

Studies in Transition

How to Help Adolescents Navigate the Path to and from Middle School

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First, they have to decipher confusing new class schedules, memorize locker combinations, and navigate unfamiliar hallways. Then they have to size up a larger group of teachers and classmates — not to mention think about making the honor roll.

Managing the transitions from elementary school to middle school and then from middle school to high school is “a big developmental leap for kids,” said University of Chicago researcher Melissa Roderick. “It’s very important for kids to go through this, but we need to do a lot of work to help.”

That assistance includes taking steps to address the emotional and social needs of young adolescents but also provide new academic challenges that tap into their emerging abilities.

“Accountability, expectation, and challenge are what shape seventh- and eighth-graders for high school, not just support and making them feel warm and safe,” said Glenda Beamon, a professor of education at Elon College in Elon, North Carolina, and author of *Sparking the Thinking of Students Ages 10-14* (Corwin Press).

Preparing students for middle school is just as important as preparing them to leave, said Ken Brighton, a former sixth-grade teacher who now works with middle level teachers at Johnson State College in Vermont. Both transitions can help set the stage for a positive adjustment to the throes of adolescence.

Brighton, whose doctoral dissertation focused on the transition from elementary to middle school, said he is amazed at the number of youths who enter the middle grades anxious and apprehensive — and just as flabbergasted that so many adults misinterpret their feelings. Contrary to widely held assumptions, young adolescents actually worry as much about handling heavy homework loads as they do about making friends, he said. “The thing that surprises me is the number of academic concerns that surface.”

Yet separate studies by University of Pittsburgh researcher Roberta Simmons and University of Michigan researchers Carol Midgley and Jacquelynne Eccles found that just as students were becoming capable of more sophisticated thinking, their teachers were more apt to assign them simplistic and unchallenging work.

“Kids are ready to meet this task, to taken more independence, to take on harder coursework,” said Roderick, the University of Chicago researcher. “They really want to do well. It’s the letdown that’s the problem.”



Transitioning Tips

Lená Morgan, chairwoman of the Department of Educational Leadership at the State University of West Georgia, has designed a model transition program for students entering high school. It calls for:

- Ninth-grade counselors and teachers who visit middle schools and talk with eighth-graders about the high school's curriculum and homework policies
- A high school orientation meeting for parents of eighth-graders
- Eighth-grade teachers who visit the high schools so they can understand the expectations their colleagues have for ninth-graders
- High school tours for eighth-graders so the high school staff can explain academic, sports, and extracurricular options
- Professional development programs for high school teachers to help them understand the developmental needs of young adolescents
- Small academies where freshmen can study together with the same group of teachers and remain somewhat separate from the rest of the high school population

Rigorous academic challenge during the middle level years can pay big dividends in high school and beyond. Teachers who ask students to tackle more complex work can help them attain genuine self-confidence, which paves the way for a relatively smooth transition to high school. But when their middle school coursework is repetitive and uninspiring, eighth-graders leave with a false sense of confidence that quickly dissolves once they reach high school.

In a study of 56 Florida and Georgia high schools, researchers Lená Morgan and Jay Hertzog found that up to 52 percent of ninth-graders in some schools were dropping out due to academic failures linked to sudden and dramatic declines in their self-confidence. Hertzog and Morgan, co-chairs of the Center for Transition Studies at Augusta State University and the State University of West Georgia, said schools with extensive transition programs have significantly lower dropout and failure rates than schools that ignore these important stages. The researchers said the best programs include counseling, school visits, and special summer courses that let students understand the culture of their new schools.

For adolescents moving to high school, Morgan and Hertzog also recommend setting up transition teams of educators and parents who can help students develop plans for the future. "The goal is to get them to picture themselves after high school [saying] 'Yes, at the end of this hall is another door,'" said Hertzog, a former middle school principal. "If we can do that with ninth-graders, we can get ahead of the game and [ensure that] those kids are going to graduate."



"It's particularly important that young adolescents learn good study habits, including the ability to juggle overlapping assignments," said Pam Van Scotter, middle school project director at the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, a Colorado Springs, Colorado, group that designs and develops pre-college science curricula. "We're losing too many kids in the transition to high school," she said. "In middle school, students are going to have to learn more and stretch themselves. By high school we really need to have done our work."

In the September issue of *Educational Leadership*, H. Jerome Freiberg, director of the Consistency Management Project at the University of Houston, described the impact that positive and negative transitions can have on a school's climate. In surveys of incoming and outgoing middle school students in Houston, Chicago, and Norfolk, Freiberg found that both transition groups were highly concerned about failing, taking tests, and giving presentations in front of others. At some schools, he wrote, educators used the information to change practices such as teaching students time-management skills or allowing them to introduce themselves in small groups instead of to the whole class on the first day of school.

"The administrative teams in several schools spent time in each homeroom class talking about school-wide expectations as well as the support that was available to each student," Freiberg wrote. "In one school, the administrators showed their own high school yearbook pictures as a way to establish rapport. The advantages of this feedback process are enormous."

John Maddalena, a science teacher at Essex High School in Essex Junction, Vermont, developed a summer program for 24 incoming ninth-graders whose middle school teachers thought they might have difficulty with the transition. Maddalena worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department to help the students restore a wetland habitat adjacent to the high school. The group conducted research in the high school library — using the school's computers — then planted trees and shrubs outside the building.

The summer experience helped the students come together as a small group and experience the high school," Maddalena said. By the time classes began in the fall, they were "the resident experts" who were familiar with the school's library and other resources. "They made some friendships and got a head start."

Resources

"The Transition to Middle School" is a digest of relevant research compiled by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Contact the Clearinghouse at 800-583-4135, ericeece@uiuc.edu, or (<http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests.html>).

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