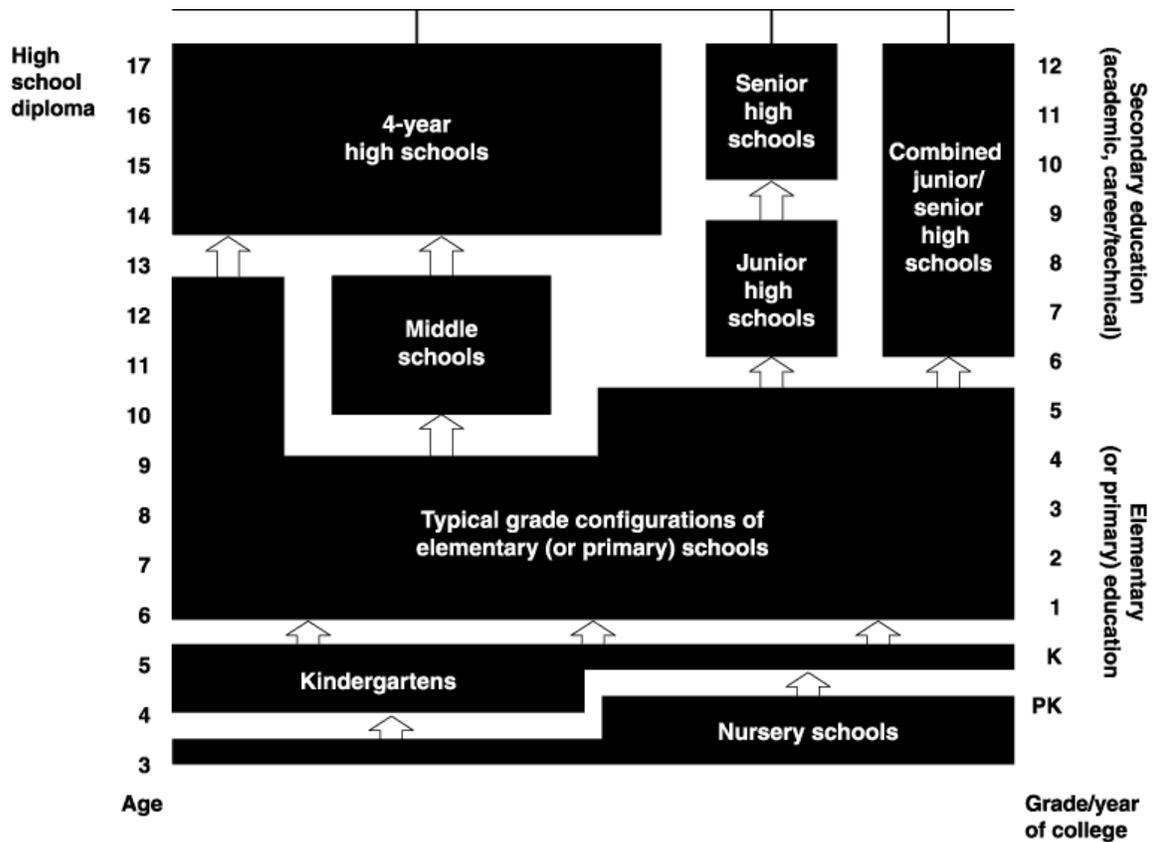
Source: National Center for Education Statistics[49]

Nonetheless, in many cases, districts have altered grade-level configurations to have a positive impact on student achievement and development. Jacobus was passionate about the

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[47] 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

[48] Dove, M.J., L. Carolyn Pearson, and H. Hooper. "Relationship Between Grade Span Configuration and Academic Achievement." *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 21, 2 (Winter 2010): p. 273. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ880581.pdf

[49] "The Structure of Education in the United States." National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/figures/fig_01.asp?referrer=figures

changes that South Washington has made to its secondary schooling configurations. Around 2010, the district built a new traditional high school and changed from a Grades 7-9, junior-high model to middle schools of Grades 7-8 and four-year high schools of Grades 9-12. He emphasized that this configuration benefited both middle schoolers and high schoolers: "We moved away from the idea that middle school is a little high school, and […] towards teachers knowing families well." He cites observations about increased achievement and decreased behavioral issues at Woodbury Middle School, but "I don't have any specific numbers. […] We think it's right but we didn't gather data to prove it made a difference."

Furthermore, Gregory-Portland ISD's Paul Clore reports that the district is currently transitioning to a K-5 elementary school and 6-8 middle school model, eliminating intermediate schools for students in Grades 5-6. This reconfiguration reduces the number of school transitions students must make over the course of their academic career.

Small changes can also work well. One district, Blue Valley, also used middle grades configuration as a way to temporarily ease the pressures on elementary education during high growth years despite not altering grades configurations in decades. Hanna explained, "we have had years with high elementary enrollment growth and we've moved 5th grade to the middle school for capacity changes. Several times, we've moved them to get us by for a year or two." Related to this, Calvert has not altered grade configuration but has added transitional opportunities for students entering and exiting middle school. Sixth graders and ninth graders are given "an extra day for orientation, along with some of the spring activities with eighth graders going to high school to get an orientation as well."

Ultimately, many factors—including enrollment trends, financial resources, and public opinion—influence the choice to operate schools that serve more or fewer grade levels. An article published in *Education World* highlights findings of a case study examination on grade span configuration published by the Northwest Regional Education laboratory, noting that "the effectiveness of grade groupings varies from community to community, school to school," and that there are a variety of factors that should be taken into consideration when thinking about optimal grade configuration:

- Number of students;
- Transportation costs;
- Socioeconomic status of the student population;
- School system goals for student achievement;
- Effects on other schools;
- Number of transitions for affected students;
- School building layout/design; and

- Effects on parent involvement.[50]

As an example, Edina Public Schools in Minnesota examined many factors, including best practices research, state standards and requirements, recommendations from the district's Secondary Program Study, and student, family, staff, and community input, in order to explore and eventually approve a 2012 plan to reconfigure secondary school buildings. Over the course of the past few years, the School Board of Edina Public Schools began the implementation process to reconfigure grade spans:

> The district explored a variety of grade configuration options, focusing on three primary options — retaining the current grade 6-9 at two middle schools and one grade 10-12 high school; two grade 6-8 middle schools and one grade 9-12 high school, and an option in which all secondary students would be together, with grade 6-7 at one middle school, grade 8-9 at another middle school, and grade 10-12 at the high school.

> After weighing the benefits and challenges of each option, the Board approved the recommended option to go ahead with second option, citing it as the best decision based on learning program and strategic direction. The Board noted that this secondary configuration, along with retention of the grade K-5 elementary schools, best supports the academic, social and emotional needs of Edina Public Schools students.[51]

On the following page, Figure 1.8 highlights some of the benefits and challenges that Edina Public Schools considered when exploring its grade configuration options. In this figure, Hanover includes only the key benefits and challenges that would remain constant across other districts and states. For example, Hanover excludes some Edina Public Schools-specific considerations, such as maximizing the district's facilities or aligning grade spans to other Minnesota school districts.

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[50] Hopkins, G. "Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?" *Education World,* September 2005. http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin017.shtml

[51] "Grade Configuration: Frequently Asked Questions." Edina Public Schools. http://www.edinaschools.org/Page/3812

Figure 1.8: Benefits and Challenges of Alternative Grade Configurations, Edina Public Schools

PROGRAM	BENEFITS	CHALLENGES
Option 1: MS – Grades 6-9 HS – Grades 10-12	▪ Eliminates concerns about developmental readiness of some ninth-graders at high school level (allows for additional supports) ▪ Provides for four-year middle level educational program ▪ Maintains the college preparatory approach at HS ▪ Provides expanded leadership opportunities for Grade 9	▪ Limits acceleration and enrichment opportunities for ninth-graders ▪ Assumes college preparatory model at HS, which may not be appealing to all learners
Option 2: MS – Grades 6-8 HS – Grades 9-12	▪ Enhances staff efficiency at middle and high schools ▪ Provides for genuine application of MS philosophy and programming appropriate for young adolescence ▪ Creates new opportunities to meet developmental needs of MS students ▪ Increases access for Grade 9 students to HS educational options ▪ Provides easier access for ninth-graders to HS athletic and activity options ▪ Improves access to credit recovery options for Grade 9 ▪ Reduces transition challenge for Grade 9 to 10 ▪ Grade 6-8 MS and 9-12 HS are the most prevalent grade configurations in the United States	▪ Creates some concerns about developmental readiness of some ninth-graders at high school level
Option 3: MS – Grades 6-7 and 8-9 HS – Grades 10-12	▪ Eliminates comparisons between middle schools ▪ Increases access for Grade 9 students to HS educational options ▪ Provides easier access for ninth-graders to HS athletic and activity options ▪ Maintains the college preparatory approach at HS ▪ Opportunity to create grade-level communities earlier in secondary experience ▪ Potential for Grade 8-12 campus learning environment ▪ Allows for continued discussion about transforming Grade 12 experience	▪ Increases transitions for students ▪ Disrupts familiarity of program for students, families, and staff ▪ Required planning to rebuild school culture, climate, and community due to disruption at secondary level ▪ Less opportunity to build community at MS due to transition ▪ Reduces ability for personalized learning ▪ Assumes college preparatory model at HS, which may not be appealing to all learners

Source: Edina Public Schools[52]

[52] "Benefits/Challenges: Next Generation EPS Secondary Learning Experiences/Grade Configuration." Edina Public Schools, June 2014.
http://www.edinaschools.org/cms/lib07/MN01909547/Centricity/Shared/PDFs/Grade%20Configuration%20-%20Benefits-Challenges.pdf

FOCUS ON MIDDLE GRADES

As reflected in Jacobus's and Fette's comments, when discussing grade configuration, **district leaders seemed most interested in describing changes related to middle grades education**. The ideological basis of a middle school or junior high school model lies in the assumption that adolescents have unique needs, as they are in a transitional period during which it is useful to isolate them from both younger and older students. While many reformers once argued that middle school-aged students have unique social, psychological, and academic needs that were best served by placement in separate schools, the K-8 model has recently reemerged in districts across the country.[53]

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform summarized evidence in the organization's "Policy Statement on Grade Configuration" (2008), noting that "few of these empirical studies actually examined whether a cause-effect relationship exists between grade configuration and student achievement, while controlling for other factors such as school size, student socioeconomic status, and teacher experience." Thus, the National Forum concluded that more evidence was needed to determine the outcomes associated with different grade level configurations, particularly between middle schools and the K-8 model. In the absence of a definitive best practice in grade level configuration, the National Forum stated, "What is most important for the education of young adolescent learners is what takes place inside each middle-grades school, not grade configuration per se."[54] To this end, the National Forum recommended that policymakers do the following in order to provide the most appropriate and effective middle-level education:

- Focus energy and target resources on improving those schools that are already serving young adolescents regardless of grade configuration;

- Review and apply current research that suggests that simply shifting students from one type of school building to another may do little to improve student academic performance; and

- Take steps to comprehensively address and incorporate proven strategies for school improvement, including setting high standards for all students, creating a personalized and caring learning environment, and providing students with the academic, social-emotional, health, and other services they need to succeed.[55]

ADDITIONAL TOPICS

Some district leaders were moved to discuss additional topics outside the explicit scope of interest Hanover and Williamson outlined in the interview schedule. The subsections below briefly describe these topics.

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[53] Schwerdt, G., and West, M.R. "The Impact of Alternative Grade Configurations on Student Outcomes through Middle and High School." *Journal of Public Economics*, 97 (2013): p. 1. Version of September 13, 2011. http://www.edweek.org/media/gradeconfiguration-13structure.pdf

[54] The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. "Policy Statement on Grade Configuration." July 2008. p. 2. http://middlegradesforum.org/files/GradeConfiguration.pdf

[55] Bullet points reproduced verbatim from: Ibid., p. 5.

FOCUS ON ACADEMICS

Some districts focus on academics as a distinction, rather than one of the three configuration options specifically addressed by our interview schedule. Fette closed our interview by emphasizing the value of Olentangy's emphasis on "unified arts." Students choose electives throughout the year – two at a time, with six rotations presenting twelve options per year – to get exposure to a variety of fields like art, language, technology, and family consumer science. In this way, student choice is maximized.

The contact from School District B commented that the district's major efforts over the last five years have focused on providing high-quality academics and instruction. While school configuration concerns such as start times and school size were not explicitly part of this effort, the contact notes that "best practice for the size of the school or start time, amounts of instructional minutes" are all related components "that come up when we are talking about preparing, creating and providing the highest quality instructional experiences for students."

Similarly, Hanna said that the Blue Valley "community is happy with the standard comprehensive high school […] vs. building a themed high school or magnet high school." Instead, the district focuses on career pathway strands organized as the Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) Program, [56] which Hanna stresses is "not vocational, but professional: there's a strand for engineering, health careers, [and] different facets for each of those strands [like] veterinary, nursing, pre-med."

SECONDARY SCHOOL SCHEDULING

Some districts reviewed for this report indicate recent changes to secondary school schedules that may not impact configuration or start times, but do alter school operations and student opportunities. For instance, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD recently transitioned from a seven-period day with four 30-minute lunch sessions to an eight-period day in which one period serves as a lunch period. According to Priddy, the addition of the lunch period helps to ease logistical concerns at the school as well as give students time to do homework, receive tutoring, or, when needed, serve detention during the school day. This allows for additional afterschool time for activities.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND STANDARDIZATION

Bennett described greater challenges around standardization than school configuration. Tipton has prided itself on building-level autonomy, meaning principals "basically make their own decisions as far as some of the programs they use in their building, some of the common assessments in their building, those types of things." But it has faced issues related to increased standardization outside of the district's control. "Over the past few years," she said, "we came together a little more as a district and did common assessments across the district.

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[56] "CAPS FAQs." Blue Valley Schools. http://www.bvcaps.org/s/1403/hs-redesign/index.aspx?sid=1403&gid=1&pgid=788

This was one way to make sure everyone in the district was teaching the curriculum at the same time and assessing at the same time so we could get the data from those schools." Now the demands from Tennessee are increased and problematic, with a recent online assessment effort becoming "a wash because the network wouldn't hold all the schools in the state," and Tipton administered it as a "paper-pencil test most people weren't prepared to take" instead.

Somewhat similarly, Priddy of Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD reports that one of the largest challenges for school management in the district has been changing leadership over the last five years. "Our biggest issue has been a change in some of our leadership, and that has really kind of been an ongoing spinning wheel," he explained. "Lots of principals, lots of new principals, some from inside, some from outside, lots of change at the central office…. Every time we take a hit, we have to kind of get people reinstated as to what our values are."

STAFFING EXPENSES

Calvert's challenges are unique among this group in that it is facing consistent enrollment decline, rather than growth. Its experiences points to the importance of staffing, in that "80 percent of [Calvert's] budget is salaries and costs associated with salaries." Between FY2015 and FY2016 the district "eliminated 75 jobs" as the principal means of managing revenue declines as a result of lost enrollment. Franklin Special has also received slightly less funding than anticipated, but did not describe a similar need to eliminate jobs. Unlike Calvert, its population has remained stable.

To contrast, high-growth districts in this interview series discussed the challenges of attracting sufficient staff, and have needed to increase base pay, benefits, and position expectations to boost hiring of bus drivers and custodial staff. Furthermore, some districts reported recruitment challenges specific to certain academic areas and disciplines. As previously noted, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD reported the need to hire more bilingual and ESL teachers as the number of English learners in the district increases. Mansfield ISD reported challenges in hiring for its expanding career and technical education programs.

BALANCING SITE EQUITY

Snowden commented on the complexities of managing funds across sites with varying needs. "When there's a disparity," he said, "we try to fund schools to make sure the needs of all those students [are met]. When you have a high risk population, those needs are greater because you need more programs. There's always going to be a struggle." One of the ways it has attempted to balance equity across sites is through "tweaking" school zoning. Snowden explains, "You don't want to go back to local tax payers for regular revenue on a regular basis."

At anonymous School District B, administrators seek to ensure equity across the district's two high schools by carefully planning attendance zones to create two student bodies that are "demographically identical." Ensuring similar levels of enrollment and distribution of resources prevents perceptions that one school is superior to the other. The contact explains:

"… by having two high schools that are very similar in their demographics, both very high-achieving, while we have some people that wish to go to one high school or the other overall the community sees that both high schools are high-performing and that there is not some perceived reason why they should go to one high school over the other."

KNOWING YOUR COMMUNITY

Many district leaders in this interview series talked broadly about their communities, taxpayers, voters, or other representations of their stakeholder groups. However, Wright gave deeper insight into how the Wilson County Schools' particular community impacts the district's ability to manage "astronomical" population growth:

> We're in a strange but difficult situation as this becomes a viable place to relocate. And two weeks from now, I'm speaking to a community in Wilson County, it'll be little over 100 individuals and over 2/3 have moved here from out of state. The median age is 65. […] The quality of life they have today is built on having a well-educated community to support them. Many people relocating in Williamson County are moving not just because of their school system but it's a great place to live. […]

In other words, Wright must manage a highly diverse population of new residents and share with them needs that are constantly changing. To do this, she has sought feedback from various groups. In addition to the meeting mentioned above, Wright has also used focus groups and community forums to ensure communication with her district's "distinct communities" and cross "geographical boundaries that divide the county." Further acting upon these findings, Wright regularly meets with the county's Chamber of Commerce, and with other civic and community groups "just to listen and hear the concerns." However, she does struggle with a vocal group of disgruntled parents organized around a Facebook page

> […] that's become a venting, ranting, raving that takes up far too much of our time. […] When you get into affluence, they stay on social media all the time. We see parents that know their kids are being tested on a certain day, they sit in the parking lot and wait for the teacher to post grades. **It's a different world right now: helicopter parents, lawnmower parents.**

Similarly, School District A in Texas strives to meet community needs and expectations for school size and grade configuration as possible, despite challenges related to lack of funding. The community is particularly supportive of small elementary schools, the contact noted, and thus the district makes an effort to keep these school sites small, building three new schools over the last several years to accommodate growing district enrollment. However, although schools for secondary students are nearing capacity, there is somewhat less community support for building a new high school due to the high cost. She explains further:

> We have two [high schools] in Texas class 6A which is the largest configuration in the state of high schools. Then we also have our ninth graders and there's about eight-hundred on each of the ninth grade campuses. Each of our high schools have well over two-thousand people when you put the two together. **We really would like to have a third high school, the community again is on board for that, but it cost a bunch of money to build a high school.**

As mentioned throughout this report, Gregory-Portland ISD places a special emphasis on communicating with the local community while planning for school and district expansion. Superintendent Clore explained:

> From our perspective, planning for the transition of this sort is just absolutely critical. It can't be a one-time process, **it has to be something that is anticipated and done intermittently over a decade or more if the school district and if the community is truly going to understand what its needs are and be ready to meet those needs before the future arrives and becomes the present.** If they don't, they will find themselves in a position where they're always going to be in a catch-up mode, which is a very difficult position to be in.

On a related note, Jacobus mentioned that South Washington hosted professional development sessions to help transition teachers to the new middle-school model, the new high school, and related "redistribution" of students. "Last year we said we need to tighten up and see if we're following the [same] philosophy of interdisciplinary teaching," he added, meaning that such trainings are ongoing. "But we've been very happy with what we've seen."

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