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Relationship between Grade Configuration
and Parent Perceptions about Schools

by

Jason John Lind

A dissertation proposal submitted to the faculty of Bethel University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

St. Paul, Minnesota
2016

Approved by:

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Abstract

This was a comparative case study that used in-depth interviews of parents to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of two grade configurations, and the possible influence of grade configuration on parent participation and parental attitudes toward their schools. The purpose of this study was to gain deeper insight into the differences of two grade configurations from the perspective of parents, and determine if parents reveal more advantages of one model over the other model. There were seven sets of parents interviewed from a K-5, 6-8 configuration and six sets of parents interviewed from a K-8 configuration. The results indicated advantages and disadvantages for each configuration. The results point to an advantage of the K-8 model for communication, middle school environment, parent participation, and a seamless transition from elementary to middle school. The advantage of the K-5, 6-8 model is the ability of students to have a wider variety of social and extra-curricular experiences, and the increased ability of the school to provide appropriately leveled instruction. Implications were discussed for the transition from elementary to middle school, the middle school environment, parent participation, and the communication across grade levels.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my intelligent and beautiful wife Katie, and my three amazing children, Kaleb, Micah, and Linnea. Their patience and support during the completion of this project has been a gift.

I dedicate this work not only to my immediate family, but all the families that have children attending schools. May this paper encourage educators to listen to the ideas of their constituents, and may parents gain a deeper appreciation for the effort of the multitudes of talented educators that are helping to shape the lives of our children.

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This research study would not be possible without the willingness of parents from both schools to share their insights throughout the interview process. Thank you for your unvarnished and articulate discussion of your experiences with your schools.

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I want to thank my doctoral committee whose insight and encouragement throughout the dissertation process was vital to the completion of this project. Thank you Dr. Craig Paulson for your energy and enthusiasm that helped buoy my spirits at key moments. Thank you Dr. Tracy Reimer and Dr. Erica Hering for your expert feedback, reinforcement, and support in getting this project nearing to completion.

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Finally, I want to thank my parents for instilling in me the value of education by their direct participation in the educational process, and more importantly, the value of hard work. Their ethical approach to life, and their continuously growing relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a quest worthy of replication.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	7
Chapter I: Introduction.....	8
Statement of the Problem.....	8
Purpose.....	18
Research Questions.....	20
Definition of Terms.....	21
Limitations of the Study.....	23
Organization of the Study	24
Chapter II: Literature Review	25
History of Grade Configuration	25
Learning Environment	28
Transitions.....	33
Parental Involvement in School.....	37
School Size.....	42
Student Outcomes and Configuration.....	42
Research Summary	50
Chapter III: Methodology	51
Research Structure	51
Subjects of the Study	53
Data Gathering Procedures	55
Data Management.....	57

Data Analysis	58
Chapter IV: Results.....	61
Overview of Results.....	61
School A Findings.....	63
School B Findings.....	83
Comparison of School A and School B	97
Summary of Conclusions.....	110
Chapter V: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations.....	115
Discussion.....	115
Implications.....	117
Recommendations.....	120
References.....	124
Appendix A.....	139

List of Tables

Interview question and research question matrix.....	54
Advantages and disadvantages from School A.....	78
Advantages and disadvantages from School B.....	94
Comparison of advantages and disadvantages.....	99
Topics and subtopics under advantages and disadvantages	114

Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

School districts faced the challenge of improving students' academic performance in an environment that supported positive social and emotional growth during an era of intense public scrutiny. The emphasis on accountability emerging from the political climate surrounding changes in federal law challenged schools to examine all aspects of the educational process to boost student performance. The former No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandated by the federal government required schools to meet student achievement standards or face the possibility of sanctions. The increased pressure on school districts generated from federal legislation and society in general spurred many initiatives that attempted to meet the higher demands for student academic performance. One of the attempted initiatives designed to help boost the performance of middle school-aged students was the reorganization of grade levels within a district, or in other words, changing the grade configuration of students housed in a particular school.

The grade configuration debate was not unique to any era of public education. Researchers and educators have long discussed the ideal configuration to best meet the needs of middle school-aged children. Education leaders as early as the 1900s decided to push for education reforms that moved the elementary to secondary transition from the ninth grade down to the seventh grade. The National Education Association (NEA), the Committee on the Economy of Time, and the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education were all calling for a junior high model that would start young adolescents on the secondary education journey in the seventh grade. The prevailing thought centered around better preparing students

for success in high school, and increasing the participation rate in high schools (Juvonen & Rand Education, 2004; Mizell, 2005). The demands for an educated workforce and the pressure to assimilate immigrants into American society led education leaders to advocate for the creation of junior high schools. The popularity of the junior high model soared through the early 1900s, and so did the disappointment with the model in meeting the needs of students. Unfortunately, the junior high model did not meet the expectation of engaging the middle school-aged student, or increase the numbers of students continuing on through a high school education (Juvonen, 2007).

Dissatisfaction with the junior high model increased in the middle of the century, and there was once again a push to examine the best placement for middle school-aged children. By the 1970s there was a significant push for a new “middle school” model (Juvonen & Rand Education, 2004; Mizell 2005). School leaders advocated for a model that would not only change the grade levels housed in a middle school, but also change the teaching methods that would better meet the needs of the early adolescent student. The predominant model emerging from the 1970s continuing on through the present day is a configuration that houses students in sixth through eighth grade.

Early in the 21st century the common discussion within the restructuring debate seemed to be centered on the difference between the K-8 structure and the other various organizational possibilities between kindergarten and eighth grade (Mizell, 2005; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). Several large urban school districts such as New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Baltimore, and New Orleans were looking to abandon the 6-8 middle school structure for a return to the K-8 model to boost social/emotional outcomes for students as well as academic achievement (Mizell, 2005). The dissatisfaction in meeting the needs of middle school-aged

children continued. The discussion was significant enough for *The School Administrator* to dedicate the March 2005 issue to the topic of K-8 configurations. The debate on how students should be grouped into grade level configurations continued. School districts were looking for any possible advantage to boost student outcomes, and changing grade configurations was an approach that many chose.

However, researchers and school officials continued to question whether changing the configuration of schools would be the Holy Grail that would boost student outcomes. The research to date has been inconclusive. School officials dating back to the early 1900s have cited research when advocating for grade configuration changes, yet over 100 years of debate has not led to any conclusive recommendations on the organization of schools. The literature on grade configuration did not overwhelmingly support any particular configuration (DeJong & Craig, 2002; Erb, 2006; Franklin & Glascock, 1996; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Renschler, 2000). Clark, Slate, Combs and Moore (2013) wrote, “those individuals involved in this endeavor have raised more questions over the life of the debate than they have answered, and as a result, an optimal configuration for adolescent education has yet to be identified” (p.1). Much of the recent research surrounding grade configuration focused on the effectiveness of middle schools (Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Mullins & Irvin, 2000), and the impact of students transitioning from the elementary school setting to the middle school setting (Anderman & Midgley, 1996; Deemer, McCotter, & Smith, 2003; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010) and from middle school to the high school (Alspaugh, 1998; Offenber, 2001; Schwerdt and West 2011).

The research findings were not conclusive, however, some studies did show advantages for students who attended a K-8 model. Franklin and Glascock (1996), Offenbergl (2001), Renchler (2000), and Schwerdt and West (2011) reported academic advantages for students who attended schools with larger grade spans. Several studies showed that the transition from elementary school to middle school had a negative impact on academics as well as students' social and emotional well-being. There was also significant research on the educational environment of a middle school, and how the middle school environment impacts students' well-being and student outcomes (Akos, 2002; Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman & Midgley, 1996; Deemer, et al., 2003; Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Connolly, Yakimowski-Srebniak, and Russo (2002) showed academic advantages for students attending K-8 schools in the Baltimore system verses students attending an elementary and middle school model. There was literature supportive of the middle school model, and there was literature critical of the middle school model. There was also literature that revealed a preference for the K-8 model. The research found did not provide a hard and fast evidence for choosing any configuration.

Theory behind K-8 model support. Some studies found an advantage of the K-8 model, and there were three categories of theory attempting to explain the potential advantage of keeping children in the same environment until the transition at ninth grade to the high school model. Researchers pointed to the timing of the transition at the onset of puberty, the mismatch of middle school environment and the needs of the middle school student, and the drop in parent participation as factors that contributed to the decline in student outcomes at the middle schools. Conversely, the K-8 supporters contended that the K-8 model could better mitigate the negative

aspects of the middle school model by eliminating the transition at the onset of puberty, providing a more supportive environment, and keeping more parents connected to school.

The timing of the transition to middle school from elementary school has been a subject for researchers since the early 1900s. The supporters of the movement to implement the junior high model thought that the onset of puberty in children signaled the need for a model that more closely resembled the high school model. Later, middle school supporters thought that the transition should occur before students start puberty, and educational experts supported the transition at the fifth-grade level. Finally, the K-8 supporters reported that students transitioning from one building to another before the ninth grade can be harmful for students, and research has been conducted that supported the arguments of a K-8 model (Anderson, 2012; Bedard and Do, 2005; Clark et al. 2013; Combs et. al. 2011; Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008; Deemer et al., 2003; Franklin and Glascock, 1996; Hough, 2005; Offenber, 2001; Renchler, 2000; Rockoff and Lockwood, 2010; Schwerdt and West, 2011; Simmons et al., 1987)

School environment is another aspect of educating the middle level student that has been studied. Researchers have tried to determine if there is a benefit for middle school-aged children to be in an environment that more closely resembles an elementary school, or an environment that more closely mirrors the high school model. The push to meet the needs of middle level students resulted in the creation of the “junior high” model in the early 1940s and a vigorous push to move to a middle school model in the 1970s (Rubenstein, Schwartz, Stlefel, & Zabel, 2009). Then in the early 2000s there was a renewed interest in reexamining the K-8 model for best meeting the social-emotional needs of students. Researchers attempted to determine if one particular configuration lent itself to a more ideal school environment for middle school-aged

children. Elementary schools tend to have a more engaging learning environment that is more task-oriented vs. the middle school environment that is more performance focused (Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks 1995). Hough (1995) surmised that schools containing elementary grade levels and middle grade levels under one roof tended to better meet the developmental needs of students. He pointed to research showing evidence of a greater implementation of teaching practices deemed appropriate for early adolescents when the middle grades are housed in schools containing the elementary grades. Hough (2005) again espoused the benefits of these school structures when he stated, “elemiddle schools are supported by many learning communities because they are closely aligned to a more nurturing, child-centered environment commonly found in elementary schools” (paragraph 32).

Finally, parent participation was found to be an important aspect of a child’s educational experience that may be impacted by grade configuration. Juvonen and Rand Education (2004) wrote about a marked decrease in parent participation for fifth grade students attending a middle school setting compared to fifth grade students in an elementary setting. Eccles and Harold (1993) explained that, “Junior high schools and middle school expand the physical community without expanding the emotional sense of community” (p. 577). The K-8 model has shown to retain more parental involvement as children progress through the educational system.

In summary, research showed that the K-8 model showed promise as a model for educating the middle school age children. K-8 models tended to sustain greater rates of parental involvement, eliminate school transitions during puberty, and encouraged a more supportive learning environment. However, there are many factors that contribute to educating the middle school student beyond parental involvement, transitions, and supportive environments. Grade

configuration alone does not account for the success of students. In addition, there are many middle schools that have shown tremendous outcomes for middle school students (McFarland, 2007). There are many considerations that must be taken into account when districts choose a grade configuration.

Theory Behind the Middle School Model. The middle school model gained support in the 1970s as an effort to better meet the needs of early adolescents. Middle school reformers advocated for a model that would act as a better bridge between the elementary environment and the high school environment (Harley, 2010). Meyer (2011) credited a speech given by William Alexander at a Cornell University conference for administrators in 1963 as the starting point of the middle school movement. According to Meyer, Alexander advocated for schools that would focus on the specific needs of adolescent children. Advocates sought to provide a more nurturing and supportive experience for students that were in the midst of the tumultuous physical and emotional period during the onset of puberty (Dickinson, 2001; Eccles, et al. 1993; Feldlaufuer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Odegaard & Heath, 1992; Simmons et al., 1987;). Researchers identified the characteristics of students entering middle schools, and then they developed recommendations to meet the needs of these adolescent students.

Students attending middle schools are experiencing a time of life marked by the onset of puberty signifying the transition from childhood to adulthood (Dickinson, 2001; Eccles, Lord, and Midgley, 1991; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Parker, 2009). Parker wrote, “Hallmark changes associated with early adolescence are increasingly complex problem-solving capabilities, growing desires for independence and decision-making opportunities, and a need for close, personal relationships with adults” (para. 3). The early adolescent changes can be difficult for

some students to navigate resulting in a decline in grades, self-perceptions, interest in school, intrinsic motivation, and confidence in intellectual abilities (Alspaugh, 1998; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Cook et al., 2008; Eccles et al. 1991; Schwerdt & West, 2011).

The unique characteristics of middle school students led researchers, advocates, and education professionals to design schools that intended to meet the emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of middle school students (Dickinson, 2001; Eccles et al., 1991; Parker, 2009).

Odegaard (1992) summarized the recommendations of middle level advocates for creating effective middle schools with the following 12 characteristics:

- Feature a program that responds to the physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral needs of the early adolescent learner.
- Possess a definite curriculum plan, which emphasizes developmental skills, reading, and other communication and learning skills.
- Build on the successes of elementary education and prepare pupils for a successful senior high school experience.
- Provide opportunities for cooperative learning and small-group and individualized instruction.
- A block of time scheduled for academic subjects, with an interdisciplinary team of teachers, which fosters teacher fellowship, interdependence, and staff consensus.
- An Advisor/Advisee program that helps students develop positive attitudes, values, and self-esteem.
- Promotes flexibility in the schedule of classes and activities to meet the multiple needs of the students.

- An extensive program of enrichment, exploratory, and special-interest classes and activities.
- Learning communities of no more than 600 students.
- A positive school climate, which is more like elementary schools than high schools with a school-wide atmosphere of cooperation and caring. Additionally, firm school and classroom standards and discipline are present.
- Students and teachers spend time together in non-instructional ways.
- Communication between teachers, school, and home (p. 11).

Mac Iver and Epstein (1993) wrote, “The goal . . . is to create responsive learning environments that make early adolescents feel a part of a supportive and caring community” (p.522).

Advocates of the middle school model worked to create a learning environment that would reduce the negative outcomes observed when students left the supportive elementary environment before entering the secondary environment in high school.

Choosing the best model. The mission statements of school districts typically contain language on student learning. However, the factors influencing decisions on grade configuration are often based on demographics, the current inventory of buildings in the district (DeJong & Craig, 2002, Hooper, 2002), building costs, or simply the preferences of the community (Paglin & Fager, 1997). These factors are important considerations when making decisions on grade configuration. However, the potential academic, social, and emotional impacts on the students, parents and teachers are important factors for consideration (Clark et al., 2013; Reeves, 2005). Juvonen and Rand Education (2004) wrote that, “throughout the history of the American middle school, the creation of separate schools for young adolescents has been guided primarily by

pragmatic concerns” (p. 18). School districts occasionally have the opportunity to explore alternate grade configurations, and when they do, careful consideration should be given to the potential impact each choice may have on the delivery of excellent instruction and a positive school climate. For districts that may not have the opportunity to consider grade configuration changes, it is also important to understand the impact that grade configuration may have on student outcomes. Every configuration has strengths and weakness, and increasing the knowledge base of how grade configuration impacts all aspects of the educational process will assist decision makers in directing resources that enhance outcomes for students.

Searching for the ideal grade configuration that produces the best outcomes for students in their early adolescent years has been a subject of debate for school leaders since the movement from the original K-8 model toward the junior high school model in the early 1900s. Reformers attempted to improve on the junior high model in the 1970s by advocating for the middle school concept. Dissatisfaction originally with the K-8 model then the junior high model, and eventually the middle school model in meeting the developmental needs of students continues to fuel the debate on how to organize grade levels into schools. The potential effect size on school configuration has not been determined as some reform initiatives, such as improving teacher performance, but the passion surrounding the continued discussion on configuration makes configuration an interesting topic for discussion. Hattie (2012) listed 150 influences on student learning in his book *Visible Learning for Teachers*, and grade configuration was not included in his meta-analyses of over 800 studies related to achievement. Hattie did not mention grade configuration in his work, and he gave no explanation of its absence in his research. The debate

on the ideal grade configuration is likely to continue into the foreseeable future if history of the discussion is any indication.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is not to prove that the K-8 model is better than the middle school model, or that the middle school model is better. There has been considerable research on the efficacy of the middle school model, the impact of transitions on student outcomes, and the ability of schools to meet the developmental needs of adolescent students. However, there has been very little research examining the parental perspectives on grade configuration, and the information that has been gathered from parents thus far has been through the use of surveys (Anderson, 2012). Therefore, the parental information was more generically descriptive, and did not provide explanations from parents on how they chose to answer the surveys. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper insight into the differences of the two grade configurations from the perspective of parents, and determine if parents reveal more advantages of one model over the other. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to provide rich content for evaluation.

Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) reported that parents of middle school students in New York had a lower opinion of their schools than parents whose students attended a K-8 school. This study compared the overall impressions of parents whose students attended K-8 schools and the parents whose students have made at least one contextual transition during the same time period. The comparison of impressions between the two parent groups in this study will help determine if the Rockoff and Lockwood findings were generalized to another context.

Parents have a vital role in a child's educational experience, and they offer a unique perspective that may be valuable for decision makers when considering grade configurations and

resource allocation for student support (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Odegaard (1992) used surveys to compare perceptions between parents, students, and teachers on the potential concerns surrounding the transition from elementary school to middle school, and the researcher recommended that further qualitative interviews be conducted to gain deeper information on transition concerns. Anderson (2012) also surveyed parents on their perceptions of school related to grade configuration. Anderson found that parents shared different perceptions than that of teachers or students related to grade configuration. Parents have significant insight into the strengths and challenges associated with the grade configuration their students have experienced. Parental insight will be helpful for school leaders when deciding how to support middle school-aged students.

It is also important for school districts to understand the limitations of the grade configurations they establish. Every grade configuration has strengths and weaknesses. Rubenstein et al. (2009) summarized the strengths and weaknesses in the following statement:

Grade span could affect student performance in a number of ways—both positive and negative. If, for example, shorter grade spans permit more classes in each grade, then there might be greater focus and specialization in each grade, better matching the needs of the student. At the same time, however, more classes per grade might provide greater opportunity for tracking and within-school segregation and their consequences. Longer grade spans could result in fewer school transitions, avoiding any costs that might occur due to switching schools, or could result in students being locked in for longer periods of time to schools that may not meet their needs. That is, shorter grade spans have the advantage of providing more opportunities for students to match to

appropriate schools. Of course, longer grade spans allow schools to create greater vertical integration of curricula and instruction and may provide greater opportunity to strategically target resources at particular grades. (p. 63)

Districts that have not changed configurations in decades may find it vital to know the potential impact of various configurations on the educational process. It is critical to understand the challenges students face when transitioning from one educational context to another, and it is important to reflect on the potential impact of transitions on parent interactions with schools. There are pros and cons to every grade configuration, and it is imperative for decision makers to have as much information as possible about the impact of their actions in order to achieve the desired outcomes in each individual community. The results of the study added information to the literature to help decision makers determine how to best allocate resources to support students in any configuration.

Research Questions

This research project was designed to answer the following research questions on the topic of parent perceptions of grade configuration:

1. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a student attend the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade?
2. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a student attend an elementary school and then a separate middle school?
3. How has the transition from elementary school to middle school impacted children's educational experiences?

4. How does the overall school satisfaction of parents whose children have experienced a K-8 model compare to overall school satisfaction of parents whose children have experienced a K-5, 6-8 model?
5. Is there a difference in participation with parents whose children have experienced a K-8 model compared to the participation of parents whose children have experienced a K-5, 6-8 model?

Definition of Terms

Grade configuration is the organization of grade levels in a school. Schools can be organized into a variety of grade configurations (Franklin & Glascock, 1996). Commonly, districts may have several smaller elementary schools feeding into a middle school, and then two middle schools feeding into a single high school. Other school districts may choose to bus all of the kindergarten and first grade students in the district to one location.

Grade Span refers to the number of grade levels housed in one school building (Rubenstein, et al. 2009).

A grade level center refers to an organization with a narrower grade span.

A Middle School “is a flexible, responsive, integrated concept with an aim of providing a safe, secure, and appropriate environment for a young adolescent to learn challenging content that will enable him or her to explore self; others, and the larger world” (Dickinson, 2001, p. 3). Middle schools generally contain of students in grades 5-8, and are typically be made up of a 5-8 grade span, a 6-8 grade span, or a 7-8 grade span, although there are also middle schools made up of students in grade 4-8. The most common grade configuration for the middle grades prior to 1970, when the Junior High model was popular, was grade 7-9. By the year 2000, the most

common middle grade configuration was 6-8. The 6-8 grade configuration continues to be the most common configuration (Schwerdt & West, 2011).

A contextual transition is when students move from one building to another in successive school years. For example, in this study, students attended a neighborhood school in kindergarten through fifth grade, and then attended a separate school for sixth through eighth grade. Students had more transitions between kindergarten and high school graduation in districts that organized around more narrow bands of grade levels.

Parent empowerment is the feeling of a parent being welcomed and wanted by the school staff in conjunction with more decision-making opportunities in the school. Empowered parents tend to be more involved and more satisfied with the education of their children (Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Griffith, 1998).

Learning environment “can be defined as the pervasive quality of a school environment experienced by students and staff, which affects their behaviors” (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004, p.12). For example, assignments for middle school students tend to be more performance oriented vs. task oriented, and vice versa for elementary students. A more task-oriented environment contributes to lower student motivation, and less risk taking behaviors for instruction (Eccles et al., 1991).

Overall satisfaction of parents for the purpose of this study is when parents reported “their child is eager and enthusiastic about learning, is getting a good education, and enjoys school activities” (Griffith, 1998, p. 57). Parents also show overall satisfaction of their school if they would recommend the school for the children of their friends.

Limitations of the Study

The relatively small number of subjects interviewed, and the comparisons of parent perceptions from only two locations limited this study. This study used purposeful sampling to choose the sites and the participants, but the study did not look carefully at the demographics of the parents selected, or the individual impact of the grade configuration characteristics on each student. Every student and parent has their own view of education, and their personal set of assets and attributes that contributed to the effectiveness of their educational experience. Those individual assets and attributes were not accounted for in this study. As Creswell (2003) also pointed out, “People are not equally articulate and perceptive” (p.186). This study focused on generalizations of parents, and did not take into account the individuality of each parent and their children.

The process of purposeful sampling also had the created limitations due to the potential bias of the superintendents of both schools. The superintendents chose the participants, and in doing so, the potential to choose parents that looked favorably on the school district existed. The participants chosen for this study had the potential to represent a more positive view of the district than the general population. This bias had the potential to skew the results.

In addition, the individual comments even when aggregated, may not have adequately represented the prevailing opinion of most parents representing a given grade configuration. There may have been more differences between parents with the similar configuration than between parents of a different configuration.

This study also did not take into account school size. There was significant research that shows that school size may have an impact on the culture and climate of a school system.

Rubenstein et al. (2009) were able to examine the many of the variables associated with grade configuration using the New York City public schools. K-8 schools tended to be larger in overall size, but they tended to have fewer children assigned to each grade level. The number and variety of grade levels within the same school system allowed them to control for many variables potentially impacting student outcomes. They found that the configuration or grade span of schools impacted the number of students in a particular grade, the size of the school, and the individual class size. The implication of this research was that the organization of a school influenced factors that may have had a bigger impact on student learning than the structure of the school itself. For example, the K-8 structure tended to have fewer students at each grade level, but had larger individual class sizes at the primary level. Factors other than grade configuration may have influenced the answers of parents more than grade configuration.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I contains an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose for writing the paper, research questions, definition of terms, limitations of the study, and organization of the study. Chapter II includes a review of literature surrounding the history of grade configurations, learning environment, transitions, parental involvement in school, school size, student outcomes and configurations, and a summary of the research. Chapter III, Methodology, contains discussion on the research structure, subjects of the study, data gathering procedures, data management, and data analysis. Chapter IV contains the results of the interviews of parents from School A and School B. Chapter IV also includes a comparison of the results from parents of each School. Finally, Chapter V is comprised of a discussion of the results, the implication of the results, and recommendations.

Chapter II: Literature Review

History of Grade Configuration

K-8 to junior high. The grade configuration debate is not unique to any era of public education. Researchers and educators have long discussed the ideal configuration to best meet the needs of middle school-aged children. Prior to 1900 and continuing on after the turn of the century, the most common school structure was the K-8, or 1-8 grouping followed by four years of high school (Manning, 2000; Mizell 2005; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Rubenstein et al., 2009). Many of the K-8 schools were relatively small, especially in the rural portions of the country, and city schools were generally organized around neighborhoods. Paglin and Fager (1997) pointed out:

In 1920, 4 out of 5 high school graduates had attended a K-8 elementary school and a four-year high school. Education leaders as early as the early 1900's decided to push for education reforms that moved the elementary to secondary transition from the 9th grade down to the seventh grade. By 1960, four out of five had attended an elementary school, a three-year junior high, and a three-year senior high. (p. 2)

The National Education Association (NEA), the Committee on the Economy of Time, and the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education were all calling for a junior high model that would start young adolescents on the secondary education journey in the seventh grade. The prevailing thought centered around better preparing students for success in high school, and increasing the participation rate in high schools (Juvonen, 2007; Mizell, 2005). The demands for an educated workforce, and the pressure to assimilate immigrants into American society led education leaders to advocate for the creation of junior high schools. The popularity

of the junior high model soared through the early 1900s, and so did the disappointment with the model in meeting the needs of students. Unfortunately, the junior high model did not meet the expectation of engaging the middle school-aged student, or increase the numbers of students continuing on through a high school education (Juvonen, 2007).

Junior high to middle school. By the 1970s there was growing dissatisfaction among educators with the junior high model. Eccles et al. (1991) quote Charles Silberman (1970) from his book, *Crisis in the Classroom*, when he wrote, ““The junior high school, by almost unanimous agreement, is the wasteland- one is tempted to say cesspool- of American education’ (p.324)” (p. 524). The junior high model was deemed to be a detriment to children, and a new model was sought. Educators recognized that the jump from elementary school to the junior high was significant for students, and it was not structured to be developmentally appropriate for learning. Dissatisfaction with the junior high model increased in the middle of the century, and there was once again a push to examine the best placement for middle school-aged children. By the 1970s there was a significant push for a new “middle school” model (Juvonen & Rand Education, 2004; Mizell, 2005). School leaders advocated for a model that would not only change the grade levels housed in a middle school, but also change the teaching methods that would better meet the needs of the early adolescent student. The predominant model emerging from the 1970s and continuing on through the present day is a configuration that houses students in sixth through eighth grade.

The growing dissatisfaction with the junior high model then gave rise to the middle school model that became common in the 1980s and continued to grow into the early 2000s. The largest percentage of elementary schools housed children only through the fifth grade level by

2003 (Rubenstein et al., 2009). The number of middle schools across the country grew from 1,500, to 11,500 between 1970 and 2000 (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). Currently, 88% of American children transition from an elementary school setting to a middle school setting (Anderson, 2012).

Middle school to ? The dissatisfaction amongst education professionals on how to best educate students between the ages of 10 and 14 continued after the turn of the century. Educational policy makers have tinkered with the configuration of schools, as well as, with the philosophy behind the delivery of instruction within the school to meet the needs of middle school age children.

Early in the 21st century the common discussion within the restructuring debate seemed to be centered on the difference between the K-8 structure and the other various organizational possibilities between kindergarten and seventh grade (Mizell, 2005; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). Several large urban school districts such as New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Baltimore, New Orleans, Oklahoma City and others were looking to abandon the 6-8 middle school structure for a return to the K-8 model (Mizell, 2005; Pardini, 2002). The dissatisfaction in meeting the needs of middle school-aged children drove the context for discussion that caught the attention of publications such as *The School Administrator* that dedicated the entire March 2005 issue to the topic of K-8 configurations. The debate on how students should be grouped into grade level configurations was renewed. School districts were looking for any possible advantage to boost student outcomes, and changing grade configurations was an approach that many chose.

However, the question remained: did changing the grade configuration work? Was there a national movement toward restructuring more schools to a K-8 model? The research on configuration showed some advantages for the K-8 model. However, the Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (2005) pointed out that there are “other factors that could affect student performance, and more research is needed on the success of the K-8 configuration” (“at a glance” para. 2). School officials dating back to the early 1900s have cited research when advocating for grade configuration changes, yet over 100 years of debate has not led to any conclusive recommendations on the organization of schools.

Learning Environment

Researchers have primarily used two frameworks when examining grade configuration, the framework of learning environment and the framework of transitioning from one school to the next (Clark et al. 2013). The research literature revealed differences in the learning environment between elementary and middle school and the impact of the transition from one school to the next as two major contributing factors to declines in student outcomes during the middle school years. Research on the learning environment in junior high and middle school started to appear in the late 1980s due to the concern that student performance was suffering (Feldlaufer, Midgely, & Eccles, 1988). Feldlaufer et al. collected observer perceptions of elementary classrooms and junior high classrooms. They found that students were in an environment that was less cognitively demanding, offered fewer opportunities for collaboration, and promoted social comparisons. According to Perlstein (2003), “Middle school, many educators thought, simply needed to be a place to do no harm, just get those crazy kids through” (p. 118). Additionally, later studies on middle schools revealed that children experienced the

physical and emotional challenge of puberty while entering into an environment that is typically less supportive, more diverse, and more performance-based than the elementary school setting (Deemer et al., 2003; Eccles, et al., 1993; Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995). Supporters of the middle school model agreed that the learning environment changed significantly after students moved from an elementary setting to a middle school setting, and they advocated for a change in practices that would provide appropriate support for the middle level learner.

Eccles, et al. (1993) emphasized six general characteristics of classrooms occupied by middle level students compared to classrooms occupied by elementary school students. First, the researchers characterized these environments as having a higher locus of control with the teacher, and fewer opportunities for student empowerment. Second, the teacher and student interactions are less friendly at the middle level than the elementary level classroom. Third, the middle level classrooms tended to focus on whole-class activities that lent itself to an increase in social comparisons, concerns about evaluation, and competitiveness. Fourth, middle level teachers felt less effective in helping their students learn. Fifth, the classwork during the first year of transition typically required a lower cognitive function. Finally, teachers tended to use stricter and tougher grading criteria that led to a decline in grades, and therefore a decline in student motivation. Eccles, et al. laid out the aforementioned six traits to illustrate the challenges students face as they transitioned from an elementary environment to a typical middle level environment. The researchers viewed these characteristics as generally harmful to early adolescent children.

The concerns that Eccles, et al. (1993) outlined in their research were echoed by the leadership of the Cleveland school district in the mid 2000s. After taking over the Cleveland

school district as CEO, Barbara Byrd-Bennett encouraged the system to launch a K-8 restructuring campaign. The premise behind the effort to change 21 of its 80 K-5 elementary schools into K-8 schools was based on the theories discussed in Eccles et al. (1991), Eccles et al., (1993), and Simmons et al. (1987). Poncelet and Metis (2004) wrote, “It is challenging enough for adolescents to grapple with the normative changes, without adults adding additional stressful events, such as a major change in environmental context” (p, 83). The Cleveland district was unsatisfied with the results of the middle school structure, and they decided the best option would be to shift to a K-8 model. The Poncelet and Metis research found an advantage for students in sixth grade that attended K-8 schools when compared with sixth grade students attending middle schools. However, the research conducted by Poncelet and Metis was conducted early in the reform process. Research evaluating the effectiveness of the Cleveland grade configuration reform was unavailable.

Stage-environment fit theory. Eccles, et al. (1993) suggested a mismatch between the needs of the developing adolescent students and a lack of support in the school environments that typically serve the early adolescent students contributed to declines in student achievement. Simons-Morton and Crump (2003) stated:

The poor fit between the middle school environment, characterized by an emphasis on rules, control, and discipline, and early adolescents’ development stage, including their need to experiment with and assert their individuality, can undermine adjustment to school and academic engagement. (p. 121)

Researchers suggested that the combination of a student entering puberty while they are transitioning into the generally more negative environment of middle school contributed to a

decline in school motivation (Eccles et al., 1991). However, Eccles et al. (1991) ultimately concluded that the timing of neither the change nor the transition itself determined a positive or negative student outcome. Rather, it was the nature of the environment itself that mattered. Their research showed that students moving to a more supportive positive environment, even during the middle school years, would provide a positive educational outcome. Conversely, a change to a less supportive school environment combined with puberty led to lower student outcomes.

Deemer et al. (2003) used questionnaires and follow-up in-depth interviewing techniques to investigate the perceptions of students regarding their learning environments as they transitioned from elementary to middle school. They used a form of convergent research by starting with questionnaires and a large sample and then narrowing their focus to a small sample of students they chose to interview. The students provided data during the school year before the transition, and during the year following the transition to middle school. Students reported that the schoolwork was more difficult in middle school, they liked their elementary teachers better, and they did not feel as supported in the classroom. Students also reported a higher rate of bullying in the middle school and difficulty with making friends. The middle school environment, as reported in this study, did not match the needs of the students. Moving from a junior high model to a middle school model did not show advantages in providing a more supportive environment to match the needs of middle level learners.

Identity formation theory. The time period between elementary school and middle school also involves the process of forming an identity for students. The formation of an identity is the discovery of how an individual relates to the larger social context (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). Perlstein (2003) wrote, “Children start to fix their values and figure out who they are

independent of their families” (p.5). Perlstein also wrote that children start the self-determination of where they align athletically, academically, and socially. Children struggle to form identities in these various domains while their bodies and brains are developing at the most rapid pace since their two-year old phase.

The convergence of identity formation at a time of rapid growth during the middle school years provided researchers with an abundance of research possibilities. Flum and Kaplan (2012) examined studies on the interplay of an individual student in an educational context and how the individual influences the educational context, and conversely how the educational context influences the individual. Flum and Kaplan wrote, “Experiences during adolescence, particularly in the social contexts such as schools, carry pivotal meaning in people’s lives, among other reasons, because of adolescent’ emerging cognitive capacity, which, in turn, elevates their self-reflection ability and develops in tandem with identity” (p. 241). The researchers constructed their theory on the work of Erik Erikson’s theories on the formation of identity. Flum and Kaplan concluded, “Identity work, we are convinced, is an educational necessity that should be adjusted to the individuals and the context of the educational setting” (p. 244).

The key concept repeatedly mentioned by researchers is the social aspect of identity development (Flum & Kaplan, 2012; Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Perlstein, 2003; Yannick, Caudroit, Boiche, & Sarrazin, 2010). The adolescent process of identity formation requires children to interact with other students and adults to test their previously held assumptions. Klimstra et al. (2010) found that the formation of identity during this period is relatively stable, but does progress in developmental intervals. It is the constant

interaction with others and the resulting feedback loop that is crucial in the solidification of identity through the rapid growth period of adolescence.

The social aspect of identity formation emphasizes the relational needs of middle school students. The importance of supportive relationships during the adolescent developmental phase led the Search Institute (2014) to publish a framework for development relationships. The framework calls for caring adults that express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities. The Search Institute contended that the relationships between adults and children had a positive impact on students. This framework is supported by the research outlined in Klimstra et al. (2010), Yannick et al. (2010), and Flum and Kaplan (2012). Children of adolescent age were shown to require developmentally appropriate adult relationships.

Transitions

While there has been research on a change in the learning environment when students move from an elementary school to a middle school, researchers have looked at the impact of the transition itself. A body of research was examined studying the impact of transitions on student outcomes when they transition from one school building to the next. Researchers have found that transitions had a significant impact on student learning (Anderson, 2012; Coladarci & Hancock, 2002; Combs, et al. 2011; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwerdt & West, 2011) and social-emotional outcomes when students transition from one school to the next. Schwerdt and West (2011) studied data from Florida and found that the learning loss realized in the transition from elementary to middle school had a lingering impact on student outcomes in the 10th grade. Combs, et al. (2011) studied reading and math outcomes of fifth grade students in K-5 settings

and fifth grade students in intermediated schools containing only fifth grade, and intermediate schools containing both fifth and sixth grades. Combs, et al. reported that fifth grade students in the elementary setting performed significantly higher on assessments than their counterparts in an intermediate setting. The direct cause of the lower performance of fifth graders in an intermediate setting could not be linked in the research. The transition from one school to the next had an overall negative impact on students, but the specific causes were not identified in either of the studies.

Many of the studies on transition examined the data as a whole without significant disaggregation. Studying the data as a whole could have led to different outcomes in the research. For example, Offenbergl (2001) studied schools in Philadelphia as a whole without significant disaggregation and found that academic performance in K-8 schools was superior to middle schools when the data was compared by the institutional whole. However, when Weiss and Kipnes (2006) disaggregated the data and took into account the socio-economic status of the students, they did not find significant differences in the performance between configurations. Deemer et al. (2003) reported that only 20% of the students in their study struggled with the transition to middle school, and those 20% were students who showed signs of academic risk. Deemer et al. found that the transition for students-at-risk had a compounding effect. Deemer et al. surmised that the compounding factor of students-at-risk might have explained differences in how transitions impact students on an institutional level.

Anderson (2012) studied a single school district in an attempt to determine the impact of transitions on students' sense of belonging, and academic impact. Anderson used interviews of school counselors and principals, surveys of parents and students, and focus groups of teachers to

gather the appropriate data in answering her research questions. Anderson discovered that students did not necessarily feel they did not have a connection to the school, but parents felt their children did not have great connections with the school after they experienced a transition. Parents reported that the time spent in one school did not allow for the development of strong relationships with staff members.

Akos (2002) conducted research on student perceptions of the transition to middle school using four phases of writing samples and questionnaires. Akos had students write down concerns about middle school in phase one and then used those concerns to further investigate student concerns in the second phase. Open-ended questions were developed to investigate students' feelings toward the middle school transition on the questionnaires in the phases two, three, and four of the research. Phase one and two were completed before the transition to middle school and the third and fourth phases were completed after the transition. The responses of the open-ended questions were then analyzed for qualitative themes concerning the transition. Akos found that students were most concerned about rules and procedures, and they were concerned about their safety regarding older students or bullies. After transitioning the students reported that getting lost, knowing the rules, and developing friendships were the most difficult aspects of the transition. This study was limited because the sample was from one school district.

Cumulative Stress Theory. Cumulative stress theory is one explanation offered to explain the impact of transition on some students. Cumulative stress theory is the accumulation of stressors on a person during a short period of time (Eccles et al., 1991; Simmons et al., 1987). The adolescent child proved to have more difficulty coping with a change from one school to the

next when multiple stressors occurred within a relatively short period of time. Simmons et. al. (1987), studied the impact of multiple stressors on adolescent children. In particular, the researchers were concerned about children's ability to cope with the stress of transitioning from the elementary school setting to the middle school setting while trying to manage typical adolescent life changes.

Simmons et al. (1987) studied the relationship between the possibility of up to five life stressors and the impact of those stressors on self-esteem, extracurricular participation, and GPA. The five stressors used as variables in this research were, transitioning to junior high school (middle school), the onset of puberty, dating, family disruptions, and geographic mobility. The researchers tried to determine if the change from elementary school to middle school, or junior high in this case, had a greater impact on student outcomes when combined with other life stressors. Students in this research project that had zero life stressors would be students that attended a K-8 school and did not have any other major life transitions during the time of the study. The researchers found that indeed children that experienced multiple transitions showed a greater decline in student outcomes. Students that experienced no life transitions had the greatest outcomes, and those students that experienced up to four of the possible five transitions had the poorest outcomes. This research is in line with Deemer, et al. (2003) which found that approximately 20% of students struggle with the transition from elementary school to middle school, and of those 20%, 100% were categorized with low socio- economic status. Students facing four major life stressors showed a significant decline in self-esteem, GPA, and participation in extra-curricular activities. The implications of the research done by Simmons et al. concluded that educators should take steps to limit the number of life transitions experienced

by adolescents during a short period of time. Supporters of K-8 schools have used this research to make a case for their model of choice.

Parental Involvement in School

Benefits for students. It is a commonly held premise that parental participation in their child's school leads to better outcomes for students, and there has been a large body of research surrounding methods of improving parental involvement in schools (Adams & Forsythe, 2007; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Rutherford, 1993; Williams, 1998). Student outcomes such as positive student attitudes toward school, increased attendance, increased self-esteem, increased motivation, higher grade-point averages, and higher test scores have been attributed to parental involvement (Hill & Tyson 2009; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). For example, Xu, Kushner Benson, Mudrey-Camino, and Steiner (2010) found that parental involvement in school had a significant impact on reading achievement, and an impact on a students' self-regulated learning at the fifth grade level. They found that the reading scores of fifth grade students were positively impacted when parents were more involved in school activities and communicating with teachers and administrators. Parental involvement with school increases positive outcomes for students.

Freytag (2001) stated, "Students whose parents are actively involved in their education complete their homework more regularly, score better on classroom tests and demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school than students whose parent are less involved" (p. 3). Williams (1998) reported similar finding when she found that parent expectations of students, and parent satisfaction with school consistently showed a positive impact. Freytag surveyed 86 parents of middle school students and analyzed the responses. The researchers reported that parents viewed

themselves as having an important role in their child's educational process, they wanted teachers to follow through with expected communication, and they wanted teachers to communicate in such a way that teachers demonstrated personal knowledge of their children. Parents wanted to feel welcomed and involved in the educational process of their children. Parental involvement boosted student outcomes in this study, but no link was made to grade configuration.

Perlstein (2003) also emphasized the importance of parents being directly involved in the lives of their children. Perlstein interviewed and observed students in a middle school setting for an extended period of time. She reported that the students realized the importance of parental involvement, and they craved the attention of their parents. Parents instinctively knew that their children needed their time and attention, but were often unable or unwilling to give it to them.

Simons-Morton and Crump (2003) studied the impact of parental involvement related to students' ability to adjust to the middle school setting. They surveyed sixth grade students at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the year to determine how students adjusted to the middle school after transitioning from elementary school. They found that students whose parents were more involved showed higher scores on school engagement and adjustment. Once again proper parental involvement showed a positive link to student outcomes.

Motivations for involvement. There was a myriad of motivators, as well as, barriers impacting parental involvement with a child's education reported across several studies (Griffith, 1998; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Parents have prior experiences with schools that may impact how they view their role interacting with schools, or they may feel intimidated by the more impersonal environment of a typical middle school (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Griffith (1998) examined the physical and social environments of schools and the relationship to

parental participation. The purpose of Griffith's study was to look at possible motivations or barriers for parent involvement so schools could search for interventions to improve parent involvement.

Griffith (1998) showed that the parents being informed of their child's education and the school's communication of student achievement was not related to parent involvement. The quality of academic instruction and overall parent satisfaction did not have an impact on parental involvement. On the other hand, parents who were more involved in their school showed a better perception of school safety and overall school climate. Goldring and Shapira (1993) also reported that increased parental involvement led to greater parent satisfaction. Griffith (1997) claimed, "Parent and student satisfaction with the school itself can serve as an important indicator of a successful school" (p. 139). Griffith and Goldring and Shapira (1993) concluded that schools more open to parent involvement lead to greater satisfaction of parents.

The three characteristics predicting school involvement were the parents' racial identification, the parents' educational expectations, and parent perceptions of school empowerment (Griffith, 1998). Parents with a racial background different from the majority of school leaders, or a majority of the other school stakeholders did not feel as comfortable participating in school related activities. Schools that made an effort to create activities for parental participation, and then made the parents feel welcome in the school, had more success in getting parents involved. Parents who were directly invited to participate and were given a legitimate role in decision-making had a higher tendency to participate (Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Parents became involved when they felt welcomed, but they also got involved if they felt the school was not communicating well. An assumption

was made that parents became more involved if they felt the school was not living up to their expectations.

Parents with higher educational expectations were also more likely to get involved in the school (Rutherford, 1993). Griffith (1998) found that as a parent's education increased, so did their involvement in the education of their students. Griffith implied that parents felt more empowered if their educational level was on par with educators.

In addition, researchers looked at the declining parental involvement in school as their children aged through the system (Griffith, 1998; Rutherford, 1993). Griffith reported that this may have been in part due to the parents' understanding that children needed to become more independent as they matured, or it may have been due to an increase in the difficulty and complexity of the schoolwork. Griffith (1998) wrote that parents might become intimidated as the work becomes more difficult. Parents also become less involved in school during the transition from an elementary school to a middle school (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

Impact of configuration on parent participation. Parental involvement with schools tends to decline when a typical transition from an elementary school to a middle school occurs. Researchers have attributed the decline to a transition from a more intimate environment to a more intimidating environment at the middle school level. Rutherford, (1993) pointed out that the more impersonal nature of the larger middle schools could intimidate parents, and impede parental involvement. Connolly, et al. (2002) surveyed parents in the Baltimore School District and showed that parents reported higher satisfaction scores when their children attended K-8 schools than when their children attended middle schools. Parents in the Cincinnati, Milwaukee,

and Oklahoma City school systems were also reported to show dissatisfaction with the middle school model. Parent dissatisfaction was one factor used by school leaders to advocate for a change in configuration to a K-8 model (Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability, 2005; Patton, 2005).

Deemer et al. (2003) reported that parents were not heavily involved in their children's education in sixth grade before the transition to middle school, and they were similarly uninvolved after the transition to seventh grade when they moved to the middle school. The Deemer et al. study was unable to draw any conclusions on the impact of a transition on parent involvement. Foley-Demby (2013) however, was able to make a connection between K-8 schools and parent participation when she studied six schools in Texas. She concluded that the K-8 model had a positive impact on parental participation.

There are additional factors influencing parent participation outside the area of configuration. Adams and Forsythe (2007) added:

Size, grade configuration, and student characteristics influence parent-school interactions, our findings suggest that the negative effects of these conditions can be mitigated by the manner in which rules, regulations, and control structures guide the interactions among agents and between agentive sectors (i.e. teachers, administrators, parents, central administration). (p. 21)

There are many factors influencing parent participation.

Another theory developed by Coleman (1985) was the idea that increasing school size and narrowing the grade span of schools had a detrimental impact on the community that was served by the school. Coleman also cited desegregation and school consolidation as having a

negative impact on the school community. Coleman wrote, “The overall impact of these changes... has been to destroy the networks of relations that once existed in geographic neighborhoods and linked these neighborhoods to the schools within them” (p. 531). Coleman observed that having parents interact with each other enough to set clear community norms was important for the success of students. Parents needed to interact enough to at least know what was considered acceptable to the larger group. These interactions helped develop behavioral norms for students.

There were many reported potential influences on parent interaction with schools, but grade configuration was not noted in the literature as a significant influence. Coleman (1985) was the only researcher found to directly link configuration to parental interactions.

School Size

One additional factor in comparing the K-8 configuration to the middle school configuration is school size, and the related factor of a smaller number of students at each grade level. K-8 schools tend to be smaller schools with fewer students in each grade level (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993). Researchers have observed that the smaller size allows students to have greater interaction with teachers, and it allows for a smaller social environment to manage (Bickel, Howley, Williams, & Glascock, 2001; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Howley, 1995; Offenber, 2001).

Student Outcomes and Configuration

Academic. Studies have shown lower academic outcomes for students after they experienced a transition from one school to another. In other words, students in a K-8 model with no building transitions showed greater academic success than those students attending a

middle school after elementary school (Renchler, 2002). Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia public school students attending K-8 schools showed higher standardized test scores when compared to students attending middle schools (Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability, 2005). Patton (2005) reported that students attending K-8 schools in Denver showed better math and reading scores than students attending middle schools.

After the decision to transition schools into a K-8 model, the Cleveland school district hired Metis Associates, a team of researchers from New York, to conduct a study on the effectiveness of the K-8 model. Metis Associates conducted case studies of two elementary schools as they transitioned into K-8 models, and they also conducted further analysis on the academic impacts of the K-8 model vs. the middle school model. They compared the test results in reading and math of sixth grade students attending K-8 schools, and those attending 6-8 middle schools. The findings indicated that students avoiding the transition to a separate middle school had a statistically significant advantage in reading and math performance. However, their research did not determine direct cause and effect of the K-8 model. Nor did their research determine any long-term gains associated with the K-8 model (Poncelet & Metis, 2004).

Connolly et al. (2002) compared seventh grade standardized scores in reading, writing, and math of students in Baltimore City Schools, and they reported a significant achievement advantage in all three subjects for students attending a K-8 school.

Offenberg (2001) studied the standardized test scores of students in the Philadelphia school district and found that students attending K-8 schools showed significantly better test scores than students attending middle school configurations. Offenberg examined the growth over time of the students and found that the performance gap between K-8 schools and middle

schools increased as students progressed through the middle grades. Offenberg also included the scores of 9th grade students in the study to determine if the gains made in K-8 were sustained in high school. He found that indeed the gains posted by students attending K-8 schools continued into high school. The Offenberg research compared institutional differences, and did not take into account individual school or student performance. There were individual middle schools in his study that out-performed K-8 schools. Offenberg concluded that the appropriate learning environment might be easier to implement in a K-8 setting, but it was not impossible to implement in a middle school.

Schwerdt and West (2011) studied longitudinal test scores of students in Florida from grades 3 through 10 and they compared students attending middle schools to students attending K-8 schools. Schwerdt and West determined that students entered middle school with a stronger academic trajectory than those entering K-8 schools, but after attending middle school the academic achievement scores dropped significantly. They found that the transition into the middle school adversely impacted students, and those students carried the lower achievement through high school. In comparison, students transitioning to high school also showed a dip in scores, but the lower achievement was eliminated after a time period.

The results shown by Schwerdt and West (2011) aligned with the results that Alspaugh (1998) produced using longitudinal assessment data. Alspaugh compared schools in Missouri and concluded that students in K-8 have greater achievement through eighth grade, and attendance in K-8 schools mitigated the negative impact of the high school transition. The negative impact of the high school transition was great for those students that attended a middle school. Alspaugh concluded that the middle school did not assist students in the high school

transition. Wren (2003) also conducted similar research to Alspaugh, but researched a sample using an urban setting. Wren produced results that aligned with Alspaugh showing that as grade span increased, student achievement increased.

Jacob and Rockoff (2011) took the results from Schwerdt and West (2011), and Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) a step further and determined a cost/benefit for school districts reconfiguring their schools from a middle school to K-8 schools. Jacob and Rockoff (2011) reported an increase of \$10,000 per student in lifetime earnings due to attendance in a K-8 school verses a middle school. They then examined the conversion cost experience in New York and Denver to arrive at a 40-to-1 benefit to cost ratio. Jacob and Rockoff pointed out that costs could vary significantly between school districts, but the benefit of a K-8 model was significant according to their analysis.

Byrnes and Ruby (2007) analyzed the test results of over 40,000 seventh grade students from 95 schools over the course of five years and found that students attending K-8 schools outperformed those students attending middle schools. However, the authors again cautioned against using the information to make drastic changes in programming. The effect size of housing students in the K-8 configuration in this study was relatively small compared to other potential reforms.

Johnson, Jones, Simieou, Matthew, and Morgan (2011) used fifth grade science scores in Texas to determine if fifth grade students performed better in an elementary setting or an intermediate school setting containing only fifth and sixth grade. They found that fifth grade students that did not transition to an intermediate school after fourth grade consistently scored higher than fifth grade students transitioning to an intermediate school after fourth grade. The

authors did not draw any conclusions on the cause of a difference in test scores between the two groups. They also cautioned that variability between individual students was significant in each setting. They cautioned against generalizing the results. Similarly, Schafer (2010) used the scores of sixth grade students in Florida and found that the sixth grade students housed in elementary schools outperformed their counterparts attending a middle school.

Anderman (1998) studied the impact of configuration on students with learning disabilities. Anderman reported that students with learning disabilities who did not experience a transition before seventh grade performed better on math and science tests.

Contrary to the previously mentioned studies, Dove, Pearson, and Hooper (2010) did not find any statistical differences between configurations when examining the academic achievement of all sixth grade students in Arkansas. Dove et al. compared all students and all grade configurations, and did not find any statistical differences. In addition, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) studied data from Philadelphia schools and were unable to report any conclusive evidence of an academic benefit for students attending a K-8 school.

Attendance. When Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) studied New York City schools, they found that students attending middle schools missed 2 more days of school per year than students attending K-8 schools. Similarly, Schwerdt and West, (2011) studied students in Florida who entered middle school in sixth grade and students that entered in seventh grade. The students entering middle school at the sixth grade were found to increase absences by an average of one day per year. Those students entering middle school at the seventh grade had a negligible increase in absences. Schwerdt and West (2011) reported the attendance rates, but they added that the attendance rates in their study was not linked to student outcomes. Finally, Franklin and

Glascoek (1996) studied all schools in Louisiana and reported that sixth and seventh grade students housed in an elementary or K-12 setting had better attendance percentages than sixth and seventh grade students housed in a middle school or secondary setting. The grade configuration was linked to an increase in student absence rates in the three studies mentioned, but the corresponding relationship to student achievement and attendance was not connected.

Self-esteem. Eccles et al. (1993) reported, “The early adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral for some individuals, a spiral that leads some adolescents to academic failure and school dropout” (p. 90). The drop in self-esteem or self-concepts is linked to negative motivational and behavioral outcomes for students. Eccles et al. focused on the developmental stage of the early adolescent, and how the classroom environments met the needs of students in this stage. Eccles et al. were concerned that classrooms serving early adolescent students did not meet the psychological needs of the students they served, and therefore contributed to a decrease in self-esteem.

Students entering puberty are developing physically, mentally, socially, and sexually at a very rapid pace. Students at this stage begin to desire more autonomy in all areas of their life, and this desire sometimes is in conflict with adult control over their lives (Dickinson, 2001). The social awareness of students at the early adolescent stage also leads to more social comparisons between students, thus further risking an erosion of a positive self-concept in some students (Eccles et al. 1993). This rapidly changing time period can be difficult for some students to manage, and it leads to further decline in students’ self-concepts resulting in a decline in student outcomes (Dickinson, 2001; Simmons et al., 1987).

Eccles et al. (1993), focused on the school environment and how it related to self-esteem, but they did not focus on the impact a specific grade configuration would have on self-esteem. Simmons et al. (1987) focused their research more specifically on comparing the impact of students transitioning from an elementary school to a middle school during the early adolescent years. They compared students who transitioned to students who did not transition during this time period, and found that students holding off on the transition from elementary school to secondary school until grade 9 tended to score higher in self-esteem and other outcomes.

Weiss and Kipnes (2006) reported evidence of a lower self-esteem in students who attended a middle school verses students that attended a K-8 model. They also found that students reported an increase in threatening behavior in the middle school environment. The increase in threatening behavior aligns with the student responses in Akos (2002) where students reported bullying as a major concern. The findings matched the previous research of Feldlaufer et al. (1988) who found that students' self-esteem and self-concept dropped after the transition to middle school, especially for girls.

Discipline. Cook et al. (2008) showed that sixth grade students in North Carolina were twice as likely to receive a discipline referral if they were housed in a middle school compared to an elementary setting. The greater likelihood of discipline interactions continued on through 9th grade for those students. The authors also pointed out that there may be a variety of causes for this difference. The authors did not draw any definitive answers explaining the reason behind the increase in discipline referrals, but they did list possible explanations for the results. For example, discipline is subjective and may be handled differently by middle school teachers and

principals. They also surmised that the older children were a negative influence on the younger children.

Anecdotal. Two studies listed positive and negative anecdotal outcomes for students attending a K-8 school with no transitions. Anderson (2012) and Connolly et al. (2002) included responses from their data collection on positive and negative implications for grade configuration. On the positive side, K-8 supporters touted the benefits of having older students in the building as role models for the younger students; conversely, parents also reported concern that older students could have a negative influence on the younger children. Staff members reported the ability to develop deeper relationships with families over a longer period of time. Pardini (2002) also reported that one of the main reasons for the Cincinnati shift from middle schools to K-8 schools stemmed from parental dissatisfaction with middle schools. Parents in Cincinnati schools were leaving the system when their children entered the middle school age citing discipline problems, attendance issues, and poor academic achievement. In addition, Patton (2005) reported that Denver and Milwaukee schools reached out to parents to determine why they were not sending their children to public schools after finishing the elementary program. The school officials in those two districts had a general idea that parents were not comfortable sending their children to larger middle schools.

Conversely, parents shared concerns about the limitations of the K-8 model in offering rigorous and varied academic programming. Supporters of the middle school model claimed that housing a more narrow age range of student allowed for more specialization of instruction and support programs for the adolescent child (Connolly et al., 2002). Connolly et al. supported this anecdotal claim when they found that students in middle schools had greater access to Algebra I

courses and Foreign Language courses. Supporters of the middle school model also report a fear that housing middle school-aged children with younger children will lead to increased bullying and negative influences (Patton, 2005).

Research Summary

The review of literature showed that K-8 schools tend to have higher student outcomes than middle schools, students are negatively impacted by transitions from one building to another, and the middle school learning environment does not always match the needs of students. However, it was noted in the research that most studies do not account for the individual differences in students and many studies did not account for individual differences from one school to another of similar configuration. In addition, proper parental involvement was crucial for student success, but there was very little research examining the impact that grade configuration might have on parent engagement with schools.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Structure

This study was a qualitative comparative case study using data gathered from interviews of two groups of parents; one set of parents who have had children attending a K-8 school, and one set of parents who have had children attending an elementary school before transitioning to a middle school, or what was sometimes referred to as grade level centers. This study revealed the potential strengths and weaknesses of each grade configuration, revealed the potential impact of configuration on children from parents' perspectives, and examined the potential differences between the experiences of students and parents from parents' perspectives, and determined if a difference in parent satisfaction between the two school configurations existed.

Interviews were used to investigate the perceptions of parents whose children attend two different configurations. The review of the literature suggested that parent perceptions of school could be used as a strong predictor of successful organizations (Griffith, 1997). Parents who were involved with their children and had some interaction with the school have a good sense of how well the school was performing. The parents also had first-hand knowledge of the potential impact of grade configuration on their child. The survey results reported in Anderson (2012) provided parent perspectives using survey questions with the option of open-ended responses. The in-depth interviews used in this research added depth and context to the information reported by Anderson (2012), Akos (2002), and Griffith (1998). Parents were interviewed to elicit their perspectives on the impact that grade configuration had on their own experiences, their child's experiences, and their overall satisfaction of their school.

Interview questions were developed to assist in answering the research questions. Mason (2002) suggested using intellectual puzzles to assist in the formation of research questions. A comparative puzzle (pp. 18-19) was used in this study to help form the questions. The experiences of a group of people in two separate educational settings were compiled and then compared. The research questions and interview questions were mapped in Table 1. The purpose of using the matrix to map the interview questions was to make sure that the interview questions were sufficient to answer the research questions. The following research questions were developed to help guide this study:

1. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a student attend the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade?
2. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a student attend an elementary school and then a separate middle school?
3. How has the transition from elementary school to middle school impacted children's educational experiences?
4. How does the overall school satisfaction of parents whose children have experienced a K-8 model compare to overall school satisfaction of parents whose children have experienced a K-5, 6-8 model?
5. Is there a difference in participation with parents whose children have experienced a K-8 model compared to the participation of parents whose children have experienced a K-5, 6-8 model?

Table 1

Interview question and research question matrix

Interview Questions	Q. 1	Q. 2	Q. 3	Q. 4	Q. 5	Q. 6	Q. 7	Q. 8	Q.9	Q. 10
Research Q. 1	X									X
Research Q. 2		X								X
Research Q. 3			X	X	X					X
Research Q. 4					X	X	X	X	X	X
Research Q. 5			X		X					X

Subjects of the Study

There were seven sets of parents interviewed from a K-5, 6-8 configuration and six sets of parents interviewed from a K-8 configuration. Five of the six sets of parents from School A were interviewed as a couple; the remainder of the interviews from both schools were conducted with the mother. All of the parents participating in this research had at least one child attend the school from kindergarten through the seventh grade. Purposeful sampling was used to select two school sites and participants from the two schools. Purposeful sampling assisted the researcher in accumulating rich data from sources relevant to the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003). Purposeful sampling helped eliminate as many variables as possible, although not all the variables between the two sets of parents could possibly be eliminated as was previously discussed in the “limitations” section of this study. The two schools chosen for this study reflected similar demographics, similar communities, and similar academic achievement.

Eliminating as many variables as possible assisted the researcher in linking the discussion directly to the research questions. The two schools chosen were located in the suburbs of a large midwestern city. The two participating schools were chosen based on information gathered from the State Report Card (2015). Both of the schools used in this study were located in neighboring communities that fed into the same high school. Both schools were considered high in academic achievement.

Parents from School A represented a grade level center configuration of four neighborhood elementary schools feeding into one middle school of 960 students. The four elementary schools ranged in size of approximately 250 students to 550 students. The average attendance rate was 96%, the low-income rate was 5%, the English Language Learners made up 2% of the population, and the student mobility rate was 2%. School A was a very high performing school in a predominately white, upper-middle class community.

Parents from School B represented a K-8 configuration. Students in School B attended the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade. A middle school model was employed in grades 6-8 within the same building, and the district started gradually transitioning to a middle school model in fifth grade. The K-8 building contained 794 students. The average attendance rate was 96%, the low-income rate was 0%, the English Language Learners made up 5% of the population, and the student mobility rate was 6%. Just like School A, School B was a very high performing school in a predominately white, upper-middle class community.

Parents were invited to participate in the research by an invitation from the administration of each district. Purposeful sampling assisted the researcher in obtaining quality data relevant to the research topic. The superintendent of each district invited eight or more parents that he/she

thought would be able to provide articulate feedback on their own experiences within the school district, and their child's experiences in the school district. An assumption was made that the parents would be involved enough in the school for the administration to be familiar with them. The parents had children attending schools in the district from kindergarten to at least seventh grade. The purpose of choosing parents with a child in at least the seventh or seventh grade was to capture the entire school experience from parents' perspectives.

Overall permission to carry out the study was obtained from the administration according to the individual district procedures. Permission to use interview data was obtained from each individual after an explanation of the process. Per Bogdan and Biklen (2003), it is important for researchers to inform the participants of the purpose of the study and to protect them from any possible harm. There was a script used at the beginning of each interview to explain the purpose of the study, the procedures for confidentiality and protection of the subjects, and procedures for maintaining data security.

Data Gathering Procedures

The data gathering process consisted of interviewing parents using eight open-ended questions. The eight questions are located in Appendix A. The interviews were conducted with individual family groups. In some cases it was only one parent, and in other cases it was both parents of the family group interviewing at the same time. For the purpose of this study, each interview session was considered a unit. The interviews were recorded for the purpose of transcribing and coding at a later time. Recording the interviews allowed the interviewer to focus on the interview process and not on any interpretation during the interview. The interview data was then coded into thematic strands.

A guided interview approach was used (Berry, 1999). The interviews followed a series of pre-determined questions, and follow-up questions were asked during the interview to increase understanding of participants' responses as recommended by Mason (2002), Berry (1999) and Bogdan and Biklen (2003). There was a script used at the beginning of each interview that explained the purpose of the research, protection of the participants, and confidentiality of the responses. The aforementioned researchers emphasized the importance of developing rapport with the interviewees in order to increase their comfort level and encourage dialogue to generate the most authentic information. The interviewer attempted to develop a free-flowing conversation that enhanced rapport with the interviewees and generated the data that highlighted the nuanced perceptions parents had surrounding grade configurations.

The interview questions were piloted with two parents unrelated to this study before attempting to interview the subjects of this study. Piloting the interview questions and interview process allowed the researcher to adjust the wording of the questions in an attempt to maintain a steady conversational flow during the actual interviews.

The interviews were digitally recorded to enhance the efficiency of the transcribing and decoding process (Mitchell, Peterson & Kaya, 2004; Tessier, 2012), and they were conducted in line with Bethel IRB procedures. Data gathered from interviews was transcribed using computer aided data analysis as recommended by Mason (2002) who suggested using software that enhances the ability of researchers to examine their data (p. 52). Using a digital recorder to record the interviews, and then creating transcripts based on the recording, allowed the researcher to have the most accurate picture of the interview (Tessier, 2012). A digital recording device was used in conjunction with the *REV* application. The *REV* application allowed the

researcher to send the recording to a third party for transcription. The transcripts created from the interviews, and the corresponding field notes taken during the interviews were viewed as the data to be analyzed.

The literature reviewed for this study suggested that overall satisfaction of parents could be measured by determining how parents answer questions regarding the enthusiasm of their children toward school, whether their children are receiving a strong education, and whether or not they would recommend this school to other parents (Griffith, 1997). Griffith used Likert type scaled questionnaires to measure the responses of parents. For the purpose of this study, the interview questions helped direct parents to offer a more in-depth picture of the experience of their children in school. The language that parents use in describing their child's experience in school was analyzed, coded, and compared to determine a discernible difference in how parents of K-8 students responded, and parents of the K-5, 6-8 students responded.

Data Management

The data gathered from interviews was sent to a third party for transcription. The researcher ensured that the third party service had a policy for confidentiality and data security. In addition, the researcher removed personally identifiable information from the transcripts after the transcripts were created. Only the transcripts "cleaned" of any personally identifiable information was saved. The transcript data was housed with the third party service only during the duration of this study. The researcher requested that the transcript data be eliminated from the third party database at the end of the research period. Final transcript copies were stored in a hard copy format in a locked cabinet with the researcher, and it was stored on a backup hard drive. No personally identifiable information was included in a transcript. The researcher

developed a numeric system to identify each interviewee that was stored separate from the transcript data. The numeric system identifier was the only identifier used when analyzing the data using *MAXQDA*. *MAXQDA* is a data analysis software program that assists the researcher in organizing large amounts of data collected through the interview process. The interview data was imported into the program, and then the data was organized and coded using the tool provided with the software.

Data Analysis

After creating transcripts of the data with integrated field notes, the data collected from parent interviews of School A and School B were coded and analyzed to determine prevailing themes. Inductive coding methods were applied to the data. The data was reviewed with the research questions in mind filtered through the purpose of the research. The researcher used the initial themes of “parent satisfaction”, “student engagement”, “academic experiences”, “parent participation”, “transition experiences”, and “advantages and disadvantages” for each configuration model. The original themes were developed before the initial reading of the interview data. This allowed the data to be understood in the context of the purpose of the study. The coding system was refined as the data was searched for patterns or emerging topics. The emerging ideas or themes were assigned a word or phrase that represents a particular idea. There were a variety of themes that emerged under disadvantages and advantages of each configuration. The preliminary themes of student engagement and academic experiences were eliminated after the initial reading of the data, and were included as sub-codes under advantages and disadvantages of each configuration. In the same manner, there were sub-codes developed under the main themes of transition, parent satisfaction, and parent participation. The sub-codes

under the themes of transition, parent satisfaction, and parent participation were labeled advantage or disadvantage of each configuration. There were additional themes developed under advantages and disadvantages of each grade configuration. Discussion on the themes and sub codes are discussed in further detail in Chapter IV, and the codes and sub-codes developed under advantages and disadvantages are visually represented in Table 5. These words and phrases made up the coding categories that were used to draw conclusions from the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The epistemological categories were then organized into groups and the results were compared between School A and B. The themes emerging from the coding process were used to determine whether specific ideas emerge from parents' descriptions attributable to each grade configuration. A second analyzer, not directly involved in this research, coded one sample of transcripts from each group in order to insure inter-coding reliability. The second coder was given two blank transcripts to code along with the list of developed codes. The second coder then coded the two transcripts using the list of codes developed by the researcher. Inter-coding reliability was achieved by reaching 80% agreement between the researcher and second coder on coding of the two samples.

While the aforementioned approach to data analysis was used to help focus the research on answering the research questions, the researcher kept an open mind as unexpected themes emerged from the data. The emerging themes are discussed in detail in Chapter IV of this research. Qualitative research experts pointed out that plans must be in place in order to conduct research, but flexibility must also be allowed in order to understand the topic to its fullest extent (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Mason, 2002). This approach of responding to the research questions

by using inductive reasoning while analyzing observed data to form conclusions was referred to as grounded theory (Bogdan & Biklen 2003; Jackson & Taylor, 2007; and Mason, 2002). The grounded theory methodology of qualitative research outlined in the previous paragraphs best meets the requirements needed to answer the research questions.

Only parent responses related to the research questions were used for analysis in this study. Comments or points that did not assist the researcher in answering the questions were ignored. All points made by parents related to the research questions were included in the findings. A topic only mentioned by one parent was included in the findings, and it was noted that multiple parents did not mention the topic.

Chapter IV: Results

Overview of Results

As stated in earlier chapters, the purpose of this study was to gain a deeper insight into the advantages and disadvantages of two school grade configurations, and then examine the potential differences of the two school grade configurations from the perspective of parents. A comparative case study was determined to be the type of qualitative research needed to adequately answer the research questions. Interview data was gathered from parents representing two separate and distinctive grade configurations and then the data was analyzed for themes related to the experiences of parents and students and how those experiences related to grade configuration. The findings revealed in this chapter were presented using supporting excerpts from interview transcripts as suggested in Merriam (2009). Merriam suggested that “You need enough to be convincing, but not so much that the reader becomes buried” when writing qualitative findings (p. 248). The topical descriptions were presented with short interview excerpts to support the ideas presented. The descriptive data was arranged by research questions under each case study, and then the two case studies were compared. Chapter IV concluded with a brief synopsis of the results.

The parents participating in this study from both school settings were agreeable to give up their personal time to participate in the study, and they were willing to share about their personal experiences with the schools and the educational experiences of their children. The parents that were interviewed responded to emails in a timely manner, and communicated in writing, and in person with professionalism. When asked, “Would you recommend this school for the children of your friends?”, every parent responded with a positive recommendation for

their school. All the parents interviewed were pleased with their children's education overall. The parents were described as articulate, upper-middle class, and professional. The parents selected for these interviews were very involved in their children's schools and they emphasized the importance of quality education.

There were seven sets of parents interviewed from School A and six sets of parents interviewed from School B. Five of the six sets of parents from School A were interviewed as a couple; the remainder of the interviews from both schools were conducted with the mother. There were no intentions to limit the interviews to one parent, or to ask both parents to participate. Differences in the results due to the effect of having one or both parents participate in the interview were not investigated in this study. The interviews with both parents participating were analyzed as if it were one set of parents. All of the parents participating in this research had at least one child attend the school from kindergarten through the seventh grade. The researcher asked the administration to include participants that had experienced all levels of district participation. Four parents had children who were currently in college, and one parent had a child who was still in pre-school. The 13 family members interviewed represented 37 children ranging in age from two to 21. The number of children in each family ranged from two to four. There were 20 boys and 17 girls in the group.

The following results were presented in a manner that linked the guiding research questions with the interview results. The results from School A were presented in relation to the five research questions, followed by the presentation of the results related to the five research questions of School B, and finally comparisons were drawn and presented between the results of School A and School B. The following research questions were presented in Chapter III, and

they were used to guide the discussion in the presentation of the results for the remainder of Chapter IV

1. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a student attend the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade?
2. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a student attend an elementary school and then a separate middle school?
3. How has the transition from elementary school to middle school impacted children's educational experiences?
4. How does the overall school satisfaction of parents whose children have experienced a K-8 model compare to overall school satisfaction of parents whose children have experienced a K-5, 6-8 model?
5. Is there a difference in participation with parents whose children have experienced a K-8 model compared to the participation of parents whose children have experienced a K-5, 6-8 model?

School A Findings

Research question 1: Advantages and disadvantages of K-8. Parents from School A were asked this question even though they may not have had any children experiencing the K-8 grade configuration. The purpose in asking this question of parents from School A was to help generate ideas using comparing and contrasting from their own experience to what they might guess about another experience. This exercise intended to generate ideas by helping parents think about what the school experience may look like from another perspective. In addition, the reflection on the advantages and disadvantages helped the researcher further refine the parent

responses. Parents tended to reflect on the advantage of the alternate configuration when thinking about the disadvantage of their current experience and vice versa.

Parents from School A reported on the aspects of communication, continuum of services for academic supports, school day schedule, peer modeling, the ability to develop long-term relationships, and student participation in extra-curricular activities as possible advantages of a K-8 model. They then listed negative peer modeling of older students, difficulty in providing individual ability-based programming, and the inability to shake a “label” that is developed at an early grade level as negative aspects of a K-8 configuration. Parents from School A presented their thoughts as anticipating what the K-8 model would provide as advantages and disadvantages since they did not have children attending a K-8 school.

One parent inferred that communication may be a little easier in a K-8, “I would think the communication inside of one school setting from K-8 would be a little bit more conducive ... Would flow a little bit better.” This was the only parent that specifically used the term communication in the responses to this direct question. However, parents when reflecting on other topics discussed the idea of communication in a continuous K-8 model. Parents inferred that a continuum of care for students with special needs might be more consistent in a K-8 building:

I love though, what I personally loved about it was the continuum of care when you've got teachers in the same school that you're not getting a kid completely cold. Yes, each teacher needs to form their own opinion of a child but that if there is something, you can go to a third grade teacher and say, “What happened here or do you have any insight or how did you deal with this?”

The parent perception on the K-8 advantage of the continuum of care for students is closely related to vertical communication structures within the school district. Parents thought it would be easier for communication to occur if the grades were organized K-8 into one building.

Parents also thought that having the same school schedule for multiple children would have been easier, “from the parent perspective, it would be nice to have them all in the same time frame. They go to school at this time; they come back at this time. As a parent, that's easier.” Parents in the K-5, 6-8 model thought that parents of multiple children found it easier to track one location, and one schedule versus multiple schedules.

Another advantage of the K-8 model discussed by parents was positive modeling of older students for younger students. Parents anticipated interactions of older students and younger students, “there are probably some very good lessons that could be done having the older kids with the younger kids”. Parents thought that it was an advantage to have older children in the building that could interact in a positive manner with the younger children in the building. On the other hand, parents also shared concern about the exposure of negative topics from older students to younger students. A parent surmised, “I don't think I would have liked my 6th, 7th, 8th graders to be in the same school as younger kids and I, for sure, would not have liked my kindergartner to be in school with older kids.” She then added, “It was hard enough being on a bus when you're a kindergartner with 5th graders. Lots of things were learned.” Parents noted that modeling from older students was a positive and a negative.

The researcher deduced that students would have a better chance to participate in some extra-curricular activities based on how parents discussed the disadvantage of the K-5, 6-8 model. Parents guessed that fewer students in a grade level meant that there would be a better

chance for some kids to make the team. This idea was deduced by examining the responses surrounding the difficulty of students making a squad at the middle school after participating at the smaller elementary school. One parent said, “You come from a smaller school where everybody makes everything and then you go to a middle school where they have to cut down the numbers, you don't make something.” In a K-8 school the opportunity for participation in a limited activity would not change from elementary to middle school because the number of students in the grade level is constant.

On the other hand, parents reported a limiting factor for providing individual ability-based programming with the smaller cohort of students in a grade level. One parent responded:

I feel that the schools are able to tailor the study towards the children's ability... You have the option of having an advanced course versus just a regular class... it's a little more tailored to student's level and to their specific needs, that's the advantage I feel like academically.

Parents thought the K-8 model had a more limited ability to provide a variety of academic levels, especially in math, since there were fewer students to group in a given grade level.

Finally, parents from School A suggested that there would be more familiarity and deeper long-term relationships with school personnel, and classmates:

They, I'm assuming, would be with the same students. They would be able to put the names to the faces of the teachers that they're going to eventually have. Staff, they're going to know who they are. They're going to be more comfortable going in as opposed to the kids who are leaving, say, the elementary school going in to junior high in sixth grade.

This idea was mentioned the most frequently by parents from School A when talking about advantages of a K-8 model. Spending more time with a smaller cohort of students would lend itself to deeper relationships.

On the contrary, parents also cited long-term relationships with school personnel and classmates as a potential disadvantage of a K-8 school. One parent pointed out, “I think that would be the disadvantage is you're kind of labeled early on and stuck with it.” Another parent said, “the flip side of it where a kid's labeled. ‘Yeah, that kid's a talker, he's non compliant,’ and maybe that would follow him.” Parents were concerned that a child could be labeled early and then stuck with that label throughout their school experience without a chance to have fresh start with a new group of peers and teachers.

Parents from School A listed communication and a continuum of academic support services as a potential positive of the K-8 structure. They also mentioned a single school schedule as a convenience for parents with multiple children. Additionally parents discussed peer modeling and familiarity with the school as both positive and potential negative of having their children attend one building in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Research question 2: Advantages and disadvantages of K-5, 6-8. Parents from School A reported that the advantage of grade level centers is that children had the opportunity learn skills of independence at an earlier age, had a high academic expectation, had opportunities for a greater variety of relationships, had greater academic opportunities for ability grouping, and a strong learning environment with a variety of opportunities for student participation. The disadvantages reported by parents from School A were poor communication after the transition to middle school, a lack of consistent academic support services, limitations for student

participation, navigating new relationships with students and school personnel, and the overall school environment. In some cases parents reported pros and cons when discussing the same topic. Parents were able to articulately share their perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of the configuration that served their children.

One of the most frequently reported advantages of the grade level center model was the opportunity for students to begin their independence at an earlier age. Parents reported that there was an advantage for students to move completely out of the elementary setting and have an opportunity to grow in their independence and maturity as articulated by the following three excerpts of parent responses:

I guess one of the advantages, looking at it from the way that they did it where my kids went where you had the K-5 and then middle school. Maybe an advantage for the kids is that they get to experience that jump in a level of responsibility and having to prove themselves and make their way a little earlier than they might have had to had they not had that, or had they been in a K-8. I don't know. I suppose there's pros and cons to both, but those are the ones that jump out at me.

I think the advantage, first of all, in the transition from the elementary school to the middle school is simply just the maturity, I think. I think they assume that now that they are moving onto a different building, a different location, that there has to be some type of a change that takes place, so there is a greater level of maturity and they're forced to accept that and assume it probably sooner than if they had stayed within the same building, I think.

Advantage wise, I do think that for my kids, it was a step in maturity. They really went from ... I wouldn't say the baby school but they went from not so many privileges to ... then they were given a little more leeway, treated more like they were young adults. They see themselves as getting older. They kind of have a mind set of, you're getting big and you are going to have more responsibilities and your classes are going to be different. This is what's going to happen when you hit high school and college. They kind of see themselves as bigger, as being a bigger kid, as being more responsible, I think.

Parents thought that having kids move from an elementary school to a middle school would give them a chance to be more prepared for the “real world” as adults, and the rigors of high school.

In keeping with a related topic of earlier independence, parents thought the middle school model provided high expectations for academics and behaviors that would better prepare them for high school and college. One parent relayed, “I believe that the quality of teaching is good, so I believe that the kids are well prepared for high school.” Another parent pointed how the middle school helped students by, “Making them feel a little bit more independent, more in control of what they can do as opposed to elementary, where they really don't have a say as far as academics what they can do. It was a good thing. They liked that.” Parents thought that moving to a separate middle school environment helped facilitate a higher academic expectation and more growth in independent behaviors.

Parents reported that another advantage of having a separate middle school that is a little larger was the ability of the school to provide more specialized learning opportunities for students. There was an opportunity for the school to provide a variety of courses for students to

choose from, and to provide a variety of levels to match learning needs. This parent's comment sums it up the sentiment by saying:

Sure. I think in my experience again with the academics, there is definitely an advantage because I feel that the schools are able to tailor the study towards the children's ability.

You have teams. You have the option of having an advanced course versus just a regular class where everyone goes from algebra one to algebra two, you know? That whole idea that it's a little more tailored to student's level and to their specific needs, that's the advantage I feel like academically.

More students in the school in a single grade level created opportunities for the school to differentiate instruction by creating multiple ability level courses.

In addition to academic opportunities, parents reported a variety of opportunities offered for students outside the normal school day. A parent stated, "I do like that, that there are so many opportunities that are offered at [the middle school] for extracurricular activities." The larger middle school allows the school to offer a greater variety of activities for students. On the contrary, parents reported fewer opportunities for some students to participate in the activity of their choice. This was seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage by parents. A parent suggested:

There are limited resources with space and with coaches, but they do not offer enough for kids to do... participate in activities like sports. Most younger kids are interested in sports and sport activities, and the only kids who make the teams are the kids who make every other team in town.

Another parent explained it this way, “When you come from a smaller school where everybody makes everything and then you go to a middle school where they have to cut down the numbers, you don't make something. That was sort of a challenge.” A third parent saw this as an opportunity for students to learn how life works, “As a life lesson, it's a good thing. Everybody can't make the team all the time. It's heartbreaking when it's your kid, but it's a good lesson.” Parents understood that the larger school offered a greater variety of activities while reducing the percentage of students able to participate in activities that allowed a limited number of participants.

The final advantage that parents from School A reported on was the advantage of a fresh start with social group, and an opportunity to make new friends. As was written earlier in this chapter, parents mentioned that a possible advantage of a K-8 school would have been the opportunity to build close friendships with classmates over time. Parents also pointed out that it was an advantage for some students to make a new start with a new set of peers. The response from the following parent sums up the advantages mentioned by four of the parents from School A:

The advantages are that there's a whole new pool of kids for you to meet and get to know, particularly helpful if things aren't going so well with the ones that you had known to that point, which definitely was the case for one of my kids. Going to middle school was, at first it was a little rough before you meet the right people, but once you meet the right people, then life is great. Then really, most of my other two kids really, for the most part, have really kept their friends that they had all through their younger ages, so I had it both ways.

Another parent explained, “Same friends, playing the same games, same teams, things of that nature. I would say between the two I feel that there is more of an advantage with the transition moving from fifth to sixth in another building.” Moving to a new setting with new peer groups provided children with an opportunity to broaden friendships.

Parents also reported their perceptions of the disadvantages of the K-5, 6-8 configuration. Parents from School A repeatedly mentioned communication as one of their biggest frustrations with the system, and nearly all of the frustration focused on the middle school. One parent of the seven interviewed did not mention communication as a frustration. Parents in general reported feeling that they were not invited to be partners in their children’s education once they arrived at the middle school. For example, a parent described a school that did not want to communicate with parents:

I did feel like the administration, stonewalls the parents and they have very canned answers and reasons for why they say no to the different things that are suggested, but they really were not very open to doing a lot of the things that would've been important for the kids and for the parents, I felt.

Another parent shared that, “There should be communication if and when needed and I felt like, the whole time I was at [middle school] I felt like the parents were an inconvenience who were to be endured.” Parents described a school that from their perspective seemed to prefer to operate with little parent interaction, and did not prefer to listen to parent suggestions.

Parents described the type of communication as basic and somewhat unimportant. Parents reported a greater desire for meaningful interaction with the school, and they did not feel that the school was providing opportunities for these types of interactions once children started attending

the middle school. One parent noticed that, “There really wasn’t a lot of communication other than about if there was a curriculum night coming up, or an invitation to an open house, whatever, there’s not a lot of communication.” Another parent relayed, “The communication part, for me, was the most challenging because it’s up to your kid to tell you the information.” A third parent shared that, “Yes. It definitely changed in that there was less frequent communication from the teachers.” She also added the caveat, “However, it was still available. If you reached out, if you wanted to establish more regular communication let’s say, it was an option, so less frequent. Yeah. It did change.” Parents described a shift in communication from the school reaching out directly to parents to having the children and parents become responsible to initiate contact with the school. As stated by one parent, “They definitely left it up to the parents too, to find the information on the website. It was our responsibility to know when things were happening and navigate that.”

Another concern closely related to communication was that parents reported concerns about quality academic support services continuing through the transition from one school to the next. For example, “If a child does have something that you need, which every child does, what I’ve found here there’s precious little communication elementary school to middle school to high school.” There were five of the seven parents interviewed from School A that reported at least one of their children experiencing a struggle academically. The children were either identified through an IEP, 504 plan, or had been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD. Parents reported a need to become a strong advocate for their children, and a need to persistently reach out to the school for help. One parent affirmed, “I never got a call from one teacher, I never got an email, I never got a letter, and I never got anybody who was concerned about him.” Parents thought that the lack

of communication between schools had a negative impact on the academic support provided for their children.

Lastly, when parents from School A spoke of the school environment, they spoke of it from two view points; they talked about the general feeling they had of how they felt when they interacted with the school, and they talked about the experience that their children had in specific situations. Some parents reported that they felt unwelcomed when they entered the building, "It's a very cold atmosphere." Another parent said, "It was very cold, very cold. All of a sudden you're just completely cut off." Again a parent described it as, "It's this isolated island that is just this very very hard experience for both parents and for the students, I think." Other words parents used to describe the atmosphere were, "unchanging", "inflexible", and "rigid". Parents did not feel welcomed to be a part of the middle school experience. A parent described the feeling as the administration saying, "Parents stay away, stay away, stay back. Let them grow up. Let them grow up." Parents consistently mentioned that the middle school could improve the atmosphere by simply utilizing a friendlier response to parents.

Parents would prefer a friendly atmosphere in general, and parent described the middle school environment for students like this:

It's not my favorite environment. I feel like it's really harsh, but it's sort of militant.

They have to do this at this time. I feel like there's not a lot of flexibility, at least where we were. When you think about the kids at that age, when their hormones are crazy, they don't know why they're feeling the way they're feeling, you have to have that hard policy of, "This is how it goes for everybody."

The middle school environment was also described as serving jail time as one parent stated:

They look at it like doing time, like they really don't like it there. I do. I think they need to lighten up a little, like they just have so many rules, and I get it. It's an unruly group, an age group, and an age group that requires a different set of rules, maybe, but I just think they take it a little far. You need to let kids be kids a little. You need to let them make mistakes sometimes. You need to show them the right way and guide them correctly. You can't have mayhem, but you can't make it a jail either.

The middle school environment described in part by the parents was very inflexible, rigid, and unfeeling.

On the other hand, parents also shared some of the exciting experiences that their children were able to enjoy during their time in middle school. The children were able to participate in an overnight-outdoor education experience in sixth grade. One parent related the excitement of the students when portrayed:

What they loved, was seeing their teachers different from when they're in the classroom. I mean, they came back like, 'Mom! They're cool. They put on skits. They danced. They wore crazy things.' They saw their teachers in a totally different light. Even though they were learning, they didn't feel like they were learning. It was fun.

Several parents mentioned specific teachers that went out of their way to make their children feel special in middle school. This parent talked about the relationship with a coach and the student experience in athletics by relaying:

I think really to having to manage their time. I have to say, the teachers really do a ... and the coaches being teachers too, it's helpful that they make sure that they're on track and doing what they need to do. My son loves it. He loves it. It's so good for him. It's great.

Finally, parents reported that teachers provided engaging activities for their children that were very memorable. For example, “They went into different teacher's rooms and they did fun activities. They were mixed up with different... Studio 1. They mixed all the kids up. They went from station-to-station, sort of.” She goes on to say, “Again, their teachers were doing fun things and doing different than in the regular classroom.” Parents reported how their children appreciated the times when teachers would interact with them in a fun manner. The activities involving a change of pace were the memorable times for students at the middle school level.

In summary, Parents from School A described that the advantages of a K-5, 6-8 configuration had given children a fresh start with relationships, given children an opportunity to grow in maturity, created high academic expectations, and a greater variety of academic and extra-curricular activities. These parents also reported that communication suffered after the transition to middle school, there was a lack of consistent academic support from elementary to middle school, student participation in some activities were limited, relationships could be challenging to navigate in a new environment, and the atmosphere of the school was not warm and welcoming for parents or students. The advantages and disadvantages of each configuration as reported by parents from School A were organized into a chart in Table 2. The chart provided a brief synopsis of the results of research question one and two as reported by School A parents.

Table 2

Advantages and Disadvantages from School A

Advantage of K-8	Advantage of K-5, 6-8	Disadvantage of K-8	Disadvantage of K-5, 6-8
Communication across grade levels	High academic expectations	Labeling	Lack of consistent academic support services
Positive peer modeling of older students	Opportunity for growth in maturity/independence	Negative peer modeling of older students	Communication at the middle school level
Continuum of services for academic support	Fresh start with relationships/greater friend opportunities	Difficulty providing individual ability-based programs	An unwelcoming atmosphere
Ability to develop deeper long-term relationships	Greater academic opportunities for ability grouping		Limited participation in some activities
Student participation in extra curricular			Navigating new relationships
Single school schedule			

Research question 3: Impact of transition. Parents reported that the transition from elementary school to middle school was difficult for their children, but most of their children were able to manage after an adjustment period. Parents also relayed that some children were impacted to a greater degree than others, even within the same family. The transition itself was reported to cause stress for some students, and parents comments revealed more concern with the environment overall as mentioned in the previous section. There were two ideas related to the transition, the transition itself and the adjustment from the elementary expectations to the middle school expectations. Overall, parents were satisfied with the transition from one school to the next, and some felt it was a growth opportunity for their children. The following parent statement revealed that there was some nervousness combined with excitement about the change,

“No, actually they all transitioned fine. They were excited to, you know, when they're leaving fifth grade, you're not ready for them to leave, but they are. They're excited to move to a new school and excited about the changes. They might be a little nervous.” The transition from elementary school to middle school was a significant event in children’s educational experience, and the impact varied from one parent and child experience to the next.

Parents reported a variety of stressors related to the transition from elementary school to middle school. One parent stated, “The elementary school going in to junior high in sixth grade. It's an honest concern of theirs, ‘How am I going to know where to go? I don't know any of these teachers. What if I'm not with my friends?’ It's a big stress.” Another parent reported, “Gym class, changing into their gym uniform. Changing in front of other girls. Having so many minutes to do it. A combination lock, too. They were freaked out about that.” The same parent shared how they tried to mitigate the impact of the children’s concern when she explained; “We played with that all summer and then remembering two different combinations for your locker and your gym locker.” A new schedule requiring class changes was worry for some, “You know, trying to figure out, ‘I've got all these different teachers, I've got the schedule that changes.’ But I think it was relatively smooth.” Again a parent relayed, “I think just being able to find his locker and his classrooms you know, pretty natural stuff.” Another parent added a similar thought when she said, “I think the locker is the scariest thing for them. Being able to open it.” Parents expressed the concerns their children had before transitioning into the middle school environment from the elementary environment.

Most of the children represented by these parents reported stress typical of a change. However, one parent did report that one of their children did start walking in their sleep. This

parent also observed that teachers in the elementary school may be contributing to some of the anticipated stress when she shared comments from elementary teachers, “‘Here's how organized you have to be for junior high. Here's how you're going to need to write papers for junior high. Here's what junior high teachers are supposed to expect.’ That they're getting really worked up about it before they even get to it.” Elementary teachers may contribute to student anxiety about future grade levels without realizing their impact.

In addition to being stressful on children, parents reported their own stress during the transition as the following excerpt reveals:

It's a stressful thing. Not necessarily just ... As a parent because it's stressful on my children. It's new, it's scary, it's learning the teachers all over, learning the office staff all over. It's learning, is this nurse the kind who sends your kids home for anything, or is this the same nurse who knows your kids and goes, “No, go back to school. Go back to class. I'm not putting up with that.” It's a lot of change that you have to get used to. Our junior high is three years, and by the time you get the hang of it, it's almost like, “Oh, done.”

Parents reflected some of the stress felt by their children, and they also reflected some of their own stress related to a transition to a new school setting.

The transition process from elementary school to middle school generated some anxiety for children, but overall the process was not reported as unbearable. Most of the anxiety was in anticipation of the changes, and the end result was generally positive as noted by the comment, “Very easy, smooth transition.” Another parent described their experience by sharing:

As a parent, I felt concerned just because with my oldest child, again it was a transition but again, the school did a really great job of just being able to transition students, provide a measure of confidence that they have got everything under control. They were very good at helping sixth graders especially transition into the middle school role, so I think the first thought was really of concern, but nothing having to do with academics.

It's more just social I think. That's how I feel.

Another parent added, "I think [the middle school] does a pretty good job of transitioning. They have a day in the summer where you can come and walk your schedule, put your stuff in your locker." In the end, one parent had a significant concern regarding the elementary to middle school transition, but not all parents reported significant concerns when they reflected back on the experience.

Research question 4: Overall school satisfaction. When parents were asked if they would recommend School A for the children of their friends, none of them hesitated to make a strong recommendation. Parents were also very positive when they were asked to describe the quality of education their children received at the school. All of the parents were exceptionally pleased with the quality of education their children received. Even the parents that illuminated some of the negative experiences of their children were quick to praise the overall quality of the education in their school. Some of the words or phrases used to describe the quality of education were, "top notch", "it's good, it's very good", "excellent, I'm very happy with it", "I am very, very pleased with the quality that they have received", "It's amazing. It's amazing." Parents were happy with the educational experience of their children.

Parents were also asked about changes they would recommend for the school district, and they were asked about what areas of the district they would never change. These questions were asked to generate discussion confirming some of the strengths and weaknesses of the school system. When answering these questions, parents generally confirmed the strengths and weaknesses that were mentioned earlier in this chapter. One parent stated, “District [] is really good about the emails and the communications and the fundraisers and the teacher education and the teacher development, and just the teachers that they hire are amazing. That's why we just never left.” Another parent hopes that the configuration will remain the same when she said, “I think what I hope they never change is really the makeup and the schools, the fact that you have within the district, these neighborhood type schools. I think that's really key.” Another parent's comment supported this sentiment when she said, “I think it's cool how the kids come from a bunch of different schools and come together.”

The parents of School A were very satisfied with their school experience for their children, but some parents would like to see the middle school environment change to a more warm and welcoming environment. They wanted to feel more a part of the educational process with their children. Parents also made suggestions for increased communication between the elementary schools and the middle school to help support students in need of academic support. Some parents also shared a desire for increased communication once their students arrived at the middle school. Finally, some parents would like to see a support system for students that more closely meets their needs. Parents wanted more teachers who “would have listened and respected kids who are trying to advocate for themselves.” Based on the overall responses to the

questions designed to measure parent satisfaction, the parents of School A were highly satisfied with the school system.

Research question 5: Parent participation. Parents with children in School A reported that their parent participation definitely changed as their children move through the school system. Some parents reported less involvement with the school, and the parents that stayed involved with the school changed the type of interactions they had with the school. Some reasons parents gave for changing their involvement included; children who didn't want their parents involved, a lack of need from the school itself, and a transition of volunteer opportunities from classroom support to policy input. The following quote summarizes the transition in the type of volunteer opportunities from a parent's perspective:

When my daughter first went in to junior high, my first child, I was told you're going to have nothing. You're not going to be able to volunteer for anything. That pretty much was true. There was nothing teachers needed. There were no events to help out with.

There were no art projects to come in and cut things out for, or anything like that.

The types of volunteer opportunities changed as children aged through the school system.

Some parents felt that they would have liked to be more involved with the middle school, but they did not feel welcomed. As one parent put it, "The least partnering I have ever done with the school, I'm an active parent, a volunteer, all the way through my son being a senior in high school, least interaction I've ever had with a school was with this middle school here...".

Another parent stated, "As a result, what ends up happening is all those mothers that love to volunteer at [the elementary school] stop volunteering, so they can't get volunteers for any of their things because no one wants to support that school. I'm just telling you so honestly." These

two quotes represent the sentiment of most of the parents interviewed from School A. The parents shared their perception that their help was not needed at the middle school, and that they were not welcomed.

Outside of the perception that parents did not feel welcomed, parents did not see the reason to be involved with the middle school. One parent explained, “In fact, she was in eighth grade, and I don't think other than conferences or going there for sports that she was involved with that I ever had to talk to anybody once.” The parent did not feel the need to get involved with the middle school because her daughter was doing well, and there were no issues to address.

School B Findings

Research question 1: Advantages and disadvantages of K-8. Parents from School B reported advantages in the areas of student participation, a sense of community, academic support services, positive modeling from older students to younger students, a lack of worldly exposure, and relationships with peers and school staff. Disadvantages reported by parents from School B were a potential lack of educational and extra curricular opportunities, negative peer modeling of older student to younger students, and an inability to move to another setting when difficult relationships formed with other students. Parents discussed the advantages and disadvantages as juxtapositions of the same topics. The following paragraphs will expound upon the pros and cons of the K-8 model as described by parents.

Parents from school B talked about how they appreciated the opportunities their children had to get involved in a variety of extra curricular activities. Some parents felt that the smaller school gave their children an opportunity to try an activity that they may not have been able to attempt at a larger school. As an example a parent explained:

It gave her a chance to try something new. She didn't play basketball ... I guess she played in first grade or something, and then she really didn't play until she went out for the seventh grade team. At a larger school, she wouldn't get that chance. The disadvantage is there's very little chance that they're going to beat a larger program; plus one, minus one. It's been a good experience for us.

Another parent emphasized the importance of having more opportunities for participation in middle school by saying:

Giving them an opportunity to actually show what they can do. I think it's really important in junior high because 90% of those kids will never get that chance in high school, because then it is about who's the best and then it's cut and you got to be the best to be on the team.

Finally, one parent explained:

The fact that if there were 300 kids in their grade, their chance to do things like a school play, I don't know. I'm not sure that they would be the ones that are selected. There's just more opportunity, I think, at an age where people are really trying to find themselves, quite frankly. In a time where there seems to be more and more specialization in sports or whatever, in a smaller school, they get to try different activities, different extra-curricular activities.

Parents from School B were glad that their children had the opportunity to participate in activities they may not have otherwise tried if they had attended a larger school.

In addition to extra-curricular opportunities, parents from School B shared some unique academic opportunities offered by the school. As one parent explained, "Kids could find out if

they liked art or they didn't like art or liked music. They had band. We have lots of opportunities. They tasted a little bit of everything.” Parents also mentioned special learning experiences such as a Veteran’s Day program, a “Valley Forge” experience for sixth graders, a variety show, an eighth grade play that invites all students to participate, and a program where eighth grade students help with kindergarten recess. Another parent explained:

They have such a different, broad array of experience that allow the child to sort of find their voice, maybe is a good way to say it. Not everybody's going to be at the top of the heap when it comes to math. Not everybody's going to be at the top of the heap when it comes to some of the arts. Helping people find their passion, their voice, I think has been important.

Parents were pleased with the opportunities provided for their children in the K-8 environment. Parents reported satisfaction with the variety of experiences that the school had to offer, and the opportunities their children had to take advantage of those experiences.

However, parents from School B also pointed out some areas where their students may not have the same opportunities they would have at a larger school. One parent guessed, “In terms of a disadvantage, perhaps there are, and I don't know this to be true, at a larger school, there may be more programs that would be available.” Another parent said, “Right, we don't have a school soccer team. There are things we don't have.” In addition to the extra curricular offerings, one parent also mentioned that there was a lack of leveling for math at the middle school level since there were not enough students to divide into appropriate sections. Parents anticipated that a larger school with more sections per grade level provided more opportunity for specialized sections. Parents realized that there was a disadvantage to having fewer students in a

school in terms of the ability of the school to provide ability grouping and every possible activity.

Parents from School B appreciated a single school schedule to manage with multiple children. Parents only had to track one school schedule with multiple children, and only one location. However, one parent pointed out that it is also nice to have some individual time with your children while the other children are at school,

On the flip side of that, it's nice if you have two different sets of kids, it's like two different schedules. You have younger kids schedule where you're focusing on them, and then once they go off to school then I'm focusing on the junior high kid, and the get their individual attention.

The parent recalled that at one time the middle school students had a different school schedule than the elementary students. Parents that both had careers outside the home appreciated the single start and end time while at least one parent that was home during dismissal time appreciated the alternate schedule. All the parents did not mention the topic, and it was not a point of emphasis for any parent.

On the other hand, the overall school environment was a point of emphasis communicated from parents of School B. The parents all reported a strong sense of community, and a “family-like” atmosphere at the school as represented by the comment, “Like our son described it as like a family.” Another parent commented about how their kids felt about the school when they said, “We even asked the kids when they left. They're like, it was like a family.” A third parent explained it this way, “From my perspective, they've got a high level of engagement from the community, from the faculty, and from the students. You see it day in and

day out.” Parents were positive about the warm and nurturing environment that they embraced as the hallmark of their school.

Parents also acknowledged that there were times when it was not the greatest to be in a tight-knit community. Parents shared challenges of having a child labeled at an early age and being unable to shake the label, or not being able to fit in with their peers. A parent explained, “If you have a child that has some sort of an issue, whether it be academic or behavioral, I think when you're in a school that's K through 8, teachers might have preconceived ideas just from things they here. That would be a disadvantage.” Another parent talked about the challenge of not fitting in when she said, “I think the only disadvantage is if you have a child that's on the fringe of not quite fitting in, I think 7th and 8th grade can be a little harder for them because there's not a bigger pool of kids to form new relationships with.” Some children may have felt like they were stuck, and unable to feel like they were part of the community. One parent explained by saying, “My younger daughter had a different social experience and not a tight group and was happy to leave Oak Grove to go meet some new kids at the big high school.” Another parent summed up the feelings of most parents, “I don't know if it's necessarily better or worse if you know the girls so well, like you've known them since kindergarten.” Parents from School B reflected on the positives and negatives of belonging to a smaller community for a longer period of time.

After reflecting on the positives and negatives of belonging to a smaller setting, the parents leaned toward the smaller setting as an advantage. Parents cited the strong relationships their children were able to develop with staff and students over the length of their children's

school experience in School B as an advantage of the K-8 school setting. One parent talked about how the teachers were involved with the students outside of class:

My daughters always come to me and say, ‘Oh, I have a breakfast. I have a breakfast.’ They're meeting with their older teachers that they have. They do that so frequently. They keep in contact with these old teachers. It's like a little family. When we go to the basketball games, all the teachers are asking about our older kids... I keep saying community. I don't know if that's the right word. It's a very unique family, in a sense. They're really tight.

Another parent talked about what it was like to know the staff:

Our kids have gotten the same teacher. Two of them had the same fifth grade teacher and two of them had the same other fifth grade teacher. That's so nice too. You just know them, they know you. I don't know. Your kids feel special because they know you already.

Parents reported a sense of having their children be “known” by the staff as a positive. A third parent explained:

I think the one nice thing is, if you like a teacher, it becomes more than just a teacher. It becomes a real friendship because of the length of time that you've known that person in your life. They know more about you than just a parent-teacher relationship- or the student-teacher relationship. They start to know your family and they start to know ... it's so awesome.

Parents reported an appreciation of knowing the staff and students over a longer time span.

The relationships with other students were also an advantage shared by parents. Parents cited deep and lasting relationships that were formed in the elementary setting that lasted into their college years. As summed up by one parent, “In K through eight there's a sense of community and it's special. It's different than everybody else. If you look at our oldest daughter's class, they transitioned that dynamic to high school. Although they have a mix of different friends, they still have that same core group of girls and boys that exist even today.”

An additional area of emphasis perceived as an advantage of the K-8 setting was the academic support for children that needed extra help in school. Parents were very pleased with the individual attention given to their children that struggled in school. One parent captured the sentiments of several when she said:

I think one is just having the more personalized attention, especially at that age, especially given some of the issues with some receiving resource, another being on the other end. I think there is probably ... we don't have children that go to a larger school, so this is just our perception, maybe not necessarily reality, but I think in a smaller environment, it's easier to identify and work with either challenges or children that need to be pushed a little harder.

Two other parents also commented that School B had a very strong reputation for providing supports for students, and that they were very pleased with the support they received.

Finally, parents from School B cited the “sheltered” atmosphere as an advantage to a K-8 environment. While they predicted that a bus route with Kindergartners and eighth graders on the same bus led to poor modeling, none of the parents gave any examples of when this was a problem for their children. Parents reported that there was an advantage to living in a “bubble”,

and that they felt they were able to shelter their children from greater exposure to worldly content. One parent responded:

They might feel like, oh it's a little too sheltered, it's a little too ... Like hey, these kids should grow up a little bit and have this chance to be in their own school and with more kids and more social contacts, and meeting new kids. It's just for us, we feel like there's definitely a time and a place for that, but in our opinion, later.

Parents liked the idea of knowing the friends of their children and even the families of their children all the way through eighth grade.

Parents saw the small community feel of the K-8 model as an advantage for building relationships with staff, students, and parents, keeping their children “sheltered” from exposure to “worldly” experiences, more opportunities for participation in a variety of activities, and excellent support services to meet the needs of individual students. On the other hand, parents cautioned that the tight community was a challenge for those students that did not fit in with their peer group, and there were fewer academic and extra-curricular programs. They felt that both peers and teachers sometimes labeled students at a young age, and it was difficult to overcome a negative label.

Research question 2: Advantages and disadvantages of K-5, 6-8. Parents from School B cited advantages to a K-5, 6-8 model as potentially having more programs available, more potential for ability grouping to meet student needs, a chance for the kids to feel like they are more “grown up”, and a chance to meet more new students. One parent guessed that, “Being exposed to an environment of different kids is probably a disadvantage of not going to the big junior high and experiencing that newness, the environment.” Just as parents from School A,

parents from School B discussed the juxtaposition of the disadvantages of the K-8 model as advantages to the K-5, 6-8 model and vice versa. Whereas “labeling” was viewed as a disadvantage of the K-8 model by parents from School B, the advantage of the K-5, 6-8 model was presented as an opportunity for children to shed any labels, and have a fresh start with a new group of peers.

In addition parents from School B thought that the larger middle school environment offered more opportunities for specialized learning and a variety of programming during the school day and after. Parents speculated that the larger school could offer more extra-curricular activities as evidenced by the parent that mentioned the lack of soccer at School B. Parents also ventured that the larger middle school could offer academic levels to provide specialized learning opportunities to meet the individual needs of students. One parent explains, “I think where maybe a larger junior high has a little more resource, maybe they're able to separate the kids more by skill level or aptitude.” Parents thought that the larger middle school had the potential to offer more specialized programming academically and for extra-curricular opportunities.

Parents from School B shared concerns about the environment of the K-5, 6-8 model, especially with the middle school. They shared that they would be concerned about having their children exposed to more “worldly” influences at an earlier age. One parent speculated:

Quite honestly, again probably felt like maybe some of the kids that we know from the larger junior high only, were maybe a little too advanced. Like there was a little too much happening too fast for kids, and our kids are a little slower than being ...

Parents also guessed there would be a loss of a sense of community if their children were to attend a separate middle school fed by smaller elementary schools. “I do think that when you go to a middle school instead of going to a K-8, you do lose that community feel school-esque thing.” Parents viewed the small community feel of the K-8 model as a positive and contemplated that the community feel would be lost during the transition from the elementary to the middle school building.

In addition, parents from School B discussed the disadvantage of starting over with relationships of administration, staff and students. They viewed the change in environment as a potential negative. One parent described the situation as, “If I know there's a problem, I know they'll contact me, because you are able to set-up friendships, relationships, all that stuff with them, versus like if you move, you don't know anyone.” Parents from School B anticipated losing some of the relationship capital that was developed over time if they had to transition to a new environment after 5th grade.

Parents from School B reflected on the positive aspects of the K-5, 6-8 model for providing a fresh start for students in a new setting, an opportunity for growth and maturity, and a broader offering of courses and activities. Parents from School B also speculated that the disadvantages of the K—5, 6-8 model were the loss of community, worldly exposure at an earlier age, limited opportunity for participation in some activities, and the challenge of navigating new relationships. The disadvantages and advantages of each configuration as reported by parents from School B are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Advantages and Disadvantages from School B

Advantage of K-8	Advantage of K-5, 6-8	Disadvantage of K-8	Disadvantage of K-5, 6-8
Positive peer modeling of older students	Opportunity for growth in maturity/independence	Labeling	Limited participation in some activities
Continuum of services for academic support	Fresh start with relationships/greater friend opportunities	Negative peer modeling of older students	Navigating new relationships
Ability to develop deeper long-term relationships	Greater academic opportunities for ability grouping	Difficulty providing individual ability-based programs	Worldly exposure at an earlier age
Student participation in extra curricular	A wider variety of programming	Fewer extra curricular choices	Loss of a sense of community
Single school schedule			
Strong sense of community			
Lack of worldly exposure			

Research question 3: Impact of transition. Parents from School B generally responded that the transition from elementary school to middle school was nearly a non-issue. When asked about the transition, parents in general did not talk about it in depth. Their answers were, it was a “nonevent”, and they “know the building, know the bus route.” One parent said that her children were slightly nervous, but it was not a big deal. Another parent mentioned that the children were concerned about changing for PE, and changing classes. The concerns were conveyed as mild, and the parents did not see the transition as a significant event in the school experience.

Parents recounted that familiarity with the staff, students, and building led to a smooth transition for their children. A parent was referring to the teachers when she said, “Even though they're new, they might've had them for a coach, or they might've had them for an after school activity or something like that. It's not like that was a big deal.” The parents described a transition that had very little impact on students.

Research question 4: Overall school satisfaction. Every parent from School B would recommend this school to the children of their friends. As one parent recounted:

Once we were there, all the neighbors started saying:

Oh, you're going to love this school, you're going to love this school. You just wait. The kids are little, but you're going to love this school.” I'm like “How good can the school be?” They were all pretty positive about it. It ended up being true.

Parents were enthusiastic in their responses, and they were all pleased with the educational experience their children had between kindergarten and eighth grade.

Parents were also asked about changes they would recommend for the school district, and they were asked about what areas of the district they would never change. Just as with parents from School A, these questions were asked to generate discussion confirming the satisfaction of parents with the school system. When answering these questions, parents reaffirmed the strengths and weaknesses that were mentioned earlier in the findings under Research Question 1, and affirmed their satisfaction with the school. One parent said, “I don't really think I would change anything, really. It's a great school. It really is. Even the bad parts are how you grow. I don't really can say there's that many bad...”. She went on to explain that maybe a couple of teachers were not that great, but her kids enjoyed the overall experience. She liked the special

activities that teachers created such as “Valley Forge”, she appreciated the support services, and she appreciated the “tight-knit” community feel of the school. Another parents replied, “I think we've brought a lot of people in the neighborhood.” Parents from School B were pleased with the school.

However, there were a couple of changes that parents suggested as they reflected on the school. Two parents spoke of the significant administrative turnover at the school, but they pointed out that it did not seem like it impacted their children’s experience. “There was talk, when turnover happens, there's always, there is talk among the engaged parties in terms of what are the implications, what will happen. It hasn't had a material, adverse impact.” Another parent added, “I think if we could've had more stability with the administration we would've been happier. That might have been an issue if we had kids that were struggling in school or socially or academically or something.” On another topic, one parent suggested more opportunities for sectioning math in the middle school. Another parent wanted the school to reintroduce overnight trips for the children. This parent was upset that overnight trips were taken away because of a bad experience with one class in the past. She explained:

For instance, one of the groups, one of the classes above one of my kids, went on a field trip and they got in trouble. So, they took away all these privileges, and then it affected every class after that...You don't just stop something because someone screwed up...

That's something kids will never forget. That's a true experience, and it's a great learning environment. You can learn a ton while you're off-campus, or out of school.

Parents had a hard time answering this question, and they had to reflect before articulating areas for improvement in School B.

Some of the parents from School B had some issues and complaints with the school, but the parents circled back to positive experiences and an overall satisfaction with the school. All the parents responded positively when asked about the quality of education, and their first reaction when asked if they could change something about the school was “nothing”. They were able to acknowledge areas where the school could improve, but it was after the researcher asked additional clarification seeking questions. Parents from School B were pleased with the overall school experience and quality of education received by the children.

Research question 5: Parent participation. Parents with children in School B reported a shift in their interactions with the school as their children aged through the system. Parents tended to become less involved with the school, and the parents that stayed involved with the school changed their type of involvement. Parents suggested that, my children no longer wanted me involved, the school no longer needed my help, and the volunteer opportunities changed from classroom support to other forms of volunteering as reasons for their altered involvement. One parent summed this sentiment up when she said:

When it comes to board meetings, PTO meetings, now that our kids are older ... I never went to a board meeting when ... my oldest was, in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th grade. I don't think it was really something I had an interest in. Now that they're older, you were a little more interested in some of those, like Common Core, and those issues.

Another parent explained, “Then your kids get to a certain age and they're like, ‘Yeah, we don't need you to come in and read to us anymore. I don't need you to cut my lamination or collate my papers for me. I'm okay.’” As children aged, the type of involvement needed changed.

The structure of volunteering also changed. There were opportunities to be a guest reader or a room parent at the younger ages, and then those opportunities faded. As a parent described, “When you're younger, as a room parent. Then junior high there is not room parent. There's one head grade parent.” There was less of a need for parent volunteers directly in the classroom. Another reason parents may reduce their volunteerism is due to a lack of desire, or because they are simply tired of it. A parent responded to the question of involvement by saying:

Drastically dropped off. Drastically. I was volunteering at the school before my daughter was there because I moved here and I quit my job... I was so involved with that school. Now, I could care less. I still do a lot, too much, but you do burn out. You definitely burn out.

An additional reason was described as the PTO trying to recruit newer parents just as this parent pointed out:

Well, I will say I'm at an all time low volunteering right now. This year, in fact, I don't think I've done anything. Yes, it does wane, for sure. In all due fairness, they're trying to get the younger parents more involved.

Parents described a structural change in the type of volunteering available as their children moved through the school system.

Comparison of School A and School B

The results of the parent responses from School A and the parent responses from School B were compared and reported in the following paragraphs. The responses were organized by research questions in similar fashion to the individual school responses. For the purpose of comparing the related answers to research questions one and two, the comparison of the results

of research question one and two were presented together in the same section. The intent of combining these questions was to increase the readability of the research findings, and to avoid repetitive presentation of related findings. The remaining comparisons are organized by the three other research questions. A summary of the findings was included in Table 4. This summary in the chart helped guide the comparison in answering the first two research questions in the following section.

Table 4

Comparison of Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantage of K-8	Advantage of K-5,6-8	Disadvantage of K-8	Disadvantage of K-5,6-8
Communication across grade levels*	High academic expectations *	Labeling ***	Lack of consistent academic support services*
Positive peer modeling of older students**	Opportunity for growth in maturity/independence ***	Negative peer modeling of older students **	Communication at the middle school level*
Continuum of services for academic support ***	Fresh start with relationships/greater friend opportunities ***	Difficulty providing individual ability-based programs **	An unwelcoming atmosphere *
Ability to develop deeper long-term relationships ***	Greater academic opportunities for ability grouping ***	Fewer extra curricular choices**	Limited participation in some activities*
Student participation in extra curricular**	A wider variety of programming**		Navigating new relationships *
Single school schedule ***			Worldly exposure at an earlier age**
Strong sense of community**			Loss of a sense of community**
Lack of worldly exposure**			

*Reported by parents of School A

**Reported by parents of School B

***Reported by both sets of Parents

Research questions 1&2: Advantages and disadvantages of each configuration.

Interview questions aligned to research questions one and two were directed at both sets of parents to help parents generate discussion around their personal experiences with grade configuration. Parent responses regarding the advantages of one grade configuration tended to reflect the disadvantage to the alternate grade configuration and vice versa. Parents also tended to give overall favorability to their own configuration when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each configuration.

As an example of when parents contrasted an advantage of one configuration to the disadvantage of the other, parents from School B reported an advantage of the K-8 model as having their children influenced by a smaller group of peers. They reported this advantage by describing the atmosphere as “living in a bubble” or “sheltered”. Parents reported an appreciation for having a deeper knowledge of their children’s peers and their families. Conversely, they reported that a disadvantage of the K-5, 6-8 model as having children exposed to a larger group of students where parents may not have as much knowledge of peer groups and family backgrounds.

In the same manner, parents from School B reported that exposure to a wider group of peers was an advantage for some children who did not fit in to a peer group in the smaller K-8 setting. The same parents projected that attending a larger middle school after a smaller elementary school presented an advantage for children that were “labeled”, and needed a fresh start in a new environment. Parents from both school settings reported a “fresh start” as an advantage to the K-5, 6-8 configuration. Parents thought that giving children who did not

develop good relationships with a peer group in the K-5 setting had a better chance of finding a peer group after the transition to a larger setting.

Parents from School A and Parents from School B also shared similar thoughts on seven additional ideas on the disadvantages or advantages of the K-8 model and the K-5, 6-8 model. Both sets of parents thought that the K-8 model had an advantage for a better continuum of academic services for special education students. Parents from both schools thought that having the children in one building from kindergarten through eighth grade provided greater opportunities for staff to collaborate and communicate across grade levels. Parents from School B reported great satisfaction with the academic support services their children had received. One parent summed up the thoughts of several parents by reporting, "I think one is just having the more personalized attention, especially at that age... I think in a smaller environment, it's easier to identify and work with either challenges or children that need to be pushed a little harder." There were no parents interviewed from School B that reported a negative experience with the academic support services.

In contrast, Parents from School A were not satisfied with the academic support their children received, and pointed to the difficulty of the continuum of services in moving from the elementary school to the middle school. As one parent summed up:

If a child does have something that you need, which every kid does, what I've found here there's precious little communication elementary school to middle school to high school. You're totally starting over, which has some advantages but also has the disadvantages of, you know, sometimes it takes awhile to figure a kid out and see what's going on with them... I think that that breaks a little bit of the continuum of care.

Parents from School A reported more dissatisfaction overall with the continuum of academic support services than parents from School B. Both sets of parents conveyed that the K-8 model held an advantage for a continuum of care for students needing specialized academic support.

The second area of similar results comparing the two configuration models was the social relationships of students. An area of advantage for the K-8 model reported by both sets of parents was the ability to develop long-term and deeper relationships with classmates. Parents reported that students would be able to develop closer relationships with a smaller group of friends since they would be together for a longer period of time. On the other side of this advantage, both sets of parents were also aware that the K-8 model is a disadvantage for some children that did not fit in with their peers. For students that needed a fresh start with peers, the larger new middle school offered a new group of peers to create social relationships. For students that had a solid group of positive peer relationships, the K-8 model offered stability and the opportunity for deeper long-term friendships. Both sets of parents relayed similar advantages and disadvantages of the K-8 model and the K-5, 6-8 model for developing social relationships. Parents from the School B viewed the K-8 model as an overall advantage in this area, and Parents from School A viewed the K-5, 6-8 model as advantages in this area.

The third area of similar reporting by both groups of parents was on the perception that children would have an opportunity for more independence at an earlier age with the K-5, 6-8 model. This opportunity was explained by parents as an opportunity to negotiate new friendships, take on more responsibility, and be exposed to a wider range of activities that would lead to a step forward in maturity for students. As one parent from School A summed up,

Advantage wise, I do think that for my kids, it was a step in maturity. They really went from ... I wouldn't say the baby school but they went from not so many privileges to ... then they were given a little more leeway, treated more like they were young adults.

A parent from School B projected what other parents would think an advantage of having students attend a middle school would be when they said, “ They might feel like, oh it’s a little too sheltered, it’s a little too... These kids should grow up a little bit and have this chance to be in their own school and with more kids and more social contacts, and meeting new kids.”

However this parent from School B did not view the earlier opportunity for maturity as something positive. Parents from School B understood why it was viewed as an advantage to have children transition to a middle school after an elementary experience, but they did not want this experience for their children after the fifth grade. As the parent from School B continued to explain, “Just for us, we feel like there's definitely a time and a place for that, but in our opinion, later.” The sentiment of this parent summed up the general sentiment of the parents from School B regarding the opportunity for students to become more independent at an earlier age.

Parents from both schools acknowledged that opportunity for earlier independence leading to maturity was an advantage of the K-5, 6-8 configuration model, but parents from School B preferred to not experience the transition after 5th grade. Parents from School B felt that the opportunity for students to learn independence was better experienced as students transitioned into high school.

The fourth point discussed by Parents from School A and School B was the impact of having older students as models for the younger students. The parents pointed out that having eighth grade students as the models for appropriate behavior had the potential to be a positive or

a negative. Eighth grade students exhibiting positive behaviors would have a positive impact on younger students. Parents from School B shared examples of how the school used the eighth grade students for positive leadership experiences, and the parents did not share examples of any personal negative experiences. One parent from School A shared an example of how the older kids on the K-5 bus exposed the younger children to some negative topics. She would be concerned that having a bus with K-8 would increase the possibility of negative influences. The same parent also contended that older children had the potential to be a positive influence with younger children. Parents from School B enjoyed having the older student interact with younger students, and they viewed this as an advantage. Parents from School A viewed this as a disadvantage, but it could have the potential to be an advantage. These responses reflected the work of Anderson (2012) and Connolly et al. (2002) that collected similar survey responses. While each parent group understood the possible advantages and disadvantages of each configuration regarding older peer modeling, this discussion topic was an example of each parent group viewing their own experiences as having an edge in the category.

The fifth point of discussion mentioned by both sets of parents centered on extra-curricular opportunities. Parents from both schools reported that there was an advantage at the K-8 level to having a higher percentage of the student body participating in activities since there were not as many students competing for positions. On the other hand, students in a smaller school would not have as many activities to choose from. Parents thought that the advantage of the larger middle school was the ability to provide students with a wider variety of activities. A parent from School A was very pleased with the opportunities at the middle school for her children when she said, "I do like that, that there are so many opportunities that are offered at

[the middle school] for extracurricular activities.” The school had the ability to offer more activities because there would be more students available to participate in those activities. There would not be enough students in the K-8 model to support a wide range of activities.

The sixth area of overlap discussed by both sets of parents was the ability of the larger middle school to offer greater opportunity for ability grouping in academic courses. Both sets of parents viewed the ability of a larger school to group students into ability levels, especially in the area of math, as an advantage. Parents from School B reported a lack of ability for their students to be in a math class with peers of similar ability as a disadvantage of the K-8 model.

The final area of overlap discussed by both sets of parents was having a single school schedule for all the children of a family. This topic surfaced in one parent from each of the groups. The two parents thought it would be an advantage for most parents if their children in multiple grade levels had the same start and end time. However, the parent from School B also liked having a staggered end time so she could spend some individual time with her children. The same parent mentioned that the school briefly had an alternate start and end time for the older students and younger students, and she enjoyed spending time with her children individually.

In addition to the areas where both sets of parents shared responses, there were points made by parents from each configuration that were not discussed by the other parent group. Parents from School A discussed three other disadvantages or advantages of each of the models such as communication, high academic expectations, and the middle school environment. Parents from School B added two more topics for consideration, such as: worldly exposure, and a sense of community.

Parents from School A reported communication across grade levels and communication as one area of concern. Parents from School A were much more focused on communication, and the overall tone regarding communication was more often negative than positive. On the other hand, parents from School B only mentioned school communication once in the transcripts, and it was using a very positive tone. Parents from School A mentioned communication in six out of the seven interviews, and communication was reported as a concern by all six parents. These parents did not feel like the middle school communicated effectively with parents beyond the most basic information. One parent described the communication by saying,

The principal or the associate principal or whatever would write a letter in our publications, and there really wasn't a lot of communication other than about if there was a curriculum night coming up or an invitation to an open house, whatever, there's not a lot of communication. They definitely left it up to the parents too, to find the information on the website. It was our responsibility to know when things were happening and navigate that.

The communication as reported by parents at the middle school level was not the type or level of communication desired by the parents.

Another area of significance discussed by parents from School A and not mentioned by parents of School B, was the middle school environment. Parents from School A shared concerns about the unwelcoming atmosphere of the middle school, and the feeling that parents were not welcomed as part of the learning process. School A parents also reflected that some of their children had a hard time fitting in to the middle school environment. The words “cold” and

“inflexible” were frequently used by several parents to describe the middle school environment. Each of the parents from School A described the elementary experience as “warm” and “welcoming”. Parents from School B did not differentiate between the elementary and middle school experience in terms of the environment.

The third area discussed by parents from School A was the high academic expectations. Parents appreciated the high expectations for students supported by comments like, “I believe that the quality of teaching is good, so I believe that the kids are well prepared for high school.” Several parents also named specific teachers that taught their children, and had a great influence on them. Parents reported that the curriculum was “tough”, but they would not change the high expectations. Several also reported that their children had struggled with the high expectations, but they were pleased with the results. Parents from School B did not mention high expectations and difficult curriculum specifically, but they did mention how well prepared their children were for the high school level.

Parents from School B added the topic of exposing children to a wider sphere of influence in the larger middle school verses the K-8 school. Parents from School B reported advantages of having some children learn how to navigate a broader world, but their overall consensus centered more on the benefits of keeping children in a smaller and more controlled environment for a longer period of time. One parent remarked, “Maybe some of the kids that we know from the larger junior high only, were maybe a little too advanced. Like there was a little too much happening too fast for kids.” Parents from School A did not share any similar concerns about having their children exposed to broader population of students at an earlier age.

Parents from School B also discussed a strong sense of community as a difference between the two configurations. Parents anticipated a loss of the sense of community they felt in the K-8 school if they lived in a community with a K-5, 6-8 model. Several parents described the school as a “family”, and they anticipated losing that sense of community if they were in the alternate configuration. Parents from School A also used the term “family” when describing the elementary school experience, but that description did not continue through the middle school.

Research question 3: Impact of transition. The discussion on transition by parents could be broken down into two thoughts: the transition itself, and the transition from the elementary setting to the middle school setting. Both sets of parents discussed the challenge of moving from the self-contained grade school learning environment to the middle school learning environment where children moved from classroom to classroom, and needed to navigate a schedule and lockers. However there was a distinct difference in the responses from parents of School A and the responses of parents from School B when discussing the impact the transition had on parents and students.

The parents from School B mentioned how the transition of middle school had the potential to be a challenge for students, but it was really not an issue for their children. Parents discussed the switching of classes, operating a lock on a locker, and changing for PE as potential stressors for their children. However, they followed up these points by adding that it was “smooth”, and a “non-event” for their children. They pointed out that their children already knew the building, knew the teachers, knew the bus route, and were familiar with all the school overall.

However, Parents from School A shared more stress for themselves and their children surrounding the transition from elementary to middle school. As summed up in this parent's statement, "It's a stressful thing... As a parent because it's stressful on my children. It's new, it's scary, it's learning the teachers all over, learning the office staff all over." Parents discussed the same logistical concerns as parents from School B, such as switching classes, operating a locker combination, and changing for PE. Most of the parents cited the transition as a stressful time period for the children. However there was mixed reports on how their children handled the transition. Overall, the children managed the transition with very little negative impact with a couple of exceptions. There was one child that was stressed to the point of sleep walking, and other parents reported general difficulties adjusting to the new middle school setting.

With parents from School A, the reviews were mixed. Parents reported that some of the children were excited about the change and adjusted quickly to the new environment with statements like, "I think that for both of them it was very successful. They were able to socialize. They retained many of the same friends but also branched out and met new friends. They also were able to succeed academically." Other parents reported that their children showed significant anxiety. Whether or not the transition from elementary school to middle school was successful for students in School A, the discussion revealed that it was definitely a more significant event for these students. Parents from School B did not see the transition as much of an event at all, and certainly not a negative experience. Parents from School A viewed the transition as a significant event for their children whether it was positive or negative.

Research question 4: Overall school satisfaction. Parents from School A and School B were both very satisfied with the quality of education their children received, and they would all

recommend the school to the children of their friends. There was no discernible difference in the overall satisfaction with the parent responses at either school. There were specific areas of concern put forth by each set of parents that were discussed in earlier sections of Chapter IV, and there were more palpable concerns brought forward by parents from School A than parents from School B. However, the difference in answers between the two groups of parents was insignificant for the purposes of this research question. Both sets of parents would recommend their school to the children of their friends.

Research question 5: Parent participation. Parents from School A and School B both reported that the type of participation changed as their children aged through the school system. Parents reported that as their children aged through the system, their participation tended to wane. Both sets of parents mentioned that they were no longer needed in the classroom to help read, or be a “room parent”, or help set up crafts for the teacher.

There were members of both parent groups that were completely satisfied with reducing their direct involvement with the school as their children aged. They felt that their children did not need them to be as involved, and they did not attempt to increase their involvement with the school. However, there were also members of both groups that wanted to continue to be engaged with the school as much as possible, and there was a marked difference between the groups of parents who wanted to remain involved in the school through middle school.

The parents from School A that wanted to remain involved in the school reported having a more difficult time getting involved than parents from School B at the middle school level. Parents from School A felt welcomed at the K-5 level, but felt like their participation was not appreciated at the middle school level. Parents from School A reported an unwelcome feeling in

the school and a feeling that the administration did not want their input or involvement. The opposite was conveyed from parents of School B. Parents from School B reported that they were needed by the administration in order for the school to be effective. One parent reported being “burned out” from volunteering, and that even though her participation had “drastically dropped off” over the years; she was still heavily involved with eighth grade activities.

Summary of Conclusions

When parents discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the alternate grade configuration, their observations tended to reflect the strengths and weaknesses they perceived in the configuration their own children experienced. The significant reported differences of strengths and weaknesses between the two groups were noted in the areas of communication, academic support services, the transition between the elementary and middle school, the school environment, and the opportunity for earlier independence that a middle school offers. Other noted areas of difference were the wider variety of activities offered at the middle school for academics and activities, and the ability for students to shed labels when transitioning to the middle school.

The topics reported by parents for the advantages and disadvantages of each configuration were consolidated into related themes. The related themes were communication, environment, parent participation, and the transition from one school to another. There were several sub-topics discussed under the four major themes. The distribution of the sub-topics under the four major themes is illustrated in Table 5. Several of the sub-topics were considered under more than one theme. For example, some of the deficiencies of academic support reported by parents could be related to communication or environment. In addition, the concerns

regarding parent participation in School A could be related to communication, environment, or it could be unrelated to either major topic. For the purpose of discussion, the major themes emerging from this study were communication, parent participation, environment, and the transition from one school to another.

The sub-topics organized under communication include: a lack of consistent support services, communication across grade levels, and communication with parents at the middle school level. Concerns regarding communication were only reported by parents from School A. Parents were not pleased with the communication they received at the middle school level regarding basic events or student academic performance. In addition, when parents from School A reported concerns with the academic support their children received, this concern was assumed to be related to communication. The teachers and school personnel were not effectively communicating with parents on how the children were being supported in the classroom, or parents were not effectively communicating the needs of their children from their perspective outside the classroom. Communication was reported a significant frustration for middle school parents.

The sub-topics organized under environment include: peer modeling, labeling, programming, student participation, sense of community, worldly exposure, relationship building, high expectations, and opportunity for growth in maturity, and atmosphere. Positive and negative aspects of each configuration were reported on these topics, but the difference seemed to be in the strong sense of community and welcoming atmosphere of the K-8 model. Parents from the K-5, 6-8 model reported a welcoming atmosphere of the K-5 building in their school system, and they would like to see that type of environment expanded to the middle

school level. The parents appreciated the opportunity for their children to become more independent by attending the “big middle school”, but they also wanted to have an environment where they felt welcomed by school personnel. Parents from School A wanted a challenging environment that also supported and appreciated their children. Parents from School B described an environment that was challenging and supportive for their students.

There were no sub-topics specifically emerging under parent participation. Both parent groups reported a similar shift in diminished participation in school as their children aged, but parents from School A did not feel as welcomed during the middle school years as parents from School B. Parents from School B reported a change in their participation, but the changes were due to their personal circumstances or desire to participate. Parents from School B described being welcomed and encouraged to participate. In fact one parent suggested, “You better take those good parents and coddle them, because without them, our school, K through 8, would not function without the awesome parents.” This parent held the idea that the administration was kind to them just to get their help. This description was a stark contrast of the way parents from School A described an unwanted feeling from the middle school.

The topic of the transition itself was discussed as a separate topic for the purpose of this study. The transition from one school to another was reported as having an impact on the three other major themes such as the environment, parent participation, and communication. However, the transition from the elementary grades to the middle grades was discussed as an event on its own. Predictably, the transition from the elementary setting to the middle school setting was reported as more significant when children transitioned from a smaller K-5 building to a separate and larger 6-8 building. The transition to the middle school in the K-8 model was

described as a “non-event”, and the transition to middle school in the K-5, 6-8 was described a “significant event”. Even though the parents from School A described positive activities to help mitigate the impact of the transition, there were parents that reported the process as producing high anxiety for their children.

Table 5

Topics and sub-topics under advantages and disadvantages

Transition	Environment	Communication	Parent Participation
	Peer modeling of older students	Lack of consistent academic support services	
	Opportunity for growth in maturity/ independence	Communication at the middle school level	
	Programming differences	Communication across grade levels	
	Student participation		
	Sense of community		
	Worldly exposure		
	Relationship Building		
	High academic expectations		
	Labeling		
	Atmosphere		

These findings were in line with earlier research on cumulative stress theory as outlined in Chapter II. Cumulative stress theory is the accumulation of stressors on a person during a short period of time (Simmons et al., 1987, Eccles et al., 1991). The adolescent child proved to have more difficulty coping with a change from one school to the next when multiple stressors occurred within a relatively short period of time. The children in this study that had additional stressors in their life such as a parent with an illness, anxiety, learning disabilities, or other

circumstances struggled more with the transition. Those children that were reported to have higher coping skills and no other stressful conditions or circumstances did not struggle with the transition, according to parent reports. In short, children that need the most support struggle the most with the transition from elementary to middle school.

Advantages and disadvantages were reported for each of the configurations in this study. However, after considering the evidence provided by parents, the findings of this study indicate that the K-8 model holds an advantage in the topic of communication, environment, parent participation, and the transition from elementary to middle school. The K-8 model in this case maintained the positive perception of the elementary environment through the middle school years, retained parent participation at satisfactory levels, and communicated effectively with parents across the seamless transition to middle school.

Chapter V: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain deeper insight into the differences of two grade configurations from the perspective of parents, and determine if parents reveal more advantages of one model over the other model. This study accomplished the intended purpose. Responses procured from parent interviews provided rich data for discussion. The findings of this study added depth to an already existing body of research on configuration. Comparing the responses from parents experiencing the K-8 model to parents experiencing the K-5, 6-8 model provided a picture of the experience in both models that aligns with other research findings.

The findings of this study point to an advantage of the K-8 model for communication, middle school environment, parent participation, and a seamless transition from elementary to middle school. The advantage of the K-5, 6-8 model was the ability of students to have a wider variety of social and extra-curricular experiences, and the greater ability of the school to provide appropriately leveled instruction.

Proper perspective is necessary when discussing the pros and cons of a particular grade configuration, or any educational pursuit (Elovitz, 2007). There were positive and negative aspects of both schools, but it is important to emphasize that the parents of School A and School B were both satisfied with the education their children received. The responses of both sets of parents also reflected the importance of strong teachers in the classroom. The strength of individual teachers was not a focus for this research, but parents repeatedly mentioned how individual teachers had positive impacts on the lives of their students. Conversely, they also mentioned some poor teachers that had a negative impact on their children. This supports

research that overwhelmingly shows the largest influence on learning within the school system is the teacher in the classroom (Hattie, 2012). The grade configuration of a school can influence student outcomes, but it is by far a lesser influence than having a strong teacher in a classroom (Erb, 2006). Clark et al. (2013) wrote, “those individuals involved in this endeavor have raised more questions over the life of the debate than they have answered, and as a result, an optimal configuration for adolescent education has yet to be identified” (p.1). The configuration debate is not likely to be quieted as long as schools continue to exist.

Validity of the findings. The small sample size of parents interviewed was noted as a limitation of this study. However, parent comments increased confidence that the findings reflected pervasive perceptions of parents across the district. For example, the middle school in School A had a reputation for a lack of communication and an environment that was not welcoming. One parent commented that she heard of the reputation before her children arrived at the middle school level, and her own experiences confirmed the reputation. She had mentioned that she tried to keep an open mind, but after experiencing the middle school experience for herself, she felt the reputation was justified. The reputation for an unwelcoming environment, and a poor communication was further reinforced when multiple parents interviewed made the same comment. The noted consistency of comments from parents of each school demonstrated likelihood that the findings represented common and pervasive perceptions.

The willingness of the interviewees to criticize decisions made by the administration of each district, and criticize the administrators themselves, was further indication that the responses were authentic perceptions of the school district. The potential positive bias of the participants due to administrators choosing only participants that would give a favorable view of

the district was dispelled by the comments of the participants. There were participants from each school that questioned why they were chosen since they had been so critical of the administration. The participants from School B were especially critical of the past administration, yet they were pleased with the education of their children. Concerns for bias of positive responses due to the administration choosing only participants that held a positive view of the district were unfounded.

When parents discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the alternate grade configuration, they reinforced the strengths and weaknesses of the configuration their own children experienced. The exercise of reflection by comparing and contrasting allowed the researcher to evaluate the consistency of the responses. Parent responses were consistent throughout the interviews in response to questions asked from the alternate perspective. The researcher had confidence in the responses based on the consistency within each interview and the consistency across interviews from each group.

In addition to examining the internal validity of the responses, the researcher asked a colleague unrelated to the study for corroboration of the coding process. The discussion between the primary researcher and a secondary reviewer further confirmed the validity of the findings through the coding process. Validity was achieved by reaching greater than 80% agreement on the coding results. The findings accurately reflect the perceptions of parents of School A and parents of School B.

Implications

Transition. The impact of the transition from one school to another in School A on parents and students was significant. Parents and students from School A reported varying

degrees of anxiety surrounding the transition. The parent responses on the impact of the transition reflected the findings of Deemer et al. (2003) who reported that about 20% of students were significantly impacted by the transition. The responses of the parents from School A showed that a majority of students had some anxiety surrounding the transition, but were not significantly impacted beyond the initial transition.

However, parents reported that some of their children continued to struggle academically or socially long after the initial transition. The parents did not directly attribute the academic struggle to the transition, but rather the middle school environment as discussed in the next section. Nevertheless, the transition was a significant event for students as they transitioned from elementary school to middle school.

Since the transition from elementary school to middle school is a significant event for children, a robust program that assists both students and parents through the transition process is recommended. A program should be developed that addresses the concerns outlined by parents in this study. A program that eases student and parent anxiety regarding the basic navigation of the facility, scheduling, friendships, staff knowledge, communication systems, and academic support should be developed. Parents must be made to feel empowered during the transition as outlined in Goldring and Shapira (1993). Parents need to feel welcomed into the middle school process to optimize the support middle school children need for success.

Environment. Parents in both school settings desired an environment that is warm and welcoming for parents and students. A warm and supportive environment for students was viewed as a positive contribution to learning in the research literature (Eccles et al., 1991; Eccles et al., 1993; Flum & Kaplan, 2012; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Students are entering a

time of rapid developmental growth, and positive school experiences are a vital ingredient during the successful and productive transition from elementary school to middle school to high school.

In this study the middle school environment in School A was described as cold and unfriendly. The middle school environment described by parents was not the ideal environment touted as providing the ideal learning conditions as outlined in the research. Middle school leaders must consider the appropriate environment needed to best support the challenges that middle school students.

Parent participation. Parents play a vital role in the educational process for students, and it is important for school leaders to define the types of appropriate participation needed. The review of the literature consistently reinforced the importance of parent involvement with the educational process (Coleman, 1991; Hill & Tyson 2009; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Parents play a key role in the development of their children, especially during the tumultuous middle school years (Freytag, 2001; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003; Xu et al. 2010). Research supports appropriate involvement in the educational process of middle school students.

The results of this study showed that parental involvement in both settings changed as children aged in through the educational experience. However, responses from parents in School A were significantly different than School B at the middle school level. Parents from School A did not feel like the school wanted to partner with them at the middle school level. They felt like the school was trying to push parents away from the educational process, or at least reduce the involvement of parents in the process. This study did not investigate the point of view from the school, and the school may be making efforts to reach out to parents. However, the parents reported a lack of partnership with the school. Previous research shows benefits for students

when parents are appropriately involved in the educational process, and school must make every effort to welcome parents into the school.

Communication. Vertical lines of communication are a more difficult endeavor in a configuration involving a school-to-school transition such as the configuration in School A. Communication was barely mentioned in the K-8 model, but it was a strong point of emphasis for most parents in the K-5, 6-8 model. Communication was an afterthought in the K-8 setting. The strong communication links in the K-8 setting was tied to the strong relationships that parents reported with teachers. Relationship requires time and interaction, and therefore, parents felt like they were a partnering with the school in the educational process. The strong sense of community that was reported by the parents was the result of the teaching staff building strong relationships with children and parents over a longer period of time.

Schools that are organized such that students must transition from one building to another must pay attention to the lines of communication. When the middle schools receive the 6th grade students from the elementary schools, systems must be in place to help the teachers know as much about the incoming students as possible. This in turn will help make parents feel like the middle school staff cares about their child, and it will help teachers provide the best supports for their students.

Recommendations

Based on the finding of this study, it is not the recommendation of the researcher to advocate for the transition of all school districts to a K-5, 6-8 configuration model. Neither is it the recommendation of the researcher for all districts to transition the school configurations to a K-8 model. The recommendation for school districts is to take into consideration the advantages

and disadvantages that each model offers, and work within the frameworks of their community context to provide the best educational experience possible. There are many factors to consider when deciding on the ideal configuration. However, the findings of this study point to the K-8 model as a advantageous model for facilitating communication, parent participation, and a middle school learning environment to meet the needs of adolescent students. The findings of this study further clarify the finding of many previous analyses (Coleman, 1985; Foley-Demby, 2013; Hough, 2009; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Rutherford, 1993; Simons-Morton & Crump 2003). School leaders must embrace parent participation throughout the middle school years, maintain lines of communication, and provide an environment that is warm and welcoming for staff, students, and parents.

After reviewing the findings, the researcher concludes that the K-8 model is the best model for maintaining a productive middle school environment through adolescence. However, the recommendation of choosing one configuration over the other must be considered in the wider context of the community. Each of the advantages and disadvantages must be weighed and measured by the individual district and/or the parents choosing a community of residence. If the preference of parents is a smaller environment that holds off the transition until high school, parents can choose to buy a home in an area that supports that idea. Parents who are looking for a wider variety of activities, opportunities, and the opportunity for children to mature earlier can seek residence in a community that supports those ideals. Other school districts may also choose to offer choice schools for parents. Parents within the same school district may be able to choose their preferred setting. The purpose of this study was to help provide additional information to make an informed decision when faced with a configuration choice.

Recommendations for further research. Further examination into strategies for effectively guiding students and parents across the transition from one school to the next is warranted. Research on the efficacy of programs, and the return on investment for such programming are merited. Researchers may also consider determining the amount of learning loss attributed to the transition. Assigning an estimated amount of learning loss due to the transition would encourage schools to invest in transition programming because a return on investment could be calculated.

An extension of the research done on self-esteem related to configuration is a topic worth investigating. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) reported a lower self-esteem for students in a middle school model versus students in a K-8 model. Feldlaufer et al. (1998) also reported the self-esteem and self-concept dropped after the transition to middle school. Examining how the transition to middle school impacts students' self-esteem and self-concept would shed light on how to develop programming and supports to further improve the middle school experience for all students. A study using student interviews combined with observations would give researchers deeper understanding into the impact of transition from a student perspective.

Another topic for consideration would be to research the perceptions of high school teachers on the difference in preparation between a K-8 model and a K-5, 6-8 model. High school teachers may have some unique perspectives in comparing groups of students entering high schools from several different settings on how well students are prepared, or how well students are able to adjust to the rigors of high school. High school teachers may notice trends emerging that are characteristics of a group of students prepared in one setting or another. The perceptions of high school teachers in how they view the preparation of students for the high

school setting would be interesting. The parents from both schools mentioned that one advantage of the K-5, 6-8 model is that the added transition from elementary to middle school would better prepare students for the transition into high school. It would also be interesting to gather the perceptions of the high school teachers to comprehend if that thought is supported.

Finally, it would be beneficial to interview parents who have had experiences in both settings. There are parents who may have had children attending a K-8 environment, and later have children attending a K-5, 6-8 environment due to a move, or even a school choice. These parents may be able to further add insight into the advantages and disadvantages of each model.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions:

1. What do you think are some of the advantages of the K-8 model? Of the K-5/6-8 model?
2. What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the K-8 model? Of the K-5/6-8 model?
3. Describe your experience, and your child's experience when transitioning from elementary setting to a middle school setting.
4. If you could change anything about your child's school experience, what would it be?
5. What has been one experience in your child's education that you hope will never change in this district? Are there any other aspects of the district that you hope will never change? Why do you hope it never changes?
6. How would you describe the quality of education your child has received at this school? Can you share some examples of what makes a quality school experience from your perspective?
7. Would you recommend this school for the children of your friends? Why/why not?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share related to grade configuration that you did not have a chance to share earlier?