



# Shrewsbury Public Schools

---

Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

October 20, 2017

To: School Committee  
From: Joe Sawyer  
Re: Beal Building Project: Recommendation for future elementary grade configuration

As the work to design a renovated/expanded or new Beal School moved into the Feasibility Study phase, it became necessary for the School Committee to determine which of the two grade configurations put forth by the Massachusetts School Building Authority for the project should be adopted by our school district. This decision is necessary at this time in order to inform the work of the architect, owner's project manager, and the Beal Building Committee so that the design process, site selection, and other elements can move forward with guidance as to exactly what kind of school "Beal 2.0" should be. Further, this decision will inform planning for how the other elementary schools will be configured, if and when a "new" Beal will come online, which we believe would be for the 2022-2023 school year at the earliest.

The two grade configurations put forth by the MSBA are:

- 1) A 750-student early childhood center with Kindergarten and Grade 1
- or
- 2) A 790-student elementary school with Kindergarten through Grade 4

After carefully considering various factors related to these grade configurations, as well as the feedback from over 900 parents and community members and 275 staff members, **I recommend that the School Committee vote to establish a Kindergarten through Grade 4 grade configuration for all elementary schools in the Shrewsbury Public Schools**, to take effect if and when sufficient space is made available through construction of additional classrooms through the Beal building project.

Before outlining the factors that led me to this recommendation, it is important to note that both models are currently in place in different schools across the district, and both models are working well. In fact, the preference of staff for a K-1 or a K-4 model, respectively, is to continue the configuration in which they currently work. This indicates that they believe that their own respective configuration is successful, and based on our students' success in both configurations, the evidence is that both views are correct. This is a good thing, especially since we have several years in the immediate future where this hybrid configuration across the district will need to remain in place prior to a "new" Beal being built.

There are potential benefits and potential drawbacks to each model, and it will be very important to address the questions and concerns raised about both models regardless of

which configuration is adopted by the School Committee. I believe the K-4 model will be more beneficial for the following reasons:

- 1) A review of the educational research literature (see accompanying document) indicates that factors other than grade configuration are most important regarding student success and the quality of a school community; in other words, there is no evidence that a certain grade configuration is more effective than another educationally.
- 2) A review of the educational research literature indicates some concern that transitions between schools can compromise student achievement. Having fewer transitions was also seen by parents, community members, and staff as a strong benefit of the K-4 model.
- 3) Several other benefits are associated with the K-4 configuration regarding having fewer transitions, including:
  - a) Students remaining in one school for five years allows families to be more familiar with the school and its staff, and vice versa, and for students to become familiar with a smaller group of classmates
  - b) Vertical articulation of curriculum from grade to grade is stronger when educators from more grades are working together in the same building
  - c) Knowledge of students' needs from year to year is more cohesive when remaining in the same building for more grades, and this is especially important for students who are experiencing difficulties or who have special learning needs
- 4) Logistically, a K-4 configuration provides several benefits that a significant majority of parents, community members, and staff found desirable, including:
  - a) The climate of the school having a "neighborhood" feel, where older students serve as role models for younger students
  - b) Siblings within the grade range are at the same school, facilitating both bus transportation for children in the same family as well as parent transportation to and from school and/or extended care
  - c) Transportation on school buses will require fewer routes that are shorter in duration compared to the alternative; this is a logistical benefit as well as avoidance of significant additional cost that would require financial resources to be redirected from the educational program (see accompanying document)
  - d) The student population of Kindergarten and Grade 1 students is projected to be significantly higher than what can be accommodated by a proposed new Beal School, meaning that there isn't a way to provide the same grade configuration model to all students (projection for 2022 is for approximately 900 students in Grades K and 1; if the "new" Beal were a 750 student K-1 school, 150 students would need to attend a *different* school for those two grades, creating an equity issue). A universal K-4 configuration across five elementary schools provides more flexibility to distribute students across the schools in an equitable manner.

Those educators, parents, and community members who promoted the K-1 configuration cited benefits and drawbacks as well, and it is very important that the district pay close attention to these if a K-4 configuration is adopted. I believe that many of these issues can be addressed effectively with the proper approaches. Examples include:

- 1) A benefit cited of a K-1 configuration was having a critical mass of early childhood educators working together in one school, as has been the case for the past 30 years at Beal, as well as being better able to have strong horizontal curriculum articulation across the the grade levels. If the “new” Beal were a K-1 building, there would be approximately 40 classroom teachers in Kindergarten and Grade 1, with about 20 in each grade. As we know from our experiences at Sherwood and Oak, it is very difficult to orchestrate certain kinds of collaboration among such large groups of teachers, and so these groups would need to be divided into smaller units even within the same building. It is interesting to note that if the “new” Beal is a K-4 building, there will be approximately 16 Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers there, which is actually a *larger* team of early childhood educators than at the current Beal. A K-4 configuration will also provide teams of teachers at each grade level in each of the five schools, allowing for collaboration within that school. The district will need to ensure teachers in the same grade level at different schools are able to stay on the same page, which is something that we work to do in all of our grades K-4 in our current situation.
- 2) Another issue cited among K-1 supporters was ensuring that a proper early childhood environment be cultivated, and that this could be more challenging in a K-4 environment. It is important that the district commit to ensuring that Kindergarten and Grade 1 students have access to the proper furniture, equipment, and instructional materials for their age, regardless of which neighborhood school a student attends. Feedback from educators and parents, and my own observations over the several years during which our district has had Kindergarten and Grade 1 classes in K-4 schools, signal that we have been successfully meeting the needs of early learners within a K-4 configuration, in a manner that is developmentally sound. There are many successful school districts where Kindergarten and Grade 1 exist in grade configurations up to and including K-8 schools. The inclusion of higher grades in school with early childhood grades and having a successful early childhood program are not mutually exclusive, and it is incumbent upon the district and individual schools to ensure that the environment, the curriculum, and the approach to teaching are matched to the needs of our students. Along the same lines, the presence of upper elementary-aged students in the same environment as Kindergarten and Grade 1 students is something with which we have years of experience, and many see this as a benefit. While it is possible that younger students might have negative experiences with older students (some cited concerns about older students “intimidating” younger students), that is rare in our experience; of course, these same dynamics can and do happen among students in the same grade or only one grade apart.

In conclusion, after careful study and thoughtful feedback from stakeholders that represents a strong consensus, I believe that establishing a K-4 grade configuration across the district will be of greatest benefit to our students, educators, and families. I will be happy to answer any questions at our upcoming meeting on October 25.