

A Transition Program Based on Identified Student and Parent Concerns

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From worries about their looks and fitting in with peers to concerns about academics and getting lost, young adolescents experience a great deal of anxiety about the transition from elementary school to middle school. This transition occurs when young adolescents are experiencing many social, emotional, and intellectual changes. At a time in their development when they are most vulnerable, they leave the security of a smaller elementary school with one primary classroom teacher for a larger middle school where they have a team of teachers, new policies and procedures, and a larger number of adults and peers with whom to interact.

It is critical that students moving into middle level schools receive assistance prior to, during, and after the move to middle school. Schumacher (1998) stated that comprehensive and effective transition programs build a sense of community and respond to the needs and concerns of the students through a multi-faceted approach. Allen (2001) further stated that it is critical that schools not only identify the components of a strong transition program, but also recognize that an effective transition program begins long before the students are ready to enter your school building.

Young adolescents need the support of both school personnel and families and it is important for schools to recognize the critical need to involve parents to help ensure a successful transition for students. Parental involvement and understanding of the issues related to this transition will help support young adolescents at this critical time. When parents are involved, students achieve more, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or parents' education levels (Cotton & Wikelund, 2001). This article will explore a transition program model used at Simle Middle School that involves parents and is based on the needs and concerns of young adolescents. Simle Middle School houses students in grades seven, eight, and nine with an enrollment of about 750 students. It is one of three middle schools in the community and serves students from six feeder elementary schools.

IDENTIFYING STUDENT CONCERNS

While it is important to address the typical transition concerns of finding your way around the new school, understanding new rules, and dealing with lockers, we must also identify the developmental concerns that many adolescents are grappling with during this transition. Many transition programs address academic and procedural issues associated with the transition and fail to address the social and emotional issues that cause student anxiety about the transition. A study by Diemert (1992) found that half of the concerns addressed by both boys and girls in the transition were social issues and the remainder of those identified were a mix of academic and procedural issues. This highlights the need to include social and emotional issues when planning transition programs.

For the purpose of an initial orientation based on student identified transition concerns, the assistant principal developed a survey to identify issues that were of greatest concern to adolescents during this transition (Figure 1). The survey items were developed through a literature review. The survey was reviewed and refined with the assistance of a small group of students in their first year in middle



school. Incoming students were asked to indicate their level of concern by circling the response for very concerned, somewhat concerned, not concerned. The surveys were anonymous, with students indicating only if they were male or female and the name of the elementary school they attended.

Figure 1
Student Concerns Survey

Elementary School _____ Boy _____ Girl _____
(Check one)

You can help us make it easier for you as you enter middle school by letting us know your concerns about entering middle school next fall. We will talk about the issues that concern you the most at our January orientation meetings. Please circle a response for each item.

1 = Not Concerned

2 = Somewhat Concerned

3 = Very Concerned

How I look	1	2	3
Being made fun of	1	2	3
Joining clubs and activities	1	2	3
Being sent to principal's office	1	2	3
Being picked on	1	2	3
Changing in front of others in PE	1	2	3
Taking showers in PE	1	2	3
Going out for athletics	1	2	3
Drugs/alcohol	1	2	3
Failing grades	1	2	3
Getting along with older students	1	2	3
Getting lost	1	2	3
Finding the restrooms	1	2	3
Getting to class on time	1	2	3
Giving a presentation in class	1	2	3
Work will be too hard	1	2	3
Homework assignments	1	2	3
Keeping up with assignments	1	2	3
Knowing what is expected of me	1	2	3
Lockers	1	2	3
Lunchroom	1	2	3
Making friends	1	2	3
Moving from room to room	1	2	3
New rules and routines	1	2	3
Rumors heard about the school	1	2	3
Size of the school	1	2	3
Taking tests	1	2	3
Peer pressure	1	2	3
Smoking	1	2	3



The survey was distributed in early January to the sixth grade classes at the six feeder elementary schools in the middle school attendance area. The sixth grade teachers were asked to have their students complete the surveys and return them to the middle school. The results were compiled for each of the feeder schools and became the basis to prepare for the first student and parent orientation meeting.

In late January each feeder elementary school had a middle school parent and student orientation night. Students and parents were invited to come to the middle school for this meeting, giving them the opportunity to visit the school together for the first time. Having separate orientation nights for each feeder elementary school allowed for smaller groups of parents and students, many of whom were well acquainted with each other through their contacts at elementary school events. This was designed to put students and parents more at ease, because in spite of the new environment, they were attending this session with the same parents and students they were accustomed to seeing at elementary school functions. The unique feature of this orientation session was the separation of students and parents into two different rooms with different orientation program formats.

THE STUDENT ORIENTATION SESSION

As the assistant principal at Simle Middle School, I realized that students and parents rarely asked many questions during our traditional parent and student orientation sessions. Most questions that were asked dealt with policies or curriculum and did little to address the "real" concerns of students. Informal conversations with students in the hall after the traditional orientation programs began to reveal some of the real questions and concerns they had about this transition. As a staff, we believed that we could do a better job of addressing the issues of real concern for the students and the survey became the tool for identifying those concerns.

Figure 2
Miller Elementary Top Ten Concerns List

Rank		Boys	Girls
1	Taking Showers in PE	1	1
2	Giving a Presentation in Class	2	3
3	Changing in Front of Others in PE	6	2
4	Getting to Class on Time	7	4
5	Getting Lost	13	5
6	Failing Grades	3	12
7	Work Will be Too Hard	8	7
8	Taking Tests	4	9
9	Peer Pressure	5	14
10	Being Picked On	14	6

Borrowing a concept from late night comedian David Letterman, we took the results from the student concern survey and developed a "top ten" list of concerns for each feeder elementary school. An example of the list from one of the elementary schools is shown in Figure 2. Talking about the issues on the top ten list became the primary focus for the student portion of the



orientation session. This also presented an opportunity to use current middle school students as peer leaders in the orientation meeting. With the assistance of team leaders, four current seventh grade students, two boys and two girls, were identified to serve as peer leaders and assist with each orientation session. The peer leaders for each session had attended the feeder elementary school that would be represented that evening so they would be familiar to the students attending the session. These peer leaders met with the assistant principal to prepare for the orientation. They received copies of the orientation agenda and top ten list to help them prepare. They indicated the topics they would be most comfortable talking about with the students and were given responsibilities for those sections of the orientation program.

The evening of the orientation session, the peer leaders greeted parents and students at the doors of the school and helped them find their respective meeting rooms. As the assistant principal, I greeted students in the meeting room and had an opportunity to visit with them informally as they arrived for orientation. The program began with introductions and an overview of middle school. Peer leaders talked about the team structure, advisory programs, and classes that were available. The session concluded with the discussion of the top ten list of concerns. The students were anxious to see the top ten list and the issues discussed for each item served as a springboard for additional questions and concerns raised by the students at the session. As an adult, I was able to talk about what they might experience, but it was clear that the peer leaders' words of wisdom had the greatest impact for the students. They offered advice on academics, dispelled the myths about the school, and shared their personal experiences.

Separating the students from their parents, keeping them in a comfortable peer group, and involving peer leaders from the middle school created an atmosphere during the orientation session in which the elementary students felt comfortable and safe asking the questions that were creating the most anxiety for them during this transition, rather than addressing the issues that adults felt were most important. At the conclusion of the 45-minute orientation session, students were given a map of the school and the peer leaders took them on a tour of the building. They were also given an opportunity to explore the building on their own before reuniting with their parents.

THE PARENT SESSION

While recognizing that the traditional orientation program was not necessarily meeting the developmental needs of students, we recognized the need for the continued involvement of parents in transition activities for their children as they move into the middle school. Maclver (1990) found that schools that actively involve parents in transition articulation activities are more likely to keep parents more actively involved in the education of their child throughout the middle school years.

Parent orientation activities were planned to address the information needs of parents and to lay the foundation for parental involvement at the middle school. Parents received information about the middle school concept and characteristics of its organizational features. The seventh grade team leaders attended the orientation and talked about how teaming benefits parents and students and ways parents can effectively work with teams of teachers to assist their child in this transition. Parents were given information about the school, curriculum, and course registration. They received a map of the school and contact information for key school personnel including administrators, counselors, and school secretaries along with copies of parent newsletters.



A representative of the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) attended each evening session and talked with parents about opportunities to serve on the council or to volunteer in many of the parent- and school- sponsored activities that were organized or supported by the Parent Advisory Council. Just as with the student orientation, the PAC representative identified to speak at each session was a parent whose child had attended the feeder school represented that evening. This helped to personalize the experience for the parents while encouraging them to get involved in supporting the school.

The student top ten list was shared with parents to help them begin to understand the concerns and anxieties their children would be experiencing during this transition. The principal and counselor were able to share information about the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development issues for young adolescents. Sharing these concerns with parents not only helped them understand the issues their children were experiencing, but opened the door for discussion at home about dealing with these concerns.

Parents concluded their 45-minute session with a tour of the school facilities conducted by the team leaders. Administrators and counselors were available to answer any additional questions parents had about the school and the programs. Parents and students were reunited in the school commons area. It was exciting to see students reporting to their parents about what they had learned about the school and talking about the potential opportunities for classes and activities.

ADDITIONAL ORIENTATION SESSIONS

While this opening orientation program was viewed as very successful by parents and students in meeting their needs, we also recognized that successful transition programs involve many activities over a period of time. Effective transition programs include several activities beginning long before the students actually enter the middle school. The opening activity of our orientation program was followed by a refocusing of the elements of our previous transition program.

Following the orientation night, copies of the results of the survey and the top ten list were distributed to the sixth grade classroom teachers and to the counselors at the feeder elementary schools. Along with this information was a cover letter about our orientation meeting and a copy of the materials distributed at the meeting. These teachers and counselors became aware of the issues and concerns of the students as they worked with them during the remainder of the school year. Many of the teachers and counselors commented favorably that by receiving this information, they were better prepared to address the concerns of their students and parents.

In mid-February the school counselor visited the sixth grade classrooms in each of the feeder schools. The purpose of this visit was to provide additional orientation information and to begin the registration process for the next school year. The counselor also brought eighth grade peer helpers along to talk about classes and other school issues. In the past this had been the first formal orientation activity for the middle school transition. Counselors commented on the lower anxiety level of the students during this visit the first year the new orientation system was in place. Student questions and concerns were more focused on registration and academic issues during this visit following our earlier orientation that addressed student anxieties.



Future orientation activities included a visit to the school during the academic day with an opportunity to shadow a current student for a portion of the day and a summer orientation session for parents and students. A staggered start was implemented for the first day of school with new seventh graders coming earlier than the returning students to give them an opportunity to get acclimated to the new surroundings with fewer students in the building.

Issues identified by the students as concerns through the survey instrument were used as the basis for seventh grade interdisciplinary teams in planning their advisory programs at the beginning of the school year. These items can become the basis for formal structured activities such as effective use of a planner to manage homework and class assignments to less structured discussions, role plays, or dialogues addressing student concerns about dealing with peer pressure.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PLANNING TRANSITION PROGRAMS

1. Establish a program that involves administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and students. The involvement of current middle school students in the orientation program was a critical link for incoming students to interact with peers who have experienced this transition. Their recent real-life experiences provided incoming students a glimpse of what middle school is like from the perspective of their peers and offered the middle school students an opportunity to show their leadership skills and mentor these new students.
2. Establish a timeline and protocol that can easily be replicated and updated each year with little additional planning. This program has become the expected standard for transition activities at this school. Parents and students have come to expect these activities; feeder schools and sixth grade teachers look forward to the survey and the results. Students attending the orientation ask how they can become peer leaders for the orientation program next school year. Parents who have had more than one child make this transition return for the transition program and become resources for parents who are experiencing their first child's transition to middle school.
3. Involve parents in transition activities and use these opportunities to encourage them to get involved and remain involved in their child's school. Provide information about how they can support their child in school and how they may actively get involved in volunteer opportunities at the school. Welcome them into your school community and give them ideas for becoming involved in the school. They can become your best ambassadors for your school and program. Provide them with information about the school, phone numbers, lunch information, school Web sites, and other practical information.
4. Plan multiple events during orientation that support parents and students before, during, and after they enter the school. Orientation programs help students and parents plan for the transition and manage the actual transition. It is important to remember that transition does not end when the students arrive the first day of the school term. Plan opportunities for students to continue addressing their transition concerns through school-wide assemblies and advisory programs. Offer parent education programs and back-to-school nights early in the school year to address ongoing concerns as students move through the transition stages.



Turning Points 2000 (Jackson & Davis, 2000) makes a strong case that school personalization and connecting students to adults contributes significantly to student success and this connection and personalization must begin before the new middle school students enter the middle school. How well young adolescents cope with the changes that take place during this time appears to rely upon the support of the environment around them. "It is important to remember that it is the student that is experiencing this transition and as a result, the transition activities should be planned and designed by school personnel to meet the needs of those students entering our schools" (Gutheinz-Pierce & Whooley, 1995 p. 61). This initial orientation program based on student concerns attempts to provide a personalized program that meets the perceived needs of adolescents as they make the transition to middle school and as a result sets the stage for their social, emotional, and academic success in this new arena.

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