

School within a School

a brief synopsis

Overview/History

The "school within a school" concept came into discussion prominently in the USA in the 1990s. The discussion, and some related reconfiguration, was a result of trying to improve education in the large, mainly urban, secondary schools, by creating more personalized, smaller units within the larger school.

The organization is an attempt to maintain the benefits of the larger school while creating the advantages found in the smaller schools. The larger schools bring benefits such as specialized staff, enhanced facilities and less administrative costs. The smaller schools have been shown to generate improved social-emotional aspects (relationships, connections, mentoring, accountability, communication and easier transitions).

In BC, many configurations exist that support multiple purposes. In this province these multiple configurations are mainly a result of demographic changes that a district experiences. Multiple school organizations are common in BC (E.g. K-12, K-9, 6-12, ...) and have the potential to operate as schools within a school to varying degrees.

Both the USA and Canada have many instances where there exist smaller, separated learning programs within the larger school setting. Perhaps the most common, legally recognized, distinct schools (within another) would be at-risk or alternative programs. These programs often have a separate administrator or Head, with separate budget and school code. Other examples of having a distinct (separate) focus, without the status of being a school, would be such programs as French Immersion, IB, Gifted, and numerous academies (sports, outdoor education or the Fine Arts). Thus, the idea of running a separate educational program within a larger context is well established in BC and Canada; where the need, the necessary personnel and the circumstances have developed the precipitating synergy.

Organizational Thoughts

There is a continuum of conceptions of what a school within a school appears to be. Concise examples would be –

Model	Characteristics
Separate schools within one building	Grade 7-8 Middle school; 9-12 Sec. Separate Administration, budget. Core objectives/vision different.
Separate Programs / Schools	Commonly at-risk (alternative) programs, with a small population (15-80s) and associated staff. Often a head teacher or VP report to district administrator. Usually a separate budget.
Academies or Special Curriculums	French Immersion, IB, Outdoor Ed. One administration and budget.
Teacher Teaming	Single Grade (E.g. Gr. 9 teachers) or Cross-grade (E.g. Gr. 6-8). Thematic teaching is common. Collaborative approach to instruction and assessment practices.

Pertaining to a scenario of two self-contained schools within one building-

- The younger school focuses on personal development and school connectedness (instructional variety, choice, experimentation, Exploratories, mentoring, social-emotional goals, transition to Sec.).
- The senior school focus maintains the earlier ethos, but a focus on academic success is the priority (successful graduation).
- While the two schools may share a common discourse regarding academics, learning and care, there would be separate monitoring of academics, attendance and possibly discipline.

Possible administrative structures:

- Two Principals, with senior one in charge of building and discipline
- One Overall Principal with a junior and senior principal
- One admin team for the overall school and department Heads or Team Leaders for class/grade organizations
- One senior administrative team and the junior school admin report to a district administrator

Research Evidence

Very little evidence exists for the few “school within a school” structures that have been implemented. Varying successes have resulted. The affective domain had most of the positive evidence. The academic domain shows little impact, with moderate or mixed results. Where success has existed, the following characteristics were found (Deweese, S.; 1999) –

- Full implementation of the educational programs (intents)
- Separate administrative structure
- Separate school identity

The evidence indicated –

- Easier transitions
- Disadvantaged students demonstrating more positive change
- Less discipline and improved behaviour
- Maximization of building capacity / efficiency

Implementation Considerations, Challenges and Cautions

While not exhaustive the following are typical areas that are addressed –

Staffing

- Concerns around placements, assignments and sense of security
- Possible divisiveness and tensions between the two schools
- Professional development initiatives (separate v. common)

Facility

- Organizing shared spaces (gym, library, grounds, auditorium)
- Equipment purchase and sharing (Science, PE, Drama, ...)
- Bell and timetable schedules (similar or separate)
- Pod or school areas for classroom organization

Political

- Younger students with the older
- The “why?” of it all
- Other decisions that are precipitated (E.g.: Closures, Transportation)
- Implementing a Transition Team

Educational

- Developing and agreeing on curriculum foci
- Maintaining academic rigor while developing the whole citizen
- Grade / school organization (E.g.: 7-8 or 7-9)

(An example of a Transition Plan I developed in SD 35 is attached, which offers more detail on implementation considerations.)

Some possible contacts / conversations to have –

(Both have websites as well.)

1

St Catharine's Collegiate (a secondary school) in Ontario has just implemented this year (2009/2010) a separate middle school within (St. Mary's Middle).

Principal – K. McDonnell

VP Todd Acaster

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2

Rossland Secondary (SD 20, Kootenay Columbia) has been a 6-12 school for about six years and tried to implement a middle school philosophy for the 6-7 grades. There were attempts to have separate (specialized) staff and activities while still using the facility and specialists of the secondary.

Principal Terry McDonnell (not related, I believe)

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