While most remixes result from enrollment challenges, some changes start with academics in mind by Kimberly Reeves

In his 20 years as a superintendent in five school districts across a wide swath of New York state, Paul Doyle has seen just about every grade-level configuration under the sun when it comes to public schools.

In the 8,000-student Rome district where Doyle started as a superintendent back in 1985, campuses followed a K-6 configuration. Rome had an Air Force base at the time, and the town was still growing. When Doyle moved on to 6,800-student Fairport, a Rochester suburb, he recombined a long-overcrowded primary school with one serving grades 3-5 and created a stand-alone 9th-grade center, never knowing that the latter concept would one day become a favorite approach for some high school reformers.

When Doyle assumed the helm of the 2,000-student Saranac Lake district in the Adirondacks three years later, he inherited a district comprised of schools with K-1, 2-5, 6-8 and 9-12 grade spans. When he moved on to the rural 1,100-student Clyde-Savannah in the Finger Lakes region, the three campuses used K-4, 5-6, 7-12 configurations. And now in the Riverhead Central School District on the eastern half of Long Island, Doyle oversees a 5,000-student district with K-4 campuses, a single 5-6 campus and a 7-12 secondary school.

“There are pluses and minuses with every grade configuration. If I had my druthers, I probably would have an early childhood center like we had in Saranac Lake,” says Doyle, who started his job in Riverhead last November. “I don’t mind putting 5-6 and 7-8 together, but it’s definitely better to have a lower school and an upper school. The lower school needs a lot more structure. The upper grades can be departmentalized. I also thought we got a lot out of the 9th-grade campus.”

Once dominated by small common school systems, New York is a fertile ground for grade-span reconfigurations within districts. Grade configurations such as K-8, 6-12 and 7-12 are growing, according to the latest data from the New York Department of Education, which shows significant changes over the past decade.

Multiple Reasons

Often, the remixes of grade levels were forced by enrollment gains and space constraints. Other times, the rationale was based on academics. The 25,000-student Yonkers district, which operates 29 open-enrollment elementary schools, recently shifted its three Montessori schools from K-5 to K-6 and created five K-8 campuses.

Jeri Fierstein, the district’s spokesperson, says the reasons for shifting campus grade levels were multi-faceted. The configuration
would provide greater personalization, raise student test results and relieve overcrowded middle schools. The plan also was heavily favored by parents. In the end, the move was intended to give parents more choices in education.

In Rochester, the board of education in 2003 approved a shift over two years to 7-12 campuses, thereby phasing out the district’s middle schools. Superintendent Manuel Rivera chose the new model as a way to reduce the number of transitions between grades and to provide students with more choices.

“I firmly believe that a change in the grade configuration of our schools was necessary for substantial academic improvement to occur,” Rivera said. “This change alone will not improve student performance, but I firmly believe it is in the best interest of our students and will set the stage for substantial achievement.”

And for some New York school districts, temporary grade-level solutions have become permanent. The 2,000-student Greenburgh Central Schools in Westchester County went to what is called the Princeton Plan, devised by the university 50 years ago to address desegregation issues in schools. Greenburgh used it to address the de facto segregation in its neighborhoods. The plan mixed students in schools with these spans: K-1, 2-3, 4-6, 7-8, 9-12.

Greenburgh today is no longer segregated by race. It is a majority African-American school district, says interim assistant superintendent Peter Lisi. The district has different pressure to reconfigure: the cost savings of one elementary school principal instead of three; greater administrative efficiency; and fewer transitions for children. But parents are resisting.

“We don’t need the Princeton Plan for racial or economic reasons anymore. We could go back to a neighborhood school plan, but the community has rejected that twice over the last 10 years,” Lisi says. “They value the schools that they have.”

Necessary Shakeups

In some cases, new configurations are the sign of a general dissatisfaction with the results of the traditional middle school format of grades 6-8. The middle school movement, now three decades old, has been around long enough to have its own reform movement. As school districts deal with aging facilities, flattening enrollments and higher performance expectations of students, school leaders are stepping out to try new models.

In Cleveland, Ohio, the 68,000-student district shifted its junior highs to middle schools in the early 1990s under a desegregation order, but after seven years, school chief Barbara Byrd-Bennett called those campuses “too big and too unsafe.” The district now is transforming all but eight middle schools into the K-8 configuration. Over the last four years, the district has converted 53 campuses.

Hayes Mizell, a distinguished senior fellow at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, has published extensively on grade-level configuration and middle school reform. He is not surprised, given the new pressure of high-stakes testing, that school districts are ready for drastic structural change.

“There are urban school systems that are in rather desperate straits in terms of student achievement, and they’ve finally hired people who are willing to shake up that system,” Mizell says. “That new superintendent comes into that environment and looks at the fact that the school system is not performing in the grades 6-8 structure and is not getting good results. It’s not unusual to think that person would say, ‘There must be a better way,’ and they see the certain advantages to shifting to the K-8 schools.”

Whether these new spins on old configurations are a sign of a sophisticated movement to create optimal learning environments—or simply unavoidable moves to accommodate gains and losses in school-age population—is difficult to say. Federal statistics tend to lag three to five years behind the current school year data. Even the research on the effectiveness of grade-level configuration is sketchy. Not a great deal of money has been set aside to study the benefits of middle school, Mizell says.

What is apparent is how far school districts have moved away from the junior high-senior high school concept. The shift from the junior high of grades 7-9 to the middle school organization is a clear pattern over the last three decades. Ever since William Alexander, consider the father of the modern middle school, talked about “the bridge institution between elementary school and high school” in the early 1960s, the concept has been widely adopted in school districts in every state.

The number of middle schools doubled between 1970 and 1980, according to statistics provided by the National Center on Education Statistics. The traditional middle school still comprises almost 60 percent of the configurations in the grades between elementary school and high school. The traditional junior high school span now accounts for only 5 percent of schools.

Middle Years

Today, concepts such as interdisciplinary teaching, integrated curriculum, heterogeneous grouping, small-group advisory programs and block scheduling have all become part of the cyclical changes in education. Strategies such as the “active learning community”
and the “individualization of instruction” are taken for granted in today’s teacher lexicon.

But other trend lines are emerging, too. In the last decade, there has been a modest but surprising increase in the number of schools housing 5th through 8th graders. Even schools with just grades 7-8 have held their own in recent years. Those two configurations account for 27 percent of all schools nationwide.

Middle school supporters say there is no magic in a particular bricks-and-mortar configuration. Debby Kasak, who leads the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, says it’s easy to get distracted by a ‘middle school’ vs. ‘other school’ debate. "As advocates for this age group, we should focus our attention on middle-grades students and their learning,” Kasak says. “Rather than simply reshuffling students and schools, we must support our educators and school leaders so they can implement proven practices to advance the learning of middle-grades students, regardless of a school’s grade configuration.”

**Forced Choices**

In most cases, a decision to reconfigure campuses is more pragmatic than philosophical. A rural school district with 250 students has little choice but to create one K-12 campus. In other places, some suburban communities are growing so fast that they are adding, literally, a high school and middle school full of children every year. The question is not how to configure but how to get schools on the ground fast enough to deal with the entree of thousands of new students.

In the Archuleta School District in Pagosa Springs, Colo., the problem hasn’t been too much growth. It has been little or no new enrollment. The population of the town has been growing over the last decade, but it’s primarily been empty nesters looking to settle in an ideal retirement community.

Superintendent Duanne Noggle knows the growth will eventually come back to Pagosa Springs, which relies on tourism for its economic sustenance, but for now he needs to think about the 1,580 students he has. With four campuses, Noggle has divided his students into K-4, 5-6, 7-8 and 9-12. The newest campus is the high school, which was built in 1998.

The campus configuration provides enough students on the intermediate and junior high campuses for each grade level to share a team of teachers, Noggle says. The two schools are located across the street from each other in downtown Pagosa Springs; each has 250 students. The elementary school has 550 students, and the high school has about 500 students.

“I think the fact that we have created a separate intermediate school has allowed us to focus on student achievement because it’s such a small student population. There’s such a sense of belonging,” Noggle says. “That kind of size—with the 6th graders on the first floor and the 5th graders on the second floor—has created a very positive climate.”

The result of the grade-level reconfiguration is that Noggle’s campuses have topped the region on Colorado’s standardized test scores. It’s also “jump started,” he says, the faculty’s enthusiasm to attempt new instructional methods. That works well for Archuleta, which provides a half-day of in-service training each Friday. Faculty teams meet to take advantage of group planning and interdisciplinary units that thread subject curriculum across courses.

But the current setup won’t last forever. The Pagosa Springs community, located four hours southwest of Denver, is talking about moving the intermediate and junior high campuses out of the middle of town and away from the main highway. Long term, the district is likely to build a junior high next door to the new high school on the south end of town. A middle school concept doesn’t figure in any Archuleta plans.

“The community is somewhat opposed to the middle school concept,” Noggle says. “The parents have a lot of concerns about putting 6th graders with 8th graders. If we did decide to make a change, it would probably be a K-3 primary school and a 4-5-6 intermediate school. That would require us to build two, and not three, schools.”

Noggle’s preferences are not just about academics. He’s also concerned about diversity in his school district. If the next school is built where the growth is, it will be in a predominantly white affluent northwest suburb. The creation of two elementary schools would separate affluent whites and lower-income Hispanic residents in the district.

“The mix has been good for us, and I would hate to see that mix change if we created two elementary schools,” Noggle says. “I’d rather be ready with a primary and an intermediate school when the growth does come.”

**Racial Mixes**

Race and diversity has been the factor in some school configuration decisions. Court desegregation orders forced the Tuscaloosa, Ala., City School District to reconfigure its campuses in 1979. Dorothy Richardson, now assistant superintendent for general administration in Tuscaloosa, was a classroom teacher at the time.
To meet the requirements of the desegregation order, Tuscaloosa took its traditional K-6, 7-9, 10-12 campus system and pulled the school configurations apart. Elementary schools became K-5. Junior high schools were disbanded and single-grade campuses were established for 6th, 7th and 8th grades in order for black and white children to attend school side by side. And since the court order stipulated no separate identifiable high schools for blacks and whites in Tuscaloosa, the two existing high school campuses became the main Central High School with grades 9-12 and a satellite high school that covered grades 11-12. Teachers would travel back and forth, if necessary.

“You had very mixed reactions in the community,” Richardson says. “You had parents who were very comfortable with the single-grade campus and you had parents who really wanted all three grades at one school. My children went through the system in that format, and they were very comfortable with it. They didn’t know any other way.”

To ease the transition to the new configuration, the school district made sure teachers used in-service days to articulate material between grade levels. The goal was to make sure the expectations remained consistent for the students as they moved from one campus to the next. The district also shifted the counselors with the students so that the students had one constant through what would have been the middle school grades.

The court eventually released Tuscaloosa from its desegregation order. Today, when Richardson’s youngest daughter returns home, she finds the concept of three high schools—each with no more than 1,000 students—an odd concept. In her school experience, she knew most of the students in her district and attended high school with all of them.

Test Preparation

In many situations, the choice for a different school configuration is made easier by the fact that parents would prefer to hold their children back during those crucial transition years of 6th grade and 9th grade. The 4,000-student Shelton, Wash., Public Schools, faced with an overcrowded high school, found widespread support among parents to divide the middle years into 6-7 and 8-9 campuses last fall.

Under this arrangement, Olympic Middle School opened last fall with 524 students in grades 6 and 7. Across the street, Oakland Bay Junior High, the former middle school, began with grades 8 and 9. The Oakland Bay campus had 788 students, leaving Shelton High School with three grades and a more comfortable enrollment of 1,100.

Olympic Principal Eric Barkman says the two-year spread for his campus made sense in terms of space and academics. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning targets 7th-grade students so his teachers have two full years to work together and concentrate on raising the students’ achievement levels.

“We’re looking at new assessment tools right now that we intend to use to prepare the kids for the test,” Barkman says. “We haven’t had the chance to use those independent tracking tools in the past, and it’s our hope that they’re going to be useful to us, knowing that we have a chance to keep a closer eye on a smaller number of kids.”

The teachers have had the hardest time adjusting to the change, Barkman says. Parents like the social aspects of keeping 6th- and 7th-grade students together. Students, given fewer distractions, are calmer. Teachers, however, have had to make a lot of changes to their schedules and spend additional time on course preparation.

“I think the teachers are feeling the stress,” Barkman admits. “Because of the program changes, the internal needs and the fact we’ve gone from three grades to two, a lot of teachers are teaching additional subjects this year. That’s a lot of anxiety, but I think it will be easier next year when they’ve gone through it at least one time.”

Academic Rationale

The affluent Manhasset School District on Long Island, with only 2,800 students, is in the enviable position of holding enough financial resources to choose how to best configure its schools. For most of the district’s history, the junior high and high school have co-existed on the same campus, but that was more from choice than any space or budget constraints. Second- and third-generation Manhasset residents, many who returned to the district to educate their own children, liked the idea of “that’s the way we did it in my day.”

Six years ago, the school district decided to make a choice to either maintain that configuration, create a middle school environment in one portion of the 1,200-student campus or go out and build a new facility for middle school students elsewhere in the district. Manhasset schools have grown in enrollment about 10 percent over the last three years, making a new campus possible but certainly not imminent.

Manhasset saw dividing the grades and curriculum more clearly to be a way to leverage the relationship between the schools, such as creating peer tutoring and mentoring programs between the middle school and high school. There was no pressing issue of tight
classrooms or falling test scores. Deputy Superintendent Robert Feirsen calls it using the high school, just a stone’s throw away, “purposefully” for the middle school’s success.

Such a change, even if it was confined to one campus, required a shift in thinking from second- and third-generation Manhasset residents who believed the status quo worked fine. Feirsen says the students accepted the 7th-8th campus idea more readily than parents.

Some campus facilities would overlap—the campuses have a burgeoning fine arts program and some common areas—but for the most part, the school district would create a separate identity for the middle school.

“The parents really felt the middle school needed more of a presence, even if they were on a single physical plant,” Feirsen says. “The schools will never be totally separate, but we can create an environment that is developmentally appropriate.”

Eventually, enrollment may force Manhasset to consider separating the junior high and high school campuses. For now the campus has used the middle school configuration to leverage both schools. After 70 years on one site, Manhasset has discovered the concept of a middle school works for them.

Other school districts, such as 14,000-student Greece Central Schools outside Rochester, N.Y., have used enrollment fluctuations as a catalyst for new academic programs. Deputy Superintendent Margaret Keller-Cogan says the K-2 and 3-5 configuration used in Greece was intended to stabilize the student population during local plant layoffs eventually led to the creation of seven signature campuses in the district.

Greece has seven signature schools, each focusing on a particular curriculum area such as the arts, technology, wellness and mathematics. Today, Greece has a completely open enrollment system, allowing families to pick what suits their child best. Last year, block scheduling was added on some campuses that are larger than 400 students.

“I think by reconfiguring the grades we have seen some modest gains in scores,” Keller-Cogan says. “Where we’ve really seen the change is in discipline. We have far fewer behavioral problems on the campuses, fewer behavioral problems in the halls. We can put more of our time into professional development.”

Other school districts choose to reconfigure on a sheer dissatisfaction with middle school performance. As researcher Mizell told the National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education in a speech in San Antonio last fall, the concept of finding new models to ease early adolescents through the transition years is now common philosophy among educators. Early adolescents are not “mini-adults” nor should they be going to a “mini-high school,” he said.

Thirty years after the concept of middle schools was introduced, however, much of the research on the benefits of the concept is inconclusive. Larger urban districts want to take a second look at grade-level configuration to try other types of models, Mizell says. He calls it a failure to properly implement the initial research on middle school education.

“When urban school boards and superintendents embraced the middle school model during the 1970s and 1980s, they did so without developing a deep understanding of the purpose of middle schools or the support they required to be effective,” Mizell says. “In many cases, school system leaders simply fell in line with the national movement for middle schools and responded to its advocates within their school system.”

K-8 Attention

For the San Antonio Independent School District, the shift to K-8 academies that began two years ago started with a discussion about the success of the city’s Catholic schools. After some review of the research and a visit to Philadelphia, the school district decided academies were a sound academic approach, says Deputy Superintendent Robert Alfaro. It provided continuity in schools and eased those transitional years for students.

“When we took all our kids into account, we decided this was the best approach for us,” says Alfaro, who oversees the district’s accountability programs. “If private schools could turn out good kids with high scores—many of them in Catholic schools—then we felt it was time for us to look at the model. What we found was that the model reduced discipline, capitalized on using older children in peer coaching and raised test scores.”

But the K-8 configuration has not come without its price. The transition to academies had to be staggered because most schools were not equipped to handle more students. Middle school classes meant facilities like science labs, football and soccer fields, which will require a bond referendum. In some cases, extracurricular activities are shared. Middle school students, for instance, may commute to another campus for band or theater arts.

“What we’ve learned is that academies were not realistic for all of our schools,” Alfaro says. “Some schools were not convinced it was the way to go. Some parents were not convinced. Where we did decide to move toward academies, we made sure the majority
of the community wanted to move in that direction before we started.”

And San Antonio may find that K-8 campuses do not work for the school district. In the latest survey of a wide sampling of K-8 schools, from rural one-school districts to the larger urban models, a surprising 84 percent of the K-8 administrators surveyed said they considered middle schools to be more effective. Researchers Kenneth McEwin, Thomas Dickinson and Michael Jacobson completed the study.

“You can put the middle school sign over the door. You can put the grade configuration in place, but that doesn’t make it a middle school,” says McEwin, a professor of curriculum and instruction at Appalachian State University. “I was an elementary and middle school principal, so I lived that K-8 life pretty personally. When you look at educating, it’s not necessarily the grade configuration, it’s what you’re doing in the classroom that is developmentally appropriate.”

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