



Support Breeds Success

Navigating the transition from elementary to middle school

By Shanna R. Speakman-Spickard

The adolescent years are a struggle, and transitioning to middle school should not add to that stress. Going to middle school can be scary for students, and most of the time, the transition is as hard or harder on the parents. In my 12 years as a middle school principal, I have noticed the students almost always seem to handle it better than their parents. Over time, I have learned several ways to support students and parents in three areas: behind the scenes, with information and exposure, and through relationships.

A great deal of work needs to happen behind the scenes to support students. Transition meetings are beneficial for students and teachers alike; trusting paperwork, plans, and student management notes is not

enough. Meetings with teachers and support personnel from the outgoing and incoming buildings can be helpful. Teacher consultants, counselors, social workers, administrators, and classroom teachers can help paint a picture of the whole student.

Behind-the-scenes assistance includes learning and understanding about curriculum, instructional practices, and other services or activities, as well as supports and plans in which students participated. Internal information-sharing sets the foundation for success, but information must be shared with students and parents as well.

The second category to foster a successful transition is information and exposure. The more we can make the unknown known, the better it is for

parents and students. Here are a few ideas on how to do that:

Branding. Having a school hashtag and online presence helps show incoming families the exciting activities and learning happening at the middle school, dispelling the mystery of what goes on at the building; work with elementary principals to repost this information on their pages. In addition, elementary offices can push out or send home information on events that include the incoming-grade families.

The Power of Branding: Telling Your School's Story (2014) by Tony Sinanis and Joseph Sanfelippo offers an easy read on how and why to tell your story. The resource will also help you get started in or develop your use of social media. The authors remind us

that “the idea of branding schools isn’t about marketing kids or making false promises. It’s about promoting the amazing things happening for those who don’t have the opportunity to experience them on a daily basis.” This approach will not only provide current families with information, but it can also turn fear into excitement for incoming families.

Orientation. Hosting a spring orientation for parents and students is a great way to help share information, while exposing students to the building, logistics, and staff. Having sixth-grade—or incoming-grade—teachers there to greet them and talk a little about themselves, their classes, and some of the fun activities they do will also settle nerves and create enthusiasm. Teacher advice on course selection and elective options can help students find classes that are a good fit. An added support is to have middle school student leaders present to greet incoming students, answer questions, and offer tours of the building.

Visitation. Spring student visitations can be helpful. We bus fifth-graders to the middle school, where a counselor, social worker, and student leaders prepare a fun couple of hours with activities that include icebreakers, tours, a scavenger hunt, and staff introductions.

Registration/open house. Our school has a registration day and an open house for families before school starts. On registration day, students get their schedules, lockers, and combinations; take school pictures; meet teachers; and get important back-to-school information. Staff are present to help students find their classrooms, practice opening their lockers, and tour the building. The week before school starts, the building is open again for families and students to hear grade-level presentations, as well as take part in a meet-and-greet with teachers.


Events. In the spring, we hold a fifth- and sixth-grade movie night. Last year, sixth-grade teachers

greeted students as they entered. Additional activities to consider include inviting the incoming grade for an end-of-year walkathon or “move up” day.

With exposure, you can build relationships. Students learn who we are when we visit elementary classrooms to talk with the students. They ask if you know their siblings or cousins, and they put faces to our names. Events such as middle school peer tours on visitation day help the students get reacquainted after a year apart.

I visit sixth-grade classes within the first two days to reintroduce myself and let them know that I also get nervous about a new year, and that that’s OK—but more importantly, I tell them “We are going to have a great year!” I like to have lunch with students, as well—at least as long as it’s still cool to eat with the principal.

The more we consciously work to transition our families, the better the experience will be for everyone involved.

Transitions are stressful, but you can take proactive measures to support students and their parents. The more we consciously work to transition our families, the better the experience will be for everyone involved. 

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