

Summary of Feedback from 6th graders

Interviewer: Michael Morris

Scribe: Mary Kiely

Dates: Jan. 14 (CF and FR) and Jan. 20 and 24 (WW)

I. Opening questions from Superintendent Morris: “Imagine you wake up tomorrow and find out that you and your class will be moving to the Middle School immediately. What are some things that you would be excited about? What are some things that might make you anxious?”

Excited about

- Consistently across buildings, the two things that students were most looking forward to were: 1) the opportunity to attend school with friends and/or siblings who were already at ARMS or who had been attending other elementaries; and 2) the opportunity for more electives and/or extracurricular activities, especially sports.
- Other items mentioned by students included:
 - the opportunity to make new friends;
 - having multiple teachers, rather than just one or two;
 - being in a new environment and in a new phase; and
 - having more opportunities in math, science (the prospect of being able to do lab experiments was appealing) and world language.

Possibly concerned about

- The things that students mentioned being worried about were also consistent across buildings. Most frequently, they expressed concerns related to greater demands on their executive functioning skills, i.e.:
 - switching classes, and finding the schedule and routines confusing;
 - getting lost in the building and being late to class as a result;
 - feeling overwhelmed by having to remember the names of so many new people;

- getting used to starting and finishing school at a later time; and
- having a heavier academic load, and carrying materials around all day.

- Some concerns were related to relationships:
 - worries about possibly being mistreated by older, bigger students;
 - having to deal with older students on buses;
 - having heard that there was a lot of social “drama” in middle school;
 - finding it more difficult to deal with several teachers at one time rather than just one or two; and
 - not knowing which adult(s) to ask for help in the case of difficulties.
- Other concerns were about missing valued aspects of the elementary school experience, including:
 - recess and getting to move around more (this was mentioned often);
 - having a designated space for my grade in the building; and
 - being in a school where I grew up and had a history.

II. Students were informed that 4 world languages are currently available for study in grades 7-12 (Spanish, French, Latin, and Chinese).

Superintendent Morris then asked them to think about and to share input on two possible models for world language study for 6th graders at ARMS.

Model 1 - have students commit to one world language before starting 6th grade, and continue with it in subsequent years. Student input offered on this model:

- Spanish is spoken by more people in our country than French or Chinese, so we should all just learn Spanish;
- Starting sooner with one language means you would get better at it faster;
- It could be confusing to do 4 languages in one year, so better to just pick one.

Model 2 - have students spend one quarter of the 6th grade year studying each of the 4 world languages, and then commit to further study of one of those 4 languages at the end of the year. Student input offered on this model:

-If you have never learned another language, you have no basis for choosing, so it's better to sample all 4 choices.

-If forced to try all 4, you might be surprised by what you end up preferring.

In the end, students were pretty evenly mixed as to which model they preferred. A few students said they would not want to study any world language.

Students also suggested that a couple of other models for language study in gr. 6 should be considered. One model would have students study each of the 4 world languages for 3 weeks each rather than for one quarter, and decide at the end of those 12 weeks which language would be continued with for the rest of the year. The other model would have students study one language for all of gr. 6, but then have the option of switching to a different world language for gr. 7 and beyond.

III. Options for physical space/ interactions with students in other grades: Superintendent Morris explained to students that two different options will be considered for the building layout, and that that decision will affect how integrated with the older grades or separate from them the 6th graders will be. The two options are: 1) to mix 6th grade classes in with 7th and 8th grade classes on both floors; or 2) to have a designated 6th grade "wing" on the second floor, with its own bathrooms and classrooms reserved for 6th graders.

Almost unanimously, the 6th graders surveyed expressed support for the option of giving 6th graders their own wing on the second floor. Students shared the following thoughts about this:

- A little bit of mixing with older students is good, but I wouldn't want too much. 6th graders already will be mixing with older students in electives and in the hallways.
- It might be overwhelming to have to interact all the time with older students. It will already be a lot for me to have to deal with 6th graders from other schools.
- After school activities and sports will be an opportunity to mix with older students.
- It would be good to be able to get settled in during that first year and have the most contact with people in your grade.

IV. Options for teaching configurations: Superintendent Morris explained to students that two different teaching models are being considered. In the first model, 6th grade students would have two core teachers, much as they do now in elementary school (one teacher for Science and Math, and one teacher for ELA and Social Studies). Student input on that model included:

- It might be overwhelming to have 4 new teachers along with all the new kids from other schools, so I would prefer just 2 teachers.
- I like to get to know my teachers in depth, and that is easier with fewer teachers.
- It is easier to get help if you just have 2 teachers.

In the second model, 6th graders would have 4 teachers (one each in Science, Math, ELA and Social Studies). Students shared these thoughts about that option:

- I would rather have 4 teachers because then you have a better chance of having a strong relationship with at least one of them. You have more choices. When you only have 1 or 2 teachers and you don't hit it off, you are stuck.
- Teachers who only teach one subject may be more knowledgeable and passionate about their one subject.

In spite of the lively discussion on this topic, when students were asked to vote for one choice or the other, the results were strongly in favor of the four teachers option. 94 students voted for the four teachers option and 25 for the two teachers option.

V. Options for extracurricular activities and electives:

Across schools, students consistently mentioned **sports** as extracurricular activities that they would look forward to participating in.

Superintendent Morris also reviewed with students some of the options for electives that 6th graders moving to the middle school would be eligible to sample. These included: bigger ensembles for music, drama, a math elective on problem-solving, and possibly a Makerspace where students could do things like woodworking and also have access to technology such as 3-D printers.

The greatest amount of enthusiasm was shown for the Makerspace option, though many students also expressed interest in the other choices discussed.

Ideas that students offered for other possible electives or extracurricular activities included:

- Social Action
- Cooking and baking (or Home Economics)
- Coding
- Gardening
- Robotics/Computer programming
- Model UN
- American Sign Language
- Martial Arts
- Chess Club
- Gaming
- Recreational swimming
- Engineering/Architecture
- Creative writing
- Rock climbing