



REL Appalachia Ask-A-REL Response

Early Childhood
October 2017

Question:

What are the pros and cons of a K–2 elementary school grade configuration, particularly in comparison with a K–5 model?

Response:

Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about K–2 elementary school configuration. Ask-A-REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. Ask-A-REL provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations in response to questions about available education research.

Following an established REL Appalachia research protocol, we searched for research reports and descriptive study articles on the pros and cons of the K–2 elementary school grade configuration. The sources included ERIC and other federally funded databases and organizations, research institutions, academic research databases, and general Internet search engines. For more details, please see the methods section at the end of this document.

The research team did not evaluate the quality of the resources provided in this response; we offer them only for your reference. Also, the search included the most commonly used research databases and search engines to produce the references presented here, but the references are not necessarily comprehensive, and other relevant references and resources may exist. Our search yielded relatively few references on your topic, but we have identified several previous Ask-A-REL responses on other school configurations and strategies to support students during school transitions that may be of interest.

References

Howley, C. B. (2002). Grade-span configurations. *School Administrator*, 59(3), 24–29. Abstract available from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ640945>; full text retrieved from http://www.portangelesschools.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_142018/File/Community/Capital%20Facilities%20Planning/Long-Range%20Facilities/ms3.pdf

From the abstract: “Discusses debate surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of various grade-span configurations. Offers several provocative “hunches” concerning the implications of grade-span-configuration research for practice. Includes list of additional resources on grade-span configurations.”

Norwood, H. S. (2002). *Update on the relationship between elementary grade span and student achievement: Identification of human interactions and behaviors in a kindergarten–2nd grade configured young primary elementary which resulted in superior student achievement observed in the 4th and 5th grade*. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED473710>

From the abstract: “This cross-sectional study used primarily quantitative methods to investigate the superior achievement of 4th- and 5th-grade students at Alaska’s Kenai Peninsula Borough School District who as young elementary students had attended K–2 primary school, compared to peers who had attended a K–6, K–8, or K–12 configured school. Since this study was limited to a single school district that included all four elementary school configurations in communities that were found to be similar, variables that historically confuse the application of results to conclusions were systematically eliminated as causal factors. To study the effect of the remaining variables on student outcome, educational instructors that had experience teaching in both a K–2 and other configurations within the district were surveyed. The survey findings revealed the magnitude of the variance between causal agents known to affect future student success that exists in the K–2 versus other configuration elementary schools. In order of decreasing magnitude, the following variables are more prevalent in the K–2 environment than in other configurations, and their increased presence related to superior student achievement in later years: Resources, Parental Involvement, Collaboration (among administrators, teachers, and special services personnel), Foundation (ability to establish social and emotional competence, language, cognition, teaching strategies that lead to next levels of accomplishment), Relevant Teacher Training, Teacher Efficacy (with regard to aligning primary students’ interests and abilities), High Expectations, Principal’s Leadership, Teacher’s Stability, and School Climate.”

Paglin, C., & Fager, J. (1997). *Grade configuration: Who goes where?* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Northwest Regional Education Laboratory. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED432033>

From the abstract: “This booklet is the fourth in a series of "hot topic" reports, that address current educational concerns. The booklet examines questions relating to grade configurations, its purpose being to increase awareness and understanding of the issues surrounding grade span. It explores the ways that schools have addressed concerns associated with particular grade spans and suggests avenues for further inquiry. The text focuses on historical trends in grade configuration and the various contexts of grade spans, such as whether a school is in a rural or an urban area. Most research on grade span focuses on the middle grades and addresses such questions as: Which grades should be grouped together in one school? How many grades should be in one school? and How many school transitions will students make during the K–12 years? Some tips for starting a school with a grade span new to a school system are offered, followed by an overview of grade-span considerations. The bulk of the volume describes eight schools’ experiences with grade spans, discussing such issues as how the grade span came about and how the schools were structured to meet the needs of the particular grades it contains.”

Schwartz, A. E., Stiefel, L., & Cordes, S. A. (2017). Moving matters: The causal effect of moving schools on student performance. *Education and Finance Policy*, 12(4), 419–446. Retrieved from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/EDFP_a_00198

From the abstract: “Policy makers and analysts often view the reduction of student mobility across schools as a way to improve academic performance. Prior work indicates that children do worse in the year of a school move, but has been largely unsuccessful in isolating the causal effects of mobility. We use longitudinal data on students in New York City public elementary and middle schools to isolate the causal effects of school moves on student performance. We account for observed and time-invariant differences between movers and non-movers using rich data on student sociodemographic and education program characteristics and student fixed effects. To address the potential endogeneity of school moves arising from unobserved, time-varying factors, we use three sets of plausibly exogenous instruments for mobility: first-grade school grade span, grade span of zoned middle school, and building sale. We find that in the medium term, students making structural moves perform significantly *worse* in both English language arts (ELA) and math, whereas those making nonstructural moves experience a significant *increase* in ELA performance. In the short term, there is an additional negative effect for structural moves in ELA. These effects are meaningful in magnitude and results are robust to a variety of alternative specifications, instruments, and samples.”

Additional Organizations to Consult

The School Superintendents Association (AASA): <http://www.aasa.org/>

From the website: “AASA is the premier association for school system leaders and serves as the national voice for public education and district leadership on Capitol Hill.”

Additional Ask-A-REL Responses to Consult

Ask-A-REL Central at Marzano Research. (n.d.). *What is the research on freshman transition programs?* Retrieved from <https://www.relcentral.org/what-is-the-research-on-freshman-transition-programs/>

Ask-A-REL Northwest at Education Northwest. (2015). *Ninth-grade transition programs*. Retrieved from <http://relnw.educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/ask-a-rel-transitions.pdf>

Ask-A-REL Southeast at Florida Center for Reading Research. (2013). *What does the research indicate about the effectiveness of various types of “transition to middle school” dropout prevention programs, especially those focused on decreasing discipline referrals?* Retrieved from http://rel-se.fsu.edu/_ask-a-rels/Middle%20School%20Dropout%20Prevention_022013.pdf

Ask-A-REL Southeast at Florida Center for Reading Research. (2015). *What are the common problems associated with school transitions for 5th graders and what are some strategies to*

aid with these problems? Retrieved from <http://rel-se.fsu.edu/ask-a-rels/3-15/Ask%20A%20REL%20Assisting%20with%20transition%20to%20middle%20school.pdf>

Ask-A-REL Southwest at SEDL. (2017). *How effective are early childhood education (ECE) transition plans in increasing student achievement in Pre-K/ECE and early elementary school (K–3)?* Retrieved from http://relsouthwest.sedl.org/ask_archive/7-17_aar_pre-k-transition-plans.pdf

Ask-A-REL West at WestEd. (2016). *Transitional kindergarten (TK) and academically focused pre-k programs.* Retrieved from https://relwest.wested.org/system/documents/pdfs/482/original/REL_West_Reference_Desk_Memo_Drawback_On_TK_Setting_508.pdf?1476396642

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- "K-2" AND "benefits" AND "elementary school"
- "K-2 elementary school" AND "benefits"
- Elementary grade span
- Differences K-2 and K-5 grade span
- "K-2 elementary school" AND outcomes
- "K-2 elementary school" AND efficacy
- Benefits of K-2 elementary school model
- Elementary school grade configuration
- Elementary school grade configuration AND K-2
- "K-2 elementary schools"

Databases and Resources

We searched ERIC, a free online library of more than 1.6 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), for relevant resources. Additionally, we

searched the academic database ProQuest, Google Scholar, and the commercial search engine Google.

Reference Search and Selection Criteria

In reviewing resources, Reference Desk researchers consider—among other things—these four factors:

- **Date of the publication:** Searches cover the most current information (i.e., within the last ten years), except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- **Search priorities of reference sources:** Search priorities include IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols. Applicable resources must be publicly available online and in English.
- **Methodology:** The following methodological priorities/considerations guide the review and selection of the references: (a) study types—randomized controlled trials, quasi experiments, surveys, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc., generally in this order; (b) target population, samples (representativeness of the target population, sample size, volunteered or randomly selected), study duration, etc.; (c) limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, etc.
- **Existing knowledge base:** Vetted resources (e.g., peer-reviewed research journals) are the primary focus, but the research base is occasionally slim or nonexistent. In those cases, the best resources available may include, for example, reports, white papers, guides, reviews in non-peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, and organization websites.

Resources included in this document were last accessed on September 15, 2017. URLs, descriptions, and content included here were current at that time.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by education stakeholders in the Appalachia region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia (REL AP) at SRI International. This Ask-A-REL response was developed by REL AP under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0004 from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, administered by SRI International. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.