

Report on the Results of the OMS Expansion Teacher Survey

4/14/16

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I. Introduction:

On March 8, 2016 Dr. Bodie led a presentation for OMS staff that centered upon the enrollment growth the district will be experiencing over the next ten years. As a means of meeting this enrollment challenge Dr. Bodie provided three space options for OMS staff to discuss in small mixed-disciplinary groups. These three options included:

- Building an addition onto the existing OMS structure.
- Renovating the Gibbs to house a single school grade (6th).
- Renovating the Gibbs to house a smaller 6, 7, 8 middle school.

Following Dr. Bodie's presentation feedback forms were gathered from each group and an anonymous Google survey pertaining to the space options was disseminated to individual staff. Out of a possible 100 respondents 75 responded to the survey. The breakdown of respondents is as follows:

- 14 responders from the 6th grade
- 8 responders from 7th grade
- 10 responders from the 8th grade
- 30 responders from "Out of Cluster" staff
- 13 responders from Special Education

Overall Findings:

The overall recommendation of the faculty was to renovate and re-open the Gibbs school. A majority of those in favor of this option also voted for the adoption of a single grade 6th model at the Gibbs. The overall findings from the survey also appeared to be relatively aligned to feedback forms obtained from the mixed-disciplinary discussions that occurred following Dr. Bodie's March 8, 2016 presentation to OMS staff regarding enrollment challenges.

II. Analysis of Findings by Grade/Discipline

6th Grade Analysis:

A significant number of 6th grade teachers (10/14, 71.4%) voted to reopen the Gibbs for a 6th grade only school. Based on survey data, formal discussion groups, and informal conversations, the primary rationale is the ability to specifically tailor a 6th grade program to the unique needs of 6th grade students. Many teachers feel clusters and class sizes have grown too large, and the time in the schedule we used to have (MSSR, Cluster Time, Directed Study,

SOAR), has been replaced with an additional teaching section. Another side effect of moving from four sections to five is the fact that there is now no period in the day when all students from a particular cluster are “in-cluster” (in math, science, history or ELA) at the same time. There is always a population in an “out of cluster” class.

This has inhibited teachers’ ability to nurture 6th grade students, ease the transition to middle school, or even get to know them well. As it stands now, there is very little difference between the experience of a 6th grader and that of a 7th or 8th grader, even though they are a unique population with different needs.

There remain concerns about this option, both from the people who voted for it, and the people who voted for the other choices (3/14, 21.4% for 6/7/8 at Gibbs, 1/14, 7.1% for OMS Addition). Among them is the loss of vertical integration within departments. 6th grade teachers already wish they were more able to communicate with 5th grade, and are concerned about the loss of communication with 7th as well. 6th grade teachers are also concerned about adding a second school transition; while a 6th grade school may ease the transition between 5th and 6th grade, adding a second transition from 6th to 7th grade may have negative consequences for our neediest populations, such as students with disabilities.

Another concern is the effect on special education. Inclusion and co-taught are grade specific, but the Supported Learning Centers serve grades 6 - 8. Grade 6 would need full time staff for Reach, Summit, Compass and their related services (SLP, OT, SW). If there is a commitment to providing this level of staffing, 6th grade teachers feel better about this option.

Teachers were also asked which their least favorite choice was. 6/14, or 42.9%, listed a 6/7/8. 8/14, or 57.1%, listed an OMS addition as their last choice. Teachers are mostly concerned about the overwhelming size of Ottoson already. There is a concern about unsupervised spaces and crowded shared spaces such as gyms and the cafeteria. Teachers who are against the 6/7/8 school are worried about equity of demographics and resources between the two schools.

6th grade teachers strongly believe that our participation is vital in shaping a 6th grade program that fits the needs of our students, should that be the final decision. We also stress that in the event of a 6/7/8, transfers should be voluntary if possible.

7th Grade Analysis:

Eight 7th grade teachers participated in the survey. Of those, five voted for a 6th grade school and three voted for a 6/7/8 at the Gibbs. No 7th grade teachers selected an OMS addition as their first choice. In fact, seven out of the eight teachers selected an OMS addition as their last choice, with one listing a 6/7/8 as their least preferred option.

Most teachers believed their choice provided the best environment for teaching and learning and created a sense of community and belonging. All five teachers who voted for a 6th grade school cited these two reasons. All of the votes for a 6/7/8 credited it with creating the best environment, and two of the three voiced that it would create a sense of community.

One concern that was raised, which was unique to the 7th grade, was that a 6th grade school at Gibbs may not allow 6th graders to take 7th grade math, an opportunity around 20 students currently have.

Similar to other subgroups, 7th grade teachers believe a voluntary transfer is ideal.

8th Grade Analysis:

Eleven eighth grade teachers filled out the space study survey. Of those, nine voted for opening the Gibbs as a 6th grade only school, one voted for opening the Gibbs as a second middle school, and one person voted for an addition at the Ottoson. Of the reasons cited for supporting a 6th grade school providing the environment most conducive to teaching and learning, and strengthening student/teacher relationships to support the needs of students were highest rated. Other comments included that a single grade school would be more equitable than two middle schools, lower costs, and a chance to remediate areas of need in a smaller setting before moving to the middle school where the schedule is more rigid. Major concerns with this model included the impact on special education, exploratory classes, and extracurricular activities.

Last choice was fairly evenly split, with 5 most opposed to an Ottoson addition and 4 most opposed to a 6-8 school at Gibbs. One person voted a 6th grade school as their least preferred option. Multiple write in comments against the idea of an addition mentioned that a larger school violated the middle school model and needs of young adolescents. There was also fear of declining neighborhood relations if the school expanded and the loss of green space. Equity was the major concern with ideas two schools.

Regardless of the chosen proposal, 8th grade teachers felt strongly that teacher should be involved in the design and technology planning and that transfers should be voluntary.

One comment proposed a different scenario- that the Gibbs should be opened as an 8th grade only school, with the rationale that older students could better handle the commute and transitions, and that 8th graders are ready for more responsibility and giving them their own building could be a step toward high school.

"Out of Cluster" Analysis:

30 “Out of Cluster” teachers took the survey. This group includes World Language, Art, Music, Technology and Engineering, Digital Media Literacy, Family and Consumer Science, Reading, Physical Education, Math Support, and more. Of the 30 responders, 22 chose a Sixth Grade school at the Gibbs as their first choice. Five supported an addition at OMS and three supported a 6-8 middle school at the Gibbs.

Most of the teachers who chose a sixth grade school cited the ability to tailor a program specifically to sixth graders as one of their key motivations. Other reasons included the benefits of a smaller environment, strengthening teacher/student relationships, Support for high quality teaching and innovation, and improving the sense of community and collegiality.

There were concerns for this model. The impact on out of cluster classes was a primary thought, with 16/22 people. Other concerns were the impact on extra-curriculars, unequal distribution of resources, and impact on special education. In our committee meetings, one concern brought up by many was the fear among “out of cluster” teachers that people would have to travel between buildings if Ottoson splits into two schools. One write-in comment said that having a sixth grade school would hinder students’ abilities to feel established in the building.

Least choice results were split between an OMS addition and a second middle school with 13 votes each and 4 votes for the 6th grade only model. Those against the building cited stress on teacher/student relationships in a large building and challenges to teaching and learning in such a large space. Those against the second middle school cited it would work contrary to students’ sense of belonging. Write in comments mentioned space limitations at both the Ottoson and the Gibbs, competition or unequal resources between the two schools, and challenges in students interacting with other grades in grade level or two-grade buildings.

Most responders indicated that allowing staff to volunteer for changes in position was key, as was allowing teachers to be part of designing of the new building or addition and school plan.

Special Education Analysis:

Unlike all the other subgroups, the majority of special education teachers voted for a 6/7/8 school at the Gibbs. They responded that this provides the environment that is most conducive not only to the cognitive needs of students, but their social/emotional needs as well. 8/13 (61.5%) of special educators who responded to the survey listed “strengthened student/teacher relationships will support the social/emotional/cognitive needs of students” as a primary reason for their choice. Of these eight, five voted for a 6/7/8 school at the Gibbs.

Additionally, special educators are concerned about the ability to maintain communication across grade levels. Eight out of nine teachers who voted for a 6/7/8 at Gibbs listed vertical and horizontal collaboration between staff as a primary reason.

Special educators voted a single 6th grade school as their least favorite choice, by a narrow margin (6/13, or 46%, vs 5/13, or 38%, against an OMS addition). Two selected a 6/7/8 at Gibbs as their third choice. Five out of the six teachers who oppose a 6th grade school cite “works contrary to the belief of community and sense of belonging” as a rationale. They are also concerned that a 6th grade school may limit educational service delivery.

Special education teachers overwhelmingly (12/13 responses) believe a voluntary transfer system is key to a successful implementation of either Gibbs option. A majority also supports teacher participation in the design of the programming and a communication protocol for maintaining a similar experience to the one being provided at Ottoson.

III. Conclusion

Teachers at the Ottoson are grateful to have been included in the discussions about our future and eager to continue to play a role in this conversation. Whichever choice is made, the staff at OMS wants to be involved in this massive change so we can best educate the middle school students of Arlington.

Overall the staff opposes the idea of making the Ottoson bigger. Limitations of space on the site, the idea of eliminating green space, challenges in parking and traffic all make this building addition challenging. More importantly, students need smaller schools so they can develop relationships with staff and feel like part of the community not a cog in a machine.

It is the belief of the majority of the faculty that the best route forward for our students would be to renovate the Gibbs as a sixth grade only school. There are a few concerns with this model that still need to be alleviated, particularly how it will affect high-need special education students, but we believe that by starting the conversation early we can resolve most issues before the new building is open.