

# Cambridge Considers Middle Schools To Close Achievement Gap

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Cambridge Schools Superintendent Jeffrey Young has been facing some tough critics at community meetings — and some of them are only 9 years old.

“I live really close to the Morse and I like walking to it,” said Olivia Shirley. “And I just would want to walk to school.”

Once Olivia and her classmates at the Morse School in Cambridgeport reach the sixth grade, they’d be bused across town to a new middle school that would share a building with an elementary school. The Morse kids would join students from another elementary school, as well as students from a Spanish bilingual-immersion program. Across the district, 12 elementary schools would feed into four middle schools. But the superintendent says he doesn’t want to just throw these kids together.

“We really are aiming to try to see the individual needs of students and groups of students and give them the support and challenge they need to excel,” Young told a recent meeting of parents.

Young says the district will spend the money necessary to make sure all the middle schools are of the same high quality. While many parents at the Morse say they like the idea of creating middle schools, they also expressed deep concerns about folding three very different elementary schools into one. Olivia’s father, Frank Shirley, isn’t convinced the proposed Spring Street Middle School would work.

“I want to be very clear that the idea of throwing more money/resources isn’t a middle school that interests me as a parent,” Shirley said. “That tells me that there’s a fundamental structural flaw in the Spring Street school and I won’t send my children there.”

Many parents could afford to move to another district or send their kids to private school. And Young is aware of that, but he said “[the program](#) that we are planning to put in place here is going to preserve the intimacy of the small-school environment that people cherish and at the same time offer a wider range of opportunities.”

The middle schools would have more teacher collaboration, more after-school activities

and larger grades. That would address an enrollment decline that has left one school with an entire sixth grade of only 12 students. Young says the change would also improve academics and help close the achievement gap. That's a top priority for the city, says Cambridge Mayor David Maher, who is also chair of the school committee.

"Cambridge spends more money than most every community in the commonwealth on public education," Maher said. "What I think we want to see happen is we want to see the outcomes improve."

Erika Wentworth agrees. She has two children in the elementary schools.

"Right now, K-8s does not work for Cambridge," Wentworth said. "And the proof is you look at the scores and the academic development of the students. It's nowhere near where it should be."

I couldn't find a parent in Cambridge who didn't want to improve the academics of the middle grades. But not everyone is convinced a middle-school model is the answer.

"The idea of it is that they are going to try to solve the achievement gap, which nobody in the U.S. has been able to do," said Mary Waters, the mother of three elementary school kids and a sociology professor at Harvard. "And the idea play musical schools and move people from one place to the next and that somehow that's going to magically improve achievement in sixth through eighth grade doesn't make a lot of sense to me."

Recent studies of middle school achievement back up Waters' argument. Looking at New York's middle schools, economist Jonah Rockoff of Columbia University found they are less effective at educating adolescents.

"What we found was pretty striking evidence that when students made the move from an elementary school to a middle school, their achievement levels fell considerably, relative to the same trajectory and achievement for kids moving into sixth or seventh grade in a K-8 school," Rockoff said.

Because of research like this, many urban districts, including Boston, are moving away from middle schools. But they work well in many suburban communities, including Sudbury, North Andover and Newton, where Cambridge Superintendent Young used to run the district. Now, he argues, middle schools will work in Cambridge.

"So one size doesn't fit all," Young said. "What works in Baltimore or Philadelphia does not necessarily work in Cleveland or in Cambridge. If somebody had discovered the right magic bullet for education, be assured, the rest of us would know about it and we'd all be doing it."

Young says Cambridge would be taking a “well-considered risk.” If the school committee passes his plan, the superintendent says the district will see a reduction in the achievement gap in five years.

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