



Grade Alignment - A Case For Cohorts

Under the Vinton-Shellsburg Community School District's current arrangement, Tilford Elementary in Vinton serves three- and four-year-old preschoolers along with kindergarten through fourth-grade students from the Vinton area, while Shellsburg Elementary does the same for Shellsburg's preschoolers and K-4 pupils and then houses every fifth-grader in the district. The middle school serves grades 6–8, and the high school serves grades 9–12. Administrators have proposed reorganizing the elementary grades so that both Tilford and Shellsburg host the district's preschool programs, Tilford houses all kindergarten through third-grade students, and Shellsburg educates all fourth- and fifth-graders, leaving the middle and high schools unchanged.

The motivation behind this “whole-grade alignment” is to have children come together as one cohort from their very first days of school, rather than remaining separated by attendance zones. Research on social-emotional learning (SEL) emphasizes that stable relationships and predictable environments are crucial for young children's development. When students stay in the same school and move through grades together, they build deeper friendships and stronger connections with their teachers, and they are not repeatedly disrupted by transitions that can cause stress and academic losses. Unifying kindergarten through third grade at Tilford and fourth through fifth grade at Shellsburg thus aims to create a more cohesive and supportive community of learners and to end any sense of “Tilford versus Shellsburg.”

Another benefit of whole-grade centers is equity. Instead of each building maintaining separate sections of the same grade, administrators could distribute class rosters more evenly district-wide and allocate specialized staff, such as Title I teachers, instructional coaches, or enrichment programs, more efficiently. Bringing teachers of the same grade into the same building also enhances professional collaboration; studies have shown that when elementary teachers are physically closer and share the same schedules, they collaborate more and share responsibility for student success. Horizontal collaboration across grade levels allows teachers to align instruction and share strategies, while remaining on a particular grade level with experienced colleagues helps teachers improve their effectiveness over time. In addition, balancing enrollment across Tilford and Shellsburg can prevent the “bubble” sections that sometimes arise when grade levels are split by geography, and operating grade-level centers has been considered a cost-saving strategy in other districts.

Moving to this configuration would not be without challenges. Some families would face longer bus rides or pick-up times. Administrators worry that a few families might choose a different district rather than commute. Teachers and support staff might need to change buildings and adjust to new colleagues and routines. These transitions would require careful planning and communication with parents and staff. Nonetheless, the proposed alignment seeks to harness the district's Viking spirit to create a unified elementary system that supports students' social and emotional development, promotes collaboration and equity among teachers, and better balances resources across buildings.

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Current Configuration

- **Tilford Elementary** (Vinton): 3-year-old preschool, 4-year-old preschool, **K–4** (Vinton area).
- **Shellsburg Elementary**: 3-year-old preschool, 4-year-old preschool, **K–4** (Shellsburg area) **plus all district 5th graders**.
- **Middle School**: **6th–8th** grade.
- **High School**: **9th–12th** grade.

Recommended Configuration

- **Tilford Elementary**: 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschoolers district-wide **plus all kindergarten–3rd grade students**.
- **Shellsburg Elementary**: 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschoolers district-wide **plus all 4th and 5th graders**.
- **Middle School**: remains **6th–8th**.
- **High School**: remains **9th–12th**.

Benefits of Whole-Grade Alignment

Improved social-emotional and relationship benefits

- Having all students start kindergarten together fosters a unified cohort, strengthening friendships and reducing the “Tilford vs Shellsburg” divide. Stability and continuity allow students to build strong relationships over time; research shows that students who stay in the same school benefit from predictable routines and stronger social networks.

Equitable class rosters and resources

- Centralising grades allows administrators to balance class sizes across the district, avoiding “bubble” sections. It enables equitable distribution of experienced teachers and specialized staff (Title I, instructional coaches, special education) to serve all students, rather than duplicating programs in separate buildings.

Stronger teacher collaboration and professional growth

- When grade-level teachers work in the same building, they can collaborate more easily. Studies show that teachers located near each other and sharing the same grade levels collaborate more, share strategies, and improve student outcomes. Teacher effectiveness also increases when teachers remain at the same grade level and work with experienced colleagues.

System unity and consistency

- All students experience the same programming and expectations. This unified system supports consistent curriculum mapping, common schedules, and shared professional

development. It facilitates flexible interventions such as “WIN time” (What I Need) because teachers can group students from multiple classes for targeted support.

Balanced building sizes and potential cost savings

- Moving grades creates more balanced enrollment at Tilford and Shellsburg, helping facilities operate at optimal capacity. Grade-level centers can reduce the need for extra sections of classes, which was raised as a cost-saving strategy in other districts. Unified grade spans also reduce transition-related costs by eliminating unnecessary moves.

Fewer transitions and smoother student experience

- Students would experience only three transitions (K–3, 4–5, 6–8) instead of the current arrangement where some students change schools after 4th grade while others remain. Research shows that frequent grade-level transitions can cause stress and are associated with achievement losses and higher dropout rates. Longer stays in one building support stable relationships and continuity of learning.

Challenges and Considerations

- **Travel time and transportation costs:** Younger students may need to travel farther. This may lengthen bus rides, increase shuttle costs, and complicate pick-up arrangements for sick children or appointments. A pro is the new 5th grade routes have proven effective in reducing travel time for students.
- **Potential enrollment shifts:** Some families may consider enrolling in neighboring districts if they prefer not to transport children in this manner.
- **Staff transitions:** Teachers and support staff may need to move to different buildings or grade levels, requiring adjustments and professional development.
- **Community adaptation:** Changing long-standing school assignments can face resistance from parents, staff and community members; careful communication and engagement will be needed.

District Identity

By balancing the logistical challenges with the significant benefits of improved collaboration, equity, stability and cost efficiency, the recommended grade alignment aims to create a more unified, effective and student-centered elementary experience.