

**GRADE 4-5 INTERMEDIATE/BRIDGE SCHOOLS  
DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS  
FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LEARNERS**

This document discusses the rationale for San Carlos School District building new Transitional/Intermediate Elementary schools to be inclusive of Fourth and Fifth Grades. We have named these (for the time being) “Intermediate/Bridge Schools” because they are intended to leverage the foundational role of Pre-K through Third Grade Schools and prepare students for the Sixth through Eighth Grade Middle School environment, which emphasizes departmentalization and content specialization.

There is a growing body of evidence calling for aligning Pre-K through third grade (P-3) as a unique educational unit (Pre-K Coalition, weblink). A Policy Brief by the Pre-K Coalition states “the years between pre-kindergarten and third grade are vital to creating the foundation for later school success.” They call for a comprehensive preschool-through-third-grade approach “to ensure that children develop a solid foundation in literacy, math, social-emotional skills, as well as strong engagement in learning.” Furthermore, a Pre-K through Third Grade alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, family engagement, and professional development better prepares all learners to acquire the skills and academic competencies to succeed in the ensuing grades.

Much has been written about the Middle School Model for the upper elementary configuration of schooling (McEwin and Greene, 2011). The vast majority of Middle Schools adopt a Sixth through Eighth Grade sequence featuring specialized content area teachers organized in departments with students moving between classrooms and teachers (Anfara and Bueller, 2005). A cause for concern has been raised with the Middle School model due to reported difficulties with transitions and decreases in student achievement as students move from (in the majority of cases) Fifth to Sixth grades. This has led to proposals to return to Kindergarten through Eighth Grade configurations. Others have called for the departmentalization of Fourth and Fifth grades to ameliorate the transition from Elementary to Middle School (Chan et. al., 2009)

San Carlos School District proposes to organize Fourth and Fifth Grade students in their own schools to serve as a bridge between the foundational learning focused, self-contained P-3 schools to the content specialization and departmentalized Middle Schools. A Four Five school presents opportunities as a hybrid model that addresses the transitional issues discussed above and recognizes the unique developmental and learning attributes of these students.

## Literature Cited:

Anfara, V. and Buehler, M. (2005). Grade Configuration and the Education of Young Adolescents. *Middle School Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1.

Chan, T.C., Terry, D., and Bessette, H. (2009). Fourth and Fifth Grade Departmentalization: A Transition to Middle School. *Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences* 13(2).  
[http://www.oak.edu/~oakedu/assets/ck/files/Chan\\_Terry\\_Bessete\\_JLAS\\_Spring\\_2009.pdf](http://www.oak.edu/~oakedu/assets/ck/files/Chan_Terry_Bessete_JLAS_Spring_2009.pdf)

McEwin, C.K., and Greene, M.W. (2011). The Status of Programs and Practices in America's Middle Schools: Results from Two National Studies. Association for Middle School Level Education.  
[http://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/research/Research\\_from\\_the\\_Field/Status\\_Programs\\_Practices\\_AMLE.pdf](http://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/research/Research_from_the_Field/Status_Programs_Practices_AMLE.pdf)

The Pre-K Coalition. POLICY BRIEF: The Importance of Aligning Pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade.  
<http://prekcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/The-Importance-of-Aligning-Pre-K-Through-3rd-Grade.pdf>

## **RATIONALE FOR NEW GRADE-LEVEL CONFIGURATION**

**Fourth and Fifth Grades are developmentally unique and a transitional time for students—a “transition/bridge” between P-3 and 6-8 students.**

Students are honing their critical thinking and process skills in an environment that encourages more independent learning. Where P-3 students are engaged in learning how to read and write, 4-5 students are reading and writing to learn. Mathematics becomes a conceptual tool that sets the stage for Pre Algebra, Algebra, and other advanced course work in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The curricular sequence of P-3, 4-5, and 6-8 grades maps with greater fidelity to the recently adopted Common Cores Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics that come online in the 2014-15 school year.

**The Transitional 4-5 grades are a time to focus on and refine developing critical skills for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning.**

The District has identified Design Thinking and Innovation, Computational Thinking, Cyber and Media Literacy, Data Visualization, and learning in Blended environments as core to participating in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century workforce, citizenship, and lifelong learning. We see 4-5 schools as embodying the physical and hybrid learning environments that establish the habits of mind for this kind of deeper learning. It also presents the opportunity to establish mobile, ubiquitous computing seamlessly integrated with school learning environments. This hybrid/bridge structure serves as a transition from the inclusive P-3 classroom to the content specialized Middle School. Traditional curricular boundaries become blurred allowing students to pursue blended and individualized learning opportunities. This model will encourage teachers to partner and take advantage of individual teacher expertise -- blurring the boundaries of teaching assignments, schedules and classroom configurations. The increased flexibility in teacher time and in how teachers interact with individuals and groups of students allows for differentiation as a matter of course. These models will bridge back to and inform the design of P-3 and 6-8 classrooms.

**A 4-5 Grade Configuration allows a more seamless transition with the Middle School Grades by focusing on Mathematics and Writing.**

Research studies identify a dip in student performance when transitioning from elementary to middle school. In San Carlos School District we typically experience a significant downturn in Mathematics performance as students move from Fourth to Fifth Grade. Fourth and Fifth grades are also a critical times to master the writing process. This is of particular importance given the Common Cores Standard’s emphasis on writing across all subject areas.

**An Intermediate/Bridge model provides an opportunity to increase parent involvement at a time when their participation often begins to wane.**

Typically, parent involvement decreases as students move from elementary to middle schools. The 4-5 configuration will promote a school “identity” that would extend into Fifth Grade. The flexibility of the learning environments envisioned for the Intermediate/Bridge

School will provide increased opportunities for parent involvement and potentially extend into the 6-8 Middle Schools.

**There will be increased access to electives beginning in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.**

A 4-5-grade configuration will open up a myriad of opportunities for students to undertake an interest in Music, Drama, Foreign Language, Art, Design and Engineering, and other pursuits to be imagined.