

THE EFFECTS OF GRADE-SPAN CONFIGURATIONS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD (TDSB)

A SUMMARY

What the Research Says¹

- There is no specific grade-span configuration that will assure student academic and social improvement. The quality of teaching and learning, effective leadership, high expectations from all, strong parental engagement strategies and high quality effective professional learning play a much larger role than the grade-span configuration of the school a student attends (Paglin & Fager, 1997).
- The best predictor of a student's academic success is the student's prior achievement. A student's third, sixth, and ninth grade achievement on Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments significantly predicts their tenth grade achievement on the Ontario Secondary Literacy Test (OSSLT). For example, students achieving Levels 3 and 4 on their Grade 6 EQAO assessment were 12 times more likely to be successful on the OSSLT even after controlling for student and school socio-economic status (SES) and school grade-span. This means that students who do well in Grade 6, do well on the OSSLT, regardless of school grade-span configuration.
- TDSB research on the significant effects of students' prior achievement during the key stages of schooling suggest that early intervention and high quality effective teaching practices that are personalised towards the needs of students are way more important than grade-span configurations. As stated by Epstein (1990) "The hard work of developing excellent middle-grade programs is not accomplished merely by changing the grade spans or constructing smaller buildings, instead, we must attend to practices that are responsive to the needs of early adolescents" (p. 438).
- There appears to be an achievement advantage on both the EQAO Grade 6 assessment and report card marks when TDSB Grade 6 students attend a school with an elementary grade-span configuration rather than a middle grade-span configuration. This advantage is most evident when comparing student achievement in K-6 and K-8 versus 6-8 schools. Grade 6 students in schools with a K-6 grade-span configuration had a higher proportion of students meeting the provincial standard on EQAO Grade 6 assessments compared to students from schools with 6-8 and K-8 grade-span configurations.
- Grade-span has no significant long term effect on student achievement on graduation, and post-secondary applications of Grade 6 students once controlled for strong student and school characteristics such as SES and prior achievement.
- When including the powerful and consistent school level predictors of student achievement, such as school SES, suspension rates, and the proportion of special needs students within schools, in a model together with grade-span configurations (K-6, K-8 and 6-8), none of the grade-span configurations had a significant effect on EQAO Grade 6 student achievement. Instead, it is a school's SES that has the highest net effect on school performance.

What Are The Implications?

- There are some recent movements across the district in United States including school districts in, Cleveland, Baltimore, New York City, and Philadelphia, to move towards K-8 schools (Weiss, 2008). In general K-8 movement is due to allowing better curriculum delivery from Kindergarten to Grade 8; enabling less transition to students throughout their schooling; keeping them in their local schools; providing less commuting and higher school safety (DeJong & Craig, 2002).

¹ For further details on the literature on Grade-Span please see Erling, 2006, from:
<http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/GradeSpanLitReview.pdf>

- Although TDSB findings suggest there are academic benefits of having sixth grade students in elementary grade-span configurations rather than middle grade-span configurations, it does not address the reasons and issues related to the current trend for a K-8 configuration. TDSB research suggests that the early intervention, parental engagement and effective educational practices that are tailored towards students learning and developmental needs are considerably more important than the grade-span configuration of the school.
- “The literature on grade span and school configuration informs us that there is no single model to achieve all desired goals related to what we hope to accomplish through the use of various models” (Seller, 2004, p.11). In addition to student achievement, district leadership planning for a change on grade-span configuration should also take into account “projected enrollments, transportation costs, size of schools, school goals, fiscal constraints, political tensions, geographic realities, and financial accountability... that best fit their community culture and current facilities, focusing financial resources on other means of improving academic achievement” (Dove, Pearson & Hooper, 2010, p.273). Current literature still refer to the work of Paglin and Fager (1997) who recognized nine key points that district leadership should take into account when deciding on schools’ grade-span configurations (as cited in McEntire, 2005):
 1. the cost and length of student travel, particularly in a school district that covers a large area
 2. a possible increase or decrease in parent involvement, possibly affected by the distance to the school and the number of schools a family's children attend
 3. the number of students at each grade level, which may affect class groupings and courses offered
 4. the effect of school setting on achievement, particularly for grades 6-9
 5. effect on whether the neighborhood schools close or remain open
 6. the number of school transitions for students
 7. the opportunities for interaction between age groups
 8. the influence of older students on younger students
 9. the building design-is it suitable for only a few or for several grade levels?.
 (para.9)

Should you require additional information please contact: Research & Information Services at 416-394-4929.

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