

TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

In support of *This We Believe* characteristic:

- A shared vision that guides decisions
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Why Is It Important to Examine the Transition from Middle School to High School?

The transition from middle school to high school is accompanied by both anticipation and anxiety (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, & Lindsay, 2003). Transition is receiving increased attention due to the fact that ninth grade course failures and high school dropout rates exceed all other grade levels (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003; Roderick & Camburn, 1999). While a long history of research on the transition to college (Tinto, 1987) and transitions for students with disabilities (Letrello & Miles, 2003; Rogan, Hunt, & Wagner, 2002) exist, there is little empirical research examining the transition from middle school to high school for the general education population (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle, 1999).

Schiller (1999) defined academic transition as “a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (pp. 216–217). This definition points to the shared responsibility of middle school and high school personnel for guiding young adolescents through this major educational transition.

Research on Impact of Transition on Student Outcomes

Currently, there is a lack of research on the impact of transition on students/families, and/or the potential of programs to assist students in the seamless transition from middle school to high school. Policy researchers have examined databases such as the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) 1988/2000 (NCES, 2002). Results of this inquiry show that students from different middle schools attending the same high school (Schiller, 1999) and participating in full or partial transition programs (Catterall, 1998;

Smith, 1997) transition with ease from middle school to high school. While the use of NELS provides valuable information about the impact of transition on student academic and social outcomes, the database is almost 20 years old. The primary data research approaches used to study transition issues include survey research (Akos & Galassi, 2004), longitudinal studies (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999), qualitative studies (Kinney, 1993; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001) and mixed-method designs (Smith, 2006).

Current research on transition from middle school to high school has shown

- Students experience a decrease in achievement from middle school to high school (Alspaugh, 1998a, 1998b; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). This achievement loss may represent the first time high-achieving students experience grades lower than As.
- In an ex post facto study of 48 school districts, Alspaugh (1998a) found that students attending school districts with transitions at grade six and grade nine experienced greater achievement loss than students in districts organized K–8. Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, and Feinman (1994) called the effect of multiple transitions on academic and social outcomes “double-jeopardy.”
- In addition to academic struggles, behavior problems in the form of suspensions and expulsions appear to increase significantly early in the ninth grade year (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996).
- Middle grades students identified academic ability as especially important to making it in secondary school (Zeedyk et al., 2003). After entering high school, students in the study added time management, ability to stay on task, social skills, and behavior as essential elements in success. Social matters such as bullying, getting lost, and establishing peer relationships at secondary school overshadow concerns about academics.



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- Kinney (1993) found that expanded social experiences in high school represent a new opportunity for students who experienced exclusion in middle school. He described social networks in middle schools as being limited to a dichotomy of popular students versus the rest of the student body. Students in high school were able to establish new social networks or cliques that did not exist in their respective middle schools.
- Akos and Galassi (2004) found that students look forward to making new friends, having more freedom, and attending school events as they transition to high school. Students' greatest concerns revolved around the amount of homework, class difficulty, and organizational issues (e.g., getting lost). Conversely, parents were concerned that their children would feel negative peer pressure in both academic and social realms. The study also indicated teachers' concerns that students would feel pressure to do well in class, experience challenging courses, and have difficulty making new friends. Teacher perceptions were found to be different from students' perceptions in regard to worries about homework, and if transition programs are oriented purely around the teacher assessments of student worries, efforts may be misdirected (Brown & Armstrong, 1982).
- Parents can play an important role in helping their children during the transition from middle school to high school. Falbo, Lein, and Amador (2001) found that students whose parents monitored their activities and intervened positively (e.g., schoolwork, peer networks, and direct participation at the school) were more likely to have a smooth transition from middle school to high school. Furthermore, it was noted by Feuerstein (2000) that increased school contact with parents typically resulted in reciprocal parent contact, improving overall communication between the schools and families.
- Programs designed to reduce high school dropout rates must address the challenges associated with the transition to high school and provide targeted early intervention in order to promote academic recovery in failing students (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Colleges have long used this approach to assist students entering college with academic deficiencies (Abelman, & Molina, 2001; Garing, 1992).
- Successful transition programs address the information gap by providing students and families with a wealth of information about the academic, social, and organizational similarities and differences between middle school and high school (Mizelle, 1999). Zeedyk and associates (2003) suggested the following: expanding the number and duration of visits between schools; allowing students to spend a day with secondary school students; inviting secondary school students and teachers to speak at the feeder schools; providing mentoring to middle school students by secondary school students, etc.
- High school dropout rates are significantly lower in school districts that have explicit middle school to high school transition programs (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Smith, 1997). Effective programs address curriculum (e.g., academic rigor of courses); facilities (e.g., location of classrooms, restrooms); and safety and discipline (e.g., rules and discipline code); and provide accurate information (e.g., organization and logistics) (Mac Iver, 1990).

What Do Effective Transition Programs Look Like?

- Successful transition programs must involve collaboration between eighth and ninth grade buildings/personnel (Mizelle, 1999). Feeder middle schools and receiving high schools should communicate to identify what Gibson (1969) called the distinctive features of academic, social, and organizational logistics and philosophies in middle school and high school. Transition programs that consistently ask students to reflect on and to experience the complexities and nuances of the distinctive features of high school will have greater impact than isolated information sessions (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Reframing the Transition Construct

While there is increased attention on transition programming, it tends to occur in isolated informational settings around curriculum selection or physical tours. Furthermore, there is little evaluation data showing that transition programming reduces students' perceptions of disconnect in social, academic, and organizational expectations. In 2002, National Middle School Association, along with the National Association of Elementary School Principals, put out a comprehensive joint position statement on supporting the elementary to middle school transition (NMSA, 2002). Many of the recommendations from the joint position are transferable to the middle school to high school transition. For example, the position paper points to the importance of involving families, recognizing the anxieties that accompany transition, and seeing transition as an ongoing process. In addition to building on those sound recommendations, practitioners and researchers need to further reframe the construct of *transition* to align with the *This We Believe* characteristic "a shared vision that guides decisions." First, it is



important to stress the concept of the period of transition as starting in the middle of eighth grade and spanning the entire ninth grade year. Second, high schools and their feeder middle schools need to identify and share their unique academic, social, and organizational attributes (e.g., course grading, rigor of courses, disciplinary procedures, length of periods, extra-curricular activities available, role of guidance counselors). Next, each organization needs to reflect on the consistency of messages presented to students and families explaining the similarities and differences in academic,

social, and organizational expectations (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Finally, we need rigorous primary data research focused on the transition from middle school to high school. Findings from these important studies are needed to inform local and national decision makers about issues ranging from curriculum conversations to dropout prevention, school configuration, and cross-building planning.

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Zeedyk, M. S., Gallacher, J., Henderson, M., Hope, G., Husband, B., & Lindsay, K. (2003). Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: Perceptions of pupils, parents, and teachers. *School Psychology International*, 24(1), 67–79.

ANNOTATED REFERENCES

Akos, P., & Galassi, J. P. (2004). Middle and high school transitions as viewed by students, parents, and teachers. *Professional School Counseling*, 7(4), 212–221.

This study describes a cross-sectional comparison of student, teacher, and parent perceptions during the transitions to middle school and high school. Surveys were administered to students during homeroom, to parents in a letter sent home with and returned by students, and to teachers during a faculty meeting. The authors compared students', caregivers', and teachers' retrospective perceptions of the transitional aspects that they looked forward to or worried about. While students and caregivers had similar perceptions of the positive aspects of the transition, teachers and school staff perceived different concerns for students. For example, the top concerns for students included the amount of homework and classes being more difficult. Although parents also mentioned the amount of homework and pressure to do well in school, teachers' top concerns were about students' difficulty fitting in or making new friends.

Isakson, K., & Jarvis, P. (1999). The adjustment of adolescents during the transition into high school: A short-term longitudinal study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 28(1), 1–26.

The research employed a longitudinal design assessing adolescents' adjustments during the transition to high school. Surveys were administered once during the eighth grade year and twice during the ninth grade year. The survey included subscales measuring school membership, daily hassles, coping, autonomy, perceived social support from friends, and relationship support. Parent surveys measured hassles and uplifts, midlife identity concerns, and coping. Student decreases in grade point average (GPA) following the transition were associated with family, school, or friend stressors. Even when peers were supportive, students experienced achievement loss. Authors speculated that the distracting nature of peer relationships was a potential factor. Student GPAs typically rebounded during second semester of ninth grade, but school attendance rates decreased in the same semester. Somewhat surprisingly, a lower sense of autonomy was associated with higher grades. Perceived support from parents was related to a greater sense of school belongingness.

Smith, J. B. (1997). Effects of eighth-grade transition programs on high school retention and experiences. *Journal of Educational Research*, 90(3), 144–152.

Using a nationally representative sample of public school students (NELS 88/2000), the researcher examined the effects of middle school transition programs on achievement and retention. The results indicated that students of color and students from lower SES backgrounds attended schools that were significantly less likely to offer transition programming. High school dropout rates were significantly lower for students who attended schools with full or partial transition programs. Students attending schools without transition programs experienced higher rates of dropout. Additionally, students with access to full and partial transition programs had higher GPAs than students who did not experience transition programming.

Morgan, L. P., & Hertzog, C. J. (2001). Designing comprehensive transition plans. *Principal Leadership* 1(7), 10–18.

The authors present a comprehensive qualitative study of student perceptions of the transition to high school. An open-ended instrument based on middle and high school personnel perspective was administered in a classroom setting. Focus groups were held with groups of 8 to 12 students per grade level. Five consistent themes related to student concerns emerged including curriculum (such as academic rigor of courses); facilities (including location of classrooms, restrooms, etc.); safety and discipline (rules and discipline code); teachers, counselors, and administrators; and general information (buses, lunch, etc.).



ANNOTATED REFERENCES *(continued)*

Zeedyk, M. S., Gallacher, J., Henderson, M., Hope, G., Husband, B., & Lindsay, K. (2003). Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: Perceptions of pupils, parents, and teachers. *School Psychology International*, 24(1), 67–79.

The authors conducted a qualitative study of student, parent, and teacher perceptions of the transition to high school. The researchers developed a set of open-ended questions related to five topics including aspects of secondary school to which children look forward, pupils' concerns about secondary school, parents' concerns about secondary school, skills that were perceived to be useful for transition, and suggested means by which schools could facilitate the transition. The authors found that both primary and secondary students were most excited about new friends, new academic subjects, new teachers, and new routines. Parents also mentioned extra-curricular activities and learning challenges. Students were less concerned with academic matters and more concerned about bullying, getting lost, and peer relationships at their new school. The most frequent responses from parents also included bullying and peer relationships. Findings suggested that teachers focused on transition as a problem to be solved by the school.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

In Case You Missed It: Insights from Internet E-mail. (n.d.). *Building bridges between middle schools and high schools*. Retrieved on July 20, 2006, from <http://www.middleweb.com/INCASEbridge.html>

Legters, N., & Kerr, K. (2001). *Easing the transition to high school: An investigation of reform practices to promote ninth grade success*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, The Civil Rights Project. Retrieved on July 20, 2006, from <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/legters.pdf>

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