

Elementary Tactics to Ease Transition Stress

Students struggle when faced with school change. This documented fact no longer surprises me. Change is stressful. As an education professional, I recently experienced the stress of the transition from elementary school teacher to middle school assistant principal.

Upon accepting my new position, I worried about connecting with the kids. Society labels middle school students as being at “a difficult age.” As an elementary school teacher, even when I had a horrible day, the sight of my students made my heart shine. I’m happy to say that I have found a similar experience with students at the middle school level. They need to be accepted, guided, supported, nurtured, and loved in the same way. They are kids—just bigger kids. They bring joy to each and every day of my professional life. The difficulty in middle schools is not the students. It is the culture.

As children enter adolescence, we often “help” them grow up by sending them to a school where they are expected to complete coursework with teacher-centered instruction and limited supports. The irony is that we are preparing them for higher education and a workforce where they will be expected to problem solve through collaboration, and offer solutions to problems through critical thinking. The “real world” does not require adults to memorize notes and complete projects in isolation.

Elementary-level instructional practices and supports can be applied to middle school. They will prepare students to be successful in their future endeavors. As we carry these effective elementary strategies through to the middle school, we also make the transition less stressful by reducing the amount of change between the schools.

Seven Strategies

I experienced a transition similar to middle-level students, and it was stressful at times.



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In many middle schools, factors that aid in students’ elementary school success, such as parent involvement and small group instruction, are missing. My goal for the year was to maintain my elementary school mindset for the benefit of my middle school students who suffer from the stress of transition and unfamiliar classroom expectations. I did not want to assimilate to society’s perception of the middle school in ways that are counterproductive for kids. The harmful social constructs of the middle school

have stayed the same because change is difficult.

Below is a checklist to support students in their transition from elementary to middle school. These elementary strategies work for students of all ages.

- **Provide “safety nets.”** Expectations must be clear, but there has to be room for mistakes to be made. Mistakes give students opportunities to grow. Examples of safety nets are “time-outs” and progressive discipline. If errors are seen as acceptable, student anxiety will decrease.
- **Give chances to redo assignments.** With student success as the desired outcome, multiple opportunities to learn and to show learning result in more chances for success. Teachers should convey the mindset that with hard work and persistence, all students can achieve at the highest levels.
- **Make parent contacts.** Parental involvement often drops off as students enter middle school. Students at the middle level are becoming increasingly independent, but parents can still be an incredible resource. Teachers and principals who contact parents and keep them informed reinforce the idea that home and school are one united force in the students’ lives. This consistency between home and school also alleviates personal anxiety for students.
- **Include small-group instruction.** Elementary teachers have perfected student-centered learning. When students collaborate, they make personal connections to the material. This strategy makes the coursework meaningful and relevant to students. As the content in middle school courses becomes more challenging, this type of instruction becomes more (not less) appropriate.
- **Provide hands-on activities.** As we prepare students for college and careers, they need to be able to apply learning to authentic situations. Hands-on activities provide



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opportunities for students to make discoveries about content and practice in the process of learning.

- **Equity does not mean equal.** Teacher-centered instruction only reaches some students. Students' diversity in race, gender, native language, and family economic status makes their needs varied. Students need different ways to access and make connections to course material that is culturally relevant. Teachers who value diversity model for students how to appreciate diversity. In turn, students feel valued.
- **Be kind.** Clear structures, procedures, and consistency in combination with kindness lead to deeper relationships with students. Speaking harshly to students to maintain order may keep adolescent behavior problems at bay, but will add to the stress students feel. Using fair, consistent consequences results in mutual respect.

Easing Stress

Transitions present difficulties for people of all ages. Achievement often drops as students transition between elementary and middle school. Educators at my middle school work very hard to help students achieve. The teachers spend hours in professional development and lesson planning to meet the instructional needs of students. Despite their efforts, an achievement drop occurs in the transition year.

The fewer aspects of schooling we change between elementary and middle school, the less stressful the transition will be for students. In my middle school administrative journey, I will maintain productive mindsets and instructional strategies that reach all students and support student success. **P**

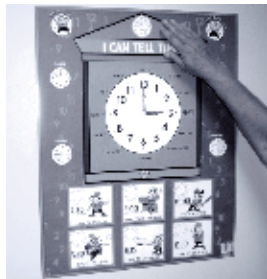
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