Aspects of Social Transition

Aspects of Procedural Transition

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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, Hingery, 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 of 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 & Hetzog, 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 & Hetzog, 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 intramural sports (Niesen & Wise, 2004);

• Establishing peer-helpers, mentors, or ambassadors who help students that struggle with systematic transitions (Anderson, et al. 2000; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; 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 new transitioning middle school students 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 (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 (Arowosafe, 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 (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 (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.
References


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Recommended Resources

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 like 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

https://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId=270/ArtMID=888/ArticleID=750/Transitioning-Young-Adolescents-from-Elementary-to-Middle-School.aspx