

Purpose:

This overview is intended to provide contextual and background information to inform on-going RSU 13 School Board and faculty discussions regarding grade 8-12 program development efforts.

Educational Research Highlights :

A variety of professional organizations (REL - Regional Educational Laboratories; ERIC - Educational Resource Information Center; Principals' Partnership Research Briefs; National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grade Reform; NMSA - National Middle School Association, and many others) have surveyed available research, contemplating the question of whether or not middle level and high school grade configuration impacts achievement (as measured by standardized assessments), or learning persistence (as measured by attendance, discipline records, and drop-out rates). While these organizations typically do not conduct the actual research, they do serve as clearinghouses for identifying relevant studies, evaluating conflicting research findings, and making recommendations for policy makers to consider.

In a 2008 policy statement on grade configuration prepared by the National Forum, the general conclusion reached was (as *paraphrased*); ***Evidence-based research on grade configuration correlated to achievement and learning persistence is not definitive.*** Several REL summaries also note; ***The sheer number of variables that come into play when attempting to measure grade-span effectiveness (class size, socio economic indicators, curriculum content, teacher experience, etc.), complicates efforts to understand this important component of education.*** Furthermore, research summaries available via NMSA emphasize – ***that the quality of program implementation is of greater importance than the actual grade configuration.***

With these conclusions in mind, the National Forum in its policy statement suggests to policy makers that; ***focusing on grade configuration as a critical factor to improving adolescent education misses the mark. Research findings do support that regardless of grade configuration, high performing schools serving adolescent learners share three essential, interlocking elements: academic excellence, responsiveness to the unique needs of adolescents, and social equity. In other words, they set high standards for all of their students, create a personalized and caring learning environment, and provide students with the academic, social-emotional, health, and other services they need to succeed. These schools are also characterized by shared and sustained leadership, a deep commitment to continuous improvement, and a powerful community of practice in which professional learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm.*** (National Forum – Policy Statement on Grade Configuration, July 2008).

There are, however, identifiable trends for grade configuration that imply potential impacts for achievement and persistence. Findings imply that including 8th graders in elementary settings (K-8, K-9, 3-8, etc.) and configurations that include grades 7-12 are both efficacious in supporting particularly younger adolescents in learning. 8th graders grouped in elementary configurations generally out performed those grouped in more traditional settings, and persistence rates for both males and females grouped in 7-12 configurations were stronger – but particularly so for males. Findings also imply that persistence rates tend to be weaker for students making multiple transitions through the K-12 sequence unless those transition adjustments are structured, incremental, and embedded within a sequential learning process. Findings also imply that transitions from middle school to high school that occur at grade 10 generally result in weaker persistence rates – again particularly for male students.

Implications for Grade 8 – 12 Program Development:

RSU 13 has confirmed a plan to reconfigure grades 8 – 12 between two campuses, one campus serving grades 8 - 9, and one serving grades 10 – 12. While strong evidence-based conclusions are not definitive within the research, the implications noted above will play a formative role in shaping the design and implementation of the 8-12 program. To this end, it is critical that:

- The 8-12 program be seen (both theoretically & operationally) as one, unified school with the transition to ‘high school’ occurring at grade 9. It is strongly encouraged that the 8-12 program be recognized under one name inclusive of both campus locations.
- The program elements fostering academic success for 8th graders in elementary settings and for students in other high performing settings (which concur with the National Forum Policy Statement above) be strongly emphasized within the 8-9 program, and be the basis for program design for 10-12.
- Transitions be carefully planned and structured within the context of personalized learning, with transitional adjustments mitigated to the degree possible with routine cross campus activities, visitations, and planning sessions.

In addition to these basic research implications, other factors are identified as strongly associated with learning environments that support high achievement for adolescent learners. The following research supported elements are seen as critical in supporting and guiding program development.

1. Findings implying that smaller schools (defined as between 400 – 800 students) appear optimum in supporting student learning. (*Principals’ Partnership Research Brief Summary - 2005*)

Highlighted implications for RSU 13’s work:

- The reorganization for grades 8-12 will maintain small schools.
- The enrollment charts below indicates the projected enrollment for years one and two of the 8-12 program:

2011 - 2012

Community	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Rockland Owls Head South Thom	91	112	88	120	129
St. George	18	34	Included below	Included below	Included below
St. George Thomaston Cushing	43	54	62	75	68
Totals:	152	200	150	195	197

8-9 Campus = 352 10-12 Campus = 542

2012 - 2013

Community	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Rockland Owls Head South Thom	91	91	112	88	120
St. George	18	18	Included below	Included below	Included below
St. George Thomaston Cushing	44	43	88	62	75
Totals:	153	152	200	150	195

8-9 Campus = 305 10-12 Campus = 545

- 2. Research supports smaller learning communities that personalize instruction – involving teachers that are both knowledgeable regarding their subject matter and meeting the developmental needs of adolescents. This is characterized by a learning environment where teachers and students know one another well, where mentoring and support are readily available, and academic interventions support successful learning. (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie et al., 1999, 2003, National Forum 2008).**

Highlighted implications for RSU 13's work:

- 8th & 9th teaming structure – historically present at GVHS, beginning at RDHS Fall 2010.
- Extension of Response to Intervention (RTI) system and structured interventions through grade 9 and beyond.
- Continued development of the high school advisory program.

- 3. High performing learning environments make effective use of accountability systems (local as well as mandated) that provide transparency regarding performance outcomes and progress towards established goals. (McKenzie et al., 2006)**

Implications for RSU 13's work:

- NEASC self study process will identify priority needs for highlighted reforms that are needed 8-12.
- Implementing systems for crafting and monitoring goals for continuous improvement grades 8-12.
- Regular reporting of assessment data to constituencies and authentic use of data to plan & guide instruction.
- Consistent grading policies and procedures to be implemented for grades 8-12.
- Create and implement an assessment plan relevant to 8-12 program reorganization that not only tracks program development tasks as they are accomplished, but provides on-going evaluation of criteria and indicators utilized to determine overall project success over time. (Ex; decrease in 9th grade failure rate, improved assessment results, etc.).

4. Findings imply that a strong focus on adolescent literacy with support for advancing reading and writing skills in all content areas, along with rigorous mathematics and science instruction for all students is imperative. The growing body of research implies that high academic expectations for all students, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and personalized support lead to higher levels of achievement. (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999; Anfara, V.A. et al., 2007; Viadero, 1993)

Highlighted implications for RSU 13's work:

Of critical importance within this reorganization effort is the need to actively address the unacceptably high 9th grade failure rate that, while not unique to our schools, currently persists within RSU 13. To that end and in consideration of:

High academic expectations for all students:

- Continue to build and utilize the writing assessment system through grade 12. Consideration of phasing this in as a graduation requirement.
- Development of additional internal assessment strategies and data analysis tools to guide instructional planning and continuous progress monitoring – supplementing standardized assessments.
- 8th & 9th grade teams working closely together are intended to focus on increasing overall rigor, via executive functioning skills (organization, planning, sequencing work tasks, etc) and independent habits of work - while efforts to improve effective supports for learning will extend through grade 12.
- A critical investigation will be pursued regarding the efficacy of tracking as a strategy for differentiating instruction and maintaining high standards for all students.
- All course offerings and plausible pathways to graduation will assume the goal of post secondary education/college readiness.
- Common expectations for quality work will be articulated via 8-12 student writing guides, product descriptors/exemplars, common rubrics, etc.
- Build and maintain a system where the lack of academic success leads to progressively intensive levels of intervention 8-12.

Rigorous and relevant curriculum:

- Investigate Expeditionary Learning model for application within the 8-9 campus programming.
- Economy of size (although remaining small) will allow the program to sustain current offerings and enrich opportunities to the extent that existing resources allow.
- Expanding plausible pathways to graduation through dual offerings (where possible), early college opportunities, continued coordination with MCST, and maximizing other community-based learning and alternative education opportunities.
- Program coherence will be established and maintained with one unified 8-12 Program of Studies, one 8-12 student handbook, common course syllabi linked to emerging National Core Standards, common assessments, etc.
- Common grading practices and procedures will insure that high standards are consistently maintained and applied – and that performance is evaluated within a common set of standards-based criteria.

5. High performing schools are also characterized by shared and sustained leadership, a deep commitment to continuous improvement, and a powerful community of practice in which professional learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm. (National Forum – Policy Statement on Grade Configuration, July 2008).

Highlighted implications for RSU 13's work:

- Establish adolescent literacy as professional development theme across content areas.
- Redouble efforts to maximize the effective utilization of available technology and extend professional development opportunities within this area.
- Articulate a comprehensive professional development plan that seeks alternative, non-traditional methods and strategies for imbedding systematic professional learning opportunities within the context of day-to-day work.
- 8th & 9th grade teaming – will function within common student-centered norms and procedures.
- Leadership teams are established within each campus that will work collaboratively within the 8-12 continuum – with the primary purpose of focusing on program development and improvement within curriculum, assessment, and best practice instruction.

Conclusion:

While there are many other important aspects related to the work that lies ahead (creating new school traditions, defining the repertoire of co-curricular and other student activities, settling on specific program content, etc.), it is intended that this working paper begins to identify the core, guiding elements that will be at the heart of continuing planning and development efforts. Undoubtedly, additional considerations will emerge through productive and creative engagement as we mutually pursue our goal of creating a unique, effective, and unified educational program for our grade 8-12 students.

Respectfully Submitted – May 26, 2010:

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