

**TUCSON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**  
**PERFORMANCE IMPACT ANALYSIS: K-6 GRADE RECONFIGURATIONS PHASE 2**

**I. Proposed Action**

This is a program to add sixth grade to four elementary schools in school year 2025-2026 (SY26). Those schools are: Borton, Ford, Kellond, and Wright. At those schools, parents would have the choice of keeping their children at the elementary school for the sixth grade or having the child transition to the middle school.

This project is part of a larger initiative to improve middle school performance and to attract students from both inside and outside the district by selecting elementary schools that are the best prospects to convert to K-6. It is part of a multi-pronged approach coupled with instructional enhancements to middle schools, incentives to improve recruitment and expansion of online-learning programs.

**II. Objectives**

The district is proposing the grade changes recommended herein to:

- prepare 6th graders for the departmentalized instruction in middle schools while they are still in the familiar, comfortable environment of their elementary school;
- improve the transition of students from elementary school to middle school;
- reduce the loss of students typical to this transition; and,
- provide greater choice for parents to find options that best fit their child.

The district is proposing this option because:

- research indicates that sixth graders do better in K-8 schools than in middle schools;
- based on surveys many TUSD parents would like the option of keeping their children in their elementary school;
- academically, and in terms of discipline, middle schools, in general, perform at lower levels than other school levels; and,
- the district loses approximately 400 students each year in the transition from elementary school to middle school.

**III. Anticipated Outcomes and Issues**

**A. Improved Outcomes**

Dr. Halley Freitas has researched the history of the K-8 and 6-8 (middle school) grade configurations and the literature comparing outcomes of K-8 schools compared to middle

schools<sup>1</sup>. From that research we can make the inferences regarding the impact of the conversion to K-6 schools, as follows:

- Many studies cited indicated that K-8 schools showed somewhat higher academic achievement among adolescents compared to traditional middle schools.
- Differences in school climate between the two systems indicated that K-8 schools offered greater opportunities for positive student-teacher relationships at a time when these relationships are important for the students' development.
- K-8 schools provided a more nurturing supportive environment similar to elementary schools versus rules and self-sufficiency in the middle schools.
- Parents preferred the smaller scale of the K-8 schools leading to greater student retention.
- Regardless of grade configuration, smaller academic communities for both teachers and students, including schools within schools, provided more opportunities for collaboration and implementing best practices.
- Students in K-8 schools, due to scale, had more opportunities to be leaders and win successes, they felt safer, and, with more personalized relationships, they could be motivated for increased academic performance.

## **B. Potential Issues**

Although there are potential benefits to this program as presented above, the following issues will need to be addressed in the implementation phase and parents will need to be informed of any issues affecting their children that cannot be addressed:

- Sixth graders in a self-contained elementary school setting may not have the same opportunities (labs, electives, etc.) as sixth-grade students in a middle school. Students in middle schools have greater exposure to high quality enrichment such as sports, STEM, arts/music programs.
- Gradually, implementing the program will allow Tucson Unified to evaluate and adjust the program in phases; however, it may not be enough to allow the district to evaluate the impacts of a full transition to 7-8 middle schools.
- There are additional costs to this approach at least in the short-term, as shown in Table 2 below.
- The dynamics of choice (high rates of open enrollment<sup>2</sup>) will make impacts hard to project.
- Parents may still choose to send sixth graders to middle school which could create small sixth grades in the selected elementary schools. Feedback from

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<sup>1</sup> Freitas, H. (2011). A literature review of school-based research among adolescents to address the question: Which educational system best meets the academic and developmental needs of adolescents: middle schools or K-8's? Paper for the University of Arizona, Department of Educational Psychology.

<sup>2</sup> On the average more than 40% of the students in a school are from outside the schools' attendance area.

the first phase of this program indicates that it is harder to create departmentalized instruction if there is only one sixth grade

- Sports will be limited for sixth graders at elementary school as they currently do not participate with K-5 students.
  - Sports will have to be provided by clubs or by teachers/coaches at the elementary school. Elementary schools will be able to provide individual sports for sixth graders. Parents/students more interested in team sports could select the middle school option.
- Additional enrollment and the addition of older students at elementary schools may increase discipline rates and tax existing school resources.
  - On the other hand, discipline issues with 6th graders at elementary schools has been shown to be somewhat less than at middle schools<sup>3</sup>.
- This program will require additional teachers in an environment where it is already hard to find teachers.
- Somewhat lower sixth-grade enrollments at the affected middle schools will mean these schools will lose FTEs which could affect electives<sup>4</sup>.
- Three rooms will need technology.
- The elementary schools will need furniture for the sixth-grade classrooms.
- This program delays transitions to middle school by one year; it doesn't reduce the need to transition to a new school. Any transition provides the possibility of losing students to other options. Thus, this program may not stem the loss of students in the 6<sup>th</sup>-to-7<sup>th</sup> grade transition. (This will be evaluated in SY26 using data from the first set of K-6 schools.)
- Parents from some of the schools being considered choose Dodge for their middle school. If they elect to keep their child at the elementary school for 6th grade, they are likely to lose that option.

#### **IV. Background**

##### **A. Selection of K-6 options for SY26**

This phase of the project started with an assessment of elementary schools to select the best elementary schools to convert to K-6 using the following evaluation criteria:

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<sup>3</sup> From a 2007 study by Duke University.

<sup>4</sup> For the financial analysis, staff projected the loss of sixth grade enrollment based on parental preference in the surveys. (For example, if 70% of the parents in a school preferred the K-6 option, 30% were moved into the 6th grade at the middle school level.) As a result of this approach projected losses at middle schools are expected to be small—Doolen and Vail may each lose 1 FTE.

Capacity	Preference was given to schools that have space for the 6th grades without the use of portables or with portables already in place.
Size of 6th grades	Preference was given to elementary schools with larger potential 6th grades. Ideally there should be at least two classes to allow for a more fully departmentalized model with language and social studies in one class and science-math in the other.
Support	Preference was given to schools where most parents and the school administration support the option.
Cost	Preference was given to schools where the cost to implement the program was less, especially as related to renovations or the need for portables.

Using these criteria, staff selected the four elementary schools for consideration. Ford has a smaller fifth grade but is being recommended based on strong interest. It may need to be pulled from this phase if the projected sixth-grade size won't support two classes.

## **B. Parental Preference**

To gauge interest and impacts of the K-6 approach, a survey of parents of kindergarten through fifth graders in the four school was conducted online from October 21 through November 3. For current fifth graders<sup>5</sup>, the results of the survey, attached as Exhibit A, show:

- A response rate of 44%.
- 89% of the respondents intend to send their child to the sixth grade if it is offered at their school.
- 14 parents who would not have sent their child to a TUSD school would send their child to the sixth grade if it is offered at their school. Adjusted for the response rate this could be a gain of over 30 students<sup>6</sup>.

## **V. Impact Analysis**

### **A. Enrollment Gains in the SY24-25 Pilot Program**

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<sup>5</sup> The responses of parents of current fifth graders are used as the best gauge of the impacts on enrollment the next year.

<sup>6</sup> The survey was self-selected, so it is likely that the parents most interested in the K-6 option are the parents who responded. Thus, the actual student gain is likely to land somewhere between 15 and 25.

Data from the ten K-6 schools started this year indicates that the option for a sixth grade at the elementary schools has increased the number of students transitioning from the fifth grade to the sixth grade in Tucson Unified schools. For those schools, the rate went from 66% the previous year to 83%<sup>7</sup>. This equates to a gain of 80 students from the previous year or gain of 40 students using an average of the past five years transition rates.

## B. Preliminary Cost Analysis

All the recommended elementary schools have the facility capacity to accept the additional students, although some will require renovations. In Borton, two larger rooms will need to be divided at a cost of \$15,000 (they were previously divided). In Wright the portables should be renovated, and \$20,000 has been added for this.

The primary costs for this program are shown in Table 2 below. The number of additional FTEs is estimated at five with a range of from four to six. A few of the FTEs will come from middle schools; others will be available due to declining enrollments overall. There are no additional transportation costs, because we have enough busses, and the routes for these schools are already in place. The costs of curriculum materials are expected to be relatively small.

**Table 2 – Preliminary Cost Estimates**

Category	Comments	Year 1	Year 2+
FTEs (teachers)	3.8 additional <sup>1</sup>	(\$ 281,200)	(\$ 281,200)
Renovations	Borton and Wright	(\$ 35,000)	\$ 0
Technology	3 rooms	(\$ 33,000)	\$ 0
Furniture	8 rooms	(\$ 141,000)	\$ 0
Subtotal		(\$ 490,200)	(\$ 281,200)
Additional Funds	23 students <sup>2</sup>	\$ 138,842	\$ 138,842
Total		(\$ 351,358)	(\$ 142,358)

### Table 2 Notes

1. These are estimates of core-content teachers based on increases in the sixth grades in the elementary schools versus decreases in the sixth grades at the middle schools.
2. This is an estimate of additional students who are expected to attend TUSD in the sixth grade. It is based on a 10% gain in students transitioning from fifth grade to sixth grade in the ten pilot schools. Based on the gain in the pilot program this is a conservative estimate.

<sup>7</sup> For the last five years, the average 5<sup>th</sup>-to-6<sup>th</sup> transition rate in these schools was 74%.

**C. Enrollment Impacts**

As shown in Table 3 below, estimated sixth grades at the elementary schools range from 23 to 47 and the sixth grades at the affected middle schools are expected to be reduced by approximately 8%<sup>8</sup> on the average, with Dodge and Mansfeld experiencing no loss due to their magnet waiting lists.

**Table 3 – Enrollment Changes**

School Name <sup>1</sup>	Letter Grade SY25	Preference for K-6 <sup>2</sup>	Current 6th Grade	6th Grade SY26 <sup>3</sup>
Dodge			144	144
Doolen	C		164	138
Wright	B	89%	0	57
Mansfeld	C		264	264
Borton	C	80%	0	34
Secrist	B		83	67
Ford	B	90%	0	26
Vail	B		199	172
Kellond	A	89%	0	43

1. Elementary schools are listed with the middle school that most of their students attend.
2. Parental preference is from the survey of fifth graders this year.
3. Estimated enrollments are based on the average transition from fifth grade last year to sixth grade this year in the ten pilot schools, coupled with an increased preference for K-6 indicated by the survey this year (81% last year to 89% this year) applied to current 5th-grade.

Detailed analyses of show that the inclusion of the sixth grades would change racial-ethnic compositions at Borton and Kellond by approximately 1%, and essentially 0% at Ford, Wright, and the affected middle schools.

**D. Analysis of Impact on District Obligations under the USP**

Below, the District analyzes the potential impact of the proposed grade addition on the

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<sup>8</sup> Enrollment impacts on the middle schools are less than expected because: (1) there are many non-neighborhood students in the recommended elementary schools; and (2) because even the students who attend their neighborhood elementary school may elect to attend a middle school which is not their neighborhood school or a non-TUSD school.

District’s obligations under each of the ten USP sections:

**Compliance** No anticipated impact.

**Student Assignment** No anticipated impact

**Transportation** No Impact-- routes and numbers of buses will be unchanged.

**Admin/Cert Staff** Most of the positions will be filled by current employees who have a K-8 certification. For new hires, the district will continue to recruit and track hiring to meet diversity goals.

**Quality of Education** This program is designed to improve student preparedness for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and create smaller school communities, which as shown in the research, can have a positive effect on academic achievement.

However, as shown in the tables below, a preliminary evaluation of the impact of this change on student achievement indicates that sixth graders in K-6 schools underperformed relative to those in middle schools. Staff is currently assessing this data to determine the validity of the data and the root causes. Additional assessments throughout the year will provide a clearer picture.

<b>2024-25 Grade 6 Benchmark ELA Q2 Scores by School Types using Matched Students</b>						
School Type	ELA MP %	ELA PP %	ELA P %	ELA HP %	Total N size	Total %P
K-6 Schools	58%	17%	23%	2%	257	25%
K-8 Schools	64%	13%	21%	2%	633	23%
Middle Schools	49%	13%	33%	5%	1192	38%
<b>Total 6th Graders</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>2082</b>	<b>32%</b>

<b>2024-25 Grade 6 Benchmark Math Q2 Scores by School Types using Matched Students</b>						
School Type	Math MP %	Math PP %	Math P %	Math HP %	Total N size	Total %P
K-6 Schools	74%	13%	11%	3%	282	13%
K-8 Schools	72%	13%	12%	3%	732	15%
Middle Schools	66%	14%	14%	7%	1411	21%
<b>Total 6th Graders</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>2425</b>	<b>18%</b>

To ensure that K-6 sixth graders have some of the same opportunities as those in middle schools, AVID programs are an elective option for the sixth grades or AVID strategies are integrated into sixth grade special programs. An accelerated math option is provided to help students prepare for eighth grade algebra. Fine Arts is also provided as an elective for sixth graders in K-6 programs.

Data for the first two quarters this year show that attendance rates for sixth grade students at K-6 are marginally better than those at the middle schools (90.3% versus 89.0%).

**Discipline** This approach has had a positive effect on discipline. So far this year, as shown in the table below, the percentage of sixth-grade students with one or more major disciplinary incidents is slightly less for K-6 schools versus middle schools.

**Sixth Grade Students with One or More Major Disciplinary Incidents**

School Type	Q1	Q2
K-6 Schools	7.3%	11.7%
Middle Schools	10.8%	13.7%

**Family and Community Engagement** No impact.

**Extracurricular Activities** Sixth-grade students in middle schools have more access to extracurricular activities. Parents who choose to keep their sixth graders in a K-6 school are informed that their children will only have access to interscholastic, individual sports; team sports will only be available if offered via clubs or similar approaches. Regardless, the program for sixth graders at K-6 schools includes opportunities for individual sports, school leadership activities, a musical and a trip to support project-based learning.



**Facilities and Technology** All the recommended schools are above average in terms of condition as measured by the Facility Condition Index and all of them have capacity to accept the sixth grades. Technology needs to be added to three rooms at the schools.

**Accountability and Transparency** No impact.

## **E. Data Sources**

The current enrollment data is from the 40<sup>th</sup> day of this school year.

The projected impacts are based on the expected movement of current students based on current and past attendance patterns. There is no adjustment for future demographic changes such as aging neighborhoods, new housing, or new charter schools. For this reason, the term “estimated” is used instead of “projected”.

The data used to calculate transitions from 5th to 6th grade included years where the effects of COVID should have been evident. However, at least for the subject elementary schools, the key indicators (percent at their “home” middle school and percent not in TUSD the following year) did not change by more than a few percent from the pre-COVID data.

Estimated enrollment gains for the sixth grade are based on the gain in students experienced this year in the ten pilot schools.

## **F. Assumptions**

Estimated elementary school impacts are based on the students who are expected to stay at the elementary schools as indicated by the parent surveys.

Estimated middle school enrollment impacts (reduced sixth-grade enrollment) are based on the students who are expected to stay at the elementary schools adjusted by the transition rates from fifth to sixth grade for each of the elementary schools into each of the middle schools.

Impacts of 10 students or less are not shown.

## **G. District Experience**

Lessons from the Pilot Program

This year is the district's first experience with K-6 schools since the 1990s. As noted in Section V.A., the number of students transitioning from the fifth grade to the sixth grade in Tucson Unified schools increased by approximately 40 over what would have been expected using transition rates from earlier years, and double that using rates from the previous year. The other take-away from the ten-school pilot program is the importance of having two sixth grades classes, at least until we can create a way to team fifth and sixth grade teachers while meeting all State requirements. We are assessing how to handle this. Staff will continue to assess effects on achievement, attendance, and discipline for Q3 and Q4.

#### Information on other Districts

K-6 schools are prevalent in other districts in Arizona. Tucson Unified is the third largest Unified school district in the state. In comparison to the other fifteen largest Unified districts, TUSD's K-5 model is relatively uncommon. Overall, nine of the fifteen largest Unified districts are organized according to a K-6 model, while five are organized according to a K-5 model. One district is organized exclusively K-8. In Arizona, elementary-aged students enrolling in the top 16 unified districts are three times as likely to attend a K-6 school and twice as likely to attend a K-8 school than a K-5 school.

#### **VI. Conclusion**

The conversion from K-5 to K-6 for these schools is expected to meet the preferences of parents, increasing choice along with enrollment. Based on research, and preliminary data from the pilot schools, the conversion to K-6 should result in positive academic and discipline outcomes. The recommended schools have the capacity to support these changes, and many of the teachers that would be needed are already employed by the District; thus, the cost to meet these objectives is low.

**EXHIBIT A**  
**ANALYSIS OF THE 2024 PARENT SURVEY FOR GRADE RECONFIGURATION**

To gauge interest and impacts of the K-6 approach, a survey of parents of kindergarten through fifth graders in the four schools was conducted online from October 21 through November 3.

For current fifth graders<sup>9</sup>, the results of the survey, attached as Exhibit A, show:

- A response rate of 44%.
- 89% of the respondents intend to send their child to the sixth grade if it is offered at their school.
- 14 parents who would not have sent their child to a TUSD school would send their child to the sixth grade if it is offered at their school. Adjusted for the response rate this could be a gain of over 30 students<sup>10</sup>.

A more detailed analysis of the data shows that response rates varied by school, with a very low response from Borton<sup>11</sup>.

School	Enroll 5th	Responded	% Response
Borton	48	5	10%
Ford	38	30	79%
Kellond	61	36	59%
Wright	80	28	35%
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>44%</b>

As shown in the table on the following page, a large majority of the parents who responded to the survey indicated that they would have their child stay in the elementary school if the sixth grade was added to the school. This includes some who would have otherwise not stayed in TUSD. The result is a gain of 14 students or 34 students assuming that those who didn't respond would make the same choice<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The responses of parents of current fifth graders are used as the best gauge of the impacts on enrollment the next year.

<sup>10</sup> The survey was self-selected, so it is likely that the parents most interested in the K-6 option are the parents who responded. Thus, the actual student gain is likely to land somewhere between 15 and 25.

<sup>11</sup> The low response rate for Borton essentially negates the usability of that data for estimating impact. Accordingly the projected attendance rates used for Borton were the average of the rate for the other schools.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 9 above.

School	Will Attend ES 6th Grade	% Attend ES 6th	Gain	Adjusted Gain
Banks	4	80%	1	10
Davidson	27	90%	5	6
Lynn Urquides	32	89%	4	7
Soleng Tom	25	89%	4	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>34</b>

Date: February 13, 2025  
Prepared by: Bryant Nodine  
Reviewed and Approved: Dr. Gabriel Trujillo