

Transitions



Moving Through the Middle

Supporting successful transitions into and out of the middle grades

BY JESSICA CABEEN AND KEVIN ARMSTRONG

Middle school is one setting that can still evoke powerful emotions, even among adults. Getting the transitions to middle school right and moving on to high school asks that all stakeholders feel safe, supported, and engaged in the process. Only then will the middle years hold more positive memories than fears.

Making the leap to middle school from elementary school can be an anxious time for students and parents alike—and that’s especially true this year, when both are dealing with the unfamiliar demands that the pandemic’s restrictions have brought. In this article, the authors discuss the strategies they have used to help

smooth the transition from elementary to middle school and beyond.

From Elementary to Middle School

Cabeen: Moving students toward greater freedom.

During my first year at Ellis Middle School, I was walking through a feeder school and noticed its lunch room practices. Students came in and sat down by their teachers, in assigned seats. I began to think about how students would transition to moving into the lunchroom at the middle school, where they had free choice to sit where they wanted.

Working with our PBIS team, we created a “gradual release” system for lunch seating the next year. Students sat with their classes during the first week, then they were gradually allowed to sit wherever they wanted. This allowed some familiarity from elementary school while transitioning students to middle-level seating arrangements.

As you think about next year—especially with COVID guidelines still in place—what routines and rituals will be dramatically different for students between elementary and middle grades, and what structures can you put into place to support the transition?

Armstrong: Recruiting is real. In our district, we have several elementary and middle schools that have been selected as open enrollment schools. These schools have a limited number of slots open to students who live outside that particular school zone. We also deal with consistent competition from private and charter schools.

With our school being one of the open enrollment schools, our job is twofold: to market and recruit “zoned” students who are tempted to go the private or charter school path, and also to cast a wide net to recruit students from across the county.

To recruit from feeder schools, we send members of our school’s musical groups, athletic teams, cheerleading squad, administrative staff, and others to visit, so that elementary students see us and know what we are all about. We also hold sessions for prospective parents at the feeder elementary schools and our campus, so we have an opportunity to debunk any myths regarding the campus and public middle schools as a whole.

Our recruiting efforts have paid great dividends; we have amazing students and families who wave the Hadley banner and help us market our brand districtwide. It is essential that middle schools have the mentality that all families have options. Don’t simply sit back and assume that families are coming your way.

From Middle to High School

Cabeen: Lunch and learn. In early spring, our eighth graders spend a

week reviewing course offerings, checking in with teachers for recommendations, and making a plan for their first year of high school. But incoming freshmen have questions, too: What sports offerings are there? What extracurriculars are available? Do they get an off-campus lunch hour? (Spoiler alert: No.)

At Ellis Middle School, we partner with Austin High School to bring a cross-section of upperclassmen in to have lunch with students. Have questions about soccer? One of the varsity soccer players might be available. What about student leadership? Here’s a student council representative.

Inviting current students to the middle school for lunch offers not only an informal opportunity for eighth graders to ask questions, but also a chance for former students to come back to the middle school and say hi to their former teachers. We share these events with families, so they know that we’re working to find intentional ways for students to feel safe and excited about the transition to high school.

Armstrong: Setting high expectations. As a middle school administrator, it is my job to prepare students—many of whom have been on our campus for four years—for their transition to high school. That’s why we find it imperative for students and their families to be informed about their options.

The first option is their zoned high school. Scheduled tours allow our entire eighth-grade class to visit the campus during the day to see it in action. Students visit classrooms, learn about the various academies, see musical performances, and learn about athletics and other extracurricular activities. Afterward, counselors from the high school set times on our campus to meet with students and their parents and register them for courses.

In addition, eighth-grade students get visits from representatives of the district’s Arts and Big Picture High School. They learn about all the things the unique high schools have to offer and get the opportunity to make an informed decision on their placement for the next four years.

It is an exciting time to be a middle school administrator. We have the unique opportunity to have strong connections with our elementary and high school principals and to play a role on all three campuses. We must build relationships not only on our campuses, but on the connected elementary and high school campuses, as well.

In this way, we can see where our students have come from and what processes need to be in place to make their transition a smooth one. And we can also learn where they might be headed, so that when they roll off the middle school “assembly line,” they are prepared for the next step in their academic careers. ●

Jessica Cabeen (@JessicaCabeen) is principal of Ellis Middle School in Austin, Minnesota, and a fellow of NAESP’s Center for Middle-Level Leadership.

Kevin Armstrong (@DrKDArmstrong), is principal of DuPont Hadley Middle School in Old Hickory, Tennessee, and is a fellow of NAESP’s Center for Middle-Level Leadership.