

## Strategies to Support General Student Transitions

Students often need additional support from adults in their lives when they experience a transition. Some transitions that most students experience include going from preschool to elementary school, elementary school to middle school, and middle school to high school. These transitions can be quite difficult, but also provide opportunities for social, emotional, academic, and behavioral growth. Students may struggle or flourish throughout the transition process. This resource includes strategies you can use to help support students transitioning from preschool to elementary school, elementary school to middle school, or middle school to high school.

### Preschool to Kindergarten Transitions

Kindergarten often marks the beginning of formal education for students. Children are expected to sit quietly for extended periods of time, learn to read and write, begin formal math instruction, and follow directions that may differ from the expectations in their home. Academic achievement in kindergarten is related to transition activities teachers complete with their students; the more transitional practices a teacher infuses into his or her classroom, the higher student academic achievement scores are likely to be. Parent involvement also contributes to higher academic achievement during this transition (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). There are several transitional practices that you may consider suggesting or implementing to aid students in this transition including (Schulting et al., 2005):

- Sending information about the kindergarten program home to parents;
- Shortening school days at the beginning of the school year;
- Arranging a parent and child visit to the kindergarten classroom prior to the start of the school year;
- Conducting teacher and paraprofessional visits to student homes at the beginning of the school year; and
- Providing parents an orientation prior to the school year.

Consider this example of successful transition practices. Prior to Aiden Wagner starting kindergarten in Virginia, his preschool class visited the school the students would be attending in kindergarten. An orientation for the students and their families was structured based on the classroom and teacher assignments. They even practiced the daily morning meeting that Aiden's teacher would be implementing for the next year. In addition, the kindergarten teacher sent home a packet with each child explaining the rules and procedures in kindergarten. These transition practices made Aiden excited about starting kindergarten and his parents comfortable with dropping him off in a new setting.

Remember, when students and their parents receive transitional support, they are able to spend more energy on educational attainment and academic achievement. Consider implementing as many transitional practices into your classroom or school as possible.

### Elementary School to Middle School Transitions

Students commonly move from elementary school to middle school at the completion of fifth grade; however, schools may have different transition milestones. During this transition, students are frequently given increased responsibilities including independent schedules, lockers, and changing for gym class; they are concerned about getting to class on time, finding their lockers, not getting lost, not getting teased or bullied, being safe, and the possibility of failing. After the transition, students say courses are more difficult, teachers are stricter, and it is more difficult to make friends (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000). At this time, students report a decrease in the quality of school environment as well as decreased academic, personal, and interpersonal functioning (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Students are disciplined more frequently for class disturbances and failing to follow the rules, indicating they are more likely to struggle with the social rather than the procedural aspects of middle school (Theriot & Dupper, 2010).

Although students have a number of concerns coming into middle school, they are also equally excited about making new friends and choosing classes (Akos & Galassi, 2004). There are a variety of transitional practices school personnel can engage in to support the transition to middle school including (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000):

- Evaluating and possibly redesigning current transition activities;
- Visiting the elementary schools and meeting with students;
- Developing introduction to middle school programs;
- Meeting with parents at elementary schools prior to the transition;
- Identifying ways to ensure students and parents are comfortable in their new setting; and
- Holding an open house for incoming students, or contacting parents and students early.

Additionally, schools can support students during the summer before the transition by (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000):

- Providing information about the start of school;
- Assigning students to teachers or teams before the end of the previous year;
- Establishing a buddy system with older students; or
- Providing time for students and parents to meet with teachers, counselors, or administrators.

During the school year schools can address concerns over logistics such as opening lockers and finding classrooms, provide opportunities for parents to support their students, provide classroom guidance lessons, establish first-year support groups, schedule time for counselors and administrators to visit classrooms, or work with teachers and students to evaluate the effectiveness of transition activities (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

Consider this example of successful transition practices to aid in the transition from elementary school to middle school. Jackson Daniels transitioned into middle school while his family lived in California. His older stepsister, Sofia did not engage in any support programs prior to beginning middle school and she struggled through the change. Because of this, Jackson's parents were excited to learn about the transition practices Jackson's school offered. His parents attended the open house and the middle school teams met separately to talk about the specific rules and procedures they would have that year. The Eagle Team, which Jackson would be a part of, decided they would implement a buddy system in the fall. Jackson was paired with another incoming sixth grader from another elementary school. They had many of the same classes and the same lunch schedule. Jackson and his parents also met with the Gifted Individualized Education Program coordinator to talk about the specific services he would receive in the middle school.

### **Middle School to High School Transitions**

Students transitioning to high school are primarily concerned about academic performance. They are equally excited about making new friends (Akos & Galassi, 2004). To aid in this transition school personnel can implement several transitional practices including (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982):

- Restructuring classes so students have similar classmates across courses; and
- Providing opportunities for students to interact with teachers and other school personnel on a counseling level.

Consider this example of transition practices for middle school to high school transitions. When Jada Williams transitioned to high school, she and her family lived in Italy. The DoDEA high school had an orientation and invited all of the students and families. For the first three days of school, only the ninth graders attended the school to get used to their schedules, lockers, and teachers. After meeting all of her teachers, successfully navigating the school for three days, and opening her locker a few times, Jada felt much more comfortable in high school. When all of the upperclassmen arrived, she felt more confident and made friends with a few sophomores in her art class.

## 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. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42732584>
- Anderson, L. W., Jacobs, J., Schramm, S., & Splittgerber, F. (2000). School transitions: beginning of the end or a new beginning? *International Journal of Educational Research, 33*(4), 325-339. doi:10.1016/s0883-0355(00)00020-3
- Barber, B. K., & Olsen, J. A. (2004). Assessing the transitions to middle and high school. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*(1), 3-30. doi:10.1177/0743558403258113
- Felner, R. D., Ginter, M., & Primavera, J. (1982). Primary prevention during school transitions: Social support and environmental structure. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 10*(3), 277-290. doi:10.1007/bf00896495
- Schulting, A. B., Malone, P. S., & Dodge, K. A. (2005). The effect of school-based kindergarten transition policies and practices on child academic outcomes. *Developmental Psychology, 41*(6), 860-871. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.41.6.860
- Shoffner, M. F., & Williamson, R. D. (2000). Facilitating student transitions into middle school. *Middle School Journal, 31*(4), 47-52. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23043242>
- Theriot, M. T., & Dupper, D. R. (2010). Student discipline problems and the transition from elementary to middle school. *Education and Urban Society, 42*(2), 205-222. doi:10.1177/0013124509349583