

The Next Best Step

Helping Our Students Transition “Out”

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Fall is not typically the time when we think about preparing our young adolescents for their transition from middle school into high school. Rather, to most middle level educators, fall means incoming students getting lost, forgetting locker combinations, getting frustrated when they remember the combinations but can't make the locks work, and finally finding their places in the fabric of middle school life.

We have recognized the importance of the “transition in” process and activities, but have often neglected the “transition out” to high school.

As we begin this new school year, now is the time to take a good look at our eighth- and ninth-grade students and determine how we can help them embrace this year as preparation for high school. Transition “out” is not about touring the high school for an evening or sitting through course and sports/activity presentations. Targeted transition out activities and mindset begin long before students begin thinking about the next step.

FROM THEM TO US

A key to knowing how to help students make the transition successfully is knowing what they are most concerned about. In May 1991, 693 eighth-grade students in six Illinois schools were asked what concerned them most about their transition to high school. Using the Transition Concerns Survey developed by Joan Maute, students were asked to rate 32 concerns on a scale of 1 (no concern) to 4 (great concern).

Additional open-ended questions allowed them to comment on their concerns about high school. In turn, these concerns were coded according to benchmarks described in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Figure 1 illustrates the students' concerns and where each concern fits into Maslow's Hierarchy.

A SNAPSHOT OF 1991

What issues do you think most eighth-grade students were concerned about in 1991? We'll venture to guess that most people think students were most concerned about getting lost and knowing how to dress, knowing how to fit in, and for some, wanting to stand out. Not so! Here's what these eighth graders told us:



1991 Top Ten Concerns

1. Getting good grades (Esteem)
2. Preparing for life (Self-actualization)
3. Taking tests and final exams (Esteem)
4. Preparing for college (Self-actualization)
5. Being successful in class (Esteem)
6. Keeping my friends (Belongingness and Love)
7. Getting all my work turned in on time (Esteem)
8. Having a lot of homework (Esteem)
9. Making new female friends (Belongingness and Love)
10. What my parents will expect of me (Esteem)

Surprised? Did you predict that the students would rank belongingness and love as their major concerns? What about all those safety and security concerns we were sure they worried about? For the majority of the students, safety and security were nonissues.

The few students who expressed significant safety and security concerns consistently rated all nine safety and security concerns high and ranked esteem and self-actualization issues low. Instead, most eighth graders were worried about self-esteem and self-actualization.

Figure 1: Student Concerns About Transition

Safety and Security Needs

- Being around kids involved with alcohol
- Being around kids involved with drugs
- Being physically hurt by others
- Getting lost
- Getting to class on time
- Handling stress
- Getting in trouble
- Peer pressure
- Gangs

Belonging Needs

(Needs that had dominated their middle school years):

- Keeping my friends
- Making new female friends
- Making new male friends
- Dating
- People making fun of me
- Knowing how to act and dress
- Being in clubs and activities
- Being liked by other kids
- Being with kids from other cultures



Esteem Needs

- Organizing my time
- Taking difficult classes
- Having a lot of homework
- Longer class periods
- Getting good grades
- Taking tests and final exams
- Getting all my work turned in on time
- Being in sports
- Being successful in my classes
- What my parents will expect of me
- What my teachers will expect of me
- Knowing how to study

Self-actualization Needs

- Preparing for college
- Preparing for life

The People Factor

To ensure your transition program is student-centered, ask the following questions about your students and their community:

- What are they like?
- Where have they been?
- How do they get their information?
- What do they believe?
- Who do they believe?
- Whom do they ask for advice?
- What do they value?
- Who makes up their support network?

You also need to answer the question: “Who can tell you what you don’t know?” The obvious answer should be “the students.” That’s why it is vital that you involve them in the transition process.

FAST FORWARD: 2001

A decade later, the Transition Concerns Survey was given to 598 “transitioning out” students in Nebraska, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. The Nebraska school was comprised of grades 7-9 and the other schools were grades 6-8.

We wanted to know if eighth and ninth graders’ concerns in 1991 were different from adolescents’ concerns in 2001. After all, our world has changed significantly in the past decade. Would the increased attention to school violence cause students to rank safety and security issues higher? It certainly is near the top of parents’ and administrators’ lists of concerns.



Once again, the survey was administered in May. And, as they shared a decade earlier, students were getting their information about what to expect in high school from friends, siblings, and middle school teachers. Here's what they said:

2001 Top Ten Concerns

1. Getting good grades (Esteem)
2. Preparing for life (Self-actualization)
3. Taking tests and final exams (Esteem)
4. Preparing for college (Self-actualization)
5. Having a lot of homework (Esteem)
6. Taking difficult classes (Esteem)
7. Getting all my work turned in on time (Esteem)
8. Being successful in class (Esteem)
9. Organizing my time (Esteem)
10. What my parents will expect of me (Esteem).

As you can see, there wasn't much change. However, two 1991 belongingness and love-related concerns—keeping my friends and making new female friends—were replaced by two esteem and self-actualization-related issues: taking difficult classes and organizing time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR A TRANSITION PROCESS

What do these results tell us? How can middle and high school educators attend to these concerns? Tours of the high school, explanations of curricular programs and after school activities, and other safety and security issues still need to be in place; however, they should not be the only component addressed in the transition process.

Because so many concerns of the students were related to esteem and self-actualization, perhaps one of the best preparations is to help students gain confidence as successful learners.

Students need to learn how to learn, how to study, and how to take tests in ways that prove to them that they can be successful academically. This issue implies knowledge and recognition of students' varying intelligences and learning styles.

Because of increasing time demands, students need to learn to organize and manage their time wisely.

Students need to explore possibilities for their futures. They need to recognize their strengths, their weaknesses, and their proclivities.

Students need to learn what it means to be responsible and accountable rather than simply complying. They should practice personal problem solving and decision making.

Students need to learn to set realistic goals and prescribe means of making progress toward their goals. They need to be able to make self-assessments and reflect on their learning and experiences.



Students need to be given the time and tools to make meaning from their learning. Students need to perceive school as personally relevant and important.

The implications for curricular and pedagogical decisions are clear. To help students transition to the high school, middle level educators must provide a climate that requires individual students to engage in their own learning.

This concept should already be at the forefront of our teaching. Students must learn about learning and apply their skills to real-life experiences. They need to perceive themselves as capable students who can accomplish meaningful and challenging tasks.

THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Every year is a transition and transition concerns should be addressed at all levels at all times. Obviously the transition is more complex when it involves moving from one school to another. Many schools provide ongoing activities that involve students from sending and receiving schools as part of their regular program.

Strategies such as peer mentoring, ninth-grade teaming, ongoing orientation and question-answer sessions for small groups of students, integrated units about change, and interactions with a teacher advisor have all been implemented at various schools to address the transitional needs of the students.

One school district in Pennsylvania addresses these concerns by orienting a cadre of incoming freshmen recommended by their eighth-grade students as caring and helpful adolescents. These students meet during the summer to learn to mentor their peers, provide friendship and assistance when necessary, and answer questions that other students may ask. At the beginning of the school year, these freshmen wear t-shirts designating them as peer helpers. Other students then can feel safe asking them questions and sharing concerns.

In addition to the standard school tours in the spring and open days during the summer with maps for self tours, a high school in Illinois sets up a "10-minute period" day in the week prior to the first day of school. Sophomores who had the class and teacher the year before give incoming freshmen a quick overview of what is necessary to be successful in the class. The passing periods are "real time" and students are in the hallways helping with directions and answering questions.

Another way to meet students' esteem needs is by lengthening the passing periods for the first two or three days. It not only helps freshmen adjust, but returning students can use the time to catch up with their friends.

One district has a student forum on diversity. This forum has middle and high school students working together to address the issues of diversity and tolerance. Many districts have drug awareness and positive choice programs. High school students work with, teach, and model for middle school students. These programs are an important part of demystifying the students and culture of the high school.



A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The following elements should also be incorporated into a comprehensive transition program:

1. **A District Transition Team or Panel.** This panel should include administrators, teachers, and parents associated with the sending and the receiving schools. The purpose of the team is to ensure a positive transition from one school to another—not only for the current students, but also for all students who enter the school during the year.
2. **A Needs Assessment.** Students, parents, and teachers should complete a questionnaire to identify common areas of concern.
3. **Transition as a Process Not an Event.** Far too often schools regard transition as something that happens in a narrow time span. It may be the first day or first week of school. Truly successful transition programs are integrated and infused with other curricular and co-curricular activities and encompass much of the first and last year in a school.

A series of well-planned, well-organized, ongoing activities, designed for students and their parents, should go beyond open houses, informational meetings, school visits, and the scheduling of individual classes.

For example, students should learn how to become successful students at their new school, how to deal with change and challenges, how to set and assess realistic personal and academic goals, how to become involved in activities and opportunities available through the school's curricular and co-curricular schedule, how and who to approach when questions and problems arise, and how to learn about their interests.

The ongoing experiences that we provide to help each student bond to the school will pay off ten-fold with students who respect the learning opportunities available to them.

4. **Articulation of Programs and Policies.** Lack of communication between sending school teachers and receiving school teachers can lead to misunderstandings and loopholes. Teachers at both the middle level and high school should meet regularly to ensure a seamless coordination of programs and policies.

One model, SAMs (Secondary Articulation Meetings), has subject-area representatives from the high schools and middle schools meeting monthly to discuss curricular issues. While curriculum-based, these meetings lead to greater understanding of student life at both levels.

5. **Evaluation and Modification of the Process and the Activities.** All parts of the transition-out program should be continually assessed by students, teachers, and parents and modified as necessary.



CONCLUSION

The middle level has been characterized as a bridge between elementary and secondary school—a place where students travel the metamorphosis from childhood to adolescence. The journey does not begin when the first bell rings on the first day, and it is not over when the last bell rings on the last day.

Rather than simply handing off students to the high school at the end of their middle level journey, educators must help them embrace the experience as the next best steps for their future.

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