

***Salem Public Schools
School Committee***

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“Know Your Rights Under the Open Meeting Law, M.G.L. c.30A § 18-25 and
City Ordinance Sections 2-2028 through 2-2033”

SCHOOL COMMITTEE RETREAT

Notice is hereby given that the Salem School Committee will hold a **School Committee Retreat on November 23, 2024 at 9:00 a.m.** This meeting will take place in person at **Collins Middle School, Room 227, 29 Highland Ave., Salem, MA.**

- 1. Call the Meeting to Order**
- 2. Introduction and Objectives**
- 3. Text and Data-Based Context Setting**
- 4. Consideration of Constituent Input**
- 5. Analysis of Benefits, Risks and Opportunities for Grade Configuration Options**
- 6. Identification of Next Steps**
- 7. Closing**
- 8. Adjournment**

Respectfully submitted by,

Shirley Dorai

Executive Assistant to the School Committee and Superintendent

“Persons requiring auxiliary aids and services for effective communication such as sign language interpreter, an assistive listening device, or print material in digital format or a reasonable modification in programs, services, policies, or activities, may contact the City of Salem ADA Coordinator at (978) 619-5630 as soon as possible and not less than 2 business days before the meeting, program, or event.”

Pre-Reading for Salem School Committee

Click on links for full articles

1. [Here's How Schools Can Soften the Blow of Sixth Grade](#) by Kat Lonsdorf (NPR, 2016)

Excerpt:

Our research shows that when the school is made to feel smaller, that's when young adolescents flourish more. With a K-8 school you have potentially more students in the school because you have all the way from 5-year-olds to 13- and 14-year-olds.

An effective middle school, or middle grades, program needs to go beyond the grade configuration change. You can change the grade configuration of a school all day long. But you can also do some other things, and should do some things, that are developmentally responsive to young adolescents.

Of course safety and security is paramount, so we want students to not feel like they're going to be bullied or picked on or harassed in a school setting. But if you just change it to a K-8 school from a 6-8 school it doesn't guarantee that there is going to be less bullying and less transition issues for kids. There need to be other characteristics in place.

...But the point is if it's just about the grade configuration but no attention is paid to interdisciplinary teaming or other developmentally responsive programs and initiatives, then you're really just putting more grades in the building.

...A young adolescent [has unique characteristics](#) that the school needs to recognize and respond to. For instance, they're undergoing the most rapid physical and cognitive change in their life in this grade. The only other time that it's this fast is birth to 3.

So, having a difficult time as a sixth-grader is in some ways regardless of the grade configuration. They're going through a massive identity shift with friends, with family, with their relationship to academics, to other adults in their lives, to other kids in their lives, trying to figure it all out.

2. [What is the Hardest Grade in Middle School?](#) By Truth in American Education (2024)

Excerpt:

For many students, the transition to 7th grade marks a significant turning point in their academic journey. This pivotal year often presents a unique set of challenges that can test a student's resilience and adaptability. Here are some of the key obstacles that 7th graders commonly face: [article names Academic Rigor, Social Pressures, and Developmental Transitions as the three key obstacles for 7th grade students.]

...Stepping into 6th grade marks a significant transition for students as they leave the familiar confines of elementary school and embark on a new journey in middle school. This change can be both exciting and daunting, as it introduces a whole new set of challenges and opportunities.

According to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics, around 88% of students experience some level of anxiety during this transition period. One of the most significant adjustments students face is the shift from a single classroom environment to a more complex schedule with multiple teachers and classrooms. This newfound independence can be overwhelming at first, but it also fosters essential skills such as time management and organization.

...In the 8th grade, students begin to explore their interests, aptitudes, and potential career paths. Guidance counselors often introduce students to various resources, such as career assessments and college planning tools, to help them identify their strengths and develop a vision for their future.

This early exposure to college and career readiness activities can be invaluable in shaping students' mindsets and preparing them for the critical decisions that lie ahead. According to a survey by [ACT](#), students who engage in college and career readiness activities in middle school are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education and achieve higher levels of academic success.

...While every student's experience is unique, the 7th grade emerges as the most challenging year for many middle schoolers. The convergence of academic rigor, social pressures, and developmental transitions creates a perfect storm of challenges that can overwhelm even the most resilient students. However, by understanding the specific hurdles associated with each grade level and implementing effective strategies, students can navigate these formative years with confidence and success. Fostering a growth mindset, developing time management skills, and seeking support from teachers and counselors can make a significant difference in overcoming the obstacles of middle school.

3. [Why is Ninth Grade Such a Critical Time for Students?](#) By The Gates Foundation, (2016)

Excerpt:

School transitions bring considerable change for students. One particular tension is the increase in responsibility that happens when students go to high school, combined with less supervision and less support. Students can easily confuse having the responsibility for getting to class and getting work done on their own with having the freedom of choice of whether to do it or not.

In Chicago, we noticed that students' unexcused absences quadrupled when they moved from eighth to ninth grade. Many students thought they did not have to go to class every day in high school. Yet, absences cause students to fall behind. When students start falling behind, they often get embarrassed or frustrated and start withdrawing further. That begins a downward spiral, until they fall too far behind to catch up. It is important for students to establish effective strategies for managing high school, and ninth grade is the time when they figure out how to do that.

The first year in high school also has an outsized impact on whether students eventually graduate because it is a critical time for students' perceptions of themselves as learners. With the school transition comes questions for students about whether and how they will fit in to the new context. If a student isn't sure she can succeed, or feels she doesn't belong, she will be less likely to put in effort when challenges arise. After failing once, each time a student starts a new class he will wonder if he's just going to fail again. On the other hand, if students have a successful ninth grade year, they know that they can succeed, and that they belong in high school, and those positive mindsets will help them face up to the challenges they face later on.

...Course failures have an outsized impact on students' likelihood of graduating. In the Consortium's 2007 report *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools*, we showed that one "F" in a year-long course in the ninth grade decreases the probability of eventually graduating by 30 percentage points, even if a student has strong test scores. Two "Fs" in ninth grade decrease the probability of graduating by over 50 percentage points (from 85 percent to 33 percent). There are many reasons students might struggle in their classes. If educators notice, reach out, and help students develop strategies to deal with their struggles early on, they not only can help students with their challenges in ninth grade, but also give them the strategies they can use throughout high school. In Chicago, we've seen that educators' work to prevent failure in ninth grade has paid off; as Freshman OnTrack rates rose from 60 to 75 percent, graduation rates showed concurrent increases when those cohorts reached their time for graduation, four years later. OnTrack rates have continued to rise, reaching 88 percent with the most recent cohort, and the district is optimistic that graduation rates will continue to improve, as well.

4. [7-12 grade configuration](#), from the Principals Partnership

Excerpt:

Pros

1. Fewer transitions to new school settings. Some research indicates that students can lose up to a year while adjusting and that fewer transitions could result in students not losing time due to the transition adjustment
2. Possibility of more consistency in the curriculum.
3. More lower level course offerings.
4. More opportunities for older students to be role models for younger students.

Cons

1. School programs often tend to revolve around the high school students' needs, not around those of the young adolescents.
2. Fewer opportunities for more students to have leadership positions in extracurricular activities.
3. Teachers are not well trained in meeting the needs of the young adolescent.

5. [Association of grade configuration with school climate for 7th and 8th grade students](#)*, American Psychological Association (2017) **Full article unfortunately not available*

Abstract:

Educational authorities have questioned whether middle schools provide the best school climate for 7th and 8th grade students, and proposed that other grade configurations such as K-8th grade schools may provide a better learning environment. The purpose of this study was to compare 7th and 8th grade students' perceptions of 4 key features of school climate (disciplinary structure, student support, student engagement, and prevalence of teasing and bullying) in middle schools versus elementary or high schools. Multilevel multivariate modeling in a statewide sample of 39,036 7th and 8th grade students attending 418 schools revealed that students attending middle schools had a more negative perception of school climate than students in schools with other grade configurations. Seventh grade students placed in middle schools reported lower disciplinary structure and a higher prevalence of teasing and bullying in comparison to those in elementary schools. Eighth grade students in middle schools reported poorer disciplinary structure, lower student engagement, and a higher prevalence of teasing and bullying compared to those in high schools.