

# NEWSLETTER

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## Middle-to-High-School Transition

### *Practical Strategies to Consider*

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*What, then, are the factors that make for a successful transition? Not surprisingly, they appear to center around the dual themes of academic emphasis and personal support and engagement.*

—National Association of State Boards of Education, 2008

*Transition is a process, not an event.*

—Dr. Jay Hertzog, Slippery Rock University

**W**ith increasing alarm at the number of high school dropouts across the United States (Dynarski et al., 2008), educators are seeking ways to help students stay in school, graduate, and move on to meaningful and productive careers. Recent research points out that a smooth transition to ninth grade can contribute to students' success in high school and beyond. This newsletter draws from several recent reports to discuss the issue of middle-to-high-school transition and also provides examples of successful transition practices.

### The Need to Address Middle-to-High-School Transition

As they enter ninth grade, adolescents need to find ways to establish their place and their autonomy in high school. They often run into roadblocks that can affect whether they develop their own self-confidence and direction or rely on other students to direct them. Eighth-grade students leave the familiarity of their school and arrive in a new, larger, and seemingly chaotic high school environment. For some students, this abrupt change may cause feelings of insecurity and alienation. Without the proper information and support, incoming ninth graders can perceive high school as an impersonal and unsupportive place and turn to unconstructive behaviors to find fulfillment. During this time, support from adults is crucial.

A 2006 research summary by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) reported findings from longitudinal studies (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999), qualitative studies (Kinney, 1993; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001), and other studies on transition programs. According to the NMSA summary, many current transition programs focus on providing eighth-grade students with information on course selection and the physical layout of the school. Although this information is necessary, it does not address affective concerns, such as the anxieties students may experience when entering high school. Research shows that, as a result, ninth graders often experience a decrease in academic achievement and an increase in problem behavior. As reported by NMSA (2006), students were aware that time management, ability to stay on task, social skills, and positive classroom behavior are essential to high school success; but many students noted that social matters and peer relationships overshadow academic concerns in the ninth grade.

Among the other points in the report was the fact that high-achieving students may experience lower grades than they are accustomed to when they move from middle to high school. Also reported were significant increases in academic struggles and behavior problems early in ninth grade. When supports for time management, social skills, and maintaining an academic focus are provided, students experience an easier transition and are more likely to have success in ninth grade and beyond.

## Components of Effective Transition Programs

Across the country, middle and high school leaders are finding innovative and effective transition strategies to help their students achieve academic success and graduate. Several

organizations have compiled and conducted research in the components of effective transition programs. Those components are identified here; further details can be found in the papers cited under References.

NMSA (2006) presents four key actions as essential to effective transition programs: (1) ensuring collaboration between eighth- and ninth-grade building personnel; (2) providing targeted early intervention to support academic recovery for failing students; (3) making available to students and families pertinent and consistent information about the academic, social, and organizational similarities and differences between middle school and high school; and (4) offering information on the curriculum, facilities, safety, and discipline of the high school.

The case for providing effective middle-to-high-school transition programs is further supported by research by the Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (2009) at George Washington University. The research report made the following recommendations to state and district leaders:

- Ensure that curriculum standards are aligned to prepare eighth-grade students for the challenge of high school work.
- Communicate the importance of literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies through policy and funding initiatives.
- Prepare teachers for teaching challenging content in the middle grades.
- Provide structures to support middle school students with the extra help they need for success in high school.
- Ensure that middle school leaders are prepared to implement a program that prepares all students for the transition to college preparatory courses in high school.

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- Provide technical assistance to turn around low-performing schools serving middle grades.
- Ensure that middle-grade students and parents receive guidance and advice to plan for high school, postsecondary learning, and careers.

Both the NMSA (2006) report and the research findings of the Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (2009) illuminate factors that might affect student behavior and achievement during the transition from middle to high school. Both sources point to the shared responsibility of the middle and high school personnel along with parental support to help students make this transition successfully.

Recommendations for successful middle-to-high-school transition are also offered by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE). The organization argued that “a rigorous core curriculum at the early secondary level is the necessary ingredient for successful transition to upper secondary school” (NASBE, 2008, p. 18). According to NASBE, this means that students, parents, and guidance counselors should work collaboratively to plan ahead for five to six years of coursework, not one year at a time. Long-term planning of this kind can help students to see the relevance of their eighth- and ninth-grade coursework to their life goals.

Many comprehensive school reform models include strategies to help students during their transition to high school. A technical report published by the National Dropout Prevention Center (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007), draws from a large body of research that identifies dropout risk factors and presents exemplary programs that address high school dropout prevention, some of which might be useful to middle and high schools working on transition strategies.

The next section presents profiles of successful transition strategies that are being implemented in middle and high schools.

## Effective Transition Practices

### *Brunswick Middle School and Brunswick High School, Frederick County, Maryland*

In Frederick County (Maryland) Public Schools, Brunswick Middle School and Brunswick High School have worked together to create a seamless and successful middle-to-high-school transition program. Program activities take place districtwide, not just with the middle and high schools, and occur throughout the school year. For example, Frederick County schools have created SUCCESS—Students Under Cluster Care Experience School Success—in which teams of two or three teachers from each school building meet every other month to discuss and share instructional issues and assessment data on students. SUCCESS teams receive reports from each school administrator after monthly meetings at which all Frederick County school administrators discuss common issues and develop common practices that are instituted in all their schools. These practices ensure that student expectations are consistent across the district.

According to Kristi Mitchell, principal of Brunswick High School, and Brian Vasquenza, principal of Brunswick Middle School, the Brunswick schools have specific activities that build on district initiatives and help students to see high school graduation as their goal already in the primary grades. Posters that depict “The Ideal Brunswick Graduate” are posted throughout Brunswick schools and community buildings, outlining key characteristics of what each Brunswick student will know and be able to do when he or she graduates. This serves as a visual reminder to students, families, and community members of the responsibility and expectation of all members of the community for student success.

Brunswick guidance counselors meet with eighth graders to share information about high

school courses and the academic and social expectations in high school. Brunswick eighth graders are pushed beyond this simple sharing, however. They also write a personal four-year plan for their high-school career with supporting information from their teachers, parents, and guidance counselors. These plans are sent home to parents, kept in students' school files, and used to help students select their classes during ninth-grade registration. They are also monitored over the course of their high-school careers, to match eighth-grade planning with the four years of high-school reality.

Brunswick students are successfully staying in school and making adequate yearly progress (AYP). In addition, Brunswick High School reports more than 80 percent of its graduates attend community college or a four-year college or enter into a business or technical program each year.

### *Hammond Middle School, Laurel, Maryland*

Hammond Middle School in Laurel, Maryland, is one of 19 middle schools in Howard County Public Schools. Kerry McGowan, Hammond's principal, and her colleagues have worked with the county's three high schools to build an exemplary transition program from middle school to ninth grade.

Like many schools with effective middle-to-high-school transition programs, Hammond team members start early in the school year acquiring information about the high schools in order to prepare their eighth-grade students. For example, students begin their course selection in December of their eighth-grade year. In addition, teams of eighth-grade teachers travel to the three high schools to discuss features of the high schools that might affect their incoming students. This information is then shared with the students and their parents well in advance of the end of eighth grade. Parent and student information-sharing sessions are an integral part of Hammond's transition program.

Hammond staff members give special praise to the staff at Atholton High School, one of the schools that Hammond's graduates enter. Chris Fritz, assistant principal at Atholton, and Lucy Hollis, one of Atholton's counselors, work extensively with the Hammond staff to coordinate middle-to-high-school transition activities. Each year, Atholton staff members create a robust spreadsheet showing the courses and grades of previous Hammond students. This historical information is enormously helpful in assessing the success of Hammond's past students and for properly placing the current group of eighth graders into ninth-grade courses.

At Hammond, McGowan and her team run assemblies for their eighth graders, showing a movie—*Charting the Course*—that directly addresses issues that transitioning teens might encounter. McGowan strives to engage her charges in dialogue about the issues presented in the movie. After students watch the movie, former Hammond students, now ninth and 10th graders, have a roundtable discussion onstage with a representative group of current Hammond eighth graders, in front of the eighth graders' peers. The roundtable is meant to ground the issues of the movie in the reality of Hammond's eighth graders.

McGowan believes that these transition efforts are paying off. Student attendance and achievement are on the rise, and both parents and students voice their appreciation for the activities that provide them with information and support to make the change a successful one.

### *Sequoyah Middle School, Doraville, Georgia, and Cross Keys High School, Atlanta, Georgia*

Sequoyah Middle School and Cross Keys High School, both part of Georgia's DeKalb County school system, see themselves as one large school, not as two separate buildings. "We are one family," said Trent Arnold, Sequoyah's principal (personal communication, February 6,

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2009), and LaShawn McMillan, Ph.D., principal of Cross Keys, concurs.

Both schools serve students with high needs: 92 percent of Sequoyah's 789 students are economically disadvantaged, and 41 percent are English language learners; 83 percent of Cross Keys' 831 students are economically disadvantaged, and 36 percent are English language learners. But these issues have not kept the two schools from achieving success and setting the bar high for their students. Both buildings have made AYP—Sequoyah for the last three years—and Cross Keys was given awards related to its Advanced Placement (AP) program. As an AP Challenge School, Cross Keys offers AP classes in English, mathematics, social studies, and science. The school is also an AP Access and Support School: 30 percent of its AP test takers are African American or Hispanic and at least 30 percent score 3 or higher on their AP examinations.

Arnold, McMillan, and their respective teams have implemented a variety of programs to ensure that the transition from Sequoyah to Cross Keys is seamless and highly supportive, in keeping with the "one-school" ethos of these two buildings.

All Sequoyah students travel to Cross Keys twice a year, and each is paired with a ninth- or 10th-grade student for a full day, seeing classes and extracurricular activities through the eyes of that student. Each visiting eighth grader receives a transition packet, with a picture of his or her counselor. Students keep the same counselor for all four years at Cross Keys.

A new initiative is a summer bridge program, during which incoming ninth graders attend

a week of orientation at Cross Keys. The first summer program occurred in 2008. "It was not just academic but also social," said Tanya Henderson, the high school's head counselor, "and it was gender-specific," with boys and girls separated (personal communication, February 6, 2009). The Cross Keys staff believes that separating the sexes during this short period of time allows teachers to address academic and social issues, some of which might be gender-specific. The district provided transportation for the students and funds to feed them breakfast and lunch. After a highly successful first summer program that more than a third of eligible middle school students attended, Arnold, McMillan, and their teams plan to monitor other indicators for success and look forward to making the summer bridge program a permanent part of the transition from Sequoyah to Cross Keys.

## Conclusion

Adolescents entering high school look forward to new activities, more choices, and new friends. But their apprehension over the unfamiliar and the unknown can cause anxiety. Since high schools are generally larger than middle schools, it can be difficult for staff members to personalize these schools for individual student needs, even though middle and high school staffs are increasing their collaborations to help students feel supported and prepared for the change. As evidenced in the accounts of the transition activities presented here, schools are providing a variety of activities that address the concerns of students and their parents and help make the experience a seamless and successful one. Communication and collaboration among all parties appear to be crucial for a successful transition.

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