



Gifted Middle School Students
Transitioning to High School:

How One Teacher Helped His Students Feel Less Anxious

by Melvin B. Benson IV

Just before the end of the last period of the day, into my room stepped two young women noticeably more mature than the eighth graders sitting before me.

“Hey, Mr. B.! Remember us?” It takes only a moment to recognize Mary Beth and Jenna, two students from the previous year. I introduce them to my present class as proof that eighth grade is passable.

As class dismisses, Mary Beth, Jenna, and I converse. I ask them how they are doing at the *big house*, the term some middle school teachers have given to the high school.

“It’s taking some getting used to,” Jenna said.

“Oh? What in particular?” I ask.

“HOMEWORK!” They both replied and laughed. Mary Beth, shaking her head, continued: “They don’t accept anything late.”

“And, they don’t remind you about it, either. Not until you have to turn it in,” Jenna added.

At that precise moment, I knew that in some small way I was failing my students. They needed to know what to expect as they transitioned from middle school to the “big house.” There should be as little surprise as possible.

I have the best job in the world. I teach American history to gifted eighth graders in the Council Rock School District of Bucks County, PA. My job is more than teaching a particular subject to students, it requires guiding the development of children and preparing them for their futures. I take great pleasure in the responsibility placed upon me and want to improve every year.

At 14 years of age, my middle school students are on the verge of young adulthood. They know that this transition to high school is an important milestone. It brings about increased freedom, as well as greater responsibility, instilling both excitement and fear. I remember not only being nervous moving from eighth to ninth grade but also that in the end, it was really not that difficult. What my students need is some experiential perspective providing the information they need, guidance on how to accomplish the transition, and a little encouragement that it will all work out. The question was: How can I provide this perspective, guidance, and encouragement?

When Jenna and Mary Beth told me homework was their biggest surprise at the high school, I knew I needed to pass on this information to my current class; the question was, how best to do it? Throughout eighth grade, teachers tell their students that at the high school things would be different. Yet, Jenna and Mary Beth proved that teachers’ words, at least those about homework in particular, go unheeded. As I looked at those two young women, it occurred to me that they should be the ones to pass on the information: student-to-student, peer-to-peer. Letrello and Miles (2003) found that student-to-student talks were the most important in reducing transition tensions. Concluding that this must be a void in my district’s current transition practices, I resolved to do something about it. First, I had to

determine exactly what practices the district already had in place.

That ninth graders are very different from eighth graders is commonly understood (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Many school districts have programs in place to help ease the adolescent social upheaval inherent in moving from middle school to high school. A comprehensive study of districts with and without transition programs confirmed that schools with “two or fewer transition practices had higher attrition and drop out rates than those with three or more . . .” (McIntosh & White, 2006, p. 41). Moving from districtwide statistics to the individual, Hertzog and Morgan (1997) found that well-planned and instituted transition programs reduce student apprehension while increasing a sense of belonging.

In the Council Rock School District, the transition program for eighth graders begins in January with a high school principal and guidance counselor hosting an assembly to explain ninth-grade course selections. Over the next 2 months, students have individual meetings with their guidance counselor for course choices. In May, eighth graders go to the high school for an assembly where upperclassmen explain and promote the many extracurricular activities available. After the assembly, students go on small-group tours of the high school guided by a junior or senior. Additionally, on several different scheduled nights during the summer, parents and students may tour the high school building and meet administrators.

Transition activities continue on the first day of school when the ninth graders alone attend the school. Teachers greet the incoming first-year students while veteran upperclassmen act as hallway assistants. All ninth graders meet with their counselors during the first quarter to see how each

has assimilated into the high school environment.

A review of current studies regarding middle to high school transition programs across the country shows these as generally accepted practices. Their intent is to reduce student apprehension concerning the newness of the building and the high school experience. Most of these programs target high-risk students and have had great success in serving that population (Letrello & Miles, 2003). The transition programs ease the general feelings of anxiety, allowing students to begin their ninth-grade year with higher levels of self-confidence.

As a general practice throughout the country, gifted students are left to work out their own issues (Clarenbach, 2007). Although my gifted students are generally not considered “high-risk,” they too need special attention. High-achieving gifted students experience similar feelings of social and physical anxiety, just like their peers. Additionally, gifted students expect that the high school experience will bring a greatly expanded class workload. With at-risk students, the apprehension concerns a fear of failure. The anxiety of gifted students is not about potentially failing, but rather it is about potentially not achieving success (Dixon, 1998). It has been my experience at the middle level that students arrive having been easily successful, even the best, at whatever they attempted during their elementary years. Maturing eighth graders wonder if it is possible to get straight A’s in two or three Advanced Placement classes while competing for varsity sports or attempting the lead in the school theater production.

My district has programs in place that succeed in preventing failure. The dropout rate is low and college placement of graduates is high. However, I determined that there was a missing element that could help my gifted stu-

Table 1
Prepanel Survey of High School Students

Self-evaluated: “Looking back to the first half of ninth grade, were you prepared for transition from middle school to the high school?”

	Very Unprepared	Unprepared	Neutral	Prepared	Very Prepared
Number of Students	2	5	24	99	37
Percentage	1.20%	2.99%	14.37%	59.28%	22.16%

Table 2
Prepanel Survey of Eighth-Grade Gifted Newtown Middle School Students

Self-evaluated: “On a scale of 1 to 5 rate your feelings as you anticipate your upcoming move to ninth grade.”

	1 Very Anxious	2 Anxious	3 Neutral	4 Comfortable	5 Very Comfortable
Number of Students	3	14	24	12	7
Percentage	5.00%	23.33%	40.00%	20.00%	11.67%

dents prepare for an easier transition. Based on my conversations with former students and bolstered by the current research, I decided to coordinate a panel discussion with high school gifted students. I hoped that eighth-grade students would more readily accept the advice and experience of high school students versus simply ignoring their teachers’ exhortations.

With the help of high school teachers, I surveyed gifted students in grades 9–12. I needed to establish how they looked back on their transition experience to compare how the current eighth graders felt about it. Table 1 is the tabulation of the results of the high school student survey. Of note is that of the 167 respondents, 136 (81.44%) felt that they had been “prepared” or “very prepared” for their transition to the high school. Important to remember is that their feeling of preparedness is after

the fact: They had already accomplished the transition.

Other questions on the survey requested information concerning the number of honors-level classes and extracurricular activities in which the student was involved. I used that information to choose my panel, for I was seeking diverse experiences. Of note is that the high school students overwhelmingly volunteered to share their experiential wisdom. It made choosing difficult.

Next, I surveyed my current students to determine their level of anxiety and ascertain what questions they had about the movement to high school. The most striking comparison was that 81.44% of the upper class students felt they *had been* prepared for the change but only 31.67% of the eighth graders felt comfortable or very comfortable about the upcoming transition (see Table 2). This indicates

Table 3
Postpanel Survey of Eighth-Grade Gifted Newtown Middle School Students

Self-evaluated: "On a scale of 1 to 5 rate your feelings as you anticipate your upcoming move to ninth grade."

	1 Very Anxious	2 Anxious	3 Neutral	4 Comfortable	5 Very Comfortable
Number of Students	1	9	19	22	11
Percentage	1.62%	14.52%	30.65%	35.48%	17.74%

Table 4
Postpanel Survey of Eighth-Grade Gifted Newtown Middle School Students Transition Question

Self-evaluated: "Which transition activity so far has been most helpful to you?"

Percentage	Responses	Transition Activities
1.61%	1	a. Initial curriculum meeting in January with HS principal.
0.00%	0	b. Class requests with MS guidance counselor.
45.16%	28	c. Panel with the HS students.
20.97%	13	d. Tour of the HS.
40.32%	25	e. Discussions with an older sibling or friends in the HS.

Note. There were 62 respondents, but 5 circled more than one answer and all responses are included above.

that, at the middle school, although the students are being adequately prepared for high school, they just do not "feel" prepared for it, thus increasing their anxiety level.

The survey also asked the eighth graders what questions they had about the next year and high school in general. Forty-three students wondered about time management, specifically balancing homework and other activities. Twenty-six had questions about the new building and getting from class to class. Other topics mentioned, but at significantly lower numbers were: (a) social activities and clubs, (b) teachers, (c) bullying, and (d) the prevalence of drugs and alcohol.

The panel discussion was held on May 29, 2007. The high school students appeared to be genuinely excited

about this opportunity. Several wished that this program had been in place for them. The discussion began with the high school participants being given an opportunity to say what they wish they had known as they had shifted to the high school. Their comments were surprisingly similar: (a) "Yes, there is a lot of work but you can do it"; (b) "Get involved in a club or activity because that is where you will make your best friends"; (c) "Manage your schoolwork but balance it with friends"; and (d) "Was it mentioned yet? Have a social life; school is more than work, work, work!"

The panel then took questions from the eighth graders. Most questions were about homework and how to balance it with extracurricular activities. The panel members handled the ques-

tions with ease and good humor, which appeared to help relieve much of the eighth graders' anxiety. As promised, pizza was delivered and shared; informal, unmonitored discussions ensued.

A postpanel survey replicated the prepanel survey as much as possible with one additional question: "Which 'transition activity' so far has been most helpful to you?" A list of five activities was given. Tables 3 and 4 provide the results of this survey. After the panel discussion, the number of eighth graders feeling "comfortable" or "very comfortable" regarding the upcoming transition rose from 31.67% to 53.22%. Furthermore, the number of students feeling "very anxious" or "anxious" dropped from 28.33% to 16.14%.

The additional question yielded a remarkable statistic that corroborated research findings as reported by Letrello and Miles (2003): Transitioning students perceived the most help from high school students rather than from adults. Of the surveyed eighth-grade students, 85.48% reported that discussions with high school students, formally or informally, helped them the most.

Finally, I conducted a survey of my former eighth-grade students during the fall semester of their ninth-grade year, which yielded interesting results. Of 38 respondents, 85% felt they had been "prepared" or "very prepared" for their transition to high school consistent with my first survey of high school students. In ranking the events most helpful to the transition, first-day activities devoted to the new ninth graders slightly edged out the panel discussion, which only slightly edged out informal discussions with upper class siblings and friends. In open comments, many of the students expressed that they wished they had had a better understanding of the geography of the school.

During my 8 years of teaching, I have always taught classes of gifted students. In the teachers' lounge, it does not take long to hear the opinion that too much already is done for the gifted students. Clarenbach (2007) found that in many school districts, the gifted were left to fend for themselves. The general attitude is that these students are smart enough to get along without extra or special attention. They may be gifted, but they are still children. I knew that the programs in place were not fully addressing the concerns of my students. I wanted to add the one missing component.

Students do not ask for much—an interesting class, less homework, and an occasional fun activity. However, students *need* much. They need information that goes beyond the subject. They need to know how to achieve success and what others have learned about that process. They need respect while acknowledging their developing maturity. They need the questions answered that they are afraid or do not even know to ask. They need guidance from mature adults and help from older, more experienced peers. In designing and providing the panel discussion, I addressed these concerns and selected their peers who would offer the appropriate guidance.

My research predicted that a panel discussion allowing high school students to talk to eighth graders would be helpful. My experience and research also confirmed that the needs of gifted students were not being fully met. The prepanel survey demonstrated that considerable feelings of anxiety existed among the eighth graders and that they were not receiving answers to many of their questions. Hence, my experience and survey results showed that the panel discussion was beneficial.

I believe there is great potential transfer for this experience. Although I designed the research and program

described above specifically for my gifted students, peer-to-peer counseling, at any level, has potentially great impact. Besides teaching history, I also serve as an assistant coach for our girls' soccer team. The coach and I constantly stress how the level of competition increases dramatically during high school. Similar to Jenna and Mary Beth's views about their homework, the soccer players always are surprised on the first day of practice and then at the level of competition from other schools. This year, at our end-of-the-year pizza party, we invited some former players to come over and talk to girls. What impact did it have? I cannot say, but believing in the principle of peer-to-peer counseling, it could not have hurt. As an aside, I believe the "pizza and party" are important as they provide a celebration for the previous year and help the students relax before asking the questions they are anxious about.

To transfer this activity to nongifted students, local research should be done to determine the exact questions students want answered. Middle school teachers can select former students who exemplify the qualities needed to succeed at their high schools. There will be informal peer-to-peer discussions as friends gather and older siblings pass on their experiences. The schools and teachers should take advantage of this proven method of information transfer and guide it by their selection of the older peers.

The panel discussion was a highlight of both my and my students' year. All of us, including the participating high school students, thoroughly enjoyed the experience (and the pizza). It is both a joy and sorrow for teachers that students pass through our doors on a year-by-year basis. In that one year that I have with my students, I want to do all that I can do to help them mature and grow. Certainly, I

hope to do this with my discussions of American history, but I also do it as I help them transition from preteens to teenagers in their movement from middle school to high school. The high school gifted students discussion panel was just one way I found that I could help them. **GCT**

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Author Note

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