Attendance Center Revisited

2005-2006 School Year

Committee Members

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Attendance Centers Revisited

In September, 2005 the District Curriculum Council was asked to revisit the concept of Attendance Centers as a pattern of staffing the elementary population for Murphysboro school district. The council members for the 2005-2006 school year, along with some of the members of the original committee met in November to revisit the original report and determine a plan for study for this year. The group decided to get feedback from some of the original schools that had just changed when we had talked to them before and do a couple of site visits to additional schools. They also began to look for and additional research that had been conducted on this concept.

Research Findings

There were no additional research studies uncovered. Again all research shows a wide variety of configurations being utilized. Just as wide a range are the reasons behind utilizing attendance centers.

Visitation Findings

The committee chose to visit three districts in our geographical area that had moved to attendance centers; West Frankfort, Anna and Harrisburg. Administrators and teachers from each of the three districts visited reported varied reasons for adjusting their building structures to an attendance center concept. As in the past study the changes were made with a mindset of adjusting for better operations in the district and a better learning environment for all students. Each town had concerns varying from staffing problems, inequitable student services, problems with curriculum alignment, to changes in housing patterns in the towns that led to unequal demographics in the buildings. They had each determined that attendance centers would be the best way to solve their specific problems. In all three districts the buildings had been split with a PreK – 2 (or K-2) building and a 3-5 building.

The discussion between the visitation team and teachers and administrators from the three districts visited led to a common listing of the positives that the district found from making the move. Once again these were pretty much a mirror of the ideas the committee had heard during the previous study. Also, as in the past, the positive points dealt more to their teaching and learning environment. And each felt that the move to attendance centers had been in the best interest of their students’ overall education. The positive items that stood out the most include:

1. The entire staff at a grade level is together so planning and articulation among the grade level was greatly enhanced. Sharing of ideas and solutions to student problems occurred.
2. All resources for a grade are in one place and there is equal access for all students at that grade.
3. Curriculum, instruction and programs are more consistent across the grade.
4. Similar services are available for a grade and are tailored to that grade.
5. Special teachers (Music, Art, PE, Title I, etc) can focus on a curriculum specific to the grades and all students at the grade receive the same instruction.
6. Easier to equalize class size and demographics.
7. There was a smaller age span so the social environment and building rules was suited for the age.

Negatives for the move were also brought up and discussed. The main ones that resurface again included:
1. Parents may have students in more than one building
2. Loss of upper grades as role models with students several years younger

In addition schools pointed out some areas that we would need to plan for that would help in any transition that might be made.
1. Staff had get to know and trust each other as working partners looking at the bigger picture of student need at a grade level.
2. Initial time needs to be spent helping parents and students get to know each other.
3. Refocus everyone on a district picture not an individual neighborhood or school perspective.
4. Activities among the different building levels need to be coordinated. Need to work out better communication methods between the buildings concerning student issues.
5. Staffing pattern for support staff needs to be carefully thought out.

Each school indicated that the change was much harder for the adults to come to terms with than the students, which was the same thing we had heard in the past visits to other schools. They consistently reported that they would not want to go back to their previous grouping structure.

**Space needs for Murphysboro**

The building layouts had not changed in Murphysboro so there was no need to look at the number of classrooms vs. the number of needed classrooms. We recognized the population continues to change and the numbers at some grade levels are in a constant state of fluctuation. The bottom line is there are enough spaces in the present buildings to accommodate the number of classrooms needed. However, the floor space would be different in classrooms of the same grade level irregardless of the configuration of each building by grade level. For example, Carruthers has three Kindergarten rooms with floor space about 1008 sq. ft. each. GJAL has three Kindergarten rooms with 1152 sq. ft. each. The rest of the rooms at Carruthers are about 740 sq. ft., with the rest at GJAL averaging 900 sq. ft. However, no matter how things are changed, such as new classes being added at a grade level or if the building changes totally in make up, class sizes per square foot are not going to be equal across the board in the district.
Building Student Population Profile

Currently student population continues to show an imbalance of free and reduce students. Carruthers has had a larger population of this group of students for the past few years. There is also slightly more minority students at that building. However, the special education population at the General tends to be higher due to the placement of all self-contained classes in that building.

Any difference in the number of students tends to be because of the number of sections offered in the school.

Staffing Considerations

The committee again looked at the issue of staffing the areas of regular education, special education, PE and Fine Arts, and non certified support staff (mentors and aides).

Here again, the determination of sections per grade level is directly dependent on the number of students at that grade level. This changes from year to year so the number needed would also fluctuate. This practice is expected to continue so the school configuration should not impact the number of staff needed in this area. Moving to attendance centers would only make it easier to add or drop sections without disturbing the students.

Special Education staff → Again the overall number of staff is dependent on the overall number of students with IEPs and the needs indicated in them. However, there could be some impact on this population as far as the classroom combinations and teaching assignments. Currently, the self-contained classrooms are housed in one building. Dependent on numbers each year the staff could have to flip between grades and between schools if the attendance center grouping was instituted. The impact on resource teachers was also discussed. There would continue to be services at each building but the exact placement would vary from year to year, again dependent on numbers at the respective level.

As these projections indicate the staffing patterns for the buildings would be different. However, there does not seem to be a change in the overall number of staff needed simply because of moving to attendance centers. Any change would continue to be dictated by the number of students and their need.

Physical Education and Fine Arts → These personnel amounts are determined by the number needed to cover the number of sections in the elementary schedules. The impact on change for these teachers would be the opportunity, for at least the majority, to curtail their instruction to a smaller grade span.

Non certified educational support staff → This group includes our Title I Mentors, Reading Improvement Aides, Bilingual aide and Special Education classroom and program aides. Each of these positions currently serves a specific population of students also. The understanding is that the personnel would continue to serve the respective populations.

Media, Social Workers, Student Advocates, Speech and Reading Specialists → There are equal services at the current buildings for these services. The committee again thought that these services would continue serving each building regardless of the
attendance pattern. The final determination of assignment would have to be made by the district.

Effects on Curriculum

After interviewing teachers and administrators from West Frankfort, Anna and Harrisburg Schools the Attendance Center Committee we found that none of the teachers or administrators that we talked to had anything negative to say about the effects of Attendance Centers and their schools curriculum. All three of the groups that we talked to had only positive comments in regard to curriculum and changing to Attendance Centers and felt that going to attendance centers positively affects the overall curriculum opportunities for all students.

Our school district’s curriculum is based on the Illinois Learning Standards and our Essential Learning Skills. Our curriculum could easily adjust to the Attendance Center concept. Dr. Campanella’s doctoral thesis, one we looked at as research information, states her thesis was based on information from 20 Illinois school districts. Having all of one grade level at the same building would allow the teachers of that grade to better communicate and plan lessons that would allow all of the students to cover the necessary materials at that grade. All curricular areas including Art, Physical Education, Library and Music could be better addressed in an Attendance Center setting.


Summary

This committee revisited the original study and looked at additional districts to determine if there were any new materials to add to the original study. After review the group determined that it would still be feasible to move to attendance centers with our present facilities and staff. Those districts that had changed to that configuration were still very positive about the move and perhaps even more set that it was a good move for them. There were still many concerns expressed by some committee members and yet others were more positive about the prospect of change.