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**The Question of Incorporating 6<sup>th</sup> Grade into Middle and High School Configurations**  
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The UR-East EPO (Educational Partnership Organization), established in 2015, set out on an ambitious project to turn around East, an urban high school deemed “failing” by the state of New York. Two years into a five-year contract, the leadership at East has increasingly recognized the importance of establishing a community school and connecting with students *before* they reach secondary school. In that effort, East, formerly encompassing grades 7-12, incorporated 6<sup>th</sup> grade during the first year of the EPO. During the EPO’s second year, East’s Superintendent, Dr. Shaun Nelms, asked the Rochester Board of Education to consider a resolution that would formally allow East to form a relationship with a nearby elementary school, thus extending the impact East could have on students by establishing a community school that would begin engaging community members, students, and their families as early as their kindergarten year.

On May 25, 2017, the Board voted to pass [Resolution No. 2016-17:717](#). The two schools, East and School No. 33, will partner in a collaboration that will smoothly transition 5<sup>th</sup> grade students to East in their 6<sup>th</sup> grade year.

This brief is a literature review that the Center for Urban Education Success prepared for Dr. Nelms as he approached the School Board with his proposal to pass Resolution No. 2016-17:717. It is organized into four sections which document: 1) how graded schools were established and have since gone through numerous iterations, 2) research from the adolescent development perspective, both supporting and critiquing 6<sup>th</sup> grade transition, 3) research from the field of education, reporting negative outcomes for students who transition to secondary school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and finally 4) why focusing on grade configuration/transition may not be the salient point in adequately addressing the needs of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### **Brief History of Graded Schools**

Of all the grade levels in U.S. public education, 6<sup>th</sup> grade has been the most changeable, fitting in to elementary, middle, and even high school configurations. This section provides a short review of schooling configurations in this country.

- School systems in the U.S. were traditionally 1st-8th grade (elementary) and 9-12th grade (secondary) until turn of the century.
- In 1909, the first junior high (7-9th) was created in Columbus, OH to offer academic programs for college-bound students and vocational programs for students heading to the job market.
- In 1950, the first "middle" school was created in Michigan, focusing on:
  - core curriculum
  - exploratory education
  - vocational/home arts

- team teaching
- interdisciplinary learning
- Middle schools meet social and personal needs of young adolescents – **"a creative faculty and administration dedicated to discovering more effective approaches to early adolescent education are more essential for education quality than grade level reorganization and school name changes"** (Gatewood Research Report: Middle School v. Junior High, 1970).

### **Adolescent Development Studies Pertaining to Grade Configuration**

The transition into middle school has been linked to **several problematic developmental outcomes** among early adolescents, such as:

- Declines in self-esteem (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984; Wigfield, Eccles, Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991)
- Declines in self-efficacy (Gutman & Midgley, 2000)
- Increases in self-consciousness (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973)
- More negative academic task-related affect (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992)
- Declines in student motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1988)
- Disrupted sense of belonging and connectedness (Juvonen, 2007; Gutman & Midgley, 2000)

However, there are also studies that **argue that the transition into middle school can lead to positive developmental outcomes** for early adolescents insofar as some crucial elements are taken into consideration. The overall consensus is that the **problematic developmental outcomes often associated with the middle school transition have less to do with grade configuration and more to do with the students' hindered access to developmentally-appropriate teaching and support throughout the transition**. Findings include:

- Autonomy supportive classrooms enhance students' motivation and perceptions of self-efficacy (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991).
- Pedagogical approaches involving peer collaboration (1) tap into early adolescents' desire to affiliate with peers, (2) help foster sense of connection, and (3) improve student engagement during this transitional period (Juvonen, 2007).
- Students are better able to direct psychological and tangible resources toward coping with the middle school transition when they live in fairly stable and supportive environments (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001).
- Group advisories and parent-involved transition programs ease the transition into middle school as students are provided with extensive social support and frequent opportunities to discuss topics that are important to them (Iver, 1990).

### **Education Studies – Problematic Outcomes**

These studies provide evidence that would suggest an argument against incorporating 6<sup>th</sup> grade into older grade configurations. However, none of them specifically look at a 6<sup>th</sup> grade transition into a high school that is configured like East (a community school, grades 6-12 with a middle-school format in the lower school, and a thorough program of social and emotional supports). Instead, these studies compare K-8 schools to middle schools, arguing that most outcomes,

particularly achievement, fare better for students in elementary configurations (K-8), rather than students in middle school configurations (6-8). Additional findings reveal:

- Significant achievement loss associated with the transition from elementary school to middle school at 6<sup>th</sup> grade, compared with K-8 schools that did not have a school-to-school transition in 6<sup>th</sup> grade (Alspaugh, 1998).
- Older K-8 schools perform significantly better in achievement than both middle schools and newer K-8 schools in the Philadelphia City School District (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007).
- 6<sup>th</sup> grade students attending middle school are more likely to be cited for discipline problems than those attending elementary school (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008).
- Students in K-8 configurations achieved significantly higher scores than middle school students in reading, math, and science assessments. However, the author also acknowledges that “there were many individual schools with outcomes not fitting the trend... suggest[ing] that it has been *easier* to provide effective middle grades education into a K-8 environment, though it is possible to provide it in a middle grades school” (Offenberg, 2001, p. 28),

### Research Emphasizing Whole-Child Context

Some researchers argue grade configuration is not the important topic to discuss when working with early adolescents, specifically because there is no adequate research on the effects of transitions on achievement (Mertens & Anfara, 2008). What matters most is how transitions support academic, procedural, and social-emotional well-being of students (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hough 2005). The more important issues to **focus on are an invigorating curriculum, trusting relationships, and family connections**. What grade a student begins middle school is less important than their social-emotional well-being (Beane & Lipka, 2006). Cohen, & Smerdon (2009) focused on the transition from middle to high school, specifically 9<sup>th</sup> grade; however, their emphasis on transitions not being a one-time occurrence applies to early adolescent transitions to middle school as well

Key points include:

- Early intervention to begin relationships and connect with families (e.g., prior to transition)
- Use data to identify students who might be vulnerable to transition struggles
- Student-focused, rigorous, and constructivist curriculum
- Socially and academically inviting settings
- Strong focus on social emotional supports
- View transition as a process that takes time, not a one-time occurrence

From this review, which covers the perspectives of history, adolescent development, educational achievement, and a more holistic answer to the questions of 6<sup>th</sup> transition to secondary school, we gather that the important point is to provide rigorous curriculum and adequate social emotional support continuously and over time. A key finding in the literature is that decisions about grade configuration are context specific and must consider factors that include the number

of students, transportation, socioeconomic status (SES), achievement goals, effects on other schools, the number of transitions, building design, and parental involvement (Paglin, & Fager 1997). Thus, context and the specific emotional and academic needs of 6<sup>th</sup> graders must be taken into account when transitioning them to secondary school settings.

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