

Transitioning Young Adolescents from Elementary to Middle School

Research Summary

By: Casey Dianna Gilewski, Monica L. Nunn

Middle school can be an exciting and terrifying time for students transitioning from elementary to middle school. By definition, transition means the change from one place, state of being, or condition to another place, state of being, or condition (Merriam-Webster Online, 2015). Thus, middle school transition is the process of changing from an elementary to a middle school environment. The transition is often complex. As young adolescents are changing school buildings they are also changing hormonally, mentally, and physically. This transition affects young adolescents' academic experiences, motivation, self-perception, and self-regulatory beliefs (Parker, 2013; Perkins, 1995). The process also affects parents and teachers. Reynolds (2005) noted that when developing a transition program, one must consider the expectations of the students as well as their capabilities and knowledge. This research summary offers suggestions for developing an effective transition program to assist all stakeholders (i.e., students, families, and school faculty) involved in the transition process.

This We Believe (NMSA, 2010) states that effective transition programs help students move to a new school, become a part of the new school, and maintain their social and academic status. However, many transition programs fail because they ignore social concerns (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Akos, 2002). With the implementation of transition programs and support of parents, teachers, and administrators, the transition can become more effective and less intimidating than some students might expect (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Shoshani & Slone, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Watson, 2004). Understanding why a transition program is necessary and implementing an effective transition program are important tasks for middle school faculty.

Tenets of *This We Believe* addressed:

- Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships
- Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of adolescents
- The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.

Issues to Address in Providing Supportive Transitions

When students transition from elementary to middle school, many students are undergoing physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral changes (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Schexnaildre, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Some students mature faster than others. Students who are developmentally behind typically experience more stress than their counterparts (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Consequently, they may earn lower grades and display decreased academic motivation, which may increase the rate of dropping out of school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). An effective transition program will enhance student success, attendance, and learning (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). However, without an effective program, the transition can have negative effects on students procedurally, socially, and academically.

Aspects of Procedural Transition

When transitioning to middle school, concerns arise regarding procedural changes. Students are worried about being thrown into an environment of independence and responsibility—an environment significantly different from any educational experience known to date. They are expected to get to and from classes on their own, manage time wisely, use a locker, organize and keep up with materials for multiple classes, be responsible for all classwork and homework from multiple teachers, and at the same time develop and maintain a social life (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004; Schumacher, 1998).

Although young adolescents seem to cry out for independence, they also need protection, security, and structure (Brighton, 2007). For instance, Reynolds (2005) conducted interviews and observations that determined the fifth grade students were coming from a highly structured environment in the elementary school to a less structured environment. Expectations are difficult to meet if expectations are unknown. Akos conducted two studies to explore these dynamics (2002; 2004). In his 2002 longitudinal study, Akos found that expectations, procedures, and rules were a major concern for upcoming fifth graders who were in the process of transitioning to sixth grade. In his 2004 study, Akos reviewed and analyzed the 2002 Virginia state writing prompt from 350 eighth graders who wrote letters to transitioning middle schoolers. He found that 41% of the responses were based on procedures and about "gum chewing, fighting, skipping class, and following directions" (p. 6). These specific procedures might seem petty to adults, but small details make an impact on young adolescents' social, emotional, and academic experiences.

Middle level educators should be explicit with their explanations of procedures and expectations with young adolescents because they are moving to an environment where more self-regulation will be required (Akos, 2002; Akos, 2004; Shoshani & Slone, 2013). Through statistical analysis of school records, Theriot and Dupper (2010) found that there was a significant increase in discipline referrals in students' first year of middle school compared to the last year in elementary school. This increase may result from different levels of structure in an elementary school versus a middle school. Providing clearer, more explicit understanding of structure may help new students navigate the school in a safe and systematic way (Akos, 2002; Brighton, 2007; NMSA, 2010).

Aspects of Social Transition

Middle school students are naturally at a crossroad with their social development at this transitional age, but when the actual transition to a new school is added into the mix, the difficulties become more complex. Students are trying to build new friendships and maintain ones they already have. In phase II of a longitudinal study (Akos, 2002) survey results indicated many students perceived maintaining and socializing with friends as a positive aspect of middle school. Yet, at the same time, many students expressed concerns about making new friends. Not only are students concerned about relationships with their peers but also anxious about relationships with their teachers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). In some instances, several small elementary schools funnel into one large middle school. This means that students are meeting new peers, as well as new teachers, administrators, and staff. In addition to the concerns expressed by students, teachers and administrators sometimes worry about interactions with older children whose needs and interests may be very different. Although many middle schools have some form of transition program, very few address social concerns (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Aspects of Academic Transition

The effects of procedural and social transitions impact students' academic performance. Students are typically accountable for multiple teachers and must multitask in ways not required in the elementary school. In many classes, students are expected to keep up with materials and master content independently. Bellmore (2011) conducted a longitudinal study of students as they moved from fourth grade through eighth grade. Using a cross-lagged panel model, she determined that peer rejection and unpopularity had a significant effect on young adolescents' GPAs during their transition from elementary to middle school, concluding "Peer relationships may be especially important during the transition from elementary to middle school" (p. 282). In a similar study, Kingery, Erdley, and Marshall (2011) noted "The relationship between peer acceptance and academic achievement was the most robust, indicating that adolescents' pre-transition social interactions play a key role in their academic success following the transition" (p. 230). These two studies suggest that social relationships have a great impact on the academic achievement of young adolescents as they transition to middle school.

While analyzing writing prompts of students offering advice to upcoming middle schoolers, Akos (2004) discovered that 34% of the suggestions they made were academic. The eighth grade students gave the fictional upcoming students advice about study habits, completing homework assignments, creating relationships with teachers, extra effort required by the work, and having good grades (Akos, 2004). These were apparently aspects of middle school that these eighth grade students had wished they had known more about prior to the transition. These are also facets of academic success that students struggle with during the transition from elementary to middle school that could be supported through an effective transition program (Anderson, et al., 2000; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Niesen & Wise, 2004; Schumacher, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Watson, 2004).

Implementing an Effective Transition Program

With all the aforementioned concerns about students transitioning to middle school, transition programs may make a big difference in the school life of students. To have an effective transition program, schools must address the expectations that middle school students need to meet, bridge the gap between what will be expected of young adolescents in middle school and what was expected of them in elementary school, and consider the procedural, social, and academic changes that young adolescents face when transitioning (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Schumacher, 1998)

Fortunately, scholars have identified some schools that have implemented successful transition programs. For instance, in Spokane, Washington, a middle school administration found that too much time was being spent establishing rules and procedures at the start of the school year (Fields, 2002). To address this problem, the middle school personnel initiated communication with the feeder elementary schools to gain information from the teachers about students through meetings and from students through a survey. Using this information, they created a program that featured:

- a shadowing experience in which one fifth grader spent the day with a sixth grader and reported back to his/her fifth grade class about his or her observations,
- school tours,
- parent and student meetings that discussed the differences between elementary and middle school,
- question and answer sessions, and
- open house activities such as: opening lockers, practicing lunch room procedures, walking through the student's schedule (Fields, 2002).

Watson (2004) described a program in Hanover County, Virginia. There, counselors at Stonewall Jackson Middle School opened up communication with feeder schools by hosting meetings with counselors to get information about the students and to collaborate on how to improve the middle school transition. After getting background information and ideas, stakeholders were invited to share their issues and concerns about the middle school transition before making improvements to the program. Improvements included elementary school counselors meeting with middle school counselors to discuss the needs of the upcoming middle school students, having meetings with the students and parents to discuss their questions and concerns, touring the middle school, shadowing a sixth grader and reporting back to his/her fifth grade class about his or her experience, holding parent-to-parent meetings where parents could discuss their concerns with each other and network, and constantly evaluating the transition program so that changes could be made. Without this open communication with all stakeholders, an effective and collaborative program could not have been developed to meet the needs of the upcoming students.

Transition Activities

Key features of successful transition programs are comprehensive and targeted transition activities for students, parents, and teachers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Morgan & Hetzong, 2001). By definition, transition activities are defined as multiple activities that occur before, during, and after transitions that support students and parents and help students develop a real sense of how middle school will be (Akos, 2002; Anderson, et al., 2000; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Fields, 2002; McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzong, 2001; Schumacher, 1998; Watson, 2004; Wormeli, 2011). These activities include but are not limited to:

- Touring the new school (Anderson, et al., 2000; Fields, 2002; McElroy, 2000; Watson, 2004);

- Starting a shadow program where fifth graders shadow a sixth grader for the day (Anderson, et al., 2000; Fields, 2002; Watson, 2004);
- Hosting meetings or assemblies and open-house opportunities where the focus is on the differences and similarities between elementary and middle school (i.e., how the schedule works, class changes, what clubs and sports are available, electives, and lockers), followed by a question and answer session (Anderson, et al., 2000; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Watson, 2004; Wormeli, 2011);
- Hosting parent-to-parent meetings where parents discuss middle school issues and concerns (Watson, 2004);
- Sending a welcome letter to students during the summer congratulating them on transitioning to middle school and including dates of upcoming transition events (Wormeli, 2011);
- Having the staff wear "Ask Me" badges to let students know it is acceptable to ask questions and who to ask during the first few weeks of school (Wormeli, 2011);
- Having new students come to school a day before returning students to get information, practice routines, and meet teachers (Wormeli, 2011);
- Starting a pen pal system where students in the fifth and sixth grades write to each other about middle school (Schumacher, 1998);
- Developing activities where students can socialize prior, during, and after transitions, such as community service projects, clubs, and intermural sports (Niesen & Wise, 2004);
- Establishing peer-helpers, mentors, or ambassadors who help students that struggle with systematic transitions (Anderson, et al., 2000; Akos, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2008); and
- Assigning students to families/teams/homerooms where they have a sense of belonging and have the opportunities for team building and socializing with others (Anderson, et al., 2000).

By implementing transition activities like these, middle schools can help build a sense of community for these upcoming middle schoolers and parents which will ultimately help them feel more comfortable with the transition process.

Extended Transitional Support

The biggest misconception with transition programs is that once the students have entered into the middle school, the transition is over (Akos, 2002). Arowosafe and Irvin (1992) and Schumacher (1998) have described ways that transition programs can be ongoing, such as periodically surveying the students to see what concerns they still have and addressing these concerns through activities and meetings; continuing activities that focus on communication between parents and student, parents and school, and building rapport with teachers and students. Continuing to support transition issues across the school year allows students opportunities to be included in the transition process, especially since some of them may not have felt comfortable with participating and giving their input at the beginning of the transition process. Continued transition activities will also allow for an open dialogue among all stakeholders involved in the transition process and offer additional assistance to students who may struggle with transitions (Akos, 2002; Anderson, et. al, 2000).

Implications and Conclusion

The transition to middle school is a challenging time for students, parents, and teachers. However, students can transition from elementary to middle school more smoothly with the implementation of an effective transition program. With the implementation of an effective transition program, scholars have identified many benefits, such as an increase in attendance, improvement in academics, reduced retention rates, and, ultimately, the creation of more successful students (Bellmore, 2011; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Kingery et al., 2011). These findings underscore the importance of the transition to middle school and its effect on students' academic successes.

To create an effective transition program, team members must understand not only the needs of young adolescents but also the expectations the teachers and administrators will have for the students once they enter middle school. Therefore, for a transition program to be successful, it needs to: (a) foster communication (McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schumacher, 1998; Wormeli, 2011), (b) respond to the needs of all stakeholders (Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schumacher, 1998), (c) build a sense of community (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Schumacher, 1998), and (d) evolve and adapt as the transition program is evaluated and needs change (Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Watson, 2004). To aid in the creation of an effective transition program, feeder schools and middle schools can start with the following suggestions to open the lines of communication and to begin the construction of a transition plan:

- Conduct surveys or questionnaires asking middle school teachers and administration what they expect from upcoming middle school students (McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schumacher, 1998; Wormeli, 2011);
- Conduct surveys or questionnaires with students and parents to understand their concerns about middle school (McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schumacher, 1998; Wormeli, 2011);
- Have on-going meetings among elementary and middle school counselors, administration, faculty, or transition teams to see what can be done to improve the transition process (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schumacher, 1998; Wormeli, 2011);
- Create a transition program that meets the needs of the upcoming middle school students, parents, and faculty (McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schumacher, 1998; Wormeli, 2011);
- Create a transition program that consists of numerous transition activities that begin the last semester of elementary school and carries into the first semester of middle school (Akos, 2002; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Schumacher, 1998);
- Continue to ask the students, parents, and school faculty about the transition process even after the elementary students have entered middle school (Akos, 2002; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Schumacher, 1998);
- Be open to change. Re-evaluate what activities have been done in the past and ask parents, students, and faculty members which activities were most beneficial to the transition process and what they would like added to improve the process (Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Watson, 2004).

All and all, with strong teamwork and collaboration among middle school and feeder elementary school faculties, an effective transition program is possible; however, it takes dedication and cooperation from all involved parties to address the needs of the transitional students.

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Annotated References

Anderson, L. W., Jacobs, J., Schramm, S., & Splittgerber, F. (2000). School transitions: Beginning of the end or a new beginning? *International Journal of Educational Research*, 33, 325-339.

Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, and Splittgerber, outline the issues and concerns of transitioning from elementary to middle school/junior high and from middle school/junior high to high school. Information is organized in seven key sections: (1) why are school transitions difficult, (2) who has the greatest difficulty with transitions, (3) difficult transitions and the process of disengagement, (4) facilitating successful systematic transitions: a conceptual framework, (5) the framework revisited, (6) facilitating successful transitions: recommendations, and (7) concluding comments. Each of these sections is supported with research and provides a clear and thorough explanation. Ultimately, these authors suggest that middle schools create collaborative transition teams that include school faculty, students, and parents.

Akos, P. (2002). Student perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school. *Professional School Counseling*, 5(5), 339-345.

Akos reports a descriptive qualitative study where he asked upcoming middle schoolers and current middle schools about their perceptions and concerns of middle school. This study was conducted in four phases. In Phase I, he asked fifth graders to write down questions they had about middle school. Phase I took place in January. Using these questions, Phase II consisted of a 5-item questionnaire that accessed the concerns that arose from the questions created in Phase I. This questionnaire was given to fifth grade students in May. Phase III took place in August as the fifth graders were transitioning to middle school. This phase consisted of a 7-item questionnaire that addressed their concerns, best aspects of middle school to date, and who helped them during their transition. Phase IV took place in December of their sixth grade year. This phase was given to a purposefully selected group of students who were helping create the next year's transition program. This questionnaire consisted of outlining the important concerns or aspects to address with transitioning fifth graders. All in all, he determined that the greatest concerns were on rules and procedures and about the amount of work and homework. Also, he determined that social interaction with friends and making friends was a critical aspect for most students as they transitioned to middle school.

Bellmore, A. (2011). Peer rejection and unpopularity: Associations with GPAs across the transition to middle school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 103(2), 282-289. doi:10.1037/a0023312

Bellmore's longitudinal study of students in fourth through eighth grades was conducted to determine the relationship between peer rejection, unpopularity, and young adolescents' GPAs across the transition from elementary to middle school. Bellmore found that students who did not have a successful transition have a greater decline in their GPAs than their counterparts. Students who were rejected by their peers had lower GPAs than their peers. Unpopular students also had lower GPAs, but they tended to rise over the transition to and through middle school. Peer associations tended to transfer with the students across the transition from elementary to middle school. Because the transition to middle school itself tends to impact grades, students identified in elementary school as peer rejected should have interventions to assist them with the transition to prevent a double negative effect.

Kingery, J., Erdley, C. A., & Marshall, K. C. (2011). Peer acceptance and friendship as predictors of early adolescents' adjustment across the middle school transition. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 57(3), 215-243.

Kingery, Erdley, and Marshall conducted a longitudinal, quantitative study to examine students' pre-transition peer experiences (fifth grade) and their transition adjustment to middle school (sixth grade) as well as possible differences in the adjustments based on gender. Students completed a survey with which they rated their peers from 1 (don't like) to 5 (like a lot), circled the names of best friends, and completed a 40-item Friendship Quality Questionnaire, a 24-item Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire, and a 27-item Children's Depression Inventory. Statistical analyses revealed ways that the relationships students had prior to transitioning the middle school played a major role in their adjustment to middle school. Students who had strong relationships with peers prior to transitioning had an easier time adjusting and generally did better academically than students who had peer rejection or weaker relationships with friends in fifth grade. Researchers did not find any changes in adjustment from fifth to sixth grade based on gender.

Recommended Resources

Georgia Department of Education. (n.d.). Middle school matters: A guide for Georgia schools on middle school transition. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/FederalPrograms/Documents/Parent%20Engagement/Final%20Middle%20School%20Transition%20Toolkit.pdf>

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2 Comments

“ Fantastic information Casey and Monica. In your research, did you find any notations about the influences of teaching to expectations, especially behavioral expectations. My experience and training points to a lack of systemic understanding regarding the the idea that kids come to us knowing how to behave and that we must show them what we want and what that looks lie in order to get the results we want and create the kind of secure relationships you mention as being so important in this period of transition. Thanks for this and I look forward to hearing from you.

Rusty May

<http://rustymayinc.com>

—Rusty

11/22/2016 1:03 PM

“ I really like the aspects of transitioning into middle school that this article talks about. It is important to keep in mind that all aspects of the child's life in changing and supports are needed in every aspect.

—Jessica

4/30/2017 12:13 PM

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