EAB

# Elementary School Grade Reconfiguration

## Impact on District Functions and Stakeholder Engagement

District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Overview

## Key Observations

**Three out of four profiled districts report positive impacts of reconfiguring grades at the elementary level**. At all profiled districts, administrators reconfigured K-5 or K-6 elementary schools into K-2 schools and 3-5 schools. While contacts at District B, District C, and District D report mostly positive outcomes and few drawbacks associated with grade reconfiguration, contacts at District A report entirely negative outcomes of grade reconfiguration. Notably, a higher total student enrollment and accompanying challenges such as the redistribution of a large number of students may have contributed to these negative outcomes at District A. Administrators at District A chose to revert to the district's original grade configuration model several years after reconfiguring grades. Contacts at other profiled districts offer solutions to many of the negative outcomes reported by contacts at District A.

**Reconfigure elementary grades to standardize instruction within each grade level**. Contacts at District B, District C, and District D report significant improvements to teachers' opportunities to collaborate with their entire grade-level team following grade reconfiguration. Contacts at these districts report that this improved collaboration in turn improved instructional standardization across different course sections within the same grade—students are now more likely to learn the same content at the same time. Contacts at District D report that instructional standardization allows teachers in each grade to spend less time re-teaching last year's concepts.

**Reconfigure elementary grades to more easily adjust staffing in response to enrollment trends**. In the event of a grade-level enrollment decline, contacts at District D report that administrators can more easily adjust staffing in a reconfigured model. Contacts explain that, prior to reconfiguration, schools in the district sustained losses or gains in student enrollment at different rates. Grade reconfiguration centralized all grade-level enrollment changes at one school. As a result, administrators can eliminate a course section and associated staffing line with a smaller impact on average elementary school class sizes, which allows administrators to more easily respond to enrollment declines.

**Devote sufficient time and resources to planning and stakeholder supports to help stakeholders recognize positive impacts of grade reconfiguration**. At the three districts that experienced positive impacts of grade reconfiguration (District B, District C, and District D), administrators invested in community-building initiatives, meticulous logistical planning, and opportunities to elevate stakeholder voice. For example, administrators at District C invited teachers to grade-level meetings at their future building during the year before grade reconfiguration. Administrators used these meetings to source teacher input on school operations (e.g., hallway paint colors, daily schedule). While stakeholders at these profiled districts did express some concerns and reservations prior to grade reconfiguration, contacts believe that these efforts helped to persuade stakeholders to support grade reconfiguration and—post-reconfiguration—recognize its demonstrated advantages.

# 2) Overview

## Motivations

All profiled districts except District A currently operate two total elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

### Profiled Districts Reconfigured Elementary Grades to Improve Academic Quality, Equity, and Operational Efficiency

At all profiled districts, administrators reconfigured K-5 or K-6 elementary schools into K-2 and 3-5 elementary schools. At District A, District C, and District D, administrators reconfigured K-5 "neighborhood" elementary schools—which enrolled students from specific neighborhoods within the district—into district-wide K-2 and 3-5 elementary schools. At District B, administrators eliminated the district's K-5 magnet school and created a district-wide K-2 and 3-5 elementary school. Under this system, all students within the district attend the same elementary school for kindergarten through second grade, then transition to a different elementary school for grades three through five.

District B, District C, and District D continue to operate separate, district-wide K-2 and 3-5 elementary schools. Alternatively, administrators at District A chose to return to their previous elementary school configuration, which comprises multiple K-5 neighborhood schools.

Contacts express varying motivations for grade reconfiguration, and most contacts cite multiple, concurrent motivations.

### Summary of Motivations for Grade Reconfiguration at Profiled Districts

**Primary Motivations**

**Improve Instruction**

- Administrators at District B, District C, and District D primarily sought to offer a standardized and high-quality academic experience to all students.

**Example**

- Contacts at District D explain that, prior to grade reconfiguration, students at different elementary schools learned different content. This variation caused frustration among middle school teachers, who often needed to re-teach elementary school concepts to ensure that all students understood the same foundational content.
- Administrators at District B, District C, and District D anticipated grade reconfiguration would improve instruction through three steps:

**Greater Opportunities for Professional Collaboration**

By placing all teachers of the same grade level within one building, profiled districts could increase professional collaboration among them.

**Instructional Standardization**

Through increased collaboration, teachers could better align each grade's curriculum to ensure all students learn the same content for at the same pace.

### Improved Academic Quality

When standardizing their instructional approach, teachers could select best practices from previous, school-specific approaches and thus improve overall instructional quality for all students.

### Improve Equity

- Administrators at District A and District B anticipated that when all students from each grade level attend the same school, neighborhood boundaries—and associated disparities in socioeconomic status and/or race—would no longer physically divide students.

#### Examples

- At District A, district residents expressed concern that the construction of a new elementary school in the wealthier neighborhood of the district would lead to student socio-economic and racial segregation.
- At District B, administrators expressed concern that the district's magnet elementary school—which the district operated prior to grade reconfiguration—mostly enrolled students from more privileged families. For example, these families possessed the time and resources to complete the school's application process. As a result, the magnet school segregated the district's population by socio-economic status and race. Administrators thus transitioned the magnet elemetnary school into a school that supported three grades, comprising all district students from those grades.

## Secondary Motivation

### Improve Operational Efficiency

- Operational efficiencies (i.e., cost savings, ease of elementary program management)—though a by-product of grade reconfiguration at some profiled districts (see **pages 9-13**)—did not constitute a primary motivation for grade reconfiguration at any profiled districts. Contacts at District D, however, cite operational efficiencies as a secondary motivation for grade reconfiguration.
- Administrators at District D anticipated grade reconfiguration would benefit district operations in two ways:

#### Streamlined Staffing Adjustments

In the event of a grade-level enrollment decline, administrators could more easily adjust staffing. Contacts explain, prior to reconfiguration, schools in the district absorbed losses or gains in students at different rates. Administrators anticipated that centralizing all grade-level enrollment changes would allow them to more easily eliminate a grade-level course section and associated staffing line when faced with enrollment declines.

#### Centralized Enrichment Programs

Elementary instrumental music teachers, who taught only students in grades 3-5, would no longer have to travel between separate buildings and thus could spend more time with students.

# Outcomes

## Most Profiled Districts Report Positive Outcomes of Grade Reconfiguration

Contacts at profiled districts note that grade reconfiguration impacts staffing and operations, professional collaboration, instruction, and student success. While contacts at District B, District C, and District D report mostly positive improvements

in all four areas, contacts at District A report entirely negative outcomes of grade reconfiguration. These negative outcomes prompted administrators to reinstate the district's original grade configuration model several years after reconfiguring grades. Contacts at other profiled districts, however, offer solutions to many of the negative outcomes that administrators at District A report.

In addition, contacts at all profiled districts report largely positive stakeholder reactions to grade reconfiguration. However, contacts stress that administrators should invest in engagement initiatives to improve grade reconfiguration success.

### Overview of the Impact of Grade Reconfiguration at Profiled Districts

| Area Impacted | Benefits | Drawbacks |
|---|---|---|
| **District Operations** | | |
| **Staffing and Operations**  | • **Equalizes class sizes** across the district (**pages 9-10**)<br>• Facilitates **staffing adjustments** in response to enrollment trends (**pages 10-11**)<br>• **Prevents redundancies** in co-curricular programs (e.g., foreign langauge clubs for older elementary students) (**page 14**) | • Without **budget formula adjustments** that account for a higher population of younger students, K-2 elementary schools may face **resource shortages** (**page 13**) |
| **Professional Collaboration**  | • Improves opportunities for **grade-level collaboration** (**page 15**) | • Without proactive mechanisms, camaraderie can **decline between second and third** grade teachers (**page 16**) |
| **Instruction and Student Success**  | • Improves grade-level **standardization** (**pages 16-17**)<br>• May improve **student achievement** (**pages 17-18**) | • K-2 elementary schools may **lack accountability** to state standardized tests (**page 16**) |
| **Stakeholders** | | |
| **Reactions**  | • Prior to reconfiguration, the majority of stakeholders across profiled districts **responded positively** (**page 19**)<br>• After grade reconfiguration, even some initially resistant stakeholders eventually **developed appreciation** for grade reconfiguration (**page 19**) | • At **District A**, stakeholders **developed resentment** toward grade reconfiguration (**page 19**) |
| **Climate**  | • Buildings that serve a narrower range of student ages can develop an **developmentally-appropriate** environment (**page 20**)<br>• **District-wide community** develops before middle school (**page 10**) | • Mixed impact on **student behavior** reported across profiled districts (**page 21**)<br>• Without investments in relocation logistics (e.g., pre-planned moving procedures), reconfiguration can cause **stress and frustration** for staff (**page 23**) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Engagement**  | • Grade reconfiguration—like any district-wide change—creates **opportunities for stakeholders to implement complementary changes to improve the district** (e.g., new school schedules). These opportunities elevate stakeholder voice and increase empowerment (**pages 21-22**) | • Absent concerted parent engagement efforts, **parents may resist** the elimination of their neighborhood-based school (**pages 21-22**) |

# 3) Impact on District Functions

## Staffing and Operations

### Reconfiguration Equalizes Class Sizes and Lowers the Number of Students in Above-Average Sized Classes

To understand the impact of grade reconfiguration on class sizes in each grade, consider the three metrics below:

- **Average class size**. This metric refers to the number of total students in a grade divided by the number of sections (i.e., classrooms) for that grade.
- **Disparity in class sizes**. This metric refers to the difference between the number of students in the largest class and the number of students in the smallest class within the same grade at the district. The size of the difference describes the extent to which class sizes differ within a grade across the district.
- **Percent of students in classes of above-average size**. This metric refers to the total number of students in above-average sized classes in a grade divided by the total number of students in that grade. The metric indicates the number of students who learn in classes that are larger than the district's average class size.

For almost all grades across profiled districts, administrators did not add or remove grade-level sections when they reconfigured grades. Therefore, any changes in average class size between the pre-reconfiguration and post-reconfiguration were due solely to enrollment fluctuations. The following example assumes constant enrollment.

Example staffing and enrollment change numbers highlighted in this report do not necessarily reflect actual staffing and enrollment change numbers at profiled districts.

**Potential Impact of Grade Reconfiguration on Three Class Size Metrics at Profiled Districts**

| 2018: Two K-5 Elementary Schools | 2019: One K-2, One 3-5 Elementary School |
|---|---|
| **1st Grade Total Enrollment: 102 Students** | **1st Grade Total Enrollment: 102 Students** |
| School A – 67 1st grade students<br>Class V: 22<br>Class W: 22<br>Class X: 23<br><br>School B – 35 1st grade students<br>Class Y: 17<br>Class Z: 18 | School A – 102 1st grade students<br>Class V: 20<br>Class W: 20<br>Class X: 20<br>Class Y: 21<br>Class Z: 21 |
| **Class Size Metrics** | **Class Size Metrics** |
| Average: 20.4 students<br>Disparity: ±6 students<br>% in Classes of Above Average Size: 66% of students | Average: 20.4 students<br>Disparity:±1 student<br>% in Classes of Above-Average Size: 41% of students |

**Description of Impact**

Average class size remains the same

Class sizes equalize—i.e., disparity decreases

Fewer students in classes of above-average size.

## Grade Reconfiguration Facilitates Staffing Adjustments in Response to Declining Enrollment

As noted above, administrators at District D decided to reconfigure elementary school grades in part because they anticipated reconfiguration would improve their ability to adjust staffing levels in response to declining enrollment. Contacts at District D report that this outcome occurred as expected following grade reconfiguration. Specifically, because the district now places all elementary students enrolled in a specific grade in the same building, administrators can eliminate a course section with a smaller impact on school-level average class size.

Under grade reconfiguration, all first-grade students—and thus all first-grade classes—reside within the same, K-2 elementary building. Under a two-school, K-5, neighborhood school model, each K-5 elementary school operates approximately half as many total first-grade classes as would a single, reconfigured, K-2 elementary school. Consequently, if an administrator at a K-5 elementary school wishes to eliminate a first-grade class, they would need to reassign a class's worth of students across a smaller pool of remaining classes. Eliminating a first-grade class would thus more greatly increase average class size at that elementary school than if administrators eliminated a class at a single, district-wide, K-2 elementary school.

Because districts often set maximum class size caps, large increases to average class size can prevent administrators from eliminating course sections and reassigning staff in the face of enrollment declines. Thus, when facing the same district-wide enrollment decline, administrators at a district K-2 elementary school can eliminate a

class and adjust staffing assignments sooner than can administrators at two separate, K-5 elementary schools.

### Example Staffing Adjustments with and without Grade Reconfiguration

Class capacity, as determined by district policy: **22 students**

| Two K-5 Elementary Schools | One K-2 and One 3-5 Elementary School |
|---|---|
| **Year One – 89 1st grade students**<br>**5 classes across 2 schools** | **Year One – 89 1st grade students**<br>**5 classes in 1 school** |
| School A – 56 1st grade students<br>Class V: 19<br>Class W: 19<br>Class X: 18<br><br>School B – 33 1st grade studens<br>Class Y: 16<br>Class Z: 17 | School A – 89 1st grade students<br>Class V: 17<br>Class W: 18<br>Class X: 18<br>Class Y: 18<br>Class Z:18 |
| **Year Two – 83 1st grade students**<br>**5 classes across 2 schools** | **Year Two- 83 1st grade students**<br>**4 classes in 1 school** |
| School A – 54 1st grade students<br>Class V: 18<br>Class W: 18<br>Class X: 18<br><br>School B – 29 1st grade students<br>Class Y: 14<br>Class Z: 15 | School A – 83 1st grade students<br>Class W: 20<br>Class X: 21<br>Class Y: 21<br>Class Z: 21 |

First-grade district enrollment declines by 6 students between Year One and Year Two. Two fewer students enroll in first grade at School A, and four fewer students enroll in first grade at School B.

**Until enrollment declines further in future years, neither building administrator can adjust the number of sections without exceeding class capacity.**

First-grade district enrollment declines by 6 students between Year One and Year Two. Due to grade centralization at School A, this results in six fewer students enrolled in first grade at School A.

**After just one year, the building administrator can eliminate a class section and still adhere to the class capacity policy.**

### Consider Avoiding Staffing Reassignments or Adjustments in the First Year of Grade Reconfiguration

Contacts at District D explain that administrators chose not to adjust the number of sections per grade during the first year following grade reconfiguration. Administrators wanted to avoid changing multiple aspects of the district's operations at the same time to minimize possible complications and stakeholder pushback. By keeping the number of sections constant, administrators ensured that the average class size remained unchanged during grade reconfiguration. In one instance, however, contacts report that due to the small total enrollment of one grade level, administrators did remove one class section from that grade. This adjustment did not impact the average class size of that grade compared to the previous year.

## Grade Reconfiguration May Benefit Inclusive Classrooms and Paraprofessional Staffing

Contacts at District D report that combining each grade's population of special education students in one building allowed administrators to more evenly distribute these students across classrooms. Subsequently, administrators could more evenly distribute paraprofessionals to support these students and, in some cases, even reduce the district's need for paraprofessionals.

Under a two-school, K-5, neighborhood school model, one K-5 elementary school could enroll a larger percentage of the district's special education population than the other. In this instance, administrators may need to assign more than one paraprofessional to some classrooms at this school.

In a reconfigured, K-2, district-wide elementary school, administrators can more evenly distribute the population of special education students across a greater number of class sections. As illustrated in the general enrollment example above, more even distribution of special education students decreases the number of classrooms with an above-average number of special education students. As a result, administrators are less likely to face a situation where they need to assign multiple paraprofessionals to one classroom.

## Grade Reconfiguration Generates Cost Savings in Purchasing of Materials at Profiled Districts

Contacts at profiled districts did not reconfigure grades specifically to save costs. However, contacts at District C and District D state that grade reconfiguration reduces purchasing costs. Contacts explain that—by centralizing all students of approximately the same age in the same school—administrators can purchase a narrower range of material for each school.

### Examples of Cost Savings Following Grade Reconfiguration

#### Playground Equipment

Following grade reconfiguration, administrators at District C and District D purchase and maintain playground material for a narrower age group of students at each school. For example, the districts may purchase additional swings for only the K-2 elementary school and additional basketball hoops for only the 3-5 elementary school, instead of increasing the number of swings and basketball hoops at both schools.

#### Library Books

Contacts at District D note that the district can now purchase fewer overall books for school libraries. Contacts explain that, though each building now houses twice as many students in each grade level, each building only needs about 1.5 times the number of books per grade level. For example, the district may purchase three copies of a given book for the reconfigured, 3-5 school's library. Pre-reconfiguration, administrators would have purchased two copies for each elementary school, for a total of four copies.

#### Grade Reconfiguration Could Impact Transportation Costs

No contacts reported ways in which grade reconfiguration—aside from initial expenses such as moving teachers' belongings into new classrooms—increases costs. For example, no contacts cited operational inefficiencies related to transporting students for longer distances. That said, at some districts—particularly districts that cover a large geographic area—eliminating neighborhood-based elementary schools could create transportation inefficiencies (i.e., longer transport times) and potentially increase overall transportation costs.

## Adjust Building Budgets According to Grade Composition to Avoid Budget Shortages

At District A, contacts attribute their decision to return to operating separate, K-5 school buildings to an operational inefficiency related to the district's funding allocation model. At District A, district administrators allocate funding based solely on the number of students attending each elementary school. Contacts explain that younger elementary school students use more materials (e.g., worksheets, glue, paper towels), which causes higher costs for K-2 schools as compared to 3-5 schools. Contacts report that K-2 building administrators struggled to fund school operations without a population of older students to offset these higher costs.

Contacts at the remaining profiled districts agree that younger elementary students use greater quantities of materials—however, contacts explain that this increased consumption does not create operational inefficiencies for their respective K-2 schools. Specifically, as part of the grade reconfiguration process, administrators at District C allocate more per-pupil funding to the K-2 school than to the 3-5 school. Contacts note that the district always allocated different amounts of per-pupil funding to the elementary, middle, and high school buildings (with high schools receiving the most per-pupil funding). The district simply expanded this model to discern between K-2 and 3-5 elementary school students.

## Grade Reconfiguration Equalizes Access to Age-Appropriate Co-Curricular Programs and Minimizes Redundancy at Profiled Districts

Contacts at District B, District C, and District D report several ways in which administrators can more easily and efficiently organize non-academic programs following grade reconfiguration. Non-academic programs at these profiled districts complement students' academic instruction. For example, these programs include co-curricular activities (e.g., clubs), field trips, and social-emotional learning initiatives.

### Impact of Grade Reconfiguration on Co-Curricular Programs

Contacts at District A report that their district did not offer many co-curricular programs at the time during which the district reconfigured grades. Thus, grade reconfiguration did not impact these programs at District A.

**Equalizes Access**

At District B and District D, contacts report that all elementary students now can access the same non-academic program opportunities. Prior to grade reconfiguration at District B, students at the district's magnet elementary school could access more co-curricular experiences (e.g., clubs, field trips) than students at the district's other elementary school. Post-reconfiguration, this imbalance no longer occurs.

**Prevents Redundancies**

Contacts at District D explain that the district provides more co-curricular programs at the 3-5 elementary school level. Contacts assert that 3-5 students are more developmentally ready for enrichment experiences and more likely to express interest in these experiences. Because grade reconfiguration centralizes 3-5 elementary students at one site, administrators can also centralize co-curricular programs to reduce overall costs. Prior to grade reconfiguration, if administrators organized a foreign language club, they funded instructors and materials for the club at both K-5 schools. Now, administrators only need to organize the club at one 3-5 school.

**Enables Age-Appropriate Focus**

At District B and District D, contacts attest that grade reconfiguration allows building administrators to implement an age-specific version of district-wide initiatives (e.g., SEL initiatives) across an entire school because grade reconfiguration yields buildings that serve a narrower age range.

No contacts cited challenges related to co-curricular activities (e.g., an increased number of total students participating in clubs at the single, 3-5 elementary school) due to grade reconfiguration. However, such challenges could occur when administrators centralize all older elementary students in one building. Increasing the number of students participating in a given club could result in less individualized attention for each student and/or a need for increased supervision (i.e., additional staff).

## Grade Reconfiguration Improves Instructional Standardization by Increasing Opportunities for Grade-Level Teacher Collaboration

Contacts at District B, District C, and District D report that grade reconfiguration substantially increased opportunities for professional collaboration among teachers of the same grade level.

### Impact of Grade Reconfiguration on Professional Collaboration at Profiled Districts

**New Opportunity for Full Grade-Level Collaboration**

Administrators at District B and District C provide weekly collaboration opportunities for grade-level teacher teams.

- At District B, when administrators reconfigured grades, they implemented new schedules at both elementary schools. These schedules incorporate an early release for students every Wednesday. Teachers typically use this time on Wednesday afternoons to meet by grade level.
- Similarly, all grade-level teachers at District C meet approximately once per week to align their curricula and lesson plans.

Due directly to grade reconfiguration, all grade-level teachers at both districts can attend these meetings together. This complete attendance allows teachers to make improvements to instructional standardization across the entire grade, rather than within the grade level at separate schools.

**Improved Productivity of Designated Professional Development Days**

Contacts at District D report that grade reconfiguration improved the productivity and inclusivity of meetings of all grade-level teachers on district professional development days.

- Prior to reconfiguration, half of the grade-level teachers would travel to the other K-5 school for these meetings. This disruptive travel made these teachers feel inconvenienced and out-of-place.
- Now, each grade's assigned building hosts these meetings, which creates a more welcoming environment for all teachers and facilitates cohesion among teachers of the same grade.

At the end of each year teachers use a grade-level meeting to collaboratively decide on the scope and sequence of the units that they will each cover in the subsequent year—i.e., teachers standardize grade-level instruction. Contacts report that the cohesion which developed among grade-level teachers after reconfiguration improved the effectiveness of this meeting.

Contacts explain that these changes do not all stem automatically from grade reconfiguration. Rather, grade reconfiguration creates an environment in which administrators can make structural changes (e.g., adjustments to school schedules) that facilitate improved professional collaboration.

## Without Mechanisms to Facilitate Collaboration between Second- and Third-Grade Teachers, Grade Reconfiguration Can Cause Tension between Schools

Contacts at District A report that vertical professional collaboration—in particular, collaboration between second-grade teachers at the K-2 elementary school and third-grade teachers at the 3-5 elementary school—declined in quality and frequency following grade reconfiguration. In District A's state, students take state-mandated

standardized testing in third grade. Contacts report that, because students at the K-2 school did not take any standardized tests, third-grade teachers (who remained accountable for student test scores) believed K-2 teachers did not feel motivated to adequately prepare students for standardized tests. These third-grade teachers believed that, prior to grade reconfiguration, K-2 teachers more willingly helped to prepare students for standardized tests because the K-5 school overall faced accountability to test scores.

Contacts note that test scores did not actually decrease following grade reconfiguration, at least initially. However, administrators expressed concern that test scores might decline in the future, which contributed to their decision to return to the model of K-5 neighborhood elementary schools.

Contacts at the remaining profiled districts agree that reconfiguring grades may create barriers to collaboration and curriculum alignment between second- and third-grade teachers. However, contacts report that they have not observed any significant issues in this area at their districts. Contacts at District C note that, regardless of grade configuration, teachers at every grade level sometimes express frustration that teachers of the grade level below do not adequately prepare the students. Contacts note that teachers who teach grades with associated standardized tests (e.g., third-grade teachers) are more likely to express this frustration. Contacts do not believe that reconfiguring grades exacerbated this tension.

Moreover, administrators at District B and District D developed protocols to foster positive relationships between second- and third-grade teachers following grade reconfiguration. For example, at District B, second- and third-grade teachers meet together three times at the end of each year—approximately once each month for the last three months of the school year. During these meetings, teachers discuss curriculum alignment (e.g., the content that second-grade teachers will cover to prepare students for third grade, the content that third-grade teachers will cover to build upon second-grade content). Second-grade teachers also use these meetings to share input on ideal class placements for second-grade students who will move to the 3-5 school in the upcoming year.

## Instruction and Student Success

### Grade Reconfiguration Facilitates Administrator Efforts to Standardize Grade-Level Instruction

Contacts at District B, District C, and District D suggest that elementary schools that house the district's entire grade-level team facilitate improve grade-level professional collaboration, which in turn contributes to improved instructional standardization. Grade-level instructional standardization occurs when all students in the same grade level, regardless of their assigned teacher and classroom, learn the same content at approximately the same time as their peers across the district. When grade-level instruction is standardized, all teachers use similar methods and activities to teach course content and all teachers emphasize similar elements of the curriculum. At District B, District C, and District D, contacts attribute their district's ability to achieve near-total standardization of grade-level instruction to grade reconfiguration. According to these contacts, instructional standardization emerges as the greatest benefit of grade reconfiguration.

For example, contacts at District C report that, prior to grade reconfiguration, teachers at one elementary school spent one week teaching fifth grade students about the Civil War. At the other elementary school, teachers devoted a three-week-long, project-based unit to the Civil War. Following grade reconfiguration, contacts report that all students now receive the same instruction on the Civil War and thus all matriculate to middle school with shared understanding.

At District A, however, contacts report that the district achieves instructional standardization with the neighborhood-based, K-5 elementary school model. Contacts explain that all teachers receive the same curricular materials and textbooks. In addition, all teachers must follow a district-created scope and sequence document, which outlines how long they should spend on each topic.

**Create a Steering Committee to Use Grade Reconfiguration as an Opportunity to Standardize Instruction**

At District B, administrators convened a committee—with representatives from each grade level—that met every other week for the year before grade reconfiguration. This committee designed detailed instructional philosophies for the K-2 and 3-5 schools and decided on the exact structure of each school day and week, including the Wednesday early release for professional collaboration time. Contacts cite this committee as key step to creating standardized instruction across each grade level in reconfigured elementary schools.

## Grade Reconfiguration May Promote Gains in Student Achievement

Contacts at District A report that grade reconfiguration did not impact student test scores or other indicators of student achievement. At the remaining profiled school districts, however, contacts report improvements in student achievement metrics in the years following grade reconfiguration. While contacts at District C report only anecdotal improvements in student learning, contacts at District B and District D report data that demonstrate increases in student achievement.

- At District B, state test scores indicate that more students improve their proficiency in core subject areas between third and fourth grade than did in the past. Contacts attribute these gains to the greater consistency of instruction between grade-level classrooms.
- This year, five years after grade reconfiguration at District D, the students who experienced the new model for each year of elementary school arrived at the middle school. Administrators noticed improvements in these students' standardized test scores as compared to students in previous years. Contacts believe that improved instructional standardization created a common knowledge among all students in the district, which allows middle school teachers to focus on teaching new concepts instead of re-teaching old ones. Contacts thus attribute gains in student achievement to improved instructional standardization.

Contacts at District B, District C, and District D caution, however, that administrators cannot solely attribute student achievement gains to grade reconfiguration. Contacts explain that grade reconfiguration, which involved redesigning schedules, programs, and—in some cases—physical spaces for both reconfigured schools—provided

administrators with an opportunity to implement other reforms. For example, administrators at District B implemented new elementary school instructional philosophies. At District C, administrators decided, due to the older age of the entire student body at this school (relative to the K-2 elementary school), to allow students to rotate between teachers in alignment with the district's middle school model. This decision afforded teachers the opportunity to collaboratively assign subject areas among themselves in accordance with their individual preferences.

Contacts note that these concurrent initiatives such as these, which established the foundation for an overall more positive educational environment, could account for some of the improvements to student achievement.

# 4) Impact on Stakeholders

## Reactions

### Most Profiled Districts Report Largely Positive Stakeholder Reactions to Reconfiguration

Contacts at District B, District C, and District D report largely positive stakeholders' positive reactions to grade reconfiguration—both before and after implementation.

For example, before grade reconfiguration, middle and high students at District B reacted positively to the proposed initiative—they expressed that they preferred to attend school alongside all other students in their grade and argued that elementary school students would also prefer this structure. In addition, contacts at District D report that while some parents expressed concern about losing the community of their neighborhood school, these parents represented only a minority of all district parents.

At District A, stakeholders initially also reacted positively to grade reconfiguration. For example, parents anticipated grade reconfiguration would prevent younger students from feeling intimidated by older students, due to the narrower range of ages within the K-2 school. However, after implementation stakeholders grew resistant to grade reconfiguration.

**Stakeholder Reactions After Grade Reconfiguration at Profiled Districts**

**Positive Reactions**

**Parents**

- At District C, parents appreciate that grade reconfiguration equalizes class sizes and standardizes instruction, which they believe yields benefits for their students.
- At District D, parents initially feared the loss of their neighborhood school community, However, contacts report that parents have grown to appreciate the development of a district-wide sense of community.

**Teachers**

- At District B, District C, and District D, teachers appreciate that grade reconfiguration allows them to collaborate with all other grade-level teachers in the district.
- At District B, District C, and District D, teachers appreciate that grade reconfiguration provided the opportunity for teachers to create a new school schedule, instructional philosophy, and culture.

**Negative Reactions**

**Parents**

- Parents at District A expressed dissatisfaction about the increased number of school transitions students experienced due to grade reconfiguration.
- At District B, contacts report that reconfiguring grades increased integration at the district's elementary schools (e.g., race, class). Contacts report that a small number of White families left the district due to their resistance to welcoming students from minority backgrounds. In subsequent years, however, contacts report that some of those same families returned to the district.

**Teachers**

- At all profiled districts, grade reconfiguration caused stress and inconvenience for the teachers who moved into a new building.

## Grade Reconfiguration Improved Building- and District-Level Climate at Most Profiled Districts

School climate refers to the quality of students' and teachers' experiences at school.[1] Contacts discussed climate both in terms of the environment at individual elementary schools and the sense of community at the district level. Teachers, students, and parents—whose opinions influence their students' experience at school—all contribute to school climate. Contacts at District B, District C, and District D report that grade reconfiguration improved the climate at their districts.

### Impact of Grade Reconfiguration on School Climate at Profiled Districts

**Focus on Narrower Age Range Optimizes School Environment for Age Group**

At District C, contacts report that each elementary school can focus entirely on the needs of a narrower range of student ages.

- For example, contacts report that K-2 teachers value approaches that nurture young students. Thus, contacts report that the K-2 school's disciplinary policies and approach patiently guide students to learn about and regulate their own emotions, with the understanding that students will not always succeed in doing so.
- On the other hand, contacts report that 3-5 teachers tend to focus on preparing students for middle school. Thus, contacts report that the 3-5 school maintains higher expectations for student academic performance and behavior.

**Shared Experiences in K-5 Build District Community**

Contacts at District D report that, prior to grade reconfiguration, families and teachers at the two K-5 schools developed communities in isolation from one another.

- While stakeholders considered this a positive feature of their schools prior to reconfiguration, contacts explain that these insular communities caused tension between the two schools, which negatively impacted cohesion across the whole district.
- Some parents initially expressed concerns about the loss of their neighborhood school. Despite this feedback, administrators decided to move forward with grade reconfiguration to create a new community inclusive to all students.
- Post-reconfiguration, students and parents now share common environments and experiences from kindergarten until high school graduation–all district students also attend the same middle and high school. Contacts report that these shared experiences create a community across the district, rather than just within individual neighborhoods.

1) "What is School Climate and Why is it Important?" National School Climate Center, accessed February 28, 2020, https://www.schoolclimate.org/school-climate.

### Contacts Report Mixed Impact of Grade Reconfiguration on Student Behavior

At District A, contacts report that grade reconfiguration exacerbated challenging student behaviors. Contacts explain that, before grade reconfiguration, a younger elementary student who exhibited challenging behaviors could work with teachers and administrators to manage his or her behavior and then retain those adults as a support system for many years. After grade reconfiguration, contacts report that students in the K-2 school often relapsed into challenging behavior after transitioning to the 3-5 school. Contacts at other profiled districts, however, report that they have not observed this phenomenon. On the contrary, contacts at District C believe that transitioning to a new environment can sometimes help students who previously exhibited challenging behavior. Contacts attribute this benefit to higher expectations for behavior at the district's 3-5 school.

## Engagement

### To Engage Stakeholders When Reconfiguring Grades, Prioritize Community-Building Efforts and Elevate Teacher and Student Voice

Total district enrollment may also account for the challenges to grade reconfiguration at District A, which enrolls approximately six to nine times more students than the other profiled districts and thus operates more elementary schools.

Administrators at District B, District C, and District D deployed a variety of engagement tactics to facilitate a peaceful transition to a K-2 and 3-5 elementary school model. These tactics may help explain the greater degree of grade reconfiguration success at these districts compared to District A. All of these engagement tactics facilitate the development of community among teachers and families at new elementary school buildings. These tactics also demonstrate to teachers and parents that administrators seriously consider their input. Contacts report that this consideration can improve stakeholders' receptiveness to grade reconfiguration.

## Stakeholder Engagement Tactics at District B, District C, and District D

### Prior to Grade Reconfiguration

#### Grade-Level Teacher Meetings

Administrators at District C invited teachers to grade-level meetings at their future building in the year before grade reconfiguration. Administrators used these meetings to source teacher input on school operations (e.g., hallway paint colors, daily schedule) and to provide opportunities for grade-level teams to interact and form friendships.

#### Community Forums

At District B, some parents threatened to leave—and eventually left—the district in response to grade reconfiguration. Simultaneously, district students at the middle and high school level communicated that they prefer to attend school alongside all other same-age students from the district.

Cognizant of this tension, administrators at District B hosted community forums to present information about grade reconfiguration and answer parent questions. During these forums, administrators invited students from the district's middle school and high school to testify to their preference for reconfiguring the district's two elementary schools.

### After Grade Reconfiguration

#### Principal-Led Community Building

District administrators at District D tasked the principals of the new buildings with identifying and honoring their teachers' favorite traditions (e.g., field day) from their old buildings. This helped parents and teachers overcome their initial resistance to the loss of their neighborhood-based school.

#### PTA-Sponsored Community Events

Building administrators at District D tasked the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) at each new building, which included members from the separate PTAs of the two previous buildings, with hosting a Halloween party. Contacts report that this task, which pre-occupied the PTAs' focus during the beginning of the first year of building reconfiguration, required all of the PTA members to work together and build a new sense of community.

#### Example of a Previous Tradition Honored at a New 3-5 Elementary School

Prior to grade reconfiguration at District D, administrators at the two K-5 schools each organized an extensive field trip for fifth-grade students as a culmination of students' time at the school. These field trips varied between the two schools—one school organized an overnight trip to Philadelphia, while the other organized a day trip to New York City. After grade reconfiguration, administrators orchestrated trips to both Philadelphia and New York City for the first class of fifth-grade students at the new 3-5 school. All students attended both field trips during this year. This allowed all students and teachers to continue to participate in their traditional trip.

At the end of the year, teachers and families indicated which trip they preferred. Administrators selected the preferred trip—Philadelphia—for all fifth-grade students to attend in future years.

## Devote Extensive Time and Resources to Logistical Planning to Mitigate Resentment Among Staff Who Transition to New Buildings

Contacts at District D caution that grade reconfiguration requires careful planning and logistical precision. Administrators at District D spent six months planning how to consolidate grades K-2 into one building and grades 3-5 into another (e.g., assigning teachers to rooms, determining moving protocols). During this planning period, administrators made efforts to mitigate power imbalances between new staff members and staff members who remained at their previous buildings. Specifically, administrators at District D required all teachers to move classrooms during grade reconfiguration. Teachers either moved to a new building, or into a new classroom at the same building. Contacts explain that this approach ensured all teachers shared the responsibility of packing up classrooms to move.

During the last few weeks of the school year and across the following summer, administrators, teachers, and staff executed the transition to reconfigured elementary schools.

### Moving Process at District D

- **During the last few weeks of the school year**, administrators distributed boxes and labels to each teacher. Teachers packed up their classroom belongings into the boxes over the course of these weeks.
- **Each night**, the custodial staff at each elementary school moved packed boxes into the school's gymnasium.
- **On the last day of school**, a moving company arrived at each school's gymnasium and picked up the boxes.
- **Over the course of the next few days**, the moving company moved all boxes into their assigned classroom across the two buildings. The district rented storage pods during these days for overflow boxes.
- **That summer**, teachers and administrators at each building unpacked their belongings and prepared the school for students to return in the fall.

# 5) Research Methodology

## Project Challenge

Leadership at a partner district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- Why did administrators at contact districts decide to reconfigure elementary school grades?
- At contact districts, how has elementary school grade reconfiguration impacted district operations?
  - At contact districts, has elementary school grade reconfiguration resulted in any operational efficiencies, and if so, what are these efficiencies?
  - At contact districts, has elementary school grade reconfiguration resulted in any operational inefficiencies, and if so, what are these inefficiencies?
- At contact districts, how has elementary school grade reconfiguration impacted elementary school class sizes?
- At contact districts, how has elementary school grade reconfiguration impacted instructional standardization?
- At contact districts, how has elementary school grade reconfiguration impacted opportunities for professional collaboration among teachers?
- At contact districts, how has elementary school grade reconfiguration impacted student achievement?
- At contact districts, how has elementary school grade reconfiguration impacted non-academic programming?
- At contact districts, how has elementary school grade reconfiguration impacted elementary school climate?
- At contact districts, how did district stakeholders respond to elementary school grade reconfiguration?
- What other outcomes of elementary school grade reconfiguration do contacts report?

## Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries
- National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov)
- "What is School Climate and Why is it Important?" National School Climate Center. Accessed February 28, 2020. https://www.schoolclimate.org/school-climate.

## Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators who managed a transition from a neighborhood based, K-5 or K-6 building configuration to a K-2 and 3-5 elementary school building configuration at the following districts:

| District | Location | Approximate District Enrollment |
|---|---|---|
| **District A** | Mountain West | 18,000 |
| **District B** | Midwest | 3,000 |
| **District C** | Mid-Atlantic | 2,500 |
| **District D** | Northeast | 2,100 |