

Beal Early Childhood Center Feasibility Study



Grade Level Configuration Report: Educational Considerations

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Introduction

The Massachusetts School Building Authority has provided two possible options for the future Beal Early Childhood Center possible renovation/expansion or new building project:

- a Kindergarten – Grade 1 school with a design enrollment of 750 students, or
- a Kindergarten – Grade 4 school with a design enrollment of 790 students.

As part of the feasibility study, the School Committee, in partnership with Dr. Sawyer and with input from community stakeholders, must thoughtfully consider the benefits and drawbacks to each model.

This report seeks to summarize the research on grade level configuration and the impact of various models on students and families with the goal of better informing the community.

Background Information

A 'Grade span' refers to the number of grade levels in a given school building. 'Grade level configuration' is a term that depicts which grades are grouped together. Currently Shrewsbury students in grades Kindergarten- Grade 4 learn in five different buildings with three different grade spans:

<i>School</i>	<i>Grade Span</i>	<i>Configuration</i>
Beal Early Childhood Center	2	K-1
Calvin Coolidge School	5	K-4
Floral Street School	4	1-4
Walter J. Paton School	5	K-4
Spring Street School	5	K-4

Given the uneven nature of school construction, this degree of variety is typical, not just in Massachusetts but across the country. As an early record review states, "The grade level organization of the American school is characterized not by a single uniform pattern but by a variety of grade level configurations. Each of these grade level configurations has its advantages and disadvantages which have varying weights and influences in local districts as a result of local circumstances...most researchers have concluded that decisions on grade level organization have

been for reasons that are more administrative than educational.” (KY state report, 1981) The same variety can be found in schools today.

Research and Literature Findings

What is the impact of different grade configurations on student achievement? Most studies have sought to answer this question for children in middle and/or high school. Researchers studying the effects of grade spans on high school graduation rates, for example concluded that students in rural communities and/or students that were disadvantaged benefitted from remaining in one school over a long period of time. (Howley, 2000) Not until recently did policy makers consider the impact of grade level configuration on younger students.

More recent studies cited on this topic suggest that the link between grade level configuration and achievement is specious even for our youngest learners. A report commissioned by the Scituate Public Schools in anticipation of an elementary building project in in 2013 reads:

The research reveals that grade level configurations have little impact on student achievement (Hooper, 2002; Howley, 2002; Klump, 2006; Renschler, 2000). In other words, it does not matter which grades are grouped together in a building. More important than the physical or structural set up 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.

This conclusion is supported by an analysis of common assessment data in Shrewsbury. Every one of our local elementary schools has a demonstrated record of success, and children in each of the current grade level configurations have grown both academically and socially. At the same time, a new building project provides an opportunity to ask: Is there evidence to support one option over the other for educational reasons?

A review of the literature suggests that rather than determining the ideal grade level configuration, districts should weigh the pros and cons of two key factors, namely school size and transitions.

School Size

The literature indicates that when parents are surveyed, they generally feel that the smaller the school the better, and there are some studies that support this belief. A 2006 study concluded that achievement gaps between boys and girls were narrower in small schools (Black, 2006) Smaller high schools tend to have better rates of attendance, behavior and achievement (Nathan and Thao, 2007) However, findings are inconclusive when it comes to students in the

lower grades. Most importantly, in Shrewsbury our educators have managed to achieve a small school feeling in their school communities despite increasing enrollment, and academic achievement and parent satisfaction are high across all of our schools, including the larger ones such as Floral Street School, the two middle schools, and the high school.

Although the size of the school does not determine the likelihood of student academic success at the elementary level, practical considerations would likely come into play in a K-1 school with 750 five and six year olds, particularly in common areas (restrooms, playground, lunchroom) and at transition times (arrival, dismissal). In a K-4 model older students make for positive role models, and there are fewer “new” students to orient to school routines. For this reason, in a K-4 model routines may be established sooner, freeing students and staff alike to focus on learning.

Transitions

Researchers claim that achievement declines when students transition from one level to another, regardless of the grade in which the transition occurred. Further, studies of students in the middle grades (6-8) conclude that the number of transitions a student makes is correlated to the likelihood that he or she will drop out of school (Pardini, 2002) For this reason, many educators advocate for schools with bigger grade spans, arguing that students and their families develop stronger relationships with teachers when they remain in one school over time. It’s important to note, however that others refute this belief, claiming that the effects of a transition can be mitigated by thoughtful planning. (Cromwell, 2006)

The Kindergarten – Grade 4 option reduces by one the number of transitions future students in Shrewsbury will have to make. Further, when students and families remain in one school over time, there are several other advantages to consider:

- Siblings are more likely to attend the same school.
- Kindergarten and Grade 1 students have opportunities to interact with older “learning buddies” as role models.
- When part of a longer, continuous stay at a single school with the same administration, families may be more comfortable with grade-to-grade transitions and be better able to anticipate the particulars of the following grade, as compared to a transition to an entirely new school.
- Educators can come to know students better, and to plan proactively to meet student needs. For example, students that are reading on grade level by third grade are likely to maintain their reading skills for the long term. Thus, early intervention and monitoring from Kindergarten through second grade is vital. Close communication between educators at different grade levels is more likely when teams teach in

proximity, and individual teachers are better able to consult with colleagues at the grade level below in this model as well.

Conclusion

In his book *What Works in Schools*, educational researcher Robert Marzano states, “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.” (2003) We are fortunate indeed that in Shrewsbury educators at all levels and in all grade level configurations work hard to put best practices into place, to serve children and their families and to contribute to our community. Not surprisingly, our youngest students in Shrewsbury are well served by both of the proposed models presented as options.

This success makes for a dilemma; although there is strong consensus through parent, community and staff surveys that the K-4 configuration is seen as more beneficial, there are committed educators and contented families advocating respectfully for both options. The thoughtful support for each model makes the decision more difficult, and transparency in the process paramount. It’s my hope that the findings in this report will help guide this important decision. Finding the right fit for “Beal 2.0” is more a matter of scrutinizing local needs and comparing the number of proposed benefits of each option than dismissing either option out of hand.

Last Words

Research suggests that the support of parents and guardians, thoughtful consideration of the needs of students as they learn and grow, the degree of collaboration among school staff, and the individual efforts on the part of the children matter most. For that reason, regardless of the decision made by the School Committee, and because under either configuration a “new” Beal will represent a significant change, it’s important that we honor the efforts of the educators that have served Beal Early Childhood Center students and families so well for so long. The teachers that shaped the model currently in place at Beal pioneered important work that met the needs of our students at a critical time, and that success will live on in the memories of the countless students and families that first experienced school at Beal.

References

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