

Addressing Barriers to Successful Middle School Transition

Middle grade schools - junior high, intermediate, or middle schools - are potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift. Yet too often they exacerbate the problems the youth face. A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grades schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents. - Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development

Researchers have stressed both personal and institutional factors as producing a significant mismatch interfering with the successful middle schools transitions. These include complexities stemming from (a) motivational and developmental differences, (b) enhanced anxiety about the degree of changes in school structure, academic demands, and interpersonal relationships, (c) reduction in the amount of support and guidance experienced by students, and (d) diminished parental involvement. Given widespread awareness of such matters, a greater intervention emphasis is needed to enhance successful middle school transitions. The following are strategies suggested in the literature and our Center's view about where they fit.

Before the Transition Year

Elementary schools vary widely in how they address the transition to middle school. Articulation programs tend to mainly focus on orientation strategies (including a field trip to the middle school). But, there are many more ways to prepare students for middle school before they step foot on their new campus.

During the last year of elementary school, the transition can begin by slowly introducing changes in daily patterns to mimic what will be encountered the next year. Commonly mentioned are strategies such as introducing the use of lockers, initiating a home room meeting every morning, and switching classrooms for at least one class period.

More specifically, here are a few typical suggestions some writers have proposed for elementary school teachers (adapted from Niesen & Wise, 2004):

- Emphasize the positive aspects of middle school (e.g., explain the opportunities for learn more about interesting subjects and making new friends).
- Gradually prepare students for the academic challenges of middle school (e.g., clarify about increased autonomy; slowly transition to such assignments).
- Teach problem solving and study skills (e.g., tips for organizing, planning, and taking notes, breaking down large assignments into manageable sub topics).
- Include opportunities for cooperative learning.
- Encourage participation in extracurricular activities.

*The material in this document was culled from the literature and drafted by Lauren Guarino as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

Note: Lauren reports that she has married and her new name is Lauren Ahlquist.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Phone: (310) 825-3634 Email:

smhp@ucla.edu Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Suggestions for middle schools in working with elementary school at this stage tend to emphasize direct orientation strategies. Beyond these are activities that connect middle and elementary students to share how they dealt with the transition and to answer questions. Traditionally, this has involved school visits; nowadays this might encompass email exchanges and social networking technology. Middle school support staff could also help recruit volunteer tutors to go to the elementary school to assist students whose current skills are seen as making the transition difficult, as well as facilitating access to other needed supports. And, having identified such students, the support staff can start planning how to ensure such supports are continued when the students begin middle school.

The Summer

Summers are notorious for loss of academic ground, and they often are a fallow time with respect to transition programs. Thus, middle schools can promote both academic and transition goals by using the summer productively in welcoming and supporting newcomers.

Minimally, families should be contacted and provided information about all local options available to them for using the summer to enhance the likelihood of a positive transition. Hopefully, this can include a transition program at the school.

As always, the first focus of a school transition program is on welcoming. For example, newcomer families can be invited to the school at designated times to meet key people such as administrators, office staff, student support staff, and some teachers. This would be a good time for a follow-up orientation tour. Fun activities could include an informative treasure hunt (e.g., finding classrooms, library, cafeteria, recreation areas, transportation locations; seeking out and opening a combination locker). Supportive strategies would include providing a range of information and charting specific plans that anticipate and will help address potential stressors. Finally, to the degree feasible, the school should offer summer enrichment and academic programs or at least guide the family to such programs.

The Transition Year and Beyond

The first few weeks in a new school are a critical period for newcomers. This is a time to ensure that students and their families are well-oriented and supported and are making a good adjustment to the new school. Good transitions are promoted by ensuring school and classrooms are experienced as welcoming and unthreatening and that students and their families are connected with social supports designed to help in adjusting to the new school's demands and opportunities. Monitoring school adjustment is essential to identifying those students not making an effective transition.

Starting the Year

Here are a few strategies for the middle school to consider at the start of the year:

- In the weeks prior to the first day, send out a welcoming package to students' homes -- the accompanying letter should congratulate them on moving up and describe middle school as a site of opportunities.
- During the first week, conduct a back-to-school or open house night for families to meet teachers and learn more about opportunities for both themselves and their children (e.g., opportunities to access support for themselves and their children, invitations to family members to volunteer at the school).

- Over the first few weeks, ask teachers to invite student support staff into their classrooms to help provide supports for any students who they have identified as having difficulty adjusting to the new school.

Subgroups who Deserve Special Transition Supports*

Of special transition concern are students with low academic performance, recent immigrants, and those designated for special education services. The literature is clear that focusing on subgroups is necessary; at the same time, it is essential to avoid the negative impact of academic tracking. Separating high and low-performing students increases risk for social alienation and disengagement for the latter because of lack of connection and often direct rejection by positive academic and social peer role models. Tracking and segregation negatively affect motivation and commitment to school learning resulting in declining academic performance and related behavior and emotional problems. The challenge is to support all students in ways that holistically address individual and subgroup needs and enhance rather than jeopardize development of positive feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness with peers and adults at school.

A few examples of special transition supports:

For Low-Performing Students

- Provide student/learning supports in elementary school as soon as a problem is identified
- Provide summer programs both for enrichment and to enhance missing skills and specifically address the impending pressures of middle school
- Provide student and learning supports in middle school from day one
- Facilitate positive peer and adult connectedness

For Immigrant Students and Families

- Provide an immigrant newcomer program with a transition-in and -out emphasis
- Enhance English language skills
- Connect families with community services
- Coordinate ESL with mainstream classes

For more on this, see "Immigrant children and Youth: Enabling Their Success at School"
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/immigrant.pdf> .

For Students Designated for Special Education

- Use an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting to add specific supports and accommodations related to middle school pressures.

Remember that, in all cases, monitoring is essential to ensure students are making an effective transition.

*Federal funding can be used to facilitate transition programs for limited English proficient students and newly arrived immigrants. Also, 15% of IDEA funds may be used for Coordinated Early Intervening Services to address academic and behavioral problems.

Ongoing Guidance and Support

In general, schools need to unify student and learning supports and then develop them into a comprehensive system designed to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students (see *Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>). Supports for transitions are one of six content arenas of such a system. Our Center has a self-study surveys for each arena; for the survey related to *Supports for Transitions*, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/transitionsurvey.pdf> .

In general, specific ongoing support in the first months of the transition to middle school reflect features of good schooling. Recommendation include:

- facilitating student engagement in classroom learning (e.g., through personalizing instruction, cooperative learning, looping)
- providing a wide range of enrichment opportunities in and out of class and during and before and after school (and ensuring students and their families are well informed about what is available and how to join in)
- connecting students with each other at school (e.g., peer buddy program, interest clubs, social opportunities through recreation and service activities)
- enhancing home involvement and engagement by providing a full continuum of supports for families (e.g., connecting families with each other, developing a family resource center, offering adult classes, providing volunteer opportunities)
- fostering a caring school climate (e.g., ensuring physical and emotional safety and nurturing, facilitating understanding of group and individual differences, promoting interpersonal connectedness among and between students, families, and school personnel)
- enhancing professional development to address barriers to learning and teaching in general, as well as implementing specific ways to enhance the transition to middle school (e.g., facilitating understanding about motivational factors related to school engagement at different stages of development and how to match instruction to such differences)

Extracurricular Activity Participation

Research has found that meaningful participation in extracurricular activity promotes skill development, positive attitudes toward self and others, and resiliency. These are buffers/protective factors that could foster a more successful school transition and have a major impact on student's perception and participation in the middle school years. Researchers also report that students who participate in multiple extracurricular activities have higher GPAs and an increased feeling of connectedness to the school than students who have no participation or low participation (Akos, 2996; Camp, 2001; Cooper, et al., 1999).

A Few Examples of Transition Programs in Place Across the Country*

A large county school district in KY:

- Planning sessions are held annually with principals.
- Transition strategies are required in each school's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan and in the District Improvement Plan.
- Parent University is held for families in May and August to welcome parents and students and to provide information on developmental milestones for students.

A city school district in GA that has 5 elementary schools feeding into 1 middle school:

- Elementary and middle school counselors communicate regularly to facilitate transition activities between the schools.
- An Academic Fair Night is held where 5th and 6th graders and parents come to the middle school and meet with teachers and counselors. It is also a good opportunity for fifth graders to interact with former fifth graders. Teachers also have examples of exemplary work on display so parents and students can get an idea of the level of expectations where work is concerned at the middle school.
- Fifth Grade Orientation Day - Fifth graders from the 5 elementary schools visit the middle school to get oriented on the particulars of middle school life. They have a chance to ask questions and get concerns addressed.
- Teacher Transition Forms -This form was created for fifth grade teachers to communicate information about students to the middle school teachers. The form allows for quick communication highlighting concerns and current learning supports so that supports can be put in place at the beginning of the school year.
- Teacher Transition Info Meeting - Each year, the sixth grade academy principal meets with all fifth grade teachers to orient them to the expectations, procedures, and the registration process at the middle school. This provides an opportunity for teachers to ask questions and for addressing mutual concerns.

A large unified city school district in AZ:

- Holds two evening events for incoming sixth graders. The families come to the evening event to hear about expectations and learn about the ins and outs of middle school.
- Offers a summer school experience for incoming sixth graders that includes Middle School 101 which helps them adjust to the rigors of middle school expectations and the change from an elementary style to a middle school style. Further, it helps the students to develop friends in a relaxed learning environment so that when they come in the fall, there is less stress on the personal/emotional aspects.
- Has a weekly newsletter that is sent home with current students and is published on the website.
- Develops a list serve that is used to relay information to parents.

(For more, see "Transitions to and from Elementary, Middle, & High School" – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitionstoandfrom.pdf> .)

Concluding Comments

For some students, transition to a new school can be disruptive to learning and interpersonal relationships. Such transitions are particularly disruptive and stressful for students who change schools several times in a year.

When transitions go poorly, learning, behavior, and emotional problems can arise and be exacerbated. All this contributes to eventual dropping out of school.

Because the middle school transition raises concerns that often are not well-addressed, proposals have been made to eliminate middle schools. Such proposals stress research suggesting that students do better academically in a K-8 configuration so that the only matriculation transition is to high school.

Given that middle schools are not going to be eliminated any time soon, the focus on transition to middle school clearly must be addressed effectively. However, supporting effective transitions is only one facet of improving how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. Our Center stresses that failure to embed transition supports into a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports risks making articulation programs just one more fragmented and marginalized approach to addressing student needs. A unified and comprehensive system enables schools to provide better supports for transitions along with a broad range of other student and learning supports that are essential in ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

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