

PLANNING FOR THE ELEMENTARY TO MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION: AN EXPERIENCE IN PROGRESS IN A RURAL MIDWEST MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Program development was based on a needs assessment that generated information about issues for student making the transition from 4th to 5th grade. Program development was based on relevant research. Issues faced during school transitions are discussed. Strategies that can be used by parents, school counselors and administrators, and teachers are delineated, and the activities that have been implemented in the Portageville School District are also presented. The program developed represents an opportunity for information sharing with a goal of finding new ideas to benefit student at transition points.

A Time to Change

Making the transition from elementary to middle school is often difficult for students. Changes in the physical and social environment, tougher academic expectations, and fluctuating hormones can make adjustment difficult for even the well-prepared student. While the challenges of the elementary to middle school transition are numerous, research shows that young people are very receptive to positive interventions during this stage of their development (Akos, 2002). Provided this information, school counselors and administrators, school faculty should have a transition program in place to help students make a smooth adjustment as they move from elementary to middle school (Akos & Martin, 2003; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995). In addition to making the experience less stressful for students, a carefully planned transition program can be the first step toward preventing future problems. Elias (2001) referred to evidence that found many of the problems that surface in high school often have their roots in poor middle school adjustment. The transition program must be a collaborative effort between schools, students, staff members, school principals, and parents in order to be successful.

Negative Effects of Transition

Referring to negative effects of transition is to comment on the development of unhealthy coping mechanisms that middle school youngsters can come up. Violence, drug use, alcohol abuse, and smoking are high school issues that seem to have their start in middle school. A *Boston Globe* journalist interviewed Lyman Goding, a principal for 29 years of Plymouth Intermediate Community Middle School, in Massachusetts, on May 2004, after being named Massachusetts Middle School Principal of the Year by the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators Association. He expressed his increasing concern with plaguing problems such as middle school kids sharing prescription medication, for example, Ritalin, and/or over-the-counter drugs like Tylenol that are in the medicine cabinets at home (*For Middle School Transition*, 2004). Making threats or bullying students over the Internet is another alarming problem. The students use e-mail to send threats to another student, or to plan something they are going to do on the bus (*For Middle School Transition*, 2004).

There is also an increase in referrals to mental health services during the transition to middle school (Elias, 2001). Especially for boys, it's no longer *cool* to be an academic success (Elias, 2001). Some actually try to do poor work; many will experience falling grades. Many students will experience a drop in self-esteem; they give up quickly and avoid making an effort because they expect to fail (Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999).

Contextual Factors Added to the Negative Effects of Transition

There was a time when the biggest transition for a child was leaving home for kindergarten. Today, many children will be faced with numerous changes during a single school year. Economic pressures can force families to move several times (Anderson, 2002). Baby boomers are more mobile than any previous generation as they make career changes and take on increased responsibilities, and many children are not mature enough to understand the shifting commitments of adults (Dickinson, 1999). Regardless of the circumstances, with each move comes that fateful day when a child is "the new kid" at school. While this transition may not be between elementary and middle schools, it is still a period of adjustment—and the child's ability to adapt to the new environment will be an indicator of his ability to cope during future changes (Dickinson, 1999).

It is no secret that the American family is struggling. Marriages are failing, financial pressures are building, and the home environment is suffering. Research has shown that a positive home environment plays a major role in a child's ability to both succeed in school and cope with school transitions (Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999). With the difficulties of the family becoming a real issue for the education system, school counselors are challenged to help students and teachers compensate for the loss—by teaching coping skills that children can use to adjust and learn (Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999).

In addition to the systemic struggles that American families have been experiencing, research also shows that middle school is a time when parents seem to become less involved in school-related issues. Students tend to turn to peers for help with academics instead of parents. Parents of middle school students also have to adjust to new routines and rules. They fear the transition to middle school because it happens accompanied by more demanding school work, switching classes, to name a few (*Boston Globe*, May 16, 2004).

Changes for the Student in Transition

Changes in the Representation of the Physical Environment

Middle school students typically enter a larger school with different teachers for each subject (*For Middle School Transition*, 2004). They are required to move between classrooms

in a limited amount of time, and are expected to arrive at each class with the correct textbooks. Books and supplies must be retrieved from lockers with combination locks. Musical instruments and gym clothes are additional items for which students are accountable. Remembering a class schedule and finding a new bus at the end of the day are other issues for students. The fear of personal safety is an issue that many students have as they enter the middle school environment. Although much of the anxiety comes from rumors and legends passed down from older classmates or siblings, middle school students have a very real fear of violence and aggression at school. Many children do not have the coping skills to deal with all of these changes at once and alone.

Changes in Academic Responsibilities

Barber and Olsen (2004) found the learning environment of middle schools to be *less* demanding cognitively than the elementary school, despite the increase in their academic workload. Their research findings indicated that there is a decrease in the quality of the school environment implicating in a decrease of academic, interpersonal functioning at every middle school grade transition. This change in stimulation, accompanied with scoring that is more evaluative and focused on comparison between students, provides few opportunities for students to develop as academic individuals. The decline in importance of individual achievement occurs at a time when students are becoming more susceptible to peer influence. This is often the beginning of a downward spiral that leads to school failure and dropping out altogether (Barber and Olsen, 2004).

Developmental Changes and the Social Environment

Elias (2001) stated that there are two areas of development that are most prominent for middle school students. First, many are going through puberty and becoming more aware of their sexuality. Secondly, students are also developing socially and emotionally, as they learn to identify and verbalize their feelings (Elias, 2001). This combination of issues, accompanied by numerous developmental tasks, truly exacerbates the problem of transition to a new school and it may have a detrimental effect on a child's self-perception and self-efficacy because it occurs, as children are vulnerable due to the onset of puberty. Armed with all this information pertaining to the stress and challenges inherent in making adjustments in the representation of the physical environment, academic responsibilities, personal development in light of a changing social environment, a proactive transition program can be a first step toward easing this process of adjusting to the middle school. To facilitate successful transitions, school counselors, in partnership with the school principal and the school community, should consider the developmental tasks of various stages, the coping skills and creative flexibility of students, and the potent systemic and contextual factors of influence.

A Suggestion of a Proactive Transition Program

Planning for Transition

The very starting point of this program is characterizing the roles of the consultant, the consultee, and the client. Given the aforementioned information, the consultants were the elementary and middle school counselors. The consultees were the middle school students and teachers. The clients were the fourth grade students who would be soon entering middle school.

As they proceeded with their needs assessment, two sources of information generated the baseline for the program design: Personal interviews with teachers, 4th and 5th grade students, and reassessing the District needs. They learned that there was a lack of adequate elementary to middle school transition program that would meet the needs of students, teachers,

and parents. This seemed to be increasing discipline referrals and homework problems most likely due to the unfamiliarity of the Middle School system, its format, and teachers' expectations. The information gathered in the interviews generated four major topical issues: (a) middle school student fear the physical environment as they are unsure about finding restrooms, about the structure of the school day, getting lost, and lunchroom anxiety; (b) student experiencing increased difficulty with academic assignments, time management, and self-discipline; (c) students experiencing changing developmental stages and the impact that the physical changes have in the transitional process; (d) less parental involvement, that is, parents were unsure of what's going on with their children. These findings were consistently corroborated with the review of literature on this subject.

Presenting Results to Teacher and School Administrators

Once the results of the interviews were presented to teachers and administrators for input and approval, the stage of brainstorming and comprising a list of all transition activities that could help the school counselors attain the goals developed following the needs assessment was put into place. After considering human and financial resources, the two school counselors started to prioritize and choose five to eight activities that could be best conducive to the fulfillment of the set goals.

Implementation of the Program

Six activities constitute this transition program. They are the following: Activity 1. Pen pals/buddy system; Activity 2. Student tours; Activity 3. Parent/child scavenger hunt; Activity 4. Video; Activity 5. Summer enrichment class/summer projects; Activity 6. Teacher/student pairing for first year accountability

For the first year of the transition program, the two first activities were implemented. Activity 1, Pen Pals and Buddy system, was implemented during the second semester of 2003 as an in-class activity. Sixty 4th graders took part of this activity. They wrote letters to 5th graders asking questions about middle school. Teacher and counselor reviewed letters. Fifth graders responded. This process was repeated. The activity culminated with end-of-year party to meet their pen pal, who would also be their "buddy." At the end of the semester, a "Pen Pal/Buddy Bash" was held at the middle school.

Activity 2, student tours, consisted of fifth graders students writing short essay on topic "Changing to Middle School." From what they wrote, teachers selected students to be trained as tour leaders. Tours were given to 4th graders the week before school began. The tour leaders were duly trained to respond to typical questions from the 4th graders. Welcome bag with maps, puzzles, and a "fun" handbook with school information were also ancillary events of the activity student tours.

The remaining activities, called alternative activities, are to be implemented in the upcoming years. Alternative Activity 3, parent/child scavenger hunt, has the potential to be incorporated into an open house before school starts. Children and parents and other participant guests come to the school building. Homeroom assignments, class schedules, and maps are handed out to everyone. Children and their parents go on hunting for objects as they become familiar with school layout. Teachers introduce themselves. This could be also an opportunity to show a video to students while responding to parents' concerns, worries, and anticipations on the transition to the middle school.

Alternative Activity 4, creating the video, the FUN video with lots of middle school student participation, provides the opportunity to answer questions, show teachers and other staff members, and film the lunchroom routine from the student perspective. The fun part is that fourth graders will look forward to being able to participate in the video the following year.

Alternative Activity 5, summer enrichment class/summer projects, entails a two-day summer class for students entering 5th grade. Activities will include: (a) review of teacher expectations regarding classroom behavior, class work, homework assignments; (b) instruc-

tion on the use of planners; (c) information on study skills; (d) summer project, like students bringing photos and creating a “page” about themselves for a book.

Alternative Activity 6, teacher/student pairing for accountability, include arranging student representatives and adult sponsors of middle school organizations and activities to display sign-up sheets for interested newcomers. Alternatively, students entering middle school for the first time can be paired with one or two adults (e.g., teachers and counselors) who can act as a source of support. Students would also be regularly accountable to these adults during the school year.

Evaluation

This transition program is creating its own corrective mechanisms as it evolves. Evaluation forms have been filled out by 4th and 5th graders and teachers assisting in the development of the transition program for future years.

Implications for the Teachers, School Counselors and School Administrators

In addition to challenges for students in transition, there are also specific challenges for teachers. Teachers are expected to help students adjust to the new environment and maintain motivation levels. In order to make the transition as smooth as possible, teachers should be educated on the developmental differences they should expect, as well as the wide range of needs and skills of their students. Teachers should be included in the both the planning process and the transition program (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

School counselors are responsible for implementing programs that address student needs. Any issue that interferes with a student’s learning is an issue that is worthy of a counselor’s response. As students advance in the education system, adjustment problems should be addressed quickly and with a carefully planned program that meets the needs of local students. Perkins and Gelfer (1995) suggested that counselors plan a transition model in advance, so that when called upon as consultants, they are ready to respond. A successful transition program implemented by the school counselor as consultant will improve the functioning of both consultees and clients, which is in agreement with the primary purpose of behavioral consultation (Fall, 1995).

The transition program must be a collaborative effort between schools, students, staff members, school principals, and parents in order to be successful. Patti Kenney, the 2003 NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the year, also shares this interdisciplinary vision of Effective Transition Programs. Her principal leadership style has created partnerships among school faculty, staff members, and the community of the school to work together and constantly discuss and refine curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices. She is aware of the stereotype that middle schools have tended to stress the emotional and social aspects of the transitioning phenomenon over the academic. She calls upon counselors, educators, teachers, parents, and school administrators to move beyond this issue and to strive to develop middle schools that challenge students intellectually and support adolescent development.

Summary

Transition is an ongoing process between and within schools. Successful transition programs should be developmental and preventive in nature, and should be planned to meet the needs of students. Helping students make a smooth transition from elementary to middle school is not a new concern for educators; one of the main principles of the middle level education movement was to help students make that move more successfully. By encouraging students to plan for the changes that come with middle school, schools can help them learn to

cope with the uncertainties that accompany these changes (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995). Students will continue to use these coping skills as they grow into adults.

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