Middle grades transition programs around the globe

Effective school transition programs take a comprehensive approach to ensuring student success in the middle grades.

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Transitions into and out of the middle grades can be challenging for many reasons. Students need to acclimate to new policies, practices, and buildings; teachers require accurate data about their new students' capacities; and families must navigate relationships with new personnel. All school transitions present different and, at times, puzzling terrain to traverse. Some students find the move between schools so difficult that they "unlearn" skills and content, beginning a potential spiral toward being retained or even dropping out. Galton, Gray, and Ruddock (1999) estimated that seven percent of 11-year-olds unlearn reading, mathematics, and language skills during their first year of secondary school. However, others have noted that secondary school dropout rates are significantly lower in school districts that have clear middle school to high school transition programs to assist learners in planning for the changes they will experience (Smith, 2006).

Because middle grades experiences correlate strongly with high school graduation rates (Balfanz, 2009), between-school transitions for young adolescents require special attention. As Wormeli (2011) asked, "If high school success, navigating the larger world, and discovering the direction we want our lives to take all have roots in young adolescence, why would anyone leave the transition into this impressionable phase to chance?" (p. 48). We share Wormeli's concern about school transitions for middle grades learners. While transitions can be difficult at all levels of schooling, moving into or out of the middle grades comes at a time when the learners themselves are going through considerable social, emotional, cognitive, and physical changes—changes that can heighten many of these difficulties.

Of course, concerns about transitions are not limited to the United States; they have long been raised in other countries as well. Fifty years ago, for example, *The Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand* expressed concern over the "continuity and coordination of education" across the various levels (Currie, 1962, p. 253). For some time, scholars in the United Kingdom have paid particular attention to middle years transitions in relation to socioeconomic class and academic ability (e.g., Burgess, Johnston, Key, Propper, & Wilson, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to share examples of transition practices from other countries and to consider how educators create transition practices that help students successfully make the move from one learning level to the next. We offer insights obtained through interviews and focus groups with students, parents, teachers, and principals in New Zealand (Auckland), the United Kingdom (London, Nottingham, and Southampton), and the United States (Georgia, Oregon, and Vermont). We begin this article by exploring some of the common concerns that arise as students transition into and out of the middle grades. We then describe some of the common practices observed in comprehensive transition programs. Next, we showcase three noteworthy, promising practices that are too often underutilized or poorly implemented: sharing academic data, implementing collaborative projects, and attending

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to vulnerable populations. We should note that, while we showcase each practice as it is implemented in a specific region or country, we do not mean to imply that the practice is not present in the other places.

Student concerns with transitions

Many students approach school transitions into and out of the middle grades with a mixture of eagerness and apprehension. Tilleczek (2007) stated, "An emotional paradox exists at this transition point, as it does in many life junctions. Students are both excited and anxious, both doubtful and hopeful" (p. 3). While some students manage the adjustment with little difficulty, others face serious social and academic challenges. Students in our study talked about the sense of loss they experienced when they transitioned into secondary school, particularly in New Zealand, where primary and intermediate schools strive to create a strong sense of *whānau* or extended family. "No one knows me," was one plaintive comment made by a student in her first year of high school.

Social factors are significant for children moving into a new school. As students enter high school, they are often eager to have more choices and to make new friends; however, they may also worry about being teased by older students and encountering harder work (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Many students express concern about being teased by older peers for being small or not wearing the right clothes. In a study by Smith, Feldwisch, and Abell (2006), students reported that their greatest worry regarding the transition to high school was peer pressure.

Navigating a new environment is hard work, and the size of the new school may have a powerful impact. During interviews we conducted, students talked about being "submerged in people and big buildings." They described the challenges of figuring out where math class was held, making sure to be ready for PE, coping with the constant change of subjects, and getting around the school with a huge bookbag all day. These were only some of the very valid concerns students raised in interviews. In their work with learners in the United Kingdom, Ruddock, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996) recounted similar stories of students missing lessons because of transitioning into middle grades schools much larger than their primary schools. Students worry about losing their way around larger schools (Mizelle

& Irvin, 2000), not being able to remember where the bathrooms are, catching the wrong bus, being late for class because of getting lost, and being unable to open their lockers. Providing students an opportunity to visit and become familiar with their new school before they start the school year is a helpful way to offset these worries. Comprehensive transition programs work to build on the excitement of transitioning to a new school while equipping students with enough good information to overcome any apprehension.

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Teachers who do not understand young adolescents may inadvertently create transition problems. Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2007, 2009) noted that a successful transition to the middle grades is partly dependent on teachers' sense of efficacy in understanding and teaching young adolescents. Hawk and Hill (1996, 2001) suggested that middle grades teachers may, in fact, exacerbate anxiety by telling students that in secondary school their work will be much harder, that they will have to be more organized, and that their teachers will not have time to care about them the way they have been cared for in the middle grades. As a result of this anxiety, "some students are unable to relax and continue focusing on their learning to the same extent" (Hawk & Hill, 1996, p. 5). This indicates the importance of teacher education specific to the middle grades—both preservice and inservice—to help educators properly address school transition issues.

Comprehensive transition programs

Differences among countries in the structure and organization of educational systems result in differences in the nature of transitions as well. In the United States,

for example, the timing of transitions depends on the grade configuration of the middle level school: K–8, 5–8, 6–8, 7–12, or other configuration. In New Zealand, while a similar variety of configurations exists, most young adolescents attend a two-year intermediate school, meaning students are always either arriving at or leaving their learning and social environments. The organization in the United Kingdom is simpler, with students finishing primary school in Year 6 and starting secondary school in Year 7.

The middle grades are a time of transition for young adolescents in schools throughout the world. photo by Tim Vacula

In each region, we found that the best and most comprehensive transition programs employed a multifaceted approach in preparing students to change schools. Two characteristics, in particular, were common to programs we considered "comprehensive." First, planners involved multiple stakeholders in the program, including students, families, and teachers. Second, planners developed programs that were longitudinal in nature, planning transition-related events to begin months before the new school year and to continue well past the start of school.

For example, Webb Bridge Middle School in Georgia created a program called Big Cheese to Small Fry, which included events throughout the entire school year to prepare students for their move to the high school.

Each activity was classified as either "required," "strongly suggested," or "optional." The school worked hard to ensure students made the move from middle school to high school with minimal disruption to their learning. Responsibility for the activities was shared by both the middle and high schools. The activities at Webb Bridge were managed primarily by the school counselor, whose yearly calendar clearly identified the activities. The high school Parent Teacher Association also partnered in the process.

Parents or other important family members who are involved in a student's transition to high school are more likely to remain involved in the child's school experiences, and such involvement is linked to heightened student achievement (Mizelle, 1999; Smith, 2006). Big Cheese to Small Fry included several events for families. Parent Night Orientation provided parents an opportunity to tour the high school and learn about curriculum. Let's Get Involved was an evening event for middle school families, held at the high school, that offered a range of performing arts, an opportunity for students to sign up for activities, and a chance for students to become acquainted with the new building. Once their children had moved to the high school, families were invited to a fall open house focused on understanding students' learning experiences and opportunities.

Middle school teachers were equally involved in assisting with the transition process, visiting the high school to share information about students and discuss curricular cohesion. High school teachers, in turn, visited the middle school to explain programs, including those for special education, gifted and talented, and English language learners. Teachers also participated in joint staff professional development, an as-needed program for staff from both schools to work together.

The program in place at Webb Bridge Middle School is just one example of a comprehensive transition program. We observed similar longitudinal and multi-stakeholder programs at other schools in the United States and abroad. Additional effective activities included the use of school and team websites to share information (e.g., FAQs, podcasts by teaching staff); "Move Up" or "Step Up" days, during which students spend a day in high school getting to know the teachers and routines before the end of their last middle grades year; first days of school during which only new students are present to allow them to find their way without pressure; and

other activities such as locker lessons, family barbecues, welcome letters, and panels of past pupils presenting to transitioning students.

Promising practices

In each of the three countries in our investigation—New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States—transition practices abound. However, in this article we focus on three specific practices evident in comprehensive transition programs that stood out to us as holding particular promise for ensuring students' success as they move from one school to another: 1) sharing academic data in a timely and efficient manner, 2) attending to vulnerable populations, and 3) collaborating in shared study across schools.

Sharing academic data in New Zealand

While the wide range of elements included in most comprehensive transition programs impressed us, we were struck by a lack of balance in many programs between the social and academic aspects of transition. Much emphasis was placed on students' anxiety about the school building and social concerns; less effort was made to ensure that high-quality academic data was shared among teachers and across grade levels to guide student learning. Thus, one reason students may struggle during their first secondary school year may be "that too much attention is paid to social aspects of transition and too little on academic aspects," (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003, p. 10). While we would not want to diminish the important of attending to students' social needs, we assert that equal attention should be paid to ensuring that instruction is targeted toward individual students' appropriate levels of challenge.

Teachers we met from both the United Kingdom and the United States expressed great concern that they did not receive valuable student data early enough to inform instruction. Although schools in both countries participated in standardized, normed testing, most teachers did not receive results until well into the next school year making it difficult, if not impossible, to use the data to facilitate learning. In the United States, in particular, teachers felt the required testing was used more as a means for school accountability rather than as a way to inform student learning.

In contrast, New Zealand schools used a platform that allowed teachers to quickly and efficiently access data about student learning. Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle), for example, was an educational resource for assessing literacy and numeracy that provided teachers, students, and parents with information about a student's level of achievement relative to national norms and curriculum achievement goals. Teachers used asTTle to create 40-minute tests designed for their own students' learning needs. The asTTle tool generated interactive graphic reports that allowed teachers to analyze student achievement against curriculum levels, curriculum objectives, and population norms. Thus, it had the potential to ensure everyone understood student progress and to ease the efficient sharing of data across classrooms and buildings.

Perhaps most important, teachers had access to useful class and individual student data within weeks and were, therefore, able to consider their classes' areas of strength and weakness and modify instruction accordingly. In New Zealand, the use of asTTle gave a clear and accurate assessment of student progress; it held great potential in the process of transitioning students successfully and ensuring the receiving school had a clear idea of the students' academic levels. Schools in other countries would do well to consider how to make similar information available to teachers in a timely manner and to allow this data to be shared with educators at the next level.

An additional issue related to the timeliness of data sharing was ensuring detailed student files were passed along to the next school quickly. Many teachers described their substantial efforts in creating student files, including everything from anecdotal running records to examples of writing and artwork to information about special needs and social problems. Teachers expressed frustration that these folders often did not arrive until well after students were settled into their new schools. In response to this difficulty, some Vermont schools were experimenting with online sharing of academic data. This allowed a principal and his or her staff more time to consider any programs needed to cater to particular students' needs well before they arrived. Giving principals access to data about students yet to matriculate has the potential to inform the following year's program and to foster a flexible, longer-term educational vision.

A failure to share academic data in a timely manner can result in a mismatch between learner readiness and the levels of challenge students face in their new classrooms. In such cases, researchers have noted lower

expectations of the receiving school, with students often reporting a sense of disillusionment at the lack of academic challenge in their early secondary school experiences (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Simply put, students lose out when instruction is not based on accurate and recent assessment data. "If schools are serious about facilitating seamless transitions from middle to high school, they should collect, analyze, and use data to inform decisions about the type of programs that will reduce the expectation/reality gap" (Smith et al., 2006, p. 7). The importance of ensuring that schools have a clear picture of where students are academically is an underlying imperative that cannot be overstated.

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Collaborating in shared study in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom demonstrated interesting methods of connecting teachers and students across school buildings. One unique strategy was called "shared study," based on an idea originated in Liverpool schools. In Hackney, students in their last year of primary school conducted a forensic science investigation which, at times, required the use of secondary school facilities. The program was designed as an overlapping study in science in which most local secondary schools implemented a similar forensic science project that built on prior knowledge gained during the primary school study. Teachers reported this to be a very popular project, as students received the opportunity to work at a local secondary school while still in primary school. This allowed middle years students the opportunity to gain some familiarity with secondary school, to work with secondary school teachers, and to understand the layout of the buildings.

We observed a similar shared study strategy in Nottingham at Ellis Guilford Secondary School.

The theme of this project was "healthy living," and it was approached in an interdisciplinary manner, incorporating mathematics, science, and English. Students began this study in primary school and completed it in high school, thus the project provided the students with a link between the two schools before they transitioned from one school to the next. In this way, both teachers and students had connections across school buildings.

Teachers were also connected across buildings through a project led by their Education Improvement Partnership (EIP), which included six primary schools and one secondary school. This initiative was aimed at improving continuity between schools, among other goals. One outcome of this work was the Mega Read program based within the secondary school library. Targeting low literacy levels across their family of schools, the EIP developed a collaborative approach to creating strong reading cultures under the city-wide, local authority umbrella of Mega Read. Local primary schools joined with secondary students, local poets, authors, and celebrities to take part in literacy activities that celebrated books and reading.

This work resulted in regular, cross-school Mega Read meetings to share good practices and coordinate activities and a calendar of reading events with themes tailored by each school. All staff from the seven schools participated in shared professional development. Staff collated the reading test results across primary and secondary schools to analyze and share baseline data. As a result, primary students became familiar with their soon-to-be high school through visitations and events, and secondary school teachers gained access to literacy data for future cohorts of students over multiple years.

Attending to vulnerable populations in the United States

All students can benefit from thoughtfully planned transitions, even those who approach change confidently and enthusiastically. We know from research and experience, however, that some youth are more vulnerable than others to changes in the school environment. Transition can be a stumbling point for many students, particularly for those who are considered "at risk" (Tilleczek, 2007).

In some Georgia schools, successful transition protocols were imperative to keeping certain students, particularly African American boys, in school. Principals

and teachers described many attempts to ensure that students stayed in school for as long as possible. They talked about identifying students who were at risk, especially those students likely to be retained or those who had already been retained. Many middle schools had "Academy Classes" in place for these students. Often, students in these classes had difficulty with the pace and style of teaching in mainstream classes and did not make the required progress. In Academy Classes, a more holistic approach was employed, supported by a lower teacher-pupil ratio. Because schools in the United States are allowed to retain pupils who fail a year, at-risk students are very vulnerable and often continue to fail. Rates of retention are highest in the middle grades and, unfortunately, some students choose to leave school at 16 when they see no hope in staying in a system in which they have not been successful. Academy Classes were designed to give these students another chance.

Georgia College and State University hosted a unique academy for middle level students called "Early College." As with all other academies, the program identified students who either had failed, had been expelled, or had been retained a sufficient number of times to be considered at risk of dropping out. Early College was housed within the university complex and staffed by middle grades teachers. The students met in small groups in a language-rich environment. Even though these students had failed many times, the staff held the expectation that all would attend college, and they communicated this idea with a lot of affirmation and support.

We observed similar programs in Vermont and Oregon, both of which have schools with high numbers of Native American Indian students who are considered at risk of failing or dropping out of school. At Mississiquoi Union Middle and High School in Vermont, we saw an intense focus on relationships as the foundation upon which successful transitions were built. The majority of Vermont's Abenaki American Indian students were served by these schools, and the guidance staff was particularly focused on this population. Both counselors had very close ties with the Abenaki people, as one was of Abenaki descent and the other was married to an Abenaki. This provided an important degree of cultural fluency. The program included mentoring; family involvement; guidance for university attendance; student tutorials from kindergarten through university; and continual monitoring of students' behavior,

academic progress, homework, and welfare. In these ways, the Abenaki students were closely supported through each of the transitions between levels of schooling—from kindergarten through college—an unusual finding in this inquiry.

Schools in Oregon focused on transitioning potentially vulnerable populations, as they attended to students at risk of dropping out or not pursuing higher education. Some Oregon middle level schools participated in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, a nationwide program that assists with smooth transitions out of secondary school and into some form of higher education. Aware that students' crucial life decisions have their roots in the middle grades years, AVID was created to target underserved students, particularly those who would be the first in their families to attend college and students in other groups historically less likely to attend college. Through AVID, teachers and counselors helped learners work toward four goals: 1) to succeed in a rigorous curriculum, 2) enroll in four-year colleges, 3) enter mainstream activities of the school, and 4) become educated and responsible participants and leaders in a democratic society. In these ways, AVID schools paid particular attention to students from groups that tended to struggle disproportionately with transitions.

Conclusion

The exemplary practices we have described help illustrate that a smooth transition between schools requires more than a student orientation, a family welcome barbecue, and a letter sent home. While communication and engagement with families is, of course, a crucial component of a successful and comprehensive transition program, ensuring that students negotiate the new practices, policies, and school layouts is a complex endeavor. Surely, many more examples of good middle grades transition practices exist in which elementary, middle, and secondary schools work together to ensure that students move to the next schooling level with their eyes wide open and ready to take on the challenges of their new schools. We want to stress that the practices we selected to highlight did not exist exclusively in the settings we described, and many effective transition strategies exist in all educational systems. Learning from our international peers is one important way to broaden our approaches to this challenging task.

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