

## **Report on the BEST Focus Group discussions on expanding the Middle School to include 6th-graders**

Three focus group discussions were held on June 9, 2016 asking parents to provide feedback and input on the question of moving the 6th grade into Mohawk Middle School and forming a 6-7 cohort (i.e., expanding Mohawk Middle School to include the 6th grade).

The following bullet points were distilled from the extensive notes taken during the sessions. When similar points were made, an effort was made to combine them but retain any relevant nuances. It was clear that many parents have deep concerns that will only be assuaged as the details emerge.

### **Background:**

After reading the literature and research, it was evident (and was often noted) that what is effective for one community or district is not a predictor for what will work in another. What the research does make clear is that having a well-thought-out, mindful process for transitions and transitioning is the predictor of the success of any change. And finally, most of the research around grade configurations focuses on K-8 vs a middle school/high school model, so was less directly applicable.

Reference and research articles are available on the [BEST website under the Research Tab](http://bit.ly/mtrsd06) (<http://bit.ly/mtrsd06>)

### ***From What the Research Says (or Doesn't Say) About K-8 Versus Middle School Grade Configurations.***

- “Rather than debate which grade configuration is best for middle grades, we would be better off expending our energy creating a curriculum that intellectually engages and inspires young adolescents, pushing for organized structures that support high-quality relationships, and finding better ways to reach out to families and communities” (Beane & Lipka, 2006, p. 30).
- In a recent research review, Anfara and Buehler (2005) note that “no sequence of grades is perfect or, in itself, guarantees student academic achievement and healthy social and emotional development” (p. 57).
- Results of the studies should be interpreted with caution as they few in number, can't necessarily be generalized across schools, and don't control for all possible variables. However, they do give insight into how to prepare for a success transition.

## **Comments and Notes from the Sessions**

### **Emotional/Social Considerations Benefits**

- Positive experiences of older students looking out for and mentoring younger students – particularly on multi-level athletic teams like track
- Arriving at MS in Grade 6 might make for an easier transition because kids would get socially comfortable before real puberty hits.

- Sixth graders who are now in small cohorts with whom they have spent the last 6-8 years are ready for new/an expanded array of friends
- It would be a mistake to bring them to Mohawk with older kids. It would be preferable to keep kids younger as long as we can.
- Most 6th graders are more than ready for MS, certainly by mid-year.

### **Challenges**

- It would be preferable to keep kids younger as long as we can. (This is true for a lot of parents, but not all.) 6th Grade is a pivotal year and bringing them to Mohawk will make them older earlier.
- What happens to the Elementary School if you pull out the 6th graders? (Requires rethinking the K-5 experience.)
- Families have moved to this area for the small school, nurturing experience, which will be lost. (Bringing 6th grade to Mohawk mean a less nurturing experience de facto?)

### **Concerns**

- Social/emotional/cultural exposure to older students (foul language; visibility of sexual cues, drugs and alcohol; sexual relationships)
- Middle school and high school are on the same campus, age range 11yrs -18yrs
- A culture of body respect needs to be implemented as a cornerstone. (This is an opportunity.)
- Bus rides with older students. (Monitors placed on buses is a good idea regardless)
- Sports – concern about 6th graders playing on teams against 8th-grade players. (Relevant for contact/team sports; different situation for non-contact sports.)
- Increased peer pressure from older kids before 6th graders have the tools to make “adult” decisions

### **Academic**

#### **Benefits**

- “Specialist” teachers are positive for a 6-7 cohort, and the 8-9 configuration might allow older MS students to take higher level (HS) courses if they were ready. (Possible to be part of a transition plan?)
- Team teaching, cohort model (6-7) allows for more academic options/learning experiences that go deep as well as broad
- Easier to make connections within curriculum with team teaching and common planning
- Many 6th graders are more than ready for MS, certainly by mid-year
- SPED services at MS are much more extensive and readily available than at elementary schools (except BSE). The model changes from elementary to middle school. How will kids be supported and what will change?

#### **Challenges**

- Loss of the (6th-grade) chance to be “kings of the school,” and mentoring opportunities to help younger students
- “Milestone” programs, like the Mexico trip (Sanderson), Nature’s Classroom, etc. would be lost (opportunity)
- Current Mohawk students who were asked about the plan say they loved being in 6th grade at their elementary school; and therefore, they don’t support this decision.

#### **Alternative Configuration Suggestions**

- Move 7th grade down to the elementary schools and move preschool to Mohawk

- Would rather bus further to a combined K-8 than moving 6th grade to Middle School.
- Is there a possibility of to have the same start time as the elementary schools?
- Other than 6th grade moving to Mohawk, what are the other options? Helpful to be presented with all the options.

**Initial conclusion by Leslie Rule, Plainfield School Committee member, BEST Education Sub-Committee.**

Parents are aware of and concerned about the financial crisis. To save most of the school experience for their beloved children, they would be willing to lose some experiences they treasure, *but only if it does actually result in a more financially sustainable district.*

Expanding the Middle School is an opportunity to enrich students’ academic and social experience, to make the transition to middle school much smoother than it’s traditionally been. The goal is to begin building a more financially sustainable district--one in which students choice in and don’t leave for private or charter schools

It is clear any grade reconfiguration must be done mindfully, especially with respect to the transition from elementary to middle school.

**Recommendations for Mindfulness in the Expansion/**

- Instructional Team does come together and does educate the whole child.
- Support system in place for transition .
- 7th grade is an extreme transition. Combine a 6-7 cohort such that leadership/mentoring was infused in that cohort, potentially leading to a stronger 7th grade and an easier transition into 6th
- Cohort configuration is “designed” to ease transition from elementary to middle
- Get the 5th-grade students into Mohawk to visit. Begin to integrate elementary school kids to Mohawk at all grade levels
- Get students accustomed to the Mohawk campus much earlier
- Implement a culture of body respect as a cornerstone.
- Recognizing and combating negative peer pressure
- Need to rethink the K-5 experience so that elementary schools stay strong

**Financial**

- Effect on school choice, both in and out
- Transportation (more or less time on the bus; more or less cost)

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## **Alternative Configuration Suggestions**

- Move 7th grade down to the elementary schools and move preschool to Mohawk
- Would rather bus further to a combined K-8 than moving 6th grade to Middle School.
- Is there a possibility of to have the same start time as the elementary schools?
- If 6th grade wasn't moved to Mohawk, what are the other options? Helpful to be presented with all the options.

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Parents are aware of and concerned about the financial crisis. To save most of the school experience for their beloved children, they would be willing to lose some experiences they treasure, but only if it does actually result in a more financially sustainable district.

Consolidation is an opportunity to expand and enrich the district's offerings, to making the transition to middle school much smoother than it's been, and to begin building a more sustainable district that attracts students to choice into the district.

Regardless, it is clear any grade reconfiguration must be done mindfully, especially in respect to the transition from elementary to middle school.

## **Transitional Mindfulness**

Taking the opportunity to rethink certain processes

- Instructional Team does come together and does look at the whole child as a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. They figure out the students' support system
- 7<sup>th</sup> grade is a extreme transition. Combine a 6-7 cohort such that leadership/mentoring was infused in that cohort, potentially leading to a stronger 7<sup>th</sup> grade and an easier transition into 6<sup>th</sup>
- Cohort configuration is "designed" to ease transition from elementary to middle
- Get the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students into Mohawk to visit. Begin to integrate elementary school kids to Mohawk at all grade levels
- Get accustomed to the new building much earlier
- Implement a culture of body respect as a cornerstone.
- Recognizing and combating negative peer pressure
- Need to rethink the K-5 experience so that ES are stronger

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