



The Transition Puzzle: Making the Pieces Fit What One School Is Doing

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by Dianne Fields

Each year thousands of students enter middle school, each of them with personal concerns, questions, and anxieties. This transition is a difficult experience not only for first-year middle school students and their families, but for administrators and staff as they attempt to help the new arrivals adjust to a very different school routine.

At our middle school, we found the loss of teaching time at the beginning of the school year particularly frustrating. We had students unfamiliar with the building getting lost and upset. Difficulty in opening lockers created additional frustration, not to mention tears, tardiness, and lack of preparedness for class. Inappropriate behaviors in hallways created discipline issues. Seventh-grade lunch often lasted over an hour, taking 30 minutes or more from fourth-period classes.

We formed a committee to study changes in our transition program, which included brief annual visits by a counselor and the assistant principal to the elementary schools feeding into the middle school. Students were told everything we felt they needed to know about middle school in 60 minutes or less. Then, in early June, approximately 350 sixth graders visited the school for a tour of the building, with groups of 40 assigned to an eighth-grade tour guide. Finally, in August, all new students and their families were invited to come to school for a self-guided tour. However, the students often came unaccompanied.

We found this program to be inadequate and decided to design a transition program that would lessen anxieties and create a successful learning environment for students coming to middle school. After a year of study and planning, we believe we have solved the transition puzzle.

Transition 101

Our two-part transition program begins in late March with visits by our seventh-grade counselor, assistant principal, and special education coordinator to each elementary school. Instead of addressing the students, we provide a substitute teacher at each school so that we can meet individually with each sixth-grade teacher. The teachers tell us what we need to know about each of their students, and the following week we return to visit with the sixth graders. We bring along two current middle school students who previously attended that elementary school. They talk to the sixth graders about the differences between middle school and elementary school, and answer any questions. We leave a transition survey for each youngster to complete (see box). The surveys help us to better understand each student's academic and social concerns.

The second step in the transition process takes place at the end of the school year. The students from each elementary school come to the middle school on a day designated just for them. Each one is paired up with a current seventh grader, who acts as host. The sixth graders are provided lunch in our cafeteria, a process very different from what they are accustomed to in elementary school—and one of their greatest concerns. The seventh graders instruct and model lunchroom procedures, and after lunch take the sixth graders with them to their classes, where they are included in all classroom activities.

After short tours of the building, the students return to the cafeteria to talk about their day and to hear

presentations from coaches and the student leadership team. Before the students return to their own school, significant concerns from their surveys are discussed. In a visit of three to four hours, these future middle schoolers learn that they can safely navigate a hallway with 700 other students, that a seventh-grade class is much like their own, that the lunch menu has a lot more choices—and that you can sit wherever you want in the cafeteria.

Bingo and Barbecue

While this visit helps reduce the anxieties of incoming seventh graders, it does not give them practice in finding classes, opening lockers, or getting from one place to another—fears that rank high on the anxiety lists of both students and their parents.

To help address these issues, the school has a barbecue for all new students and their parents the week before school starts. The evening begins with an orientation for parents in the gym. Parents learn about such things as attendance procedures, phone numbers for staff, recognition activities, and opportunities for parents to participate in school programs. Meanwhile, the new students are in the cafeteria, where student leaders discuss involvement opportunities for the coming year and answer any questions.

When students and parents are reunited, they fill out special "bingo cards." The cards have squares for each important location in the building—library, administrative offices, counselors' offices, restrooms, music rooms, business office, gym, art rooms, and a site where 20 lockers have been set up for practice in opening and closing. At each location, a staff member stamps the appropriate block. The completed card is the family's ticket to the barbecue, which is served using the school's cafeteria procedure—providing students still another practice opportunity. During and after dinner, tables are set up where parents can sign up to serve on committees and projects that include everything from volunteering in classrooms to fund raising and chaperoning field trips and dances.

The Final Pieces of the Puzzle

The transition process continues once school starts. For the first two weeks, pairs of student leaders are stationed in the hallways five minutes before each class period ends to assist new students with schedules, room locations, lockers, and questions. In the classrooms, the new students are instructed in the skills necessary for success in middle school. Each day, for 13 days, a different period is devoted to a particular activity, including time management, studying, test taking, and self-evaluation.

The final piece in the transition puzzle is the rules convocation on the first Friday of school. The convocation is planned, produced, and presented by students, who present a fashion show and skits that reinforce the dress code, attendance procedures, and appropriate behavior in the hallways and cafeteria.

A Stress-Free Transition

The new transition program could not succeed without the strong support of the school's staff. The teachers demonstrate their support by welcoming visiting sixth graders into their crowded classrooms, attending the fall barbecue, and opening their rooms during student tours so that the incoming seventh graders can find their classes and identify their teachers. The office staff, counselors, and library staff volunteer their time to stamp bingo cards at the barbecue, and the kitchen staff volunteers to prepare and serve dinner.

Their combined efforts have paid off. New students report fewer worries about their first day, thanks to the orientation process. In a follow-up survey of seventh-grade teachers, they overwhelmingly indicated that the new transition approach has been "very effective." Their comments include statements like: "Seventh graders have pride and ownership in their school"; "On the first day, students weren't afraid of lockers"; and "All my students had their materials the first day." The cafeteria manager reported that the new students knew where to line up and how to enter their ID numbers.

We are pleased with the success of our transition program. By better preparing new students, we have greatly

reduced their anxieties and helped get their middle school experience off to a stress-free start.

Student Transition Survey

Please read each statement and respond by putting a 1, 2, or 3 in each space. A 1 means you are very concerned, a 2 means you are somewhat concerned, and a 3 means you are not concerned.

- ☐ Getting lost in school
- ☐ Forgetting your locker combination
- ☐ Buying new school supplies
- ☐ Eating in a larger cafeteria
- ☐ Leaving the wrong books or supplies in your locker or forgetting to bring books and supplies to class
- ☐ Having tougher teachers
- ☐ Having to do harder work
- ☐ Having too much homework
- ☐ Having teachers expect too much of you
- ☐ Being sent to the assistant principal
- ☐ Getting into fights
- ☐ Having things stolen from you
- ☐ Being bothered by eighth graders
- ☐ Not getting along with all your teachers
- ☐ Being teased by other kids ☐ Having trouble making new friends
- ☐ Being made fun of in the locker room
- ☐ Being pressured to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or do drugs
- ☐ Belonging to the right group
- ☐ Joining clubs
- ☐ Joining sports
- ☐ Liking your teachers
- ☐ New rules and school policies
- ☐ Going to the restroom
- ☐ Opening your locker
- ☐ Finding your way around school
- ☐ Earning good grades
- ☐ Having enough time to eat breakfast or lunch
- ☐ Dealing with bullies
- ☐ Dressing for PE
- ☐ Taking tests

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