

## **PSD to Overhaul Grade Structure**

by Sandy Perlic

Poudre School District officials are moving ahead with a plan to reconfigure the current grade structure within the district after the Board of Education approved Superintendent Jerry Wilson's controversial grade reconfiguration recommendation at its April 23 meeting.

Board members voted 5-2 to change the current grade configuration of kindergarten(K)-6, 7-9, and 10-12 by moving sixth graders into "middle schools" with seventh and eighth graders, and shifting ninth graders into high schools. As part of the reconfiguration, a K-8 structure may be a possibility at some schools within the district. District officials anticipate a phase-in process of three to four years before all district schools conform to the new configuration.

"Although I was hoping we could give more definitive guidance in the K-8 configuration, on the whole, I think we made a good decision on grade configuration," said boardmember Ross Cunniff. "This decision will give much more equity to our ninth graders. And with K-8 at least being an option for communities, I believe we will be able to offer more support, via fewer transitions, for the students who need it the most. I look forward to seeing the administration's implementation move ahead."

### **The Process**

The board's decision follows many months of research and gathering input on various grade configuration possibilities.

In February 2006, the board approved the appointment of a study group to explore alternative grade configurations, with a special focus on moving ninth grade students into high schools. This was spurred by a desire to create equitable opportunities for all students in the district, including opening up more academic and extracurricular opportunities for ninth graders. Also driving the study was concern about unbalanced enrollment between schools, a high dropout rate, and a noticeable decline in student achievement during "transition years" as students move from elementary schools to junior highs, and from junior highs to high schools.

With these concerns in mind, two teams comprised of parents, teachers, administrators and principals were formed. They met frequently to review existing research on grade configuration, and to solicit input from the community and schools on various configurations and their potential benefits and drawbacks.

Ultimately, the Design Team narrowed its focus to two configuration alternatives: maintaining the status quo, and moving the sixth and ninth graders for a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade structure. After more debate, the Design Team recommended to School Superintendent Dr. Jerry Wilson and his cabinet that the district shift to the new configuration. Dr. Wilson then used the Design Team's input to prepare a formal recommendation to the Board of Education to change grade configuration in the district to the K-5, 6-8, 9-12 structure, and later amended his recommendation to allow K-8 schools where desired.

### **A District Divided**

Throughout the public process, it was apparent that not everyone was convinced that switching the district's grade configuration would be beneficial. Those who attended forums on the north and west sides of the district, where high schools are currently full, favored retaining the current grade structure. Attendees from the south and east parts of the district were more amenable to change.

At the forums and during public comment periods at school board meetings, many spoke out against the change. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," was a common theme for many opponents.

"I don't believe this proposal is very well researched," stated one parent at the April 23 meeting. "I am vehemently against the movement of sixth graders to junior high school," said another.

Concern about sixth graders being moved up with seventh and eighth graders proved to be a sticking point even for those who otherwise supported the idea of changing the grade structure, and several board members publicly struggled with the idea.

"I'm essentially opposed to moving sixth graders out," said boardmember Ed Hayes, who stated that he didn't think the success in moving Zach Elementary's sixth graders into Kinard Junior High this past year would translate across the district.

### **Potential Benefits**

In the long run, however, five of the seven member board voted to approve the proposed grade reconfiguration. The potential benefits of the change appeared to weigh heavily in their decision.

After researching the issue, members of the Design Team reported numerous possible advantages to moving ninth graders into the high schools. "Putting them in the high school buildings will allow better vertical articulation of curriculum across the 9-12 so teachers can collaborate better on the expectations there," said parent and Design Team member Rob Petterson.

"High schools are able to offer a greater variety of courses and a greater variety of scheduling options. Therefore students of all abilities have the potential to better meet their needs in that environment," he said.

Petterson also believes there is a real advantage to the 9-12 structure for ninth graders who wish to participate in extracurricular activities. "Some of the extracurricular activities that are on a statewide or nationwide basis are coordinated around a 6-8, 9-12 kind of basis," he said. "(The current configuration is) sort of awkward for those ninth graders in the junior high that can't really participate in the senior high version, but are beyond the 6-8 version or the junior high version."

Improving the district's high dropout rate was also a factor in the Design Team's recommendation to move ninth graders. Petterson says the research indicates that "the dropout rate among high school kids is less the earlier they get into high school."

Rocky Mountain High School Assistant Principal Brett Larsen, another Design Team member, said the ninth grade reconfiguration was the easy question to answer in their process. "The much more difficult question, and this is what the Design Team wrestled with, was the sixth grade piece."

In the end, Larsen reports, research into the middle school model was enough to convince most Design Team members of the wisdom of the change. "It's a teaming

model,” Larsen said. “For a group of kids you (may) have three core teachers that teach all their academic subjects, whereas a kid that goes to a regular junior high will see eight different teachers.

“It’s easier to keep track of that group of kids when you have intentionally made them small and accountable. It’s a first step into the world of secondary education.”

Middle schools will also benefit seventh and eighth graders, Larsen believes. “So much of what the junior high has to offer is dictated by ninth grade graduation requirements, and then it’s like whatever’s left over we can do with our seventh and eighth graders. I think they can be much better served by a model that fits their entire age group, which is the middle school model.”

Another advantage to moving sixth graders up may be better teacher collaboration. “The academic curricula by and large in the nation are structured 6-8, 9-12,” Petterson said, including the science and math courses in Poudre School District. “I do think that having the staff in the same building that have to teach through that curricular sequence allows them much more opportunity to collaborate and get the pieces right for our students going through that sequence.”

Petterson also believes that sixth graders are ready and willing to have more learning opportunities. “Many of them want to have a deeper, richer curriculum,” he said. The middle school model would allow for sixth grade students to take courses in instrumental music and foreign languages earlier than they might in the elementary schools, according to Petterson.

The potential benefits for all students ultimately convinced the Design Team, and subsequently the Board of Education, that the grade reconfiguration was desirable. “I support it because I think it’s good for students at all grade levels, and of all ranges of abilities, or it can provide benefits for them in any case,” said Petterson.

### **Caution: Bumpy Road Ahead**

Recognizing the advantages in a revised grade structure did not prevent the Design Team from acknowledging there would be obstacles to overcome with the change.

“This is going to be a huge culture change,” Larsen admitted. “When it occurs, half of our school (at Rocky) will be brand new.”

“For the middle schools, sixty-six percent of their kids are going to be brand new that year. So there’s some areas for concern,” he said. “But there’s also some areas for growth. You can really work on the culture and climate of your building when so many of your kids are brand new. It gives a school an opportunity to change things they didn’t like and strengthen things that they did.”

Although Larsen expects a smaller effect on elementary schools because they will lose only one grade level, there will be an associated loss of per-pupil funding. “That’s a serious concern,” he said.

Concerns about a smooth transition with so many new students at the middle school and high school levels are one of many things school staff and administration will have to contend with. Design Team members identified 30-40 areas of concern with the reconfiguration that they forwarded to Dr. Wilson with their recommendations for an effective transition. New school boundaries will have to be established. Also, sixth grade teachers may need additional training to teach effectively at the middle school level,

acknowledges Dr. Wilson.

### **What's Next**

An implementation team will be assembled soon to identify all potential concerns and develop plans for addressing them, said Dr. Wilson. Meanwhile, a Facility Steering committee has already begun to evaluate school buildings districtwide to identify what will be necessary to accommodate the changed grade structure, and meetings have begun with the purpose of identifying what conditions will be applied before granting exceptions to the K-5 configuration.

Although Poudre School District's administration and staff have a daunting task ahead in the next three to four years, Larsen believes they are up to the challenge. "Most people in our school district (are) committed to making the district as good as it can be," he said. "I know at Rocky, we're just going to move forward. We're going to do what we can. We're going to say, 'Okay, these are challenges. Let's meet them head on and be better.'"

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