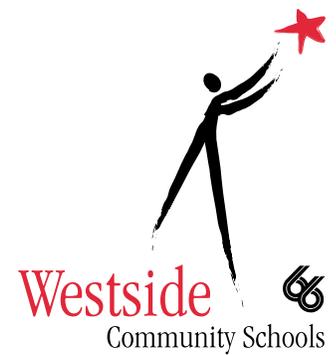


# School Board Executive Summary



**Topic:** Westside Community Schools  
Middle School Options & Grade Configuration

**Date:** September 15, 2015

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**Recommended Action:**

- Information Only
- Presentation/Discussion
- Discussion/Action by Board of Education
- Presentation/Action Next Meeting

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**Purpose:** Information presented for discussion on middle school grade configuration

## **Background:**

### **District Background Information**

The Westside Community School District is located in Omaha, Nebraska. Nearly 900,000 people call the Omaha metropolitan area home, and major employers run the gamut—from healthcare to railroads to insurance to construction.

When the school district was created in 1947, it was on the “west side” fringes of Omaha. Today, the school system’s 13 schools enjoy being in the heart of the community with an enrollment of more than 6,000 students in grades K-12.

Westside’s tradition of uncompromising commitment to excellence, ongoing quality improvement driven by data, and setting high expectations for students, faculty, and staff has meant national recognition and acclaim over the decades. Recent focus groups showed that 92 percent of those surveyed rated the quality of education at Westside schools as very good to excellent. In addition, average ACT scores within the district are more than two points higher than the Nebraska state average and three points higher than the national average.

A fall 2014 phone survey conducted by the Westside Foundation highlighted overwhelming support for Westside Community Schools. Ninety-three percent of those polled said people choose to live in the school district because of the high quality of neighborhood schools. On a separate question, 93 percent also said that maintaining quality local schools helped strengthen property evaluations.

### **Situation Statement**

The middle school concept is one that the vast majority of school districts have embraced. Giving older children and young teens the academic and social support they need makes a tremendous educational difference. At Westside Community Schools, much of our district-wide academic and facilities planning hinges on what we want to achieve with our middle school grade configuration.

The structure of middle school is one that has always been flexible. The number of grades at a middle school building can range from as many as four (fifth through eighth) to as few as two (usually seventh and eighth.) Westside Community Schools, after initial input from the public, educational professionals and architects, is now looking at the following middle school configuration options:

- A single middle school with seventh and eighth grades;
- Two middle schools with seventh and eighth grades; and
- Two middle schools with sixth through eighth grades

### **Junior High/Middle School Background Information**

The original high school for Westside Community Schools opened in 1952 and actually served as a 7-12 junior/senior high.

In the early 1960s, growth in the district spurred the construction of three junior high schools – Arbor, Valley View, and Westbrook. The educational philosophy of the day called for the elementary schools that fed into each junior high to work closely together and to align curriculum. Also worth noting, the junior highs served seventh through ninth grades. Changes in population over the years, along with new teaching strategies, made it necessary to rethink the junior high concept.

Faced with declining enrollment, Westside Community Schools consolidated its three junior highs into one middle school at the Arbor Heights location in 1987. The middle school also began serving only seventh and eighth grade students.

For a time in the 1980s, the Omaha Public Schools rented Westbrook Junior High from Westside. Valley View Junior High eventually became Westside's Community Conference Center, which also houses the Westside High School Career Center.

Nearly 1,000 students (seventh and eighth grade) attend Westside Middle School, which was built in 1962. The school's large attendance number minimizes the number of students that can option enroll at the district's elementary schools and high school and creates challenges in implementing a middle school philosophy.

### **Options Currently Considered**

As outlined in the Executive Summary, three options are now being considered. They include:

- A single middle school with seventh and eighth grades;
- Two middle schools with seventh and eighth grades; and
- Two middle schools with sixth through eighth grades

A single middle school with seventh and eighth grades is the current configuration. Making physical changes to the Westside Middle School could help with overcrowding issues, but the culture of the school would most likely remain much the same.

Creating a second 7-8 middle school would drop the number of students served in each of the two schools to around 450. While the smaller enrollment would be beneficial there would also be challenges. An additional building would increase operational costs for support staff and maintenance. Also, adding a 7-8 middle does not alter space needs at the district's elementary schools.

Reconfiguring Westside Middle School and adding a new middle school to accommodate sixth through eighth graders is the most unfamiliar and different option. On a national level, 6-8 middle schools have been popular. Other benefits include a longer middle school experience, lining up with state standards that are typically 6-8, freeing up elementary school space, and "right-sizing" enrollment at each middle school to about 700 to 750.

Planners at Westside Community School again see increased operational costs for support staff and maintenance as a challenge, along with concerns from the public and parents about sixth graders being influenced by older students and unfamiliarity with the 6-8 middle school concept. A Fall 2014 phone survey conducted by the Westside Foundation highlighted age/grade concerns. Thirty-eight percent of respondents supported the idea of a 6-8 middle school; 52 percent opposed it. (An additional note, 68 percent of those who responded to the survey did not have/no longer had students attending schools in the district.)

### **Westside Community Schools Facilities Task Force Timeline**

In May 2013, Westside Community Schools engaged the DLR Group, an integrated design firm, to conduct a comprehensive study of the district's schools and

buildings. During the course of the assessment, the team walked through every building and met with representatives from each grade level and every department in each building in order to understand how the buildings were currently being used—and how faculty and staff thought they should be used.

What DLR learned from these meetings was the desire for renewed and transformed spaces throughout the District, as well as the need for attention in the following areas:

- Early Childhood Education
- Special Education
- English Language Learners
- Flexible Learning Spaces to implement real-world learning opportunities (spaces that maintain Westside’s academic programs and rigor and also better prepare students for the economy of the future).

In 2014, the next step was to convene a 40-member Facilities Task Force consisting of parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. District administrators will review this input and provide a recommendation to the Westside Board of Education for action by the Board in early 2015.

The Task Force has particularly focused on how potential middle school change could positively impact offerings across the district.

### **Key Considerations**

There have been a handful of studies analyzing the best grade configuration for sixth grade students (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991; Miami Dade County, 2005; Oklahoma City, 2008; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). There is no consistent trend or finding that suggests a definitive correct answer. However, many who study the topic suggest (Beane & Lipka, 2006; Gordon, 2011) that it isn’t the grade configuration that needs to be studied, but rather the philosophy of the school. These authors suggest that schools following the true middle school philosophy will see strong results whether sixth grade is placed in an elementary or middle school.

The Middle School Philosophy (Turning Points, 2000) can be summarized into several points, which follow below. The Middle School Philosophy calls for:

- Students being divided into smaller learning communities
- Robust curriculum standards that live at the core
- Interdisciplinary teams (i.e. A group of sixth grade students are led by a two-person teacher team)
- Success for all
- The idea that healthy development and academic strength go hand in hand
- Families to be allied with the school staff
- Schools and communities to be partners in education

## 2014 Teacher and Student Input

In the fall of 2014, Westside Community School officials and others conducted surveys, focus groups, and community phone feedback. Every sixth grade student in the district was part of a focus group and follow-up survey. More sixth grade students stated they would prefer to stay at the elementary school; 40 percent indicated that they would be in favor of the change. However, the focus group feedback indicated that the sixth grade students, as a whole, did not appear to fully grasp the concept.

The seventh grade students, who were two weeks into their middle school careers, indicated in focus groups, that after seeing the more diverse schedule that they wished they had been able to start middle school in sixth grade. However, when surveyed, their responses were quite different. Eighty-seven percent of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students were in favor of 6<sup>th</sup> graders staying in elementary school.

Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers also were surveyed. Seventy-one percent of all sixth grade teachers and 80 percent of middle school teachers being surveyed stated that they felt that sixth grade students belonged in middle school.

Anecdotal highlights from the surveys of sixth and seventh grade students and teachers are included below.

*Seventh grade Westside Middle School teacher response highlights to the questions "Where do you feel 6th grade students would fit best?" Highlights:*

- "Well, as of now the current middle school is too small with two grades. If there are going to be three grades that means there will be another middle school. If there's another middle school, that will mean more space. That's a win for everyone. Something to think about though... are they going to give the 6th graders laptops too?"
- "I don't think that middle schoolers currently have any ownership in the middle school. They are in and out in 2 years and it feels like both of those years are transition years, first getting them used to the school and then preparing them for the high school. I think if they have more time at the middle school they will feel more connected to not only the school itself but to their peers and their teachers."
- "I think it would be helpful for students to have three years in a middle school environment. 6th graders have the maturity to handle a middle school environment and preparing them in 6th grade will make them more successful in 7th and 8th grade."
- "I've worked in a district that moved sixth grade to the middle schools to clear room in the elementary--a dubious reason for making such a system-wide change. Sixth graders can be successful in middle school, but they need careful shepherding during the transition. I've seen too many barely-eleven-year-olds collapse under the pressure of six teachers a day, a/b scheduling,

and their first experience with letter grades. I would say that, should sixth grade move to the middle school, the first year should look different from the following two. Perhaps a block schedule that gradually morphs into the eight period day. Perhaps a pass-fail grade system where students could be shown the grade they would have received had grades been real. Then transition to full grades by seventh grade. Without well-planned supports, bringing sixth graders to middle school will likely not benefit them.”

*Sixth grade teacher response highlights to the questions “Where do you feel 6th grade students would fit best?” Highlights:*

- “Many 6th graders can benefit from the middle school model. Having multiple specialized teachers and added personal accountability would be good. It seems that there are times when 6th graders are too big or mature for an all inclusive classroom.”
- “I have a lot of mixed feelings about this, I compare 6th grade to kindergarten as far as the amount of growth that occurs in one year, (academically, emotionally, physically and socially). In a grade school the students have an opportunity to be the leaders, work with the primary students and grow in maturity and responsibility before entering the Middle School. I believe by putting 6th grade at the middle school, will make these 10-12yr olds grow up faster and experience unnecessary behavior earlier.”
- “Sixth Graders are at a unique developmental stage and they need to be in their own environment. Truthfully individuals are all over the place developmentally. I think their need for movement, independence, and individualized education is best served in an middle school environment. Where they have better opportunity for changing between classes, different instructors. And more freedom for instructors to individualize the schedule and the curriculum.”

*Seventh grade student response highlights to the questions “Where do you feel 6th grade students would fit best?” Highlights:*

- “I think the 6th graders should attend middle school as long as the 5th grade teachers give the same preparation for middle school that the 6th grade got.”
- “When I was in 6th grade I don't think I would of had a problem adapting to middle school. It would just take a couple of days to get used to middle school.”
- “I think it should stay the same because 6th graders are already going through changes. I think it would be harder to adjust. Personally I think it would be very hard to do so much change at one time.”
- “The middle school would be to packed if the 6th grade was at WMS.”

*Sixth grade student response highlights to the questions "Where do you feel 6th grade students would fit best?" Highlights:*

- "I think it would be nice to have a longer middle school experience. Also a new middle school would give students and teachers more space it would be less cramped and there would be a more even number of students."
- "6th graders going into the middle school is too much pressure and they are not ready for it yet."
- "Maturity is big. Some of us aren't there yet to the 7th and 8th grade levels. It also puts more homework, pressure, and time into kids in 6th grade."
- "If you went to MS in six grade, you would get to meet more people. You would be more responsible. You would be able to do clubs and more classes."