**Report on the BEST Focus Group discussions (June 9, 2006)on a   
combined 6/7 cohort housed at Mohawk Middle School**

A Focus Group[[1]](#footnote-1) was convened on June 9th to ask parents to provide feedback and input in the form of discussion on the question of moving the 6th grade into Mohawk Middle School and forming a 6-7 cohort. 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.

**Background:**

After reading a lot of the literature and research, it was clear and was often noted that what is effective for one community or in district is not a predictor for what might work in another. What the research does make clear is that having a well-thought out, mindful process for transitions and transitioning is what will determine 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.

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 are very few in number, can’t necessarily be generalized across schools, and don’t control for all possible variables.

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 key year and bringing them to Mohawk will make them be older earlier.
* What happens to the Elementary School if you pull out the 6th graders? (Will need to rethink the K-5 experience)
* Families have moved to this area for the small school, nurturing experience, which will be lost. (Is this assumption true? (Does bringing 6th grade to Mohawk result in a less nurturing experience de facto.)?

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| **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 generally a good idea regardless)
* Sports – concern about 6th graders playing on teams against 8th grade players. (Relevant for contact/team sports; less so non-contact games.)
* Increased peer pressure from older kids before 6th graders have the tools to make “adult” decisions

**Academic**

**Benefits**

* “Specialist” teachers are a 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. (opportunity) (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). people thinking about special education and that 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 chances to help younger students
* “Milestone” programs, like the Mexico trip (Sanderson), Nature’s Classroom, etc. would be lost (opportunity)
* Many current Mohawk students who have been asked about the plan say they loved being in 6th grade at their elementary school and therefore 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?
* If 6th grade wasn’t moved to Mohawk, what are the other options? Helpful to be presented with all the options.

**Initial conclusion by Leslie Rule, Plainfield SC member, BEST Education, Program Manager, Education Dept, MCLA; M.Ed Harvard Graduate School of Education: MA, Instructional Technology, Middle School Educator.**

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. (See financial projections for potential configuration scenarios in [Financial Analysis of Scenario Presentation, July 20, 2016](http://mtrsd-best.weebly.com/uploads/8/3/9/5/83954794/best_presentation_july_20_2016.pptx).

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 6th grader**. They figure out the students’ support system
* 7th grade is pretty horrible, or it was. 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. (opportunity)
* 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 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

**Financial**

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

1. Administrators were asked to invite parents/caregivers they thought would like to participate in the discussion. For total inclusion and a wider reach, a letter from the superintendent went home with every student informing and inviting all parents/caregivers to attend. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)