

Facilitating Student Transitions into Middle School

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Two students began middle school today. Ramon always did well in elementary school, but today he is concerned about the pressures he has been told exist at middle school. He does not know how to get to his classes, and the other sixth graders do not appear to know where they are going either. The people in his classes are strangers, and he feels intimidated by the seventh and eighth graders when walking in the halls. Ramon cannot open his locker. He is overwhelmed by the amount of information he is receiving about life in middle school. His first period teacher gave him an assignment book, but he is not sure what to do with it. Even though he is looking forward to it, the greater freedom is confusing to him.

Last spring in elementary school, he met his middle school counselor who came to his school for a brief presentation. He has not met the principal, and is told that he will not meet her until later this month, unless he “gets in trouble.”

Ramon rides a bus home from school. Listening to high schoolers and older middle schoolers discuss their weekend of partying, he feels sad and lost. This is going to be a terrible year.

Across town, Nikita also started middle school. She moves easily from class to class, helped by two opportunities to visit the middle school and run through her schedule. She is very comfortable with the teachers; they are not new to her. She is happy that her locker was as easy to open today as it was at the open house in August.

During the summer Nikita received a booklet about the services offered at the middle school. She and her parents also received an information packet about peer pressure, middle school expectations, a student handbook, and what to expect the first day of school. She met her school counselor and principal on several occasions, and also met the teacher who will be her teacher-advisor. Mr. Chung likes kids, and she is sure he will be able to “relate” to her. Nikita also has an assigned “buddy,” eighth grader Amanda. Amanda was at the school-sponsored picnic held two weeks ago where Nikita met the sixth grade teachers and some of the other students. It was a fun picnic with lots of exciting stories about middle school. All of the “buddies” were there, and they helped the sixth graders practice opening their lockers. Today their buddies will spend time with them, helping them with lockers, showing them how to get around, and being helpful. Nikita’s first period teacher spent most of the period discussing assignment books, locker organization, and other expectations. The counselor also had a short meeting to give the students the opportunity to talk about their first day. Next week they will meet again.

On the bus ride home, Nikita sits with another sixth grader and Amanda. She hears some of the high schoolers talking about their “wild weekend.” She does not think they sound too smart. Nikita feels that her day has been “awesome.” This is going to be a wonderful year.



Two students, two vastly different experiences. Ramon and Nikita represent thousands of students who every year make the transition from elementary to middle school. Some experience a relatively smooth move to a new setting. They feel knowledgeable, confident of their own abilities, and secure that they are known and cared for. For others, the experience is quite different.

They feel unsure of themselves, have little information about the school and its programs, and wander through the school feeling uncared for and lost.

Crossing the threshold to middle school is a life altering passage. Not only are students growing and changing in remarkable ways, they are also moving to a new phase of their education. They often enter a larger school, with greater diversity and a wider range of curricular choices.

This article addresses the transition to middle school by discussing the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. It will describe specific strategies used by teachers, teacher-advisors, school counselors, and principals to smooth student transition to a new school. Middle school educators have developed a variety of approaches to help students make the move to a new school. They recognize the importance of implementing sound transition programs and helping students enter their new school confident and knowledgeable.

THE CHANGING ADOLESCENT

During the developmental period of early adolescence, there is a strong need for intimacy, autonomy, cognitive challenge, and feelings of competence. Coupled with the more obvious physiological and biological changes are changes in the cognitive, moral, psychological, and social realms. Young adolescents become more knowledgeable and skillful, with a growing ability to use abstract reasoning and critical thinking. Their moral decision making processes become similar to that of most adults as they progress into the level of conventional reasoning. Most of their moral thinking is centered on issues of group consensus and social contract, rather than on issues of reward and punishment (Kohlberg, 1976).

Psychologically young adolescents desire control over their lives and the establishment of identities outside of their families (Erikson, 1968). They attempt to clarify where they fit into society, what they believe, and who they are (Perry, 1995), while at the same time trying to avoid feelings of exposure and embarrassment (Kottman, 1990). These psychological changes are most evident in manifestations of rapid interpersonal development. Extreme self-consciousness and self-focus is expressed in concern about one's relationships with friends and adults outside of the home. There is a strong desire to form close and supportive relationships with non-family adults (Midgley & Urdan, 1992). As the focus of young adolescents moves into the social realm, they strive to satisfy social needs, sometimes at the expense of academic concerns.

The move from elementary to middle school adds yet another challenge. This transition can be a difficult time for many adolescents. It is a period filled with both anxiety and anticipation (Odegaard & Heath, 1992). The comfort of a familiar setting is gone. The size and perceived anonymity of middle schools may appear overwhelming to young adolescents. Long-standing peer relationships become strained as students become members of middle school "teams" in which they may be



unable to easily interact with former elementary school friends. Different expectations from teachers and parents (Weldy, 1991), briefer contacts with more adults, and the perception of being less connected and less valued contribute to the stress. This combination of environmental, social, psychological, and physiological changes may overwhelm some students. Lack of skills needed to cope with these stressors can have significant effects on adjustment, achievement, aspirations, and feelings of self-worth.

The potential negative effects of school transitions on youth in this stage of development have been documented by research (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Seidman, LaRue, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). Following the transition, many students feel less positive about their own potential and the importance of schooling. They may put forth less effort and give up more quickly. Grades may decline (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). There is a perceived decrease in support from school personnel and increased engagement with peer groups. Students with the most difficulty are frequently those unable to focus on school and learning. Without a thoughtfully designed transition program, the adjustment period for these adolescents can be lengthy (Allan & McKean, 1984) and may be accompanied by a lack of school success. It is vital that those who work with young adolescents address transition issues. This needs to be done at the school level, as well as at the individual level.

ACTIVITIES THAT SMOOTH THE TRANSITION

Meeting the needs of young adolescents during the transition involves nurturing student/adult relationships and helping students feel that someone is looking out for them (Mac Iver, 1990). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) suggested that these relationships are vital to adolescents' intellectual growth. Transition programs must also address students' needs for competence and autonomy (Shoffner, 1997). This involves enhancing interpersonal relationships and coping skills and addressing normal fears, concerns, and excitement about moving to a new school. Coping skills developed during this transition will make future transitions, such as the move to high school, easier. In addition, there is a clear and positive effect of parental involvement on student success in school (Monson & Myers, 1992; Tracey, 1995).

Schools address these student needs in a variety of ways. The most common transition activities include meetings with incoming students and their parents, visits to the middle school, and interaction between school counselors and elementary school staff (Mac Iver, 1990). While these strategies are helpful, they can be strengthened by using a wider range of activities to support students during the move to middle school.

A comprehensive approach to transition is increasingly employed by middle school faculty. Built on a commitment to teamwork and collaboration (Carnegie Council, 1989; National Middle School Association, 1995), teachers, parents, and students work together in designing and implementing transition programs.



The attributes of successful transition programs include a sensitivity to the anxieties accompanying such a move, the importance of parents and teachers as partners in the effort, and the recognition that becoming comfortable in a new setting is an ongoing process, not a single event. The following activities represent the range of transition approaches used by schools.

Prior to the transition

1. Invite teams and/or teacher advisors to participate in a study group to examine prior transition activities and evaluate and possibly redesign the program. One Connecticut school established a group with representation from each team to gather data and refocus their program. Engaging teachers as active participants builds support, fosters collegiality, and minimizes resistance to the impact that transition activities have on classroom time (Oakes, Quartz, Gong, Guiton, & Lipton, 1993).
2. School counselors and administrators should visit the elementary school(s) during the spring preceding the transition to provide students with information about the middle school. Students thrive on specific detail about the school, its programs, and a typical school day. Inviting current students to participate in the visits personalizes the new school and allows students to ask questions they might not pose to adults.
3. Work with teachers and students to develop an "Introduction to Middle School" program (e.g., a video, visits by elementary students to middle school, chat groups with current students, a handbook of typical first-year concerns, and coping skills) that addresses some of the persistent concerns of new middle school students (Williamson, 1993). A Michigan middle school faculty surveys incoming students annually to identify their concerns and then aligns transition activities with the expressed concerns of students.
4. Meet with parents at each of the elementary schools. School counselors and principals report that more meetings, often with smaller groups, promote interaction and increase the opportunity to provide specific, detailed information to parents (Kaiser, 1996). Meeting at the elementary school provides a familiar and comfortable setting for such conversations.
5. Identify ways to assure that students and their parents will be comfortable in the new setting. One midwestern middle school strives to assure that each student is in class with a friend during his/her first year (Williamson, 1993). During the spring students are asked to list three or four possible classmates.
6. Hold an open house during the spring for incoming students and their parents. Use it as an opportunity to showcase current students. One school began with a general meeting in the auditorium followed by student demonstrations throughout the building including band and choir performances, art displays, short skits, typical math and science lessons, foreign language activities, and technology demonstrations. Each event was presented by current students. Incoming students and their parents moved at their own pace, becoming acquainted with the school's program and physical layout.



7. Build connections with parents at an early date. One school mails the middle school newsletter to the parents of all incoming students during the spring before the transition. Another school works with the parent organization to call all incoming parents and welcome them to the “new” school community (Williamson, 1993).
8. Establish connections for students between elementary and middle school. For example, pair each elementary school classroom with a middle school class and have students write letters to one another. Arrange for each incoming student to visit the middle school and shadow a first-year student for a day.
9. Arrange for school counselors to meet with each incoming elementary school student to become acquainted, provide information about their new school, and deal with questions or concerns. A follow-up letter to parents reinforces the importance placed on assuring a smooth transition for students (Williamson, 1993).

During the summer

1. Provide information concerning the start of the school year at an early date (Williamson, 1993). Students are comforted by knowing many of the details of their school day, such as schedules and locker assignments. Invite students and parents to tour the building, locate their classrooms, and try out their locker combination.
2. Assign students to teachers or teams before the end of the previous school year. Encourage teachers, teacher-advisors and/or teams to contact each student during the summer through a phone call, postcard, or brief letter. Parents report that their children immediately begin to feel a link to the school and to their teacher as a result of such initiatives (Johnston & Williamson, 1998b).
3. Establish a buddy system with older students (Allen & McKean, 1984; Grant, 1989; Mac Iver, 1990). At one school this involves deploying most eighth graders as a “big brother” or “big sister” for an incoming student. The school counselors at this school worked with teachers and students to clarify the common tasks and responsibilities of the program. They report that incoming students enjoy the interaction with “older” students and that the “buddies” take pride in their new responsibilities.
4. Provide a time for students and parents to meet with teachers, counselors, and administrators during a summer open house, breakfast, or picnic (Case, 1989). One northeastern middle school holds a family potluck a few days before the beginning of each school year for new families. They meet others, tour the building, visit classrooms, and meet staff. Such initiatives help to lessen the anxiety of the first day of school.



During the school year

1. Address early concerns over logistics. Provide practice sessions with lockers and discuss locker organization. Have a system in place the first weeks of school to help students get around, such as using older students as resources and guides (Williamson, 1993).
2. Provide an opportunity for parents to continue to support their children in the new setting. Work with parent groups to design parent education programs (e.g., Understanding Your Middle Schooler, Strategies for Maximizing Homework Completion) or other opportunities for parents to meet with school staff, discuss the issues confronting middle school students, and build networks with other parents to support the school's program (Perry, 1995).
3. Provide classroom guidance lessons for use by teams or teacher advisors that deal with persistent transition issues (e.g., peer pressure, study skills, how to meet people, communication skills) (Odegaard & Heath, 1992).
4. Establish first-year support groups where school counselors work with students to address typical transition problems. Smaller settings provide a more intimate environment in which to explore and examine concerns in greater depth (Odegaard & Heath, 1992).
5. Schedule a time for counselors and/or administrators to visit the classrooms of first-year students during the first weeks of the school year. Provide time to interact with students, respond to questions, and clarify lingering transition concerns.
6. Work with teachers and students to evaluate the effectiveness of transition activities. One school asks students to respond to a short survey and then selects students to participate in focus group discussions about their experience with moving to a new school. The most effective evaluation models involve teachers, parents, and students in the design and implementation of surveys and interview questions (Johnston & Williamson, 1998a).

CONCLUSION

A sound transition program can directly influence an adolescent's formation of an identity as an active participant in the learning process and as a successful student. Although there is no one perfect model for helping students adjust to a new school, what is critical is a commitment to serving students, regardless of background or development. The more varied and extensive the articulation program, the greater the success students will experience during their first year in a middle school (Mac Iver, 1990).

Ramon and Nikita will probably adjust to middle school quite differently as a result of their first few weeks in the new setting. Some of this will be due to individual differences and maturity levels. Some of it will reflect the transition programs offered by their schools. All students deserve the opportunity to be successful. Middle level educators can make a difference for students as a result of the activities incorporated into their transition programs.



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