The Transition to High School: Perceptions and Reality

It is essential that educators understand how students think and feel as they make the complex transitions from elementary to middle to high school. These are transitions that involve real differences in organizational structure as well as real or perceived changes in academic rigor, social interactions, and availability of support, especially in moving from the middle grades to high school. Although many districts offer programs designed to familiarize students with the similarities and differences in the academic, social, and organizational structures of the schools, there is little evidence of coordination or consistency in program goals (Mizelle 1999). In addition, schools rarely collect information about how students, families, and school personnel view the transition periods.

This article briefly summarizes a research study of transition from middle school to high school in two large Midwest districts. It looks at the complexity of transition by examining similarities and differences of perceptions between parents and students, as well as gender and racial differences.

The study was based on a survey of student and parent perceptions of the transition to ninth grade, with students completing a follow-up survey during their ninth-grade year. The surveys measured students’ feelings about academic, social, and organizational aspects of high school, as well as their perceptions of how helpful their parents, eighth-grade teachers, and eighth-grade counselors were in assisting them with the transition.

Parent and Student Perceptions

Parents and students in the study were generally looking forward to increased academic and social opportunities in high school. In particular, students anticipated having some freedom to select courses and participate in extra-curricular activities. Students thought their ninth-grade classes were going to be challenging, but reported confidence that they would be successful.

Although parents were significantly more concerned about social issues, such as students fitting in, being bullied, and experiencing peer pressure, the students reported lower levels of concern on these issues and felt positive about the prospects of interacting with more and older students in high school. They felt less anxious about their ability to navigate the new physical and organizational structures of the ninth grade.

Gender Differences

Some important differences emerged in the way boys and girls viewed transition. For instance, girls held lower expectations about social opportunities in eighth grade, but their social experiences ended up being more positive than boys in high school. Although there were no significant gender differences in boys’ and girls’ perceptions of academic issues prior to and after the transition to high school, both generally felt more positive about academic issues in the ninth grade than they expected to feel when they were in eighth grade. Both groups reported significantly lower levels of support when they reflected back on the assistance of eighth-grade teachers and counselors, and their parents.

Racial Differences

There were few significant differences between black and white students. For example, black students held slightly lower expectations in academic, social, and organizational perceptions of transition during eighth grade, and they reported feeling less supported than their white peers. Ironically, in ninth grade black students’ perceptions of the support that they received during the previous year were significantly higher than those of white students.

Implications for Principals

These findings point to the complexity of transition and the importance of paying attention to how parents and students think about high school, both prior to and after the transition. These findings can help administrators, teachers, and counselors focus on ways to bring about a more realistic understanding of the academic, social, and organizational similarities and differences between schools. It is important for schools to identify unique patterns and develop interventions to reduce the gaps between perceptions and reality in academic transitions.

The findings also have implications for elementary and middle school principals who are interested in facilitating conversations and inquiry around academic transitions. Specifically, principals can follow or modify procedures to collect data on perceptions of transition and use the data to inform practice (Smith, Feldwisch, and Abell 2006).

Building leaders can make a real difference in promoting seamless transitions if they facilitate conversations among themselves (Morgan and Hertzog 2001). Middle school principals in
particular need to partner with their feeder elementary school principals and high school principals in order to study their students’ and parents’ perceptions of transition. Armed with this information, schools can collaborate to create programs that address major gaps of understanding in the areas of curriculum articulation, behavior expectations, academic expectations, and social opportunities at each level.

Schools can then create and disseminate transition messages far more supportive than the more common reactive transition messages often heard in schools (“You won’t get away with that next year”) or “You need to know this next year”). In some cases, these messages may be true, but more than likely they come across as unrealistic or threatening.

Finally, schools should look at specific academic programs, extracurricular activities, and other support systems that address achievement gaps between black and white students, and between boys and girls, in specific content areas. Addressing these issues in elementary and middle-level education can have a profound impact on subsequent achievement in high school and college.

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References