

HALIFAX REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD Grade Configuration Report

PURPOSE: To provide the Governing Board with information regarding grade configurations and to seek approval from the Halifax Regional School Board to transition to a grade 9-12 configuration when and where possible.

BACKGROUND: On March 6, 2013, the following motion by Board Member Dave Wright was approved:

I move that the governing board direct staff to compile a report on the educational advantages and disadvantages of grade configurations in HRSB schools and the impact on operational efficiencies.

CONTENT: Senior Staff of the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) have been exploring the benefits of a change to the grade configuration at high school related to student engagement and maximizing operational efficiencies in our facilities. The HRSB Facilities Master Plan and the 2012 Capital Plan submission to the Department of Education were based on moving forward with a grade 9-12 configuration when and where possible.

Senior Staff would not support this configuration change if it were pedagogically unsound. Currently, both provincially and within the HRSB, there are a range of school/grade configurations that are supported successfully. Senior Staff is recommending that the Governing Board adopt a grade 9-12 configuration, when possible. Research indicates that grade 9 is a significant period of transition for students and without engagement at school during this time, many students lose interest in school. A move to high school at this level with a change in programming may be the stimulus that is required to increase student engagement and student success. The recommendation also acknowledges that with declining enrollments and decreasing funding, the Governing Board needs to use its resources as efficiently as possible. The resulting savings will be directed to the classroom to support students rather than to maintain excess space.

The report on grade configurations, as requested by Board Member Wright, is attached. (Appendix 1)

COST: N/A (may reduce operating costs)

FUNDING: Annual Board Budget

TIMELINE: As space in high schools becomes available.

APPENDICES: Appendix 1: Grade Configuration Report

Appendix 2: Responses to Specific Questions from Board Members
Linders and Wright

RECOMMENDATIONS: That the Governing Board adopt a grade 9-12 configuration for high schools, when and where possible.

COMMUNICATIONS:

AUDIENCE	RESPONSIBLE	TIMELINE
Public	HRSB Communications	Following Board decision
Schools	Director – School Administration	Following Board decision
School Advisory Councils	Director – School Administration	Following Board decision
Central Office Staff	HRSB Directors	Following Board decision

From: For further information please contact Judy White, Superintendent, at jwhite@hrsb.ca or 464-2000, ext. 2312.

Filename: *jwhite/mydocuments/Board Report Grade Configurations*
Date last revised: March 19, 2013

Grade Configuration Report to the Governing Board March 19, 2013

Background:

On March 6, 2013, the following motion by Board Member Dave Wright was approved:

I move that the governing board direct staff to compile a report on the educational advantages and disadvantages of grade configurations in HRSB schools and the impact on operational efficiencies.

This document will provide information to the Governing Board when considering grade configurations within the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB). Senior Staff are recommending that the Governing Board transition to a grade 9-12 configuration for high school, when and where possible. Research indicates that grade 9 is a significant period of transition for students and without engagement at school during this time, many students lose interest in school. A move to high school at this level with a change in programming may be the stimulus that is required to increase student engagement and student success. The recommendation also acknowledges that with declining enrollments and decreasing funding, the Governing Board needs to use its resources as efficiently as possible. The resulting savings will be directed to the classroom to support students rather than to maintain excess space.

Research:

There has been much discussion provincially over the last several years regarding the advantages and disadvantages of grade configurations. However, a survey of the research on the educational advantages and disadvantages of grade configurations is minimal and often situational.

According to Dr. Jim Gunn, in his report *The Relationship Between Learning and Grade Configuration and How It May Influence the Use of Schools in Nova Scotia* (2007), “the findings from educational research are indefinite with respect to the effects of various grade level configurations on students, in terms of how different configurations affect their learning and their social and emotional development.” According to a report by the Avon Maitland District School Board in Ontario, “In fact, the only thing that the research was definitive about is that the largest impact on student achievement is what happens as part of the daily classroom activities.” (Summary of Research Related to School and Grade Configuration, 2009).

According to the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Statistics Canada, 2007), the school-to-school transition of Canadian students did not impact on student achievement as it did in the United States, but the students did experience some difficulty with transition experiences such as homework and making friends.

John Alspaugh’s (1998) research demonstrated that there was a greater achievement loss with middle school students who transitioned to high schools as compared to K-8 students.

Alspaugh (1999) also indicated that:

The findings imply that as the grade level of transition to high school is raised, high school dropout rates increase. Boys have larger high school dropout rates than girls. It appears that as the grade level of transition to high school is raised, the difference between dropout rates for boys and girls increases. The highest dropout rates occur at 11th grade. The dropout rates are particularly large for grade 10-12 high schools with the transition to high school at 10th grade. The dropout rates were lowest for both boys and girls in high schools with grade spans from 7 through 12 in which the transition to high school occurred at seventh grade.

Throughout the literature, fewer school-to-school transitions are recommended for students; although, it appears that any loss of achievement is regained within a year of the transition.

Research completed in British Columbia by Elizabeth Dhuey, *Middle School or Junior High? How Does Grade Level Configuration Affect Student Achievement?* (2012), refers to the negative effects of attending a middle school or junior high, but it was not necessarily related to grade configuration. More study would be required to make this determination as there are many factors that would need to be controlled (e.g., socioeconomic, parent involvement, administrators and staff, etc.).

Paglin & Fager (1997) compiled a list of nine factors that a school board may wish to consider when making decisions about grade configurations in their board. They are:

- The cost and length of student travel, particularly in a school district that covers a large area;
- A possible increase or decrease in parental involvement, possibly affected by the distance to the school and the number of schools a family's children attend;
- The number of students at each grade level, which may affect class groupings and courses offered;
- The effect of school setting on achievement, particularly for grades 6 and 9;
- Effect on whether the neighbourhood schools remain open or closed;
- The number of school transitions for students;
- The opportunities for interaction between age groups;
- The influence of older students on younger students; and
- The building design – is it suitable for only a few or for several grades?

This research provides many things to consider when determining grade configuration. What appears most often is that the transition of students from one setting to another requires attention. In HRSB, transition teams are created to help assess the situation, the needs of students, parents and staff and to develop appropriate actions to ensure a successful transition.

In much of the research, there is support for a grade 6-8 “middle school” concept; yet, there is also research that indicates that this model has not always been successful. Middle school

philosophy embraces interdisciplinary teaching with the same group of students and less daily classroom transitions and operates more closely aligned with an elementary model with a curriculum that is more focused on the developmental needs of students. What becomes apparent is that if the middle school philosophy is not fully implemented, then it appears the model is failing, when in fact it is the implementation of the philosophy. Research also indicates that K-8 schools are becoming the preferred model in some jurisdictions in the United States (yet there is research to contradict this). Regardless, K-8 schools are most effective when a middle school philosophy is embraced and there is in fact a “school within a school” model.

One thing is for sure. Regardless of the configuration, it is essential that a strong transition plan be in place for students and staff when moving from one configuration/school to another.

There are many opinions on grade configurations. There is evidence for earlier transitions to high school, but there is also evidence that one school-to-school transition is better than multiple transitions. Again, it is the importance of how the transition occurs that we must recognize.

In *kids & learning first*, the province’s multi-year plan for student success, it states the following:

Review and improve grade 9, a critical transition year, so students stay interested in school and are better prepared for high school. The review involves

- what students are being taught
- how they are taught and tested
- how students themselves can actively influence their learning
- how to strengthen connections between what is taught in the classroom and what can be experienced in the community, workplace, and the world. Having more high schools include grades 9 to 12 students, versus 10 to 12, is one approach. Grade 9 students would then have access to larger programming spaces—from libraries to labs to gyms—and more specialist teachers. As well, high school programs like skilled trades could more easily expand to include grade 9 students.

Although the province is not mandating a specific grade configuration, there is recognition that the province and school boards need to focus on grade 9. Dr. Jim Gunn (2007) clearly articulates that grade 9 is a period of transition for students of this age and there is no definitive answer as to what grade configuration will work best for these students; however, grade 9 students seem to fit better with high school students than younger students.

Toronto District School Board states that:

Ultimately, the decision to remix grade configurations is often more pragmatic than philosophical or academic. Rather than debate the configuration issue, districts should perhaps be determining the desirability of alternative grade configurations according to other important contextual or administrative factors. These may include: geographic location, community values and preferences, financial resources, projected enrollments,

space constraints, transportation costs, the number of school to school transitions, the size of the school, the need for conversion of facilities, neighbourhood diversity, and/or overall school goals (Howley (2002); Paglin & Fager (1997); Reeves (2005); Renchler (2002)).

Dr. Jim Gunn (2012) in his report for the South Shore Regional School Board on the impact of the transfer of designated Grade 9 students to a high school indicates:

Most answers to questions about potential impacts can be only general in nature because they do not apply to all students. As with all age or grade groupings of students, a grade 9 class is a grouping of unique individuals who cannot be described with only one set of characteristics. Because their personal interests, maturity levels, abilities, and aptitudes vary greatly, what may be considered as a benefit for some students are challenges for others.

This difficulty in trying to label a potential impact as a benefit or challenge becomes evident in discussions with families. For example, some families are deeply concerned about how their child may be influenced by negative role models in the high school. Others see more potential benefit than challenge in how their child may be influenced by the various positive role models whether in academics, sports, the arts and student leadership.

Dr. Gunn also summarizes the potential benefits for grade 9 students in his paper:

- The physical, social and emotional developmental stage of grade 9 students dictates that their interests, behaviours and activities are or quickly become more aligned to those of the older students in high school than those of younger students.
- Grade 9 students who do not transfer to the high school until grade 10 commonly face two sources of considerable anxiety: moving to the high school next year and selecting their grade 10 courses. If they have already transferred to the high school after grade 8, one of these sources of anxiety has been removed. Also, getting to know the staff and their surroundings in grade 9 increases their comfort level in going through the registration process for grade 10.
- A decision to transfer grade 9 ... to a high school for the first time provides an opportunity to redesign the grade 9 program and methods of instruction to fit the unique needs and interests of the students---the grade 9 program is presently under review by the Department of Education.

In the Halifax Regional School Board, currently there are 11 different grade configurations for schools:

Grade Configuration	School
P-4	Oceanview, Tallahassee
P-5	Atlantic Memorial-Terence Bay, Beechville-Lakeside-Timberlea, Eastern Consolidated, Hammonds Plains, Prospect Road,
P-9	Bedford South, Bicentennial, Cavalier Drive, Elizabeth Sutherland, Oxford, Oyster Pond Academy, Park West, Ross Road
4-6	Seaside
6-9	Brookside, Madeline Symonds, Ridgecliff
7-8	Georges P. Vanier, Harold T. Barrett
7-12	Duncan MacMillan, Musquodoboit Rural High
9-12	Lockview
P-6	76 schools
7-9	23 schools
10-12	13 schools

The Halifax Regional School Board supports all of these configurations. Effective administrators and staff, parental involvement and positive socioeconomic conditions are a few examples of factors that contribute to a school's success.

Conclusion

The Halifax Regional School Board is facing some serious issues: declining enrollment, declining funding and aging facilities. Some important decisions need to be made, but never at the cost of student success.

The research is not conclusive regarding the effect of grade configuration on student success. The Halifax Regional School Board has 11 different configurations that are working well. Regardless of the grade configuration, there is no substitute for effective leadership and teaching. Transition planning is critical regardless of the age/grade of students.

Senior Staff is recommending that the Governing Board adopt a grade 9-12 configuration where and when possible. Our high schools can be more fully utilized in areas of declining enrollment. When the opportunity arises to move grade 9 students to high school, there is potential to take advantage of the facilities and programs offered at the high school level. A high school setting would be beneficial to students in grade 9 as it would provide access to specialized learning spaces and a social climate more conducive to their interests and activities. Student engagement is a key factor in keeping students in school and by moving students to the high school level,

students may be more engaged academically, socially, and intellectually resulting in more students graduating and prepared for the path beyond high school.

Given these factors, Senior Staff recommends that the HRSB establish high schools that will serve students in grades 9-12 when it is possible to accommodate the students. The resulting grade configurations in the feeder schools should be determined based on what works best within the Family of Schools, when taking into consideration the enrollment, funding and facilities available.

Response to Specific Questions Provided by Board Members Linders and Wright

Q. 1 What is the justification for this recommendation including but not limited to discussion of declining enrolments and effective stewardship of our physical resources?

A. As indicated in the Grade Configuration document, there is inconclusive evidence that grade configuration impacts student achievement. The placement of Grade 9 students has been a question for some time. Senior Staff is suggesting the change to 9-12 high schools, as grade 9 students are better suited to the high school environment. This is supported in Dr. Jim Gunn's report, *The Relationship Between Learning and Grade Configuration and How It May Influence the Use of Schools in Nova Scotia (2007)*.

Our high schools are large facilities that should be utilized to capacity. In addition, they have specialized program spaces that are not always available in other schools. The Halifax Regional School Board has aging facilities and declining enrollment. The board must maximize the use of facilities as this will ultimately affect the board's operating budget.

In these times of declining budgets, the board needs to use its limited resources as efficiently as possible and ensure that the maximum dollars are used to support students in classrooms, not maintain excess capacity.

Q. 2 Grade 9 Engagement – I have been told frequently that Grade 9 is a tipping point for many of our students. What are the implications (positive and negative) of the proposed move into a High School environment?

A. As indicated in the Grade Configuration Report, there is no research that supports one configuration over another. The most important factor is the leadership and the teaching at the site. That being said, we know from our HRSB surveys that more students appear to lose interest in school around grade 9. This is a factor that requires attention. In Dr. Jim Gunn's report *The Relationship Between Learning and Grade Configuration and How It May Influence the Use of Schools in Nova Scotia (2007)*, he indicates that grade 9 students are better placed within a high school environment for academic and social reasons. Developmentally, grade 9 students fit better with the older students. In a high school, students will also have access to dedicated program spaces.

Dr. Gunn also indicates that:

Grade 9 students who do not transfer to the high school until grade 10 commonly face two sources of considerable anxiety: moving to the high school next year and selecting their grade 10 courses. If they have already transferred to the high school after grade 8, one of these sources of anxiety has been removed. Also,

getting to know the staff and their surroundings in grade 9 increases their comfort level in going through the registration process for grade 10.

Q. 3 Give a summary of the research or refer to the *kids and learning first* document for their comments.

A. In the Report No. 13-03-1398 – Grade Configuration Report, the research is outlined and is inconclusive. No one grade configuration is the best or will ensure student success. According to research from the Avon Maitland District School Board in Ontario, “In fact, the only thing that the research was definitive about is that the largest impact on student achievement is what happens as part of the daily classroom activities” (Summary of Research Related to School and Grade Configuration, 2009).

In *kids & learning first*, the province’s multi-year plan for student success, it states the following:

“Review and improve grade 9, a critical transition year, so students stay interested in school and are better prepared for high school. The review involves

- what students are being taught
- how they are taught and tested
- how students themselves can actively influence their learning
- how to strengthen connections between what is taught in the classroom and what can be experienced in the community, workplace, and the world. Having more high schools include grades 9 to 12 students, versus 10 to 12, is one approach. Grade 9 students would then have access to larger programming spaces—from libraries to labs to gyms—and more specialist teachers. As well, high school programs like skilled trades could more easily expand to include grade 9 students.

Q.4 Please provide explicit discussion of intention (or lack thereof) to move to this model in the 10-year Facility Master Plan throughout HRSB.

A. Senior Staff of the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) have been exploring the benefits of a change to the grade configuration at high school related to student engagement and maximizing operational efficiencies in our facilities. The HRSB Facilities Master Plan and the 2012 Capital Plan submission to the Department of Education were based on moving forward with a grade 9-12 configuration when possible.

Senior Staff would not support this configuration change if it were pedagogically unsound. Currently, both provincially and within the HRSB, there are a range of school/grade configurations that are implemented successfully. Senior Staff is recommending that the Governing Board adopt a grade 9-12 configuration, when and

where possible. Research indicates that grade 9 is a significant period of transition for students and without engagement at school during this time, many students lose interest in school. A move to high school at this level with a change in programming may be the stimulus that is required to increase student engagement and student success. The recommendation also acknowledges that with declining enrollments and decreasing funding, the Governing Board needs to use its resources as efficiently as possible. The resulting savings will direct additional resources to the classroom to support students rather than to maintain excess space.

Decisions around other grade level configurations should be determined through an analysis of facilities and enrollment within the Family of Schools feeding into the 9-12 high school.

Q. 5 What is the impact on Grade 9 curriculum and scheduling in the short and long term?

A. There should be no immediate impact on curriculum. Regardless of the grade configurations within a building, teachers will implement the provincial curriculum for each grade. However, in *kids & learning first*, the province's multi-year plan for student success, it states the following:

“Review and improve grade 9, a critical transition year, so students stay interested in school and are better prepared for high school. The review involves

- what students are being taught
- how they are taught and tested
- how students themselves can actively influence their learning

HRSB already has a school that includes grade 9 in a high school setting and two other schools that include grades 7-12. These schools are operating well and the curriculum is being addressed. However, when the province completes the grade 9 review, the HRSB will implement accordingly. There could be changes to curriculum and/or scheduling but the changes should not be dependent on grade configurations. Scheduling of courses is done on an annual basis at each site.

Q. 6 What is the impact on Grade 6 curriculum and scheduling in the short and long term?

A. There should be no immediate impact on curriculum or scheduling. Regardless of the grade configurations within a building, teachers will implement the provincial curriculum for each grade.

Q. 7 In comparing the separate Elementary/Junior High model with P-8/9, I understand both are accepted configurations, but what are the benefits/drawbacks (both academic and social) to both?

A. The research indicates that no one configuration is better than another. However, there has been research that indicates that students in K-8 appear to do better when they transition to high school than students from a grade 7-9 configuration. However, there is evidence that students regain any losses within one year. Research has not been able to determine if the K-8 model is better due to grade configuration or other factors such as socioeconomic, ethnic background or enrollment size.

Q. 8 Compare 7-9 vs. 6-8 in terms of social/culture.

A. In most of the research, there is support for a grade 6-8 “middle school” model. However, this means adopting the middle school philosophy. Research has indicated that in middle schools where the philosophy is adopted, there has been marked improvement in educational outcomes. However, HRSB has schools with both these grade configurations and again, it is the leadership and teachers that determine success in a school, not the configuration.

Q. 9 What about the physical activity level of students in elementary and junior high?

It is a well-known fact that there is concern over the physical activity levels of young people. As students get older, the less active many of them become. However, whether or not students are with lower elementary students or in a junior high, it is an issue that needs to be addressed. There are programs offered in schools to enhance physical activity and the Thrive! strategy from the Department of Education indicates the commitment to increasing physical fitness of young people.

There is a recess at the elementary level, but that does not ensure that students are physically active. Some students choose to stand and talk with friends, whereas others participate in a variety of activities.

The HRSB in its survey “*Getting To Great*” does examine the physical activity of young people and does partner with HRM to develop programs that might engage more young people. There is a program offered by the government which allows schools to access funding to help students become more active.

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