Making the Transition to Middle School

The transition from elementary to middle school is a critical time that warrants thoughtful, vigilant leadership and innovative, culturally responsive transition structures.

Middle Matters » May 2007, Vol. 15, No. 5

by Donna Marie San Antonio

Across the nation, elementary school students are preparing to make the transition to middle school. While researching middle-school transition for my book, Adolescent Lives in Transition: How Social Class Influences Adjustment to Middle School, I asked dozens of transitioning students what they were looking forward to and what they were worried about as they approached the middle grades.

Students voiced worries about keeping up academically, finding their way around a new building, having new teachers, dealing with more homework, and being selected to play their favorite sport. But above all else, transitioning students worried about the very thing they were most excited about: their ability to make new friends and be successful socially.

In early adolescence, students broaden their focus from immediate home and classroom environments to an expanded range of concerns that include peer groups, after-school clubs and athletic teams, and sometimes even a workplace. Their lives become far more complex as they negotiate affiliation with several different groups and play more complicated roles. Students and the adults who care about them are keenly aware that the social milieu of the middle grades—in terms of increased autonomy, diversity, and emotional demands—will heighten both opportunities and risks.

The transition to middle school also often brings increased economic and racial diversity in peer groups and provides students with important opportunities to exercise perspective-taking skills and empathy. Emotional attachments to others deepen and the possibility of disappointment and rejection loom large, especially for students who have previously experienced social difficulties or who may suffer the impact of economic or racial stereotypes.

Students Who Need Additional Support

Successful school adjustment is highly correlated with previous success. Students who adjust well in their new school environment are likely to have navigated other transitions successfully. When I work with students who are having a hard time adjusting to their new school, I find three common conditions.

1. Students who have a difficult time adjusting to their new schools often have had a series of poor adjustments in school, starting with the transition from home to preschool or kindergarten. Or, in the case of transient students, they have had a tough time adjusting to one new school after another. Each insecure transition reinforces the possibility that the next transition will be overwhelming. It is critical that we identify these students and provide extra support. When we break the pattern by providing a “corrective experience,” we can build a foundation for successful transitions to high school and beyond.

2. Students who have an unstable or insecure base also have a hard time making the transition to middle school. Students who have experienced the death, serious illness, absence, or incarceration of a loved one; students who live with a parent who suffers from alcoholism or other mental health problems; and students whose sense of safety and stability has been threatened by trauma, divorce, or illness all need thoughtful attention.
The students in these first two categories would benefit from interpersonal strategies designed to build trusting relationships. Pretransition, small-group, or individual visits to the new school that include introductions to teachers can be helpful. Just as students with special learning needs are identified when they go from one school to another, students with special social and emotional needs require similar attention and support. It is beneficial to identify these students, pass on useful information to the receiving school, and scaffold the relationship-building process with the student and his or her family.

3. A third group of students who need our thoughtful attention during the transition to middle school are those with learning differences, those from minority racial or cultural backgrounds, those with a physical disability or gender variation, and those from low socioeconomic status homes. Along with building strong relationships with these students and their families, schools must have clearly articulated policies that express the values and beliefs of the school community regarding diversity and respect. Classroom and corridor walls, spoken and written messages, teacher introductions on the first day of school, and student handbooks should affirm the identities of students from all backgrounds and should delineate the expectation of respect for each and every student in the school.

Four Key Competences

The primary concerns of early adolescents as they face the transition to the middle grades are summed up in four areas of competence: practical, academic, social, and emotional. Transition designs must address all four of these by using a variety of strategies and by involving older students as much as possible.

Practical competence includes knowing how to use the lockers, finding one’s way around the school, getting on the correct bus, understanding the schedule, and arriving to class ready and prepared with the correct supplies. Small groups led by older students can be an effective way to teach these new skills. Maps and other visuals are helpful, as is the use of technology that allows students and their parents to explore their new schools from home.

Academic competence refers to the students’ need to be intellectually challenged and to feel prepared for the increasing demands of homework, organization, and long-term planning. Students from elementary schools with low test scores may fear that they will be behind their peers. Other students may become disengaged if they find the curriculum to be less challenging than expected. Intellectual competence is enhanced when students feel that they are regarded as intelligent people with complex ideas and good prospects for the future.

Recognition of all sorts of skills—creative, mechanical, physical, and interpersonal—is important in helping students develop an overall sense of engagement in school. Unfortunately, in today’s environment we are at risk of riveting attention on only those skills that are tested, to the detriment of students who are smart in other ways. One student I interviewed spoke for many of her peers when she said: “People don’t seem to be paying too much attention to those things [music, art, etc.]. They just pay attention to their core classes. I think teachers and many grown-ups have trouble understanding that kids have other ways of being smart.”

Social competence includes the ability to make friends, to stand in someone else’s shoes, to develop positive relationships with others who are perceived to be different, and to articulate one’s position in the face of disagreement. One student addressed the central role of social well-being in school success when he said: “If you have a lot of friends, you want to come to school because you want to see them. If you don’t have any friends, then you think, ‘What’s the point?’”

Although students cue us that peer relationships are their domain, not ours, they also look to us for guidance and direction. We can scaffold healthy peer relationships by delivering clear messages about respect, by being vigilant about interrupting peer-to-peer targeting, by checking our own biases and the way we might implicitly allow some youngsters to be
treated with less respect, and by helping students with common interests get to know one another.

Students are hopeful that their teachers will “see them for who they are” and help facilitate positive peer relationships. It is particularly essential for school staff to be aware of the ways they support or diminish potential relationships across economic and racial borders. One sixth grader made this observation about the way teachers can help relationship building: “If they [teachers] know the kid, the kid’s family, they might get to know them more. They know lots about them so they can talk to them more. They could show kids that there are kids from different towns that have the same interests.”

Emotional competence addresses the inevitable disappointment, hurt feelings, and betrayed trust that comes with the territory during early adolescence. Students need to know that they can take risks, such as trying out for a competitive sports team, and that they are emotionally competent and resilient. Sometimes students get the message that disappointment and failure cannot be tolerated. They need to learn that failing is a part of development, and that rebounding from disappointment is a fundamental skill to learn. Older students who have faced similar disappointments can be helpful “advisers” during difficult times.

**Everyone Has a Role**

The transition to middle school can be a time of tremendous opportunity and growth, and most students gain self-understanding and important interpersonal skills during the middle grades. For some students, however, the middle grades are marked by struggles that set the stage for further alienation from school and peers.

Everyone has a role to play in helping such students navigate these grades successfully:

- **Teachers** are mentors and relationship brokers. They facilitate the ways that students can integrate personal and familial interests, skills, and beliefs into the school environment. This requires special attention to ethnic and economic diversity and to the ways that some students might be targets of rejection, indifference, or abuse. Again and again, students with whom I have talked have voiced appreciation for teachers who noticed and intervened in peer-to-peer targeting and who stood up for caring, safe classroom communities that honored diversity.

- **Counselors** play a key role in planning the transition between sending and receiving schools and facilitating the exchange of appropriate information. Counselors also can assist in identifying students who may be at high risk for difficult adjustment and in developing ways to provide additional support for these students. They also can explore resources for social and emotional learning and assist teachers in implementing such programs.

- **Parents** have an enormous impact on the way their sons and daughters approach the middle grades. They can promote a positive, resilient attitude by discussing their child’s excitement and fears openly, by speaking positively about the middle grades, by getting to know their child’s teachers, and by helping their child through inevitable disappointments.

- **Administrators** are leaders in writing appropriate school policies; articulating beliefs and values to staff members, students, and parents; developing and monitoring a positive school climate; and ensuring that there are adequate resources and structures to assist vulnerable students.

- **Older students** play an important role in providing information, encouragement, support, and guidance to their younger peers. They often have the credibility and the insight about immediate issues that adults lack. They are very important members of the transition team.

Finally, it is important to remember that transitioning students are the main characters in the process. They should be encouraged to conceptualize the transition to the middle grades, to articulate their hopes and concerns, and to identify the skills that will help them in this phase of their development.

**Notes**
Although this article most specifically addresses transition from grade 5 or 6 to grade 6 or 7, these comments have relevance for all middle grades students from grades 5-7.

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