



Frequently Asked Questions

Grade Configuration in the City School District of Albany

August 2017

What is grade configuration?

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

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

- Eight elementary schools serve students from prekindergarten-grade 5;
- Four elementary schools serve students from prekindergarten-grade 6;
- Three middle schools serve students in grades 6-8; and
- One comprehensive high school serves students in grades 9-12.

What is the Grade Configuration Steering Committee?

The Grade Configuration Steering Committee consists of some 30 parents, teachers, principals and community members charged with studying existing grade configuration and recommending possible long-term enrollment scenarios for elementary and middle schools. The committee began its work in May 2015. The first phase of its work finished in June 2016. The second phase of its work began in September 2016 and finished in June 2017 (*see pages 4-6 for more information about the work completed during Phase 1 and Phase 2*).

Why is the district considering changing the current grade configuration?

In short, for three reasons:

1. Too many students and not enough space. The district's elementary and middle schools are full or nearly full today. The district anticipates middle-school enrollment (grades 6-8) to grow by about 425 by September 2025. There is not enough space in the district's existing middle-school buildings to accommodate that growth.
2. Inequity between and among schools. Programs, opportunities and experiences vary widely across district schools, creating inequities. This is especially true for sixth-graders. Today, roughly two-thirds of the district's sixth-graders currently attend middle school. (*When the committee first began deliberating, about half the sixth grades were in middle school and half were in elementary school*). The rest attend elementary schools, which have their own inconsistencies in delivering academic programs and services to sixth-grade students. This has occurred over time primarily because decisions had to be made based on where there was space in buildings due to the significant fluctuations in the opening and closings of charter schools in Albany.

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

During the first decade of the 2000s, the district either renovated or rebuilt its elementary and middle schools. Why didn't the district anticipate the growing enrollment when it built those schools?

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

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

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

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

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

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

How much has the district grown?

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

A fall 2015 demographic study commissioned by the district predicted that by the 2025-26 school year there will be about 425 more students in grades 6-8 than there are today. Projections of current enrollment produce similar estimates.

What caused the increase in enrollment?

Many factors have contributed to the enrollment growth. More families are choosing district schools throughout the city. Five charter schools have closed, all serving middle-school students, with the most recent two closures coming in June 2015. A large influx of international and refugee students – quadrupling to 1,300 in recent years – has contributed to more students overall, as well. Also attracting more families is the 2000s facilities project that renovated or rebuilt the district’s elementary and middle schools and created modern, appealing schools in all areas of the city.

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

How is the current configuration inequitable?

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

Also, students at Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School and William S. Hackett Middle School had access to more programs and opportunities than middle-school students in at North Albany Academy. (At the recommendation of the Phase 1 committee, North Albany converted from a prekindergarten-grade 8 school to a prekindergarten-grade 5 school).

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

Why the focus on sixth-graders?

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

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

Sixth-graders in elementary school have a half-hour less instruction per day than sixth-graders in middle school because the school day is contractually 30 minutes shorter for elementary employees than for middle-school employees. That means elementary sixth-graders have 13 fewer days in school (more than 2½ weeks) each year than sixth-graders in middle school.

There are almost 250 sixth-graders in district elementary schools who will transition to middle school in seventh grade and, two years later, to high school. Grade configuration research is clear on the effect of transitions on children: they are disruptive and can cause trauma. This is especially true during the middle-school years of physical and emotional changes.

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

What are the phases of the committee?

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

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

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

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

What did the Phase 1 Grade Configuration Steering Committee recommended to the Board of Education?

1. The district should begin to move away from the prekindergarten-grade 8 model. Until September 2017, North Albany Academy, had this grade configuration.

This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on Nov. 19, 2015. *Starting with the 2017-18 school year, North Albany Academy will serve students through fifth grade.*

2. Sixth-graders belong in middle school. The committee expressed its preference for a permanent third middle school for grades 6-8. Eventually all sixth grades will move to middle school and all elementary schools will serve students through fifth grade. This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on Nov. 19, 2015.
3. There needs to be a permanent middle school on the north or northwest side of the city. Since the district closed the former Philip Livingston Magnet Academy in the face of rapidly dwindling enrollment and charter-school growth in 2009, middle-school students and families who live in the north and northwest parts of Albany have to travel long

distances to get to Hackett and Myers. Providing a more accessible, equitable middle school for these students and families is a priority for the committee and the district.

This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on Nov. 19, 2015. *The district's newest middle school, Edmund J. O'Neal Middle School of Excellence, will open in September 2017.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The district's newest middle school, Edmund J. O'Neal Middle School of Excellence, will open in September 2017. It is located at 50 North Lark St. The former Alternative Learning Center, now the Tony Clement Center for Education, relocated to 395 Elk St., former home of West Hill Middle School. This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on June 16, 2016.

After extensive discussion, the committee agreed that the interim middle school could serve as a neighborhood middle school serving families from the north and northwest parts of the city. This recommendation was reported to the Board of Education on June 16, 2016.

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

The school, now named Edmund J. O'Neal Middle School of Excellence, will consist of students from Arbor Hill Elementary, North Albany Academy, Philip Schuyler Achievement Academy and Sheridan Preparatory Academy. The school also would house the remaining students from West Hill Middle School, which served as a temporary middle school after Brighter Choice Middle schools closed.

What did the Phase 2 Grade Configuration Steering Committee recommend to the Board of Education?

The Phase 2 committee consensus at the end of their deliberations on June 5 was:

1. The district should operate four middle schools to accommodate its increasing student population.
2. Arbor Hill Elementary School should be converted into a 500-student middle school and the new middle school opening at 50 North Lark in September should continue to operate as a 500-student middle school. Arbor Hill Elementary would need to be renovated to accommodate middle-school students and North Albany Academy would need to expand to accommodate the Arbor Hill Elementary students. Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School and William S. Hackett Middle School would continue to operate as 650-student middle schools.
3. All four middle schools should be enrolled using a formula that evenly spreads higher-, medium- and lower-performing elementary schools across the four middle schools.

What has the Board of Education acted on to date?

On March 3, 2016, the Board of Education agreed with and approved the following recommendations of the Phase 1 Grade Configuration Steering Committee:

1. Maintain West Hill Middle School at 395 Elk St. for at least the 2016-2017 school year. West Hill served students in grades 7-8 only in 2016-17 in anticipation of a transition to a new third middle school in 2017-18. [*West Hill Middle School served students through the end of the 2017-17 school year, at which point it closed.*]
2. Cap Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School enrollment for 2016-17 at 725 students. [*The school did not exceed its cap in 2016-17.*]
3. Cap William S. Hackett Middle School enrollment for 2016-17 at 650 students. [*The school did not exceed its cap in 2016-17.*]
4. Create a process to enroll middle-school students in other schools in 2016-17 should Myers and/or Hackett reach their caps. [*The school did not exceed its cap in 2016-17.*]
5. Maintain North Albany Academy as a prekindergarten-grade 8 school for 2016-17 with a plan to phase out grades 6-8 starting in September 2017 (if space permits). [*North Albany Academy will become a prekindergarten-grade 5 school in September 2017.*]

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

No, according to the Phase 2 Grade Configuration Steering Committee. The committee recommended that the district operate four middle schools to accommodate its growing enrollment.

The committee’s rationale: By the 2019-20 school year, the district will have roughly 400 more students in grades 6-8 than it has seats for today. With its continued emphasis on equity, the committee determined that two middle schools of roughly 500 students each and two middle schools of roughly 650 each would more effectively balance resources among buildings and allow for enrollment growth and flexibility when seating special populations.

The committee considered but rejected the concept of renovating an existing elementary school and converting it to a 1,000-seat middle school.

Committee members also considered but rejected two options that proposed serving Albany’s middle-schoolers in three buildings. Committee members raised repeated concerns about the safety and academic options that would be available in such a large middle school.

Three buildings would have meant that one school would have to serve a minimum of 1,000 students to meet enrollment needs, a prospect that committee members overwhelmingly rejected.

The committee examined research findings about the success rates between larger and smaller middle schools. Although overall data are generally inconclusive, individual studies of districts with similar demographics to the City School District of Albany indicate that minority and economically disadvantaged students tended to perform better in smaller schools. In addition, a national survey of principals found discipline problems were related to school size: The bigger the school, the higher percentage of discipline issues.

In the end, the Board of Education will have the final decision following the committee’s recommendations.

Will the district build new middle schools?

At this point, no.

If the Board of Education accepts the Phase 2 committee’s recommendation, Arbor Hill Elementary School would be converted into a 500-student middle school and Edmund J. O’Neal Middle School would continue to operate as a 500-student middle school. Arbor Hill Elementary would need to be renovated to accommodate middle-school students and North Albany Academy would need to expand to accommodate the Arbor Hill Elementary students. Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School and William S. Hackett Middle School would continue to operate as 650-student middle schools.

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

When the committee began its deliberations, six elementary schools and North Albany Academy had sixth-grades. As of September 2017, four elementary schools have sixth grades: Albany School of Humanities (ASH), Eagle Point Elementary School, Giffen Memorial Elementary School and Thomas O'Brien Academy of Science and Technology (TOAST). Those schools will be affected.

When would those changes go into effect?

That depends on whether the board accepts the committee's recommendations, which the board will consider in the fall of 2017. All changes will require board approval.

What other options did the Phase 1 Grade Configuration Steering Committee consider?

The committee studied, discussed and ultimately rejected the following:

1. Creating an early childhood center or centers that all prekindergarten children would attend
2. Creating at least one more prekindergarten-grade 8 school
3. Changing magnet elementary enrollment. The committee said that issue should be decided by the school board.

The committee also studied the possibility of establishing, at some point, a "newcomer" school for newly arriving international and refugee students. *The district has created a newcomer program – Albany International Center – that will begin serving students in September 2017.*

What other options did the Phase 2 Grade Configuration Steering Committee consider?

1. Serving all students in grades 6-8 in three middle schools. The committee considered but rejected the concept of renovating an existing elementary school and converting it to a 1,000-seat middle school.

Committee members raised repeated concerns about the safety and academic options that would be available in such a large middle school, and overwhelmingly rejected the proposal.

The committee examined research findings about the success rates between larger and smaller middle schools. Although overall data are generally inconclusive, individual studies of districts with similar demographics to the City School District of Albany indicate that minority and economically disadvantaged students tended to perform better in smaller schools. In addition, a national survey of principals found discipline problems were related to school size: The bigger the school, the higher percentage of discipline issues.

Committee members rejected two scenarios of three middle schools because:

- Not enough seats to meet current enrollment or projected growth
- Does not relieve crowding in existing middle schools and some elementary schools
- Does not allow all sixth-graders to be in middle school
- Would allow current inequities to continue

2. Enrolling all students via lottery. The committee rejected this because:
 - A truly random lottery removes all parent choice.
 - A truly random lottery separates established peer groups and possibly students living in the same house.
 - Magnet elementary and Albany High School lotteries have not resulted in balanced student bodies. (Example: Montessori Magnet School has the largest percentage of white students and smallest percentage of black students of all elementary schools.
 - A lottery with choice (such as the magnet lottery) favors families with the knowledge and means to research schools, continuing inequity on wider scale.
 - History in our district has shown that a lottery with sibling and neighborhood preferences results in demographic imbalance.

3. Allowing open enrollment for all students. Open enrollment would allow families to select the middle school their child would attend. The committee rejected this option because it would be extremely challenging to administer and it favors families with the knowledge and means to research schools.