

When I first started the 6th grade I didn't know what to do or what to think.

Teachers don't know about how hard it is for a sixth grader to feel good and how a lot of kids are scared of life.

Well, my parents, they told me it would be different. I would have to watch myself...grades...picking fights.

Sixth grade is like kindergarten, like starting all over again.

(Comments made by 6th grade students, "Transition to A Middle Level School: What Kids Say," Middle School Journal, November, 1992)

Moving from an elementary school to a middle school is experienced by more than 88% of public school students as they begin the middle grades. This time of transition evokes a wide variety of emotions, behaviors, and concerns for both young adolescents and their parents. For many students it's considered a major stepping-stone on the road to becoming an adult. For teachers and principals, it is an opportunity to have a fresh start with students and to introduce them to the culture and expectations of their new school in a way that promotes positive behavior and involvement.

Transition to middle school is marked by several changes in educational expectations and practices. In most elementary schools, children are taught in self-contained classrooms with a familiar set of peers and one or two teachers. Once students reach middle schools, however, they must interact with more peers, more teachers, and with intensified expectations for both performance and individual responsibility. Social, developmental, and academic experiences are affected, requiring them to adjust to what they see as new settings, structures, and expectations. All of this comes at a time when they are also experiencing a host of changes associated with the transition from childhood to adolescence. They are beginning to mature physically, and to think of themselves as individuals outside of their families. Their attentions turn to exercising independence and developing strong relationships with peers — while avoiding exposure and embarrassment. The atmosphere at home may become strained as both parents and children struggle with redefining roles and relationships. This complicated period of transition has often been associated with a decline in academic achievement, performance motivation, and self-perceptions. It is a time when young adolescents are most likely to experiment with at-risk behaviors. It is also the point at which children begin to make pivotal decisions regarding their academic and career choices — precisely at a time when they may be distracted or turned off by academic endeavors.

A well-designed transition plan can restore the strong sense of belonging the entering middle school student once felt in elementary school - a key element associated with the positive motivation to enjoy and succeed in academic tasks. The young adolescent must feel successful in school, have opportunities for self-

expression and decision-making, and feel cared for and respected as a person. The concerns most often expressed by students about to enter middle school focus on the routine of the new school: finding their way around and getting to class on time, dealing with lockers and combination locks, and mixing with older students. They also worry about choosing sports or extracurricular activities, and keeping up with homework and long-term assignments. Schools at both levels can mitigate many of these concerns by providing orientation activities that demystify new routines well before the first day at middle school. Involving students at both levels in the planning and implementation of these activities ensures they are appropriate to student needs and provide positive initial contact between younger children and their older peers. Throughout the middle years, teachers can provide opportunities for every child to experience social and academic success by utilizing classroom strategies that promote social development as well as those that address individual learning needs. And schools must reach out to parents, helping them to become more knowledgeable about young adolescents' developmental needs and concerns, and encouraging ongoing parental involvement in their children's education. A strong home and school connection can create a seamless web of support for children in transition.

The most common transition activities include meetings with incoming students and their parents and student visits to the new middle school. Typically, there is some type of information sharing between middle school administrators and counselors and elementary staff to help facilitate the transition initiatives. However, transition literature as well as transition studies over the past decade call for a more comprehensive approach to this time of change. The more comprehensive approach is built upon a commitment to teamwork and collaboration where educators, parents, and students work together in designing and implementing transition programs.

The attributes of successful transition programs include the following:

- A sensitivity to the anxieties accompanying a move to a new school setting
- The importance of parents and teachers as partners in this effort
- The recognition that becoming comfortable in a new school setting is an ongoing process, not a single event.

A Call to Action:

The National Middle School Association and the National Association of Elementary School Principals urge principals, teachers, school counselors, parents, and students at both elementary and middle school levels to work together in the planning and implementing of strategies that will directly address students' concerns and ease the transition to middle school and provide children with a foundation for success in school and life. Specifically,

School leaders should:

- Make the planning, implementation, and evaluation of transition activities an annual focus, beginning in the intermediate grades of the elementary school.
- Begin as early as grade five to create an environment that promotes a confident transition from a self-contained classroom structure to the larger team structure of the middle school.

- Encourage collaboration among elementary and middle schools and teachers, students, and parents.
- Provide comprehensive orientation programs for teachers, students and families, including older siblings, who strongly influence attitudes and perceptions of transitioning students.
- Become knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of young adolescents in transition.
- Support teachers' efforts to address students' social, developmental, and academic needs.
- Provide leadership in creating a climate that values and supports effective home/school communications.

Teachers and Counselors should:

- Engage in collaborative planning with their counterparts at the elementary and middle levels to ensure a smooth academic transition that recognizes and accommodates variations in curricula across feeder schools.
- Become knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of young adolescents in transition.
- Keep parents informed, help them become skilled in dealing with issues related to transition, and welcome their participation in their children's education.
- Provide counseling at both the elementary and middle levels to address transition concerns and assure students of the availability of ongoing support.
- Provide programs, activities, and curricula to help students understand and cope successfully with the challenges of transition.
- Use a variety of developmentally appropriate instructional practices that will enable each child to experience academic success.
- Employ strategies such as cooperative learning that provide opportunities for peer interaction.
- Consider organizational structures such as team teaching that ensure teachers have meaningful knowledge and understanding of each child.

Parents should:

- Provide young children with manageable tasks that will help them develop organizational skills and responsibility.
- Encourage children to try new things and to regard failure as a necessary part of learning and growing.
- Become knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of young adolescents in transition.
- Help children turn their anxieties into positive action by learning about school rules, schedules, locker procedures and the availability of counseling.
- Attend school functions and stay involved in children's schooling.
- Support children in their efforts to become independent.
- Maintain strong family connections with young adolescents.
- Be alert to signs of depression or anxiety in their children and seek help.

In planning and implementing programs to address the needs and concerns of students moving from elementary to middle school environments, it is clear that collaboration among all adults who share responsibility and concern for our children's welfare is ultimately the most effective transition strategy we can employ.

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