



Office of the Superintendent
Arlington High School
P. O. Box 167
869 Massachusetts Avenue
Arlington, MA 02476-0002

Telephone
(781) 316-3500
Fax
(781) 316-3509

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To: School Committee
From: Kathleen Bodie, Ed.D.
Re: Recommendation Gibbs Configuration

My recommendation to the School Committee is that the Gibbs School be configured for sixth grade only. The rationale for my recommendation is based on a number of considerations:

- Having all sixth grade students together in their own school presents a unique opportunity for students from seven elementary schools to come together as a class in an environment that can be organized for their needs as they transition from elementary to middle school. Presently, the sixth grade schedule must conform to the schedule that works for all grades at OMS.
- The choice of a sixth grade only school rather than 6-8 grade school eliminates the potential for inequity between two unevenly sized 6-8 grade middle schools.
- Sixth grade students would benefit socially-and emotionally in this key transition year by being in a more personalized learning environment in which there is a narrower age range of students. There is a notable difference between sixth and eighth grade students - that difference in a school can both be beneficial and detrimental.
- A positive result of bringing all students from seven elementary schools together in the middle school is that students will find new friends among the larger pool of students who have similar interests. If there are two smaller middle schools, then the opportunity to meet all of the students in your grade cohort is deferred until high school. Many students know and are friends with students from other schools through the various town activities they have participated in during their elementary years, which is only an asset in the development of class cohort identity. This identity could be better nurtured in a smaller learning environment.
- Research regarding the potential detrimental effect of transitions on academic performance focuses on individual students moving from school to school or district to district. In this situation, the sixth grade would move as a cohort, which would mitigate the effect of moving to another building because they are moving with their friends. The impact of transitions can be prevented by thoughtful planning and communication

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between the schools. The experience in Needham is that the sixth grade only school provides strong support for students as they transition from elementary school to middle school. The transition to seventh grade is smooth because of the communication and thoughtful planning that occurs between the two schools.

- The Gibbs School is a much more navigable school than Ottoson Middle School, which is a challenging environment for incoming sixth grade students who are transitioning from smaller elementary schools. If the decision was to configure Gibbs as a 6-8 grade school, then two-thirds of the each incoming sixth grade would still experience the challenge of the labyrinthine Ottoson as they adjust to the other challenges of entering middle school.
- Smaller schools encourage a feeling of community, which is important in supporting a positive school culture. In the sixth grade configuration, all sixth grade students would experience a smaller learning environment.
- The incremental costs of a sixth grade school are about half those of replicating a 6-8 grade school primarily because of the number of programs that must be replicated for equity.