



Frequently Asked Questions

Grade Configuration in the City School District of Albany

July 2016

What is grade configuration?

Grade configuration refers to how a school district organizes grades in its schools. It affects the number and size of schools in a district.

How does the City School District of Albany currently group grades in its schools?

The district has:

- Five elementary schools serving students from prekindergarten-grade 5;
- Six elementary schools serving students from prekindergarten-grade 6;
- One prekindergarten-grade 8 school;
- Three middle schools serving grades 6-8 (One of those schools, West Hill Middle School, opened in September 2015 to accommodate Albany students who were displaced when the state closed two Brighter Choice middle schools. West Hill will serve students in grades 7-8 during the 2016-17 school year as the district transitions to a new middle-school configuration);
- One comprehensive high school serving students grades 9-12; and
- An alternative school for middle- and high-school students.

What is the Grade Configuration Steering Committee?

The Grade Configuration Steering Committee consists of some 30 parents, teachers, principals and community members charged with studying existing grade configuration and recommending possible long-term enrollment scenarios for elementary and middle schools. The committee began its work in May 2015. The first phase of its work finished in June 2016. The second phase of its work begins September 2016 (*see pages 4-6 for more information about the work completed during Phase 1 and the focus of the committee's work in Phase 2*).

Why is the district considering changing the current grade configuration?

In short, for three reasons:

1. Too many students and not enough space. The district's elementary and middle schools are full or nearly full today. The district anticipates middle-school enrollment (grades 6-8) to grow by about 150 by September 2016, and by about 425 by September 2025. There is not enough space in the district's existing middle-school buildings to accommodate that growth.
2. Inequity between and among schools. Programs, opportunities and experiences vary widely across district schools, creating inequities. This is especially true for sixth-graders. A little more than half of the district's sixth-graders currently attend middle school, and the rest

attend elementary school, which have their own inconsistencies in delivering academic programs and services to sixth-grade students. This has occurred over time primarily because decisions had to be made based on where there was space in buildings due to the significant fluctuations in the opening and closings of charter schools in Albany.

3. Current enrollment zones may not be sufficient. The district's eight neighborhood elementary schools and North Albany Academy are divided into zones based on geography and the demographics of 20 years ago. The current zones may not reflect the reality of where today's students reside.

In the early part of the century, the district either renovated or rebuilt its elementary and middle schools. Why didn't the district anticipate the growing enrollment when it built those schools?

By 2008, district enrollment had declined substantially, particularly at the middle-school level. This was due primarily to the presence of 12 charter schools, the first of which came to Albany in 1999. Six of the charter schools had middle-school programs.

The influx of charter schools, along with the national trends of an aging population, lower fertility rates and the migration of families to the suburbs led the district to conclude that its declining enrollment was more than a short-term trend.

For example, Philip Livingston Magnet Academy (grades 6-8) dwindled from more than 700 students to fewer than 300 by the 2008-09 school year, when three charter middle schools were operating in Albany and two more were planned to open. Another new charter middle school not envisioned in the 2000s also opened after Livingston closed.

As charters grew and overall enrollment in district schools fell through the 2000s, the district seized the opportunity to expand prekindergarten in its elementary schools, which originally were renovated and rebuilt as schools that would serve primarily students from kindergarten through grade 5. The district had about 200 prekindergarten seats in the early 2000s, when the elementary- and middle-school facilities project began. Today, the district serves more than 1,000 prekindergarteners, with about half of those seats located in the district's 12 elementary schools.

In the meantime, the charter-school trend began to reverse. Since 2010, the state has closed five of the original 12 charter schools (all five included middle-school programs) because of poor student performance. A majority of those students returned to Albany's public schools.

Over the 17-year span of the charter-school era in Albany, the state has approved seven charter middle-school programs. Today, only two remain in operation serving students in grades 6-8 – KIPP and Albany Community.

How much has the district grown?

The district's overall enrollment has climbed 16 percent, or more than 1,300 students, since the 2008-09 school year. The increases have been particularly significant at the elementary level, up more than 28 percent, and the middle schools, up nearly 25 percent. Consequently, the district's elementary and middle schools are full or almost full.

A fall 2015 demographic study commissioned by the district has shown that by the 2025-26 school year there will be about 425 more students in grades 6-8 than there are today.

What caused the increase in enrollment?

Many factors have contributed to the enrollment growth. More families are choosing district schools throughout the city. Five charter schools have closed, all serving middle-school students, with the most recent two closures coming in June 2015. A large influx of international and refugee students – more than 500 new students over the last five years – has contributed to more students overall, as well. The 2000s facilities project that renovated or rebuilt the district’s elementary and middle schools also has created modern, appealing schools in all areas of the city that are attracting more families.

The Grade Configuration Steering Committee is charged with examining possible short- and long-term enrollment scenarios to accommodate that growth.

How is the current configuration inequitable?

Students at Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School, West Hill Middle School and William S. Hackett Middle School have access to more programs and opportunities than middle-school students at North Albany Academy.

In addition, the school day at North Albany is a half-hour shorter than the school day at the other middle schools due to contractual agreements with the district’s labor unions with respect to the pre-K-8 makeup of that school. That means North Albany seventh- and eighth-graders, over a two-year period, have 26 fewer school days – more than a month less of instruction – compared to other middle-school students.

Also, sixth-graders in elementary school get less time in the classroom, as well, compared to their counterparts in middle school – more than 2½ weeks less (see next question). Program delivery for sixth-graders also varies widely at the elementary level. Nearly half of the district’s sixth-graders currently attend elementary school.

Why the focus on sixth-graders?

Some sixth-graders are educated in elementary school, others in a prekindergarten-grade 8 school and still others in middle school. Consequently, programs, opportunities and experiences vary significantly from school to school.

For example, many sixth-graders in district elementary schools are taught core subjects by one classroom teacher with whom they spend the majority of the school day. Conversely, sixth-graders in middle school are taught by teachers who specialize in a particular subject – English, math, science and social studies.

Sixth-graders in elementary school have a half-hour less instruction per day than sixth-graders in middle school because the school day is contractually 30 minutes shorter for elementary

employees than for middle-school employees. That means elementary sixth-graders have 13 fewer days in school (more than 2½ weeks) each year than sixth-graders in middle school.

There are almost 300 sixth-graders in district elementary schools who will transition to middle school in seventh grade and, two years later, to high school. Grade configuration research is clear on the effect of transitions on children: they are disruptive and can cause trauma. This is especially true during the middle-school years of physical and emotional changes.

When students transition into middle school in seventh grade, they come from six different elementary schools into existing groups of students who have been together for a year. The transition affects both groups, which may explain why seventh grade has been a challenging time for discipline.

What are the phases of the committee?

Phase 1 of the committee began in May 2015 and ended in June 2016. Phase 1's charge was to:

- Study different elementary- and middle-school enrollment and facilities options
- Formally recommend a location for an interim third middle school to begin serving students in September 2017

Phase 2 of the committee will begin in September 2016 and will focus on developing long-term recommendations about:

- Location of a third permanent middle school
- Enrollment of a third permanent middle school
- Equitable programming for a third permanent middle school
- Timeline for what needs to happen before the permanent third middle school opens (board approval, public vote [if necessary], state approvals, construction)

What has the Grade Configuration Steering Committee recommended to the Board of Education to date?

1. The district should begin to move away from the prekindergarten-grade 8 model. Currently one district school, North Albany Academy, has this grade configuration.

This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on Nov. 19, 2015.

2. Sixth-graders belong in middle school. The committee expressed its preference for a permanent third middle school for grades 6-8. Eventually all sixth grades will move to middle school and all elementary schools will serve students through fifth grade.

This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on Nov. 19, 2015.

3. There needs to be a permanent middle school on the north or northwest side of the city. Since the district closed the former Philip Livingston Magnet Academy in the face of rapidly dwindling enrollment and charter-school growth in 2009, middle-school students

and families who live in the north and northwest parts of Albany have to travel long distances to get to Hackett and Myers. Providing a more accessible, equitable middle school for these students and families is a priority for the committee and the district.

This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on Nov. 19, 2015.

4. Equity is a priority. The committee determined at the outset of its work in June 2015 that equity would be a priority in all its discussions and decisions. It came up with the following definition of equity:

The district must provide all students with what they need to succeed in a competitive educational experience and beyond, and their achievement must not be predictable by race, gender, socioeconomics or any other life circumstances.

This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on April 7, 2016.

5. Any changes must be at least a first step in a long-term, permanent solution.
This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on April 7, 2016.

6. The district needs an interim middle-school building by September 2017 and it should be located at 50 North Lark St.

Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School and William S. Hackett Middle School already are full or near full and cannot serve more students. The current West Hill Middle School building (the former Brighter Choice boys' and girls' middle schools) is not large enough to accommodate additional students and was not designed to comply with state classroom-size mandates for public schools. Also, the district doesn't own the West Hill building and cannot renovate it to meet state requirements.

In Phase 1 of the committee's work, the committee examined all available options for a location for a temporary third middle school. It concluded that 50 North Lark St., the original home of the former New Covenant Charter School and currently home to the district's Alternative Learning Center, was the most suitable location that would disrupt the fewest number of students.

After extensive discussion, the committee agreed that the interim middle school could serve as a neighborhood middle school serving families from the north and northwest parts of the city.

This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on June 16, 2016.

In September 2016, Interim Superintendent Kimberly Young Wilkins, Ed.D., will present specific recommendations to the Board of Education about how the interim middle school at 50 North Lark will be enrolled beginning in the 2017-18 school year.

What has the Board of Education acted on to date?

On March 3, 2016, the Board of Education agreed with and approved the following recommendations of the Grade Configuration Steering Committee:

- Maintain West Hill Middle School in its current location at 395 Elk St. for at least the 2016-2017 school year. West Hill will serve students in grades 7-8 only in 2016-17 in anticipation of a transition to a new third middle school in 2017-18.
- Cap Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School enrollment for 2016-17 at 725 students.
- Cap William S. Hackett Middle School enrollment for 2016-17 at 650 students.
- Create a process to enroll middle-school students in other schools in 2016-17 should Myers and/or Hackett reach their caps.
- Maintain North Albany Academy as a prekindergarten-grade 8 school for 2016-17 with a plan to phase out grades 6-8 starting in September 2017 (if space permits)

Will three middle schools be enough to meet the growing numbers of students?

That remains to be seen and will be part of a second phase of work by the Grade Configuration Steering Committee. In the end, the Board of Education will have the final decision following the committee's recommendations.

Will the district build new middle schools?

At this point, there are no firm plans for new construction related to middle-school expansion. However, facilities expansion is a possibility that the Grade Configuration Steering Committee will consider in the second phase of its work beginning in September 2016. This consideration is necessary due to the projected enrollment growth at the middle-school level, and the space limitations of the buildings currently available to the district in its goal to provide equitable programming and opportunities for all students in grades 6-8.

What schools will be affected by moving all sixth grades to middle school?

Elementary schools that currently have sixth grades would end at fifth grade. Those schools are Albany School of Humanities (ASH), Arbor Hill Elementary School, Eagle Point Elementary School, Giffen Memorial Elementary School, Pine Hills Elementary School and Thomas O'Brien Academy of Science and Technology (TOAST).

North Albany Academy, which currently serves students from prekindergarten-grade 8, would convert to a prekindergarten-grade 5 school.

When would those changes go into effect?

That depends on where a new permanent middle school is located and how that school will be enrolled. The timing for these conversions will be among the considerations the Grade Configuration Steering Committee will evaluate in the second phase of its work. Any committee recommendations will go before the Board of Education. All changes will require board approval.

What other options did the Grade Configuration Steering Committee consider?

The committee studied, discussed and ultimately rejected the following:

1. Creating an early childhood center or centers that all prekindergarten children would attend

2. Creating at least one more prekindergarten-grade 8 school
3. Changing magnet elementary enrollment. The committee said that issue should be decided by the school board.

The committee also is studying the possibility of establishing, at some point, a “newcomer” school for newly arriving international and refugee students.