Planning for the Transition to High School

The manner in which students make the transition from middle school to high school is crucial because it is this transition that sets the tone for high school graduation. As one middle school principal put it, “Elementary school is very similar to middle school; high school is very similar to the first year in college; but the last year in middle school is nothing like the first year in high school.”

There are several reasons why this statement paints an accurate picture of what takes place when students move from middle school to high school. First, grade 9 is often when students begin to accrue credits that lead to graduation. In fact, some schools mandate that a ninth-grade student must gain one-fourth of the total credits required for graduation in order to be promoted to 10th grade. The aim of such policies is to provide a steady progression culminating in graduation four years after entering the ninth grade. However, research shows that some districts had in-grade retention rates as high as 52 percent in ninth grade.

Second, there is a difference in educational philosophy between the two educational levels. The middle school concept involves teams of teachers who are responsible for instruction in the core subjects at each grade level, who meet regularly to discuss student progress (academically and socially), and who have a set of consistent expectations for their students. In contrast, some high school teachers might have freshmen one period and seniors the next. This can lead to ninth graders being taught by teachers who are not in touch with the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of 14-year-olds. Student expectations are based on the needs of the teacher and the subject matter, and not on students’ needs.

Finally, a difference exists in the importance placed on the material to be learned at the two educational levels. The middle school concept is built on subject mastery by students who are provided with opportunities to show their understanding in various ways. However, the high school approach is based on competition for honors and class rank.

Creating an Effective Program

In developing transition programs, it is essential for principals to acknowledge that, given the emphasis placed on student success, no permanent template can be developed. Each eighth-grade class is unique and must be treated accordingly in the transition process. Evaluation of various transition program components, such as grades, absences, discipline referrals, and counselor visits, must be conducted and benchmarked to gather relevant data concerning the exiting eighth-grade class.

For schools beginning a transition program, it is imperative that all the stakeholders be involved in the development of the transition program. These include eighth- and ninth-grade students, their parents and teachers, and an administrator and counselor from each level. This group needs to begin its work during the summer before the start of the eighth-grade year in order to discuss the needs of the transitioning students, develop activities and events to address these needs, set a timetable for implementation, and establish an ongoing data-gathering system.

The start of the school year is an excellent time to gather data from all the transitioning students. Using a simple survey, my colleague and I found that the No. 1 concern of eighth graders was bullying by older students. Other areas of anxiety included getting lost in the building, opening combination lockers, finding friends, and “mean” teachers (i.e., teachers who gave...
A Ninth-Grade Academy

An alternative strategy to consider in student transition from eighth grade is the establishment of a ninth-grade academy within the high school facility. This concept, similar to that of the middle school approach, calls for a committed group of teachers to provide instruction in core subjects for ninth-grade students in separate classrooms. In this way, students can more easily make the transition from middle school while using the high school facilities for electives, co-curricular activities, lunch, and library use.

By implementing the academy concept, schools provide the transitioning students an opportunity to adjust to the new facility, acquire the skills to succeed in a competitive educational environment, and enjoy a feeling of security similar to what they experienced in middle school.

Successful transition programs don’t end once eighth grade is completed, but continue through the ninth-grade year, culminating with a meeting of the student, his or her parent or guardian, and the school counselor. During this meeting, a plan is developed to carry forward for the rest of the high school years and beyond. Although this plan is not binding, it provides the student with a glimpse of what lies beyond high school and serves as an impetus for graduation.

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