

Port Angeles School District
Grade Level Re-Design Task Force Report
August 23, 2004

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2003, the Port Angeles School Board of Directors directed the creation of a Task Force representing a balance of staff, parents and community members to review, research, and study grade level configurations through the lens of defining the overall program model that provides for the best academic opportunities and outcomes for students. A key challenge confronting the Grade Level Re-Design Task Force involved assuring that consistently diminishing resources will continue to support an optimal level of student achievement.

The Task Force was comprised of nineteen members including Cindy Kelly, school board director; Tom Anderson, chairperson; Ron Spanjer, assistant superintendent; Michelle Olsen, elementary principal; Chuck Lisk, middle school principal; Pat Kane, high school assistant principal; Pat Wawrin, elementary teacher; Lu Meiner and Susan Williams, middle school teachers; Mike Frick and Bernie Brabant, PAHS teachers; Lesley Thompson, Choice teacher; Judy Fletcher classified representative; parent representatives Vicki Helwick, Chuck LeBer, Sarah Methner, Patti Happe, and Maureen Sandison; and community representative Leo Leonard.

The Task Force was charged with the responsibility of determining whether grade level design has a direct, relational impact upon the level of student achievement. The Task Force was directed to examine the current Port Angeles School District grade level configurations and determine if changes to the current grade level configuration would be in the best interest of students. Any recommended grade level modifications would have to be based on the presence of quantifiable achievement data that would clearly support the position that a change in grade level configurations would provide a superior educational environment, resulting in improved academic performance and social skill development on the part of all students. An August 2004 status report was suggested with a final report recommended for December 2004.

PARAMETERS

The Grade Level Re-Design Task Force held the first of eight meetings on November 6, 2003. Port Angeles Superintendent Dr. Gary Cohn, in his initial remarks to the Task Force, reminded members that their recommendation would be advisory in nature, and should include descriptions of multiple options, the pros and cons of each, while addressing a ranked order of preference for board consideration.

The specific charge to the committee was to examine research, seek input from out-of-district staff, visit schools implementing a variety of grade level configurations, examine current practices within and outside Port Angeles School District, rank potential grade level configurations for our K-12 schools and present a recommendation to the Board of Directors for consideration.

PROCESS

The Task Force began its work by reviewing a variety of articles and current reports documenting the process and problems school districts of various sizes from across the nation have experienced in efforts to change grade level configurations and meet the needs of students in a changing educational environment. During our research and review of each article, the Task Force examined the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each configuration and the common conclusions reached by school district and/or research staff. The Task Force's attention was immediately drawn to several articles examining K-4 and K-5 elementary schools, 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools, and 9-12 and 10-12 high schools. Members of the Task Force traveled to Kitsap County to visit schools in Bremerton, Poulsbo, Silverdale, and Bainbridge Island to speak with school district staff about the strengths and weakness of their current grade level configurations and the potential for consideration of modification on the future. Telephone calls were also made to out-of-state school districts highlighted in some of the literature to inquire about the progress and impact of their grade level re-configuration efforts.

The Task Force invited former Port Angeles Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Curtis G. Horne, to a meeting to discuss the work of the last Grade Level Re-Design Task Force employed in the mid 1970's. Dr. Horne shared information regarding the grade level research, committee processes, and the history of the Port Angeles School District in changing from a K-6, 7-9, 10-12 configuration to the current K-5, 6-8, 9-12 design.

Dr. Horne articulated in clear and comprehensive detail that previous school district staff, community members, and parents carefully examined the research, literature, and possible grade level alternatives before recommending a major change to the then existing grade level model. The grade level configuration changes were implemented at that time in response to growing concerns and problems associated with the junior high (grades 7-9) model and to coincide with new school construction. The junior high schools environments were very competitive and impersonal and not conducive to healthy academic and social development.

The research is consistently clear that school size, to the degree that smaller schools result in a more personalized level of teaching and learning, can influence student achievement. Early adolescents need more personal care and less competition. Prior to moving to middle schools, Roosevelt Junior High had a student enrollment of approximately 900 students and Stevens Junior High 350 students. In building a new school, changing grade configurations and moving to middle schools, the middle school enrollments were balanced and the enrollments of the K-5 elementary schools were reduced. Most of the junior high competitive athletic programs were dropped, the cheerleading program was eliminated, and pep dances were no longer allowed. Middle schools became a more nurturing, and consequently safer, environment for students.

The research completed by the Grade Level Re-Design Task Force indicated that over the past three decades there has been a dramatic shift from junior high school to middle schools (grades 5-8 and grades 6-8). Research indicates that most administrators consider the 6-8 grade configuration ideal for developmentally appropriate middle school programs. Students in grades 6-8 appear to have more in common in terms of physical, psychological, social, and intellectual variables than those in other age-grade combinations. A three-year middle grade configuration allows the opportunity for strong, positive relationships to be built among students, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

LITERATURE REVIEWED

The Task Force primarily focused on, reviewed, and researched five grade level design models. The K- 4, 5-8, model currently found in many school districts including Bainbridge Island. The K-5 and 6-8 middle school model currently in place in our own district. The K-6 elementary and 7-9 junior high model from which our district changed, as have many districts from around our state and nation. A K-8 and 9-12 model that several very small and several very large districts champion. And, the more traditional K-12 school model. Other alternative models were reviewed, such as the “Isolated Academy Concept” for ninth graders.

It is important to note that the Grade Level Re-Design Task Force examined literature that clearly indicates that all configurations can be effective in certain communities under the right conditions. Effective programs and practices, not grade configuration, determine quality schools. Effective school research is a catalyst for school re-invention work today. Effective schools are those with a common vision and mission, a supportive and nurturing environment for students, collaborative time for staff planning, staff development programs and well trained staff, staff utilizing effective teaching practices, sequenced curriculum, and alignment of the written, taught, and tested curriculum.

The research on grade level configurations clearly indicated that multiple transitions for students during their K-12 experience is detrimental to a quality education. The number of times students must change schools may significantly impact student achievement. Every transition from one narrowly configured school to another seems to disrupt the social structure in which learning takes place, impeding the continuity of learning. Students learning in programs in which the configuration supports longer periods of time within the program tend to experience better education outcomes.

The literature was very clear to point out that factors other than grade level configuration ultimately affect student achievement more positively or negatively. Factors that make a significant difference include staff competency, training and attitude, course offerings, student activities, safe schools, limited grade level transitions, strong principal leadership, and programs designed to connect students with a caring adult in a nurturing school environment.

The research examined indicates that major grade level transitions that are not smooth, well designed, and purposeful can cause a serious disconnect between students and school, especially at the ninth grade. Research indicates that without the interventions students lose interest in school and at the ninth grade level a large percentage of students tend to drop out of school. The statistics indicate a lower drop-out rate and a higher academic performance rate for school districts with fewer transitions and well designed transition or intervention programs. Members of the Task Force were impressed with the efforts currently underway at Port Angeles High School to improve intervention efforts and the successful transition of ninth grade students.

MAJOR ISSUES CONSIDERED

Student achievement, social development, and student retention within various grade level configurations were the major issues considered by the Grade Level Re-Design Task Force. It was very clear from the literature that student achievement is influenced by multiple factors.

Student academic performance is influenced more positively by the level of interaction of students in the educational environment than by a specific grade level configuration. A highly trained and motivated staff, skilled in helping every student learn, is more significant than any specific grade level design.

Although the Grade Level Re-Design Task Force was not directed to consider financial implications, some financial discussions, and related recommendations did surface during our meetings.

Recent budget cuts and the proposed closure of Monroe Elementary School prompted the Task Force to look at the expense of student activities that appear to help students “bond” with school. The Task Force discussed the financial difference between a “true middle school philosophy,” and what currently exists in our district, the general expense of middle school sports, and the overall impact of funding middle school sports on the other schools. The continued loss of financial resources due to the reduction in student enrollment, the impact of an overall reduction in state funding, and the cost of interscholastic athletic activities at the middle school level were concerns expressed by several Task Force members.

Several members of this Task Force consistently communicated the belief that the School Board should consider the creation of another staff and community group, specifically charged to examine the educational value of all middle school activities, the current middle school philosophy of the Port Angeles School District, and our district’s current expenditures for middle school activities during a period of declining financial resources.

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

After a very thorough review of the literature, discussions with staff from other school districts regarding grade level configuration, student achievement, and possible grade level changes in their districts, and following careful examination of the work currently underway in our own district that is designed to improve academic programs, social development, and student achievement, the Grade Level Re-Design Task Force unanimously recommends *no change* to the current grade level configuration in the Port Angeles School District. The Grade Level Re-Design Task Force supports our current grade level configurations and endorses the school improvement efforts currently underway at each level.

It appears to the Task Force that our current grade level configuration was well researched, designed, and implemented. It was learned that after careful study and community review, numerous other school districts across the country, have in recent years changed to the same configuration that the Port Angeles School District adopted more than twenty-five years ago and they have done so for parallel reasons. The K-5, 6-8, 9-12 configuration offers the best educational opportunities for students.

The Task Force supports further study and the intentional implementation of quality professional development programs to bring about improvements within each of the existing grade level configurations, while assuring for the highest possible level of student achievement. The current grade level configurations are appropriate and provide the best academic opportunity for students in our district at this time.

Finally, members of the Task Force believe that their work has been completed and respectfully recommend closure to their assignment.