
TRANSITION FROM ELEMENTARY TO MIDDLE SCHOOL: STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

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Transitions can be difficult for everyone, but for young people one of the most difficult transitions is the one from elementary to middle school. At the same time that young adolescents are adapting to hormonally induced physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, they suddenly enter new educational environments that are typically less nurturing, larger, more departmentalized (e.g., going from one classroom to another), more competitive, and more demanding academically. Middle school students are generally expected to be more independent and responsible for their own assignments as well as other commitments.

Concerns About Middle School

Student concerns. Often, students spend the summer before middle school being anxious about everything from friendships to their academic ability to finding their classrooms. Misstatements from their elementary school teachers (e.g., “You won’t get away with this kind of work in middle school.”) and their slightly older peers and siblings (e.g., “If you go into the restroom, you’ll get your head shoved in the toilet.”) fuel these anxieties.

When asked, sixth-grade students reported the following worries about middle school (Weldy, 1991; Schumacher, 1998):

- Getting to class on time.
- Finding lockers.
- Keeping up with materials.
- Finding lunchrooms and bathrooms.
- Getting on the right bus to go home.
- Getting through crowded hallways.
- Remembering which class to go to next.

Teacher concerns. According to Weldy (1991), middle school teachers report a similar but expanded list of specific challenges that students face in making the transition from elementary to middle school. Selected challenges mentioned by teachers but not by students include:

- Reduced parent involvement.
- More teachers.
- No recess, no free time.
- New grading standards and procedures; more long-range assignments.
- More peer pressures (e.g., cliques, dealing with older students and students from other schools).
- Accepting more responsibility for their own actions.
- Unrealistic parental expectations.
- Lack of experience in dealing with extracurricular activities.
- Coping with adolescent physical development.
- Social immaturity.
- Lack of basic skills.

Factors Influencing Middle School Transitions

Various research studies (e.g., see “Resources” at the end of this handout) have shown that a number of factors affect the transition to middle school.

Boys versus girls. Gender may influence adjustment as females tend to worry about physical attractiveness and males worry about athletic competence. Females experience greater declines in self-esteem during the transition.

Merging multiple student groups. The number of new peers in the middle school may also make a difference. When two or three elementary schools merge into one middle school, students may perform more poorly academically than when all students make the move from a single elementary school building to a single middle school. This may be because the merged students may spend more time and energy worrying about where they stand academically as well as socially with their expanded peer group whereas those who make the move en masse are already aware of a sort of academic pecking order. Such worries may lead to a drop in academic self-esteem.

Social skills. The ability to make friends and to be part of an accepting peer group relates directly to middle school adjustment. Students with good social skills and stable and supportive friendship groups before the transition will make a smoother transition to their new school.

Parent involvement. Family support and parental supervision are also critical in making the transition to middle school a smooth one. Students with moderate levels of parental supervision have higher grade point averages and achievement test scores than do students with low levels of parent involvement. If parents supervise their students in a supportive way while allowing them some freedom and autonomy, students are more successful.

How Elementary Schools and Teachers Can Help

Emphasize the positive aspects of middle school. Elementary school teachers can minimize the fear in the minds of their students by emphasizing the positive aspects of moving ahead to middle school. They can make an effort to teach coping strategies at all grade levels and to encourage students to think of the transition to middle school as a challenge and an opportunity for intellectual and social growth (e.g., “In middle school you’ll be able to learn more about the things you’re interested in and there will be more possibilities for friends with common interests.”).

Gradually prepare students for the academic challenges of middle school. Elementary school teachers should prepare students for middle school academics by gradually increasing the amount of autonomy they expect of students in completing assignments. The teacher should take time to explain

this to students in a relatively non-anxiety producing manner. For example, an elementary teacher might say, “As you move to middle school and to high school, you’ll be expected to take more responsibility for getting work done without a lot of reminders. I’m going to try to introduce this gradually so you’re ready for that responsibility when the time comes. I have confidence that you’ll all be able to handle the increased responsibility.”

Include opportunities for cooperative learning. Move from competition-based learning to cooperative-based learning. Teach students to work in groups and support each other. Since students have less contact with and support from a single teacher in middle school, they need to learn strategies for coping with increased academic demands from multiple teachers. One such strategy is working cooperatively with their peers.

Encourage participation in student government. Encourage student involvement in all school decisions. Use student councils and focus groups to discuss real problems and generate solutions.

Teach problem solving. Provide work in school and through homework that encourages problem solving and comprehension.

Teach study skills. Help students learn to self-regulate by breaking large tasks into manageable pieces and by providing guidelines so students can monitor their own progress. Provide students with assignment books preferably with a middle school logo and teach them how to use this to organize their assignments and other obligations. Individual teachers should not assume that students know how to study, get the most out of lectures, read for content, understand text material, prepare for tests, or even take tests. Providing hints and strategies and spending time discussing these in all classes can be very helpful.

How Middle Schools and Teachers Can Help

Encourage participation in extra-curricular activities. Offer a wide variety of organizations, teams, and clubs, and encourage students to suggest groups they would like to start. Have an activity fair/open house the first week of school so that parents may familiarize themselves with their children’s teachers as well as the many opportunities to become involved.

Encourage parental involvement. Provide diverse opportunities for parental involvement in the schools. Communicate with parents in meetings, through the Internet, in notes or postcards from school to home, in phone calls, and in periodic newsletters. Do not limit contacts with parents to occasions of student misbehavior or other bad news.

Encourage parents to be guest speakers. Gather demographic and special talent information about

parents and use this information in planning events and programs. A father from another country, for example, may be asked to speak about his upbringing to a social studies class or a mother who is a physician may be asked to speak to a health class.

Make the school a community resource center.

Offer evening classes for parents on a wide range of topics such as technology or parenting tips. Classes might also focus on parent-child interests such as cooking, travel, stress management, and conflict resolution. Parent-child book clubs might also be encouraged.

Schedule tours of the students' new school.

Encourage students and their families to tour the school during the summer before entering. Provide information about the school as well as, for example, maps and class schedules. Virtual tours and an orientation session may also be appealing to students and their families. It may be useful to have students who have already made the transition successfully speak at the orientation about their strategies. These students should be screened so they paint a realistic but not overly anxiety-producing view of the school. Address the specific concerns that students and parents may have and allow time for questions and answers, either orally and in writing.

Provide opportunities for students to meet each other. When students from several schools will be merging into one middle school, an effort might be made to help the students get to know each other early in the year. One possibility might be getting students involved in service activities such as picking up trash around the school, conducting a car wash to raise money for a class-wide social activity, training students in peer mediation, or providing child care training for students.

How Other Professionals Can Help

Most middle schools have school psychologists, counselors, and social workers who can assist in planning for smooth transitions and may be useful in several ways including teaching stress management, peer mediation, and conflict management skills. They may work individually or in small groups with students experiencing unusual difficulty in making the transition. They can help to address the issues of special needs children for whom the transition may present extra difficulties and can give presentations to parent groups, identify recurring problems through research studies or program evaluation, and participate in team meetings to solve problems that arise.

Summary

The transition to middle school can be the most difficult transition a child has to make. With the help of parents and teachers, and with adequate preparation,

students can be assured a successful entrance into the middle school years.

Resources

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Website

National Middle School Association—www.nmsa.org

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