

Reducing Transitions in BPS (updated March 10, 2018)

by Lisa Jeanne Graf

Grade Configurations

In Boston, the Exam Schools have a large influence on K-8 schools largely by lowering enrollment for those schools in the 7th and 8th grades and the impact that has on those schools. Families love K-8s largely because they prefer their children to be with younger students when they are in the middle school years, than to be with high school students. Research has shown that the K-8, 9-12 grade configurations work well for student achievement as well. Also, the stability of a longer period in a school is beneficial for students who have had a lot of challenges in their lives.

A K-8, 9-12 Grade Configuration

It is hard to imagine that the exam schools would welcome a change to a 9-12 grade configuration. If they were that would be one good solution. K-8s are popular in the district. The biggest reason that families leave the K-8 schools is to enter the exam schools. Although there are seats available for 9th grade there are less than for grade 7 so many families think they need to make the shift at grade 7 or their child will not get a spot in the school.

A K-6, 7-12 and a K-8 , 9-12 Grade Configuration

Another solution would be for about half the schools to have a K-6, 7-12 model and for the other half to have a K-8, 9-12 model. The main concern with this approach is making sure that each group has an equal mix of options that would suit many different needs. The fact that there are no exam schools that are 9-12 and no arts academy at grade 7-12 is one example of students not having equal choices for the different grade configurations.

I would be concerned that the K-6, 7-12 grade configurations would end up having stronger academic options and that the K-8, 9-12 would become less popular. Slowly over time the whole system might move to K-6, 7-12 which doesn't have the best academic outcomes. Also, many families love K-8s and would prefer to see them survive and thrive.

One idea would be for some 7-12 schools to offer 50% of their seats in the 7th grade, and 50% of their seats in the 9th grade. This would help K-8 schools not lose as many students in the 7th and 8th grades, making their schools stronger. This would give families more choices to choose from as well. A K-8 student might want to go to a 7-12 in 7th grade. A K-6 student might want to go to a K-8 for middle school, and then a 9-12 school. There could be different options that could be good fits for individual students. This could both add more consistency and add more good choices for each family to choose from. One downside would be an influx of new students at grade 7 and grade 9 which might make some students feel like they have lost half of their community or gained too many new faces. But because students could more easily be in a place that is the best fit for them, I think those adjustments to changes in school populations might be worth it.

Balancing Options for K-6 and K-8 students

	For K-6 or K-8 students	For K-8 or 7-12 students	For K-6, K-8, or 7-12 students
School Grade Configuration	7-12 schools	9-12 schools	7-12 schools with admissions at grade 7 and grade 9. There would be guaranteed 50% admission at grade 7 and guaranteed 50% admission at grade 9.
Percentage of these schools to ensure equal options for K-6 and K-8 students	Equal to 9-12 schools	Equal to 7-12 schools	These schools do not impact the balance between 9-12 schools and 7-12 schools. There could be any number of these schools.

A K-7, 8-12 Grade Configuration

Another solution is a compromise between the K-8 supporters and the exam schools. That would be to have a grade configuration of k-7, 8-12. This would take one year away from the K-8 model. I think this might be accepted if it meant that most students would have all the BPS high schools open as options. That would be a great improvement. It would be a little harder to get K-5 schools to a K-7 configuration. For Roslindale I would imagine that the Irving could become a 6-7 school and possibly have a strand of K-5 if there was additional space. The smaller K-5 schools could continue to feed into the Irving. For the other small K-5 schools either additional grades could be added or perhaps they could pair with Early Learning Centers so that the grade configurations could start later and go to grade 7.

The other part is that the exam schools would need to lose one year of their school. The main benefits would be the following:

- More students could go to the exam schools
- Students that need more time to catch up academically to be ready for exam school work could get to that place
- There would be the potential for more diversity at the school in race, income, special needs, LGBT, etc..

Things to consider would be:

- Presently students have two years where they can apply to the exam schools. Perhaps the first exam could happen a year earlier, and half the class could be picked at that point. Then there would still be two years that students could apply.
- As for Latin classes, students could still take those classes. The current students who join in grade 9 are able to make that work. Also Latin could be offered to 7th graders in a summer program or through online courses.

As for alternative High Schools they provide a very specific and necessary contribution that is not in conflict with a K-7, 8-12 model. They can coexist fine alongside other schools with k-7, and 8-12 grades.

This grade configuration would also work well for busing.

As for schools outside of the district they could choose to adopt this grade configuration if they choose to.

Advanced Work

This year my daughter tested for advanced work. Experiencing this process personally makes me understand it's impact better. I learned that two options were available- Advanced Work and Excellence for All. Advanced Work is only offered in General Education classrooms. This is not ideal for students who need a smaller classroom for reasons like autism (less kids = less overwhelming). Because of this, I was happy that Excellence for All was an option. It seems like an improvement on making advanced work accessible to more students.

Next, I considered the schools that offered both options. The schools that were offered for my home address were schools that were not a good fit when I looked for schools back in pre-K. The schools that I would have been happy with either didn't offer Advanced Work, or Excellence for All or were not options. For me personally the thought of my daughter going to a school that doesn't feel like a good fit makes me only want to consider Advanced Work if she could go to another school with at least one friend. And this brings up a real problem. If a school has a group of students that all want to do Advanced Work it would be hard for them to go to another school as a group because most likely they live in many different neighborhoods. I would recommend that students have an option to go to a nearby school as a group. This would allow some friends to go to advanced work together. Maybe it could be set up to be like sibling preference.

One other problem about advanced work is that it is dependent on the lottery system. You might want a spot for your child in a school, but it might not be available.

Another problem is that each year students are tested to be in advanced work. If a student has a tough year that impacts their learning they are taken out of the program. This can be heart breaking for families (this happened to a friend's daughter this year). Now she will not have access to test prep for the exam schools even though she is very bright and wants to remain in advanced work. If she were in an excellence for all classroom I am guessing she could keep going and dive back into her studies. So this seems like another reason to embrace the Excellence for All approach more.

One thing I recently learned about advance work placements is that choices are determined by a zone system of three areas. Here is a link to see that zone map:

http://lgraf.com/BPS/DistrictMapSY18_19_%203ZoneAssignment.pdf

If the schools were more evenly offered around the district money could conceivably be saved on busing costs. It might be a non-issue however as few families would want to choose a school that is super far away.

I would much rather each school offer some type of Excellence for All program. It would be much fairer and cause less transitions. It would be much better for maintaining friendships which is huge especially for students that have a difficult time building friendships.

P.S. I just learned about a new program yesterday from my neighbor whose daughter was taken out of advanced work. Her daughter's school is offering International Baccalaureate Diploma and International Baccalaureate Middle Years programs. The mother is very excited about this program and is even considering keeping her daughter in the school's upper school instead of her original plan of shooting for an exam school. She loved the international part of the program and how it would open opportunities for college outside of our country. She also liked that it gave access to advanced work, without shutting students out. I am excited about this program too and want to learn more about it.

I would be interested in hearing other families' thoughts on Advanced Work and grade configurations.

Lisa_jeanne_graf@msn.com