



Transitioning to Middle School for Students with Learning Disabilities

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by Laurie Wasserman

The excitement and nervousness of the first week of middle school is even more pronounced for children who have learning disabilities. They may think, Will the teachers understand my learning differences? Will they be patient and understanding when I forget my medication for ADD or ADHD? Will they be sensitive to the fact that I learn in a different way from other kids?

We need to establish the groundwork for this transition before these children enter middle school and the first step is for the middle school special education teacher to join the annual review held at the elementary school. The special education teacher then has an opportunity to listen and make notes as the children's current teachers review strengths, weaknesses, and areas of concern. This also allows parents to meet the special education teacher who will be working with their children and to learn about the middle school program and services, which are often different from those provided in elementary school.

For instance, in elementary school special education teachers generally work with students in self-contained classrooms for most the day, or a learning disabilities specialist teaches them outside their classrooms for an hour or two per day. In my school system, middle school special education students are taught in the mainstream classroom, with co-teaching by a paraprofessional, with small-group instruction for math, language arts, reading, and academic support. Or they may be taught by a special education teacher in a separate classroom for most academics, but attend exploratory classes in music, physical education, computer, art, or foreign languages with their peers.

Because parents often are more nervous and afraid of middle school than their children, it is reassuring and comforting for them to know ahead of time what types of services their children will have in middle school. When I attend these meetings, the parents often thank me for assuaging their fears, answering their questions, and explaining what to expect.

Collaboration Is the Key

During the first few weeks of school, I summarize all the modifications and accommodations from my students' IEPs onto one or two sheets of paper. I then meet with teachers during common planning time in order to familiarize them with the students who need help, as well as to answer their questions. Throughout the year, we share ideas about upcoming tests and meet with parents. Collaboration is key to making middle school work for students with learning disabilities.

The most crucial transition is with the students themselves. When I meet them for the first time at our fifth-grade open house, I try to talk individually to each one about the kinds of help they will receive to help them learn. I let them know I can't wait to see them in September, and give them and their parents my e-mail address. I've found that the anonymity of e-mail makes it easier for them to ask questions or express concerns.

The first week, my students fill out learning style questionnaires that help them to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and why they receive special help. As students with learning disabilities transition into middle school, it is crucial to be honest with them in explaining why they are in my classroom. Many have never heard of an IEP or a 504 accommodation plan, or don't understand why they learn differently from their peers. They often feel frustrated, anxious, or just different. My goals are for them to familiarize themselves with their learning disabilities and understand the objectives of their IEPs.

Understanding Strengths and Weaknesses

For example, students who are taught that they have central auditory processing weaknesses,

but are strong visually, benefit from understanding both their learning disability as well as learning strategies which utilize their strengths. I teach these students to focus on pairing their written classroom handouts and texts with classroom discussions. To kinesthetic learners, I explain that while they may not do as well on tests, they can really soar with hands-on projects.

Middle schoolers with learning disabilities enjoy being treated as mature and independent students. They want to learn about their learning style, as well as how to compensate for their weaknesses. For many students, this is the first time that they are in control of their learning and have a plan to do something about it. For example, they can now ask teachers to give them extra time on tests or remind them when they need word banks or study guides.

At our school, a child with a learning disability may take an untimed test, have a scribe, have questions read aloud and clarified, use a computer for written responses, or be given a word bank. Classroom teachers often send me children who are not on IEPs but may just need a little extra help and reassurance.

I acknowledge students' newfound sense of power over their learning by using a validation exercise called "What I See in You," which I learned from a colleague who works with gifted and talented middle schoolers. In this exercise, I spontaneously recognize students who have demonstrated the ability to apply what they have learned—for example, students who helped classmates with frustrating assignments, made connections from lessons to their own lives, or reviewed what happened in class for other students. I write the specifics on an index card, announce it to the class, and give it to the child, who comes up, shakes my hand to loud applause from the class, takes a bow, and pins it on the "What I See in You" bulletin board.

The exercise encapsulates what I want all students with disabilities to become in middle school: proud, independent learners.

Laurie Wasserman is a National Board Certified Teacher for grade 6 special needs students at Andrews Middle School in Medford, Massachusetts. Her e-mail address is crystalannie@comcast.net.