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Opening a New High School

Question: When opening a new high school, how many grade-levels should you include?

Summary of Findings:

“One size does not fit all,” usually refers to differentiation and how students learn. However, it can also be applied to what grade levels should be included in a new high school setting. What is feasible for one school district and its students may not be so for another (Howley, 2002; McEntire, 2005). “The underlying issue is how should we configure educational institutions, not what grade-span configuration is best” (Howley 2002). Nevertheless, the research is clear about the important components that should be considered when establishing a high school campus.

Considerations

As a school community, it is critical that the following be researched, examined, and discussed. No one model fits every community. There is no research about how many grades to include on a new high school campus. Frequently, considerations other than what is “best” educational drive decisions about which students will attend a new school. For example, some students and parents may not want to be reassigned to the new campus. Or, some may want to attend because the school will have new facilities or be closer to their home. Similarly, arrangements for staffing the new school become complex and competitive.

Overall Questions to Consider

- What are the goals for the students?
- What are the best ways to meet the needs of the students?

- What is the projected enrollment? The research on small learning communities seems to indicate that smaller schools containing grades 9-12 with fewer than 600 students fair better academically than those where there is a larger population
- What configuration will work for the students and fit with the community's goals and values?
- What effect will the configuration have on the neighboring schools?
- What effect will the configuration have on parental involvement?
- What facilities will be available to meet the students' and programs' needs?
- What are the transportation needs of the students? How long will students need to be on the road to get to and from school? (Howley, 2002; Quint, 2006; NorthWest archives, 2001; (Stevenson, 2007)

Transition Questions

- How many school transitions will there be for the students? Research shows that the fewer school transitions a student makes, the more likely they are to remain in school and the easier it is on learning and socialization. Paglin and Fager reported that feelings of anonymity increased with each school change. In a study done by Anspaugh, it was found that the drop out rate was lower in schools that housed grades 7-12 and higher in those that had grades 10-12 and there tended to be a loss of achievement in the transition year (Howley, 2002; McEntire, 2005; Renchler, 2000; NorthWest archives, 2001).

Academic Issues

- What will it cost to put together a program that provides rigor, relevance and meaningful work? Does such a program require a minimum number of students to operate?
- What will the implications be for course offerings and availability?
- Will there be on-going and ample opportunities for teacher collaboration? (Quint, 2006; NorthWest archives, 2001).

Social Issues

- What are the social and developmental needs of the students? How will those be addressed?

- How will the structure of the school be set up to provide for personalization (Quint, 2006; Talent Development High School Programs)?

9th Grade: To house with 10th through 12th grades or not?

The question about including 9th graders in the comprehensive high school is a topic of significant debate. Because there is not a “right” answer there are many factors that must be considered when making this decision.

Facts:

- 30-40% of 9th grade students are not ready for high school work
- 9th grade is usually the year when students have their lowest GPA and highest discipline referrals
- 9th grade is a pivotal year that often determines whether students will succeed in high school or drop out
- Students tend to mature slower when they are not around people of varying ages (Dejong & Craig; Fields; Reents, 2002; NorthWest archives, 2001).

Characteristics of Successful 9th grade only programs:

- a diagnostic program prior to 9th grade provides low achieving students an opportunity for “enrichment” before entering high school
- a strong “bridge” or transition program. One study reported that schools with a well-built program had a drop out rate of less than 8% and without was 24%.
- a shared core belief about goals and values for meeting the needs of 9th graders
- teachers who are trained to work with this age level and want to work with them
- a counselor(s) that is dedicated to working with this population
- curriculum that is presented in meaningful ways, relevant to the students
- students that have an active and involved advocate and/or mentor
- students that are not allowed to fail and are provided additional support when necessary and appropriate
- each student has a workable and viable plan for high school and beyond
- a facility that is appropriate for developmentally appropriate programs
- offers opportunities for students to excel and take courses that best fit their needs (McEntire, 2005; Fields; Reents, 2002, NorthWest Archives, 2001; Talent Development High School Programs; Walsh, 2002; Walker, 2006).

New Schools and Campuses

Every year many new school campuses open. The decision about how many grades of students to include is complex. The following schools and districts recently opened new campuses and provide guidance about how they decided which grades to include.

Skyline High School – Ann Arbor, MI - <http://www.a2skyline.org/skyline.home/home>

This comprehensive high school opened in Fall 2008 with only ninth graders. Each year a grade will be added until all four grades are on the campus. The district minimized transfers for students attending other district high schools.

Rouse High School – Leander Independent School District, TX - <http://rhs.leanderisd.org/>

Only ninth graders were included on this campus when it opened in the Fall 2008.

River City High School – Washington Unified School District, CA -
<http://www.rivercityhs.com/id9.html>

This school opened in Fall 2008 with all four grades. Most students relocated from another campus.

Aldine School District, TX -

<http://www.greatschools.net/schools.page?district=83&lc=h&state=TX>

Information about contacting high schools, including several 9th grade centers is provided at this link.

Minnie Howard School, VA - <http://www.acps.k12.va.us/mhs/>

9th grade school in Alexandria, VA. This is the home link.

Online Resources:

- DeJong, W. S., and Craig, J. (n.d.). Age appropriate schools: How should schools be organized? Retrieved online from <http://www.dejonginc.com/ageappropriateschools.pdf>

This piece provides an overview of different grade level configurations and considerations for each type.

- Fields, G. M. (n.d.). *Reinventing 9th grade. Academics through personalization*. Retrieved online from <http://lhsplc.wikispaces.com/file/view/89ReinventNinthGradeFields2200.pdf>

This is a “kit” that provides descriptions of the typical 9th grade student and several checklists a school can utilize to make certain they are on track to meet the needs of this particular population.

- Howley, G. B. (2002, March). *Grade span configurations*. Retrieved online from <http://www.aasa.org/publications/saarticledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=2672>

A brief history of grade configurations is provided in this article.

- Johns Hopkins University. *Talent Development High School Programs*. Retrieved online from <http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/tdhs/index.html>

A description of the Talent Development program and active links to different aspects of it are provided in this piece.

- McEntire, N. (2005, May). *Grade configuration in K-12 schools*. Retrieved online from <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/poptopics/gradeconfig.html>

An overview of considerations in different grade configurations is outlined in this piece.

- NASSP. (2005). *Breaking ranks II: An executive summary*. Retrieved online from http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/institutes_2005/documents/Ollarvia_executive_summary.pdf

This provides a comprehensive list of the recommendations for high schools and components each should encompass.

- NorthWest Archives. (2001, last updated). *Grade configuration: Who goes where*. Retrieved online <http://www.nwrel.org/request/july97/article3.html>

This contains information about different grade configurations and also provides some historical background about this.

- Osborne, M. (2008). 8th to 9th grade transition. Retrieved online from <http://www.principalspartnership.com/8thto9thMay08.pdf>

Ideas for what 8th grade students need to have for a successful transition is provided in this research brief.

- Quint, J. (2006, May). *Meeting five critical challenges of high school reform*. MDRC. Retrieved online from <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/428/execsum.pdf>

“It discusses three comprehensive initiatives — Career Academies, First Things First, and Talent Development — that have grappled with the challenges of improving low-performing urban and rural schools.”

- Reeves, K. (2005, March). *Figuring and refiguring grade configuration*. Retrieved online from <http://www.aasa.org/publications/saarticledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=985&snItemNumber=950&tnItemNumber=951>

A description of a few different grade level configurations, mostly middle school, is provided in this article.

- Renchler, R. (2000, Spring). *Grade span*. Retrieved online from <http://cepm.uoregon.edu/publications/roundup/S00.html>

Descriptions of research done regarding different grade level configurations are briefly explained in this article.

- Reents, J. N. (2002, March). *Isolating 9th graders*. Retrieved online from <http://www.aasa.org/publications/saarticledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=2668&snItemNumber=950&tnItemNumber=951>

This piece provides a description of several 9th grade centers in a district in Texas.

- Stevenson, K. R. (2007). *Educational trends shaping school planning and design: 2007*. Retrieved online from <http://www.edfacilities.org/pubs/trends2007.pdf>

12 general trends in education that are influencing school planning and design are described in this piece.

- Talent Development High Schools Program. (n.d.). *Components*. Retrieved online from <http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/tdhs/about/components.html#High1>

This site provides brief descriptions of this program

- Toch, T., Jerald, C. D., & Dillon, E. (2007, February). *Surprise: High school reform is working*. Retrieved online from http://www.pdkmembers.org/members_online/publications/archive/pdf/k0702to1.pdf

This provides an overview of concepts and programs that are working well in high schools.

- Walker, K. (2006). *Special needs of 9th grade students*. Retrieved online from <http://www.principalspartnership.com/ninthgrade.pdf>

This research brief provides an overview of the characteristics of 9th grade students.

- Walsh, M. M. (2002, March). *Delivering the promise to 9th graders*. Retrieved online from <http://www.aasa.org/publications/saarticledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=2671&snItemNumber=950&tnItemNumber=951>

This article, written by a principal of a 9th grade school in VA, describes the school and its critical components that have helped it be successful.

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By: Dr. Karen Walker, Lebanon Valley College

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