

Research Brief

Transition from Middle School to High School

Question: What does the research say about effective transition systems between the middle grades and high school?

Summary of Findings:

In a Nutshell

The most successful schools see the transition between the middle grades and high school as a process, not an event. These schools involve teachers, students and families in continuous planning to support students' academic and social success in high school and beyond.

Students that have a successful transition are more likely to achieve in the 9th grade, to attend regularly and to not drop out of school. They are more likely to develop and sustain positive social relationships with peers and with adults.

Four components of effective transition systems have been identified. They include providing students and families accurate and useful information, supporting students' social success in high school, preparing students for academic success in high school, and working collaboratively to monitor transition plans and adjust those plans based on data about student success (attendance, achievement, dropout rate).

Why Is It Important?

The transition from one school to another can be challenging for many students and their families, particularly when it involves moving to a different building and losing the familiar routines and long-established social support systems. The transition to high school has become more important because of the high rate of course failures and dropout rates in the 9th grade. The single most predictive indicator of high school dropout is the student's academic standing during the ninth grade. Other reasons for paying attention to the transition include:

- Student achievement declines between middle school and high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).
- Declining achievement during the transition to high school impacts decisions to dropout of school (Balfanz, 2009).
- Behavior problems resulting in suspension or expulsion increase significantly early in the ninth grade (Jerald, 2006).
- Students who have transitioned to ninth grade report that academic ability, time management, ability to stay on task and social skills are important in high school (Zeedyk, et al., 2003).
- Social issues such as peer relationships, bullying and getting lost overshadow concerns about academics (Maute & Brough, 2002).

- Students' greatest concerns with high school center on the amount of homework, organizational issues (getting lost) and difficulty of classes (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Maute & Brough, 2002).
- Students look forward to the opportunity to make new friends, have more freedom and to participate in student activities and events (Akos & Galassi, 2004).
- Parents who monitor their children's activities and who intervene positively are more likely to have a smooth transition to high school (Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001).
- Increased school contact with parents is likely to result in reciprocal parent contact, improving overall communication with families (Feuerstein, 2000).
- Students who do not complete high school have little chance of sustaining themselves or a family in today's economy (Turner, 2007).

What Are the Characteristics of Effective Transition Practices?

The most effective transition systems are comprehensive, occur in both the middle school and the high school, recognize that students, and their families, experience the transition differently, and are characterized by an early intervention, "do whatever it takes," approach (Williamson & Johnston, 1999).

It is recognized that the transition is not an event, but a process, a set of activities and dispositions to support student success. The transition process should be anchored in your school's vision of success for each student and your commitment to improving their educational experience.

Mac Iver (1990) reported that failure in the transition grade lessened when there were several, diverse transition activities. Similarly, Hertzog and Morgan (1999) found that the best transition programs included activities like counseling, school visits, special summer programs, and academic preparation. Bottoms and Young (2008) from the Southern Regional Education Board identified the components of an effective transition program. Those components fall into four categories---providing information, supporting social success, addressing academic preparation, and collaboration among stakeholder groups.

Component 1: Provide Students and Families with Accurate, Useful Information

There is a lot of anxiety among students and their families about the transition to a new school. One of the most effective ways to mediate this anxiety is to provide ample information beginning early in the middle grades and continuing throughout the transition (Zeedyk et. al., 2003). Of particular importance is parental involvement in decisions their eighth graders make about the classes they will take in the ninth grade.

Schools have traditionally done a good job providing information about the logistics of transitioning to high school. Students meet with counselors, learn about course requirements, make decisions about classes they will take, visit the school, and have an on-site orientation the first day of school. While such activities are important, the evidence is that information alone is not nearly sufficient for most students and their families.

Parent involvement in students' transition from middle to high school is essential. When parents are involved in students' transition, they tend to stay involved longer in their child's high school experience (Mc Iver, 1990), students achieve more (Linver & Silverberg, 1997; Paulson, Marchant, & Rothlisberg, 1998), are better adjusted (Hartos & Power, 1997), and less likely to

drop out of school (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). Epstein (1996) found that parental involvement decreased unless teachers and principals worked to encourage their continued involvement.

Strategies for Providing Information to Students and Parents

- Invite parents to participate in a conference with their child and the high school counselor about course options and schedules.
- Tell students and parents the truth about what counts in high school and what they will need to know and be able to do.
- Provide lessons on how and who to approach when questions and concerns arise in the new school.
- Ask parents to visit the high school with their children in the spring and again in the fall.
- Invite parents to spend an entire day at the high school to help them understand what their child's life will be like.
- Involve parents in planning transition activities that will support students and parents during the transition. Include them on the transition team.
- Connect middle school parents with parents of current high school students. They are an excellent resource.

Adapted from: Mizelle & Irvin (2000), SREB (2002, 2008), Maute and Brough (2002)

Component 2: Provide Social Support

Friendships and social networking are really important for middle grades and high school students, particularly as they move to a new school. There is some evidence that the transition to high school disrupts students' social networks and that some students spend the early part of the ninth grade figuring out where they fit, interfering with their success (Barone et al., 1991).

It is important that school personnel recognize the importance of providing social support for students at a time of great vulnerability. As with most social activities, one program will not suffice for all students. Implement multiple activities at both the middle school and the high school to support students' social transition. It is important to teach students the skills they will need for success in high school, things such as time management, organization and goal setting.

Strategies for Providing Social Support

- Help students gain confidence in themselves as learners to increase self-esteem and confidence about success in high school.
- Include lessons on how to learn, how to study and how to take tests.
- Focus on personal problem solving and decision making in both middle school and high school. Help students learn how to set and assess realistic personal and academic goals.
- Invite middle school students to shadow ninth graders.
- Have students at both schools write letters to students at the other school.
- Establish small houses or academies for ninth graders
- Include an opportunity to interact with high school students in all summer bridge activities.
- Provide specialized eighth and ninth-grade courses that focus on a multi-year plan for success in high school.
- Provide every ninth grader with an adult mentor or adviser.

Adapted from: SREB (2002, 2005, 2008), Maute & Brough (2002)

Component 3: Support Students' Academic Preparation for High School

The one thing that defines the most successful transition programs is the shared commitment to the academic preparation of students. They recognize that an effective instructional program, a rich, rigorous and challenging curriculum, and a commitment to providing students with additional time and support if needed, makes students more successful. These schools look at every aspect of their operation to assure that it supports student learning. For example, they modify the schedule to provide longer blocks of time. They assign the best teachers to the most needy students. They accept accountability for the success of every student and pride themselves on their accomplishments. The strategies are designed to accelerate achievement and minimize the disruption to student learning when they move to a new school. (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002, 2008).

Strategies for Supporting Academic Preparation

- Communicate clearly what students will need to know and be able to do in English/language arts, mathematics and science to do challenging high school work.
- Hold high expectations for students who are performing below grade level.
- Review the middle grades curriculum and identify ways to add additional rigor and challenge.
- Monitor ninth grade failure rates to determine what middle grades must do to assure greater high school success.
- Work with students and families to create six-year career development plans for high school and two years beyond.
- Set high expectations for students performing below grade level. Successful schools require students to redo work, provide extra support or stay after school to complete unfinished coursework.
- Modify instruction to include challenging, meaningful and engaging assignments anchored in real-world problems.
- Provide time for teachers from both schools, in the same content area, to meet and discuss curricular issues by using data about student success to guide curricular revisions.
- Talk about high standards and expectations. Teachers in successful schools make it known that they believe students can do high-level work. Students in these schools believe their teachers will be available to support their success.
- Establish a way to provide extra-time and extra-help programs to assist students.
- Implement summer programs to support success in the ninth grade. Many schools offer summer programs to bridge eighth grade and ninth grade.
- Reorganize the school to create a ninth grade school-within-a-school. Such academies provide both academic and social support.
- Provide more time for English and mathematics. Some schools arrange double doses of both classes for ninth grade students at risk of failure.
- Adopt no-zero grading policies.
- Explicitly teach a variety of time management strategies for students.
- Help students develop a future-focused plan for success in high school.

Adapted from SREB (2002, 2005, 2008), National High School Center (2008), Maute & Brough (2002)

In *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*, Williamson (2006) discussed the importance of greater emphasis on academic preparation. He reported a study by Cooney and Bottoms (2002) that found three experiences that are directly connected to success in high-level courses in the ninth

grade. They include studying “something called algebra” in middle school, reading at least 10 books a year, and expecting to graduate from college. “Simple in their description, these ideas are more complex in implementation. They require raising expectations for all middle level students--more reading and more math---and they demand setting high expectations for student success in high school and beyond” (Williamson, 2006, p. 250).

Component 4: *Work Together to Support Students’ Successful Transition*

The most successful transition programs are the result of extensive collaboration between the middle grades school and the high school (Maute & Brough, 2002; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; SREB, 2008). Personnel in both schools frequently have inadequate, out-dated or misleading information about the academic, social and logistical expectations at the other school. In the interests of helping students and their families, they often share this misleading information.

One of the most effective ways to collaborate is to create a “Transition Team” consisting of teachers, administrators, parents and students from both schools. They work best when students who are less successful or with less social status are included as well as those with high academic and/or social status. The role of the team is to identify transition needs, develop plans for attending to them, and monitoring their implementation. Frequently the first activity of the team is to conduct a needs assessment to gather data about the success of students when they transition to the ninth grade (number taking challenging courses, attendance, failure rates). The most successful teams use data to understand student needs and to identify proven practices to support student learning.

Examples of Transition Team Activities

Information

- Parent information activities;
- Honest information about what is expected academically at high school;
- Co-curricular Fair;
- Bridging communication gaps;
- Identifying multiple ways to share information;

Social Support

- Eighth grade culminating activity;
- Mentoring programs;
- Organizing school visits;
- Eighth graders shadowing a ninth grade student;
- Professional development on young adolescents;

Academic Support

- Support high academic expectations for all students;
- Examine and recommend ideas to redesign the ninth grade experience (course offerings, schedule, extra-help);
- Arrange teacher exchange or shadowing between middle school and high school;
- Review achievement data and use these data to guide decisions about changes to the transition plans.

Adapted from Morgan & Hertzog (1998, 1999, 2001), SREB (2002, 2008), Maute & Brough (2002)

Final Thoughts

The evidence is clear about the importance of comprehensive transition programs between the middle grades and high school. Students with a difficult transition are more likely to fail and dropout of school. The good news is that educators have identified the most essential things that must occur to reduce anxiety and increase success during the transition to a new school.

Online Resources:

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First Year of High School: A Fact Sheet (2007) – From National High School Center -
http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_FirstYearofHighSchool_032807_000.pdf

Freshman Transition Initiative – Information about a comprehensive guidance plan designed to help students develop a 10-year education and career plan – www.freshmantransition.org. A detailed set of standards for a *Freshman Transition Class* are available at the website once you complete a free registration form.

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National Association of State Boards of Education (2008). Ninth grade transition.

<http://nasbe.org/index.php/hsr/917/567>

Beginning in the Middle, Executive Summary - <http://nasbe.org/file-repository?func=startdown&id=878>

Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path: A Policy and Practice Brief (NMSA, 2009) -

http://www.nmsa.org/portals/0/pdf/research/Research_from_the_Field/Policy_Brief_Balfanz.pdf

High School Reform Toolkit - <http://highschooltoolkit.com/toolkit.htm>

Launching Students into Their Decade of Transition (Freshman Initiative) -

Easing the Transition to High School: Research and Best Practices -

http://www.betterhighschools.com/docs/NHSC_TransitionsReport.pdf

Redesigning the Ninth-Grade Experience: Reduce Failure, Improve Achievement and Increase High School Graduation Rates (SREB, 2008) - http://publications.sreb.org/2008/08V06_9th-grade_redesign.pdf

Freshman Transition Programs: Long-Term and Comprehensive (NASSP, 2006)

Making High Schools and Middle grade Schools Work (SREB, 2005) -

http://publications.sreb.org/2005/05V12W_Making_HS_MG_Schools_Work.pdf

National High School Center (2008). *Easing the Transition to High School: Research and Best Practices Designed to Support High School Learning*.

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School Study: A Comparison of Two Middle Schools and Transition -

http://sitemaker.umich.edu/fitzgerald.356/transition_from_elementary_to_middle_school

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<http://www.principalspartnership.com/ninthgrade.pdf>

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www.principalspartnership.com/8thto9thMay08.pdf

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<http://www.nmsa.org/Research/ResearchSummaries/TransitionfromMStoHS/tabid/1087/Default.aspx>

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National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006). *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform*, Reston, VA: Author. (www.principals.org)

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