Bridging the Gap for Students at Risk of School Failure:
A Social Work-Initiated Middle to High School Transition Program

Elementary, middle, and high schools often become separate islands for children as they move toward their high school diploma. Facing different evaluation criteria, perceived differences in student needs, and competition for scarce resources, schools targeting different age groups are seldom encouraged to work together. As students move from elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school, they face the sometimes difficult tasks of dealing with a greater number of peers, interacting with adults in authority, and balancing their competing needs for social support and increased autonomy (Compas & Wagner, 1991). When students have difficulty with these transitions, schools often provide additional support through school social workers or special programs to enhance school success. As the transition to high school approaches, the stakes become higher as students begin to connect school success or failure with perceived life chances (Hurrelman, Engel, Holler, & Nordlohe, 1988). For students who already have had difficulty negotiating these changes at the middle school level, high school success may seem impossible.

The change from middle to high school is seen by many as particularly salient (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992; Zsiray, 1996). Pantle (1992) reported that grades and attendance often decline in the ninth grade, which leads to increased failure rates. In addition, three of four students reported that ninth grade was academically much more difficult, and one of five reported increased feelings of isolation during the ninth grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Although some literature exists on middle to high school transition programs for all students graduating from middle school, only a few reports could be found on ninth-grade transition programs that addressed the specific concerns of students labeled at risk of school failure.

To help students experiencing school failure, many schools have incorporated programs that provide students with extra academic and personal support. These programs often
include tutoring, individual counseling, advocacy, and efforts to increase parental involvement. Although empirical evaluations are scarce, many programs report seeing changes in student performance and attitudes as a result of their efforts (Manning & Baruth, 1995; Uroff & Greene, 1991). However, connections between middle and high school programs are rare, meaning that when students leave the middle school environment, the extra support they had been receiving may come to an end until a crisis presents itself in high school. This article describes the Culbreth Middle School Communities-In-Schools High School Transition Initiative, a program designed to make connections between a supportive middle school program for at-risk students and the high school environment. Recommendations for replication and evaluation are also presented.

Theoretical Foundations

Hirschi’s (1969) social bonding theory provides a foundation for considering the potential positive effect of a high school transition program. Hirschi described a bond as an individual’s connection to society. This bond is formed by four processes: (1) attachment (a student’s level of caring about others); (2) commitment (the degree to which a student is cognitively invested in prosocial activities); (3) involvement (the amount of time a student spends in prosocial activities); and (4) belief (the sense that students care that their behavior should be morally right). The theory posits that the stronger each of these elements is the stronger the others are, thus creating a firm connection between individuals and society. For adolescents, the hope is that connections exist with major socializing aspects of the culture: school, parents, and prosocial peers (Hirschi, 1969). For students at risk of school failure, a strong connection to school is already threatened. A student may have little attachment to teachers who are perceived as uncaring, lack commitment to studies perceived as irrelevant, be uninvolved in extracurricular activities, and not see investment in school as a reflection of character. Programs that seek to strengthen these elements during a student’s middle school years may be undermined by the student’s graduation to high school. With its unfamiliarity and increased demands, the high school transition may threaten the positive changes made at the middle school level. Research suggests that patterns of achievement throughout the early adolescent years can predict school achievement in the 12th grade (Petersen, Ebata, & Graber, 1987). These findings highlight the importance of helping students maintain new patterns of school behavior throughout the transition to high school.

Linkages or mesosystems in an individual’s life also are important in ecological theory. (Garbarino, 1992). If students at risk of school failure and their parents have begun to experience school as a supportive place during the middle school years, maintaining this perception should be an important goal for intervention programs. In addition, the complementary mesosystem created by parental engagement with their child’s school provides for consistent expectations. Expanding this linkage to include the new high school environment would seem to be a highly effective intervention for students at risk of school failure.
Transition to High School Initiative

In February 1998 an MSW intern placed in a middle school Community-In-Schools (CIS) program, began discussing the upcoming move to high school with the 11 eighth-grade students participating in the program. Communities-In-Schools is the nation’s largest stay-in-school network. At this middle school, CIS students spent one class period each day with a CIS teacher. During this time they received tutoring and supportive counseling and participated in enrichment activities. The program worked extensively with the students’ parents, in many cases creating the first positive relationship parents had experienced with school personnel. The MSW intern was involved with all aspects of the program and worked closely with the school social worker.

In his conversations with the students, the intern discovered that students had significant concerns about moving to the high school. They worried about fights in the high school, being around students who were physically larger than they were, how to become involved in high school sports, and how difficult the classes would be. In response, the students were asked if they would be interested in cocreating the Middle School Transition Initiative, and all agreed. The students and the intern identified three program goals: (1) to introduce students to the high school environment while they had the support of their current teachers, peers, and counselors; (2) to give their parents a chance to discuss their children’s transition to high school in a small group; and (3) to begin to help the students think about career choices and the role of school in those choices. In addition, the students decided to participate in a “ropes” course—an activity that the staff felt would promote group cohesion so that the group might continue to support one another as they move through their high school years. A ropes course is a series of team building exercises that require interpersonal cooperation to accomplish physically challenging activities.

These activities took place during the last six weeks of the school year. One day each week was set aside for transition program activities. Each “transition day” included a presentation by a different professional. The students asked to hear from kindergarten teachers, physicians, professional athletes, and high school coaches. These requests were met with the exception of the professional athlete. Because the students in this program were disproportionately from ethnic minority groups, efforts were made to have individuals of color represent the various professions. Presenters focused on the educational requirements needed to enter each profession and how the students’ current studies would be important to future success.

The students spent one morning at the high school they would attend the next fall. Each was assigned a high school student mentor, who took them on a tour of the school and to a class with them. Students also met with the ninth-grade principal and guidance counselor during a special reception held for these at-risk eighth graders. Success strategies for high school were discussed with the students, and they were given an opportunity to ask questions and make comments about what they had heard. Most of the eighth graders were interested in high school sports; accordingly, time was scheduled to meet...
with a varsity coach and some student athletes. Discussion centered on the requirements for participation in high school athletics and other types of clubs and activities. Strategies for managing extracurricular activities and maintaining the grades necessary to continue participating were stressed.

An important piece of the program was “parents’ night,” an experience that created an important linkage between the families of these at-risk students and the high school administrators. The event was held at the middle school and was attended by parents, the ninth grade principal, as well as middle school teachers and administrators. Many parents of color in this district are suspicious of the district’s commitment to their children’s academic success. After a brief presentation, a frank discussion about these issues took place. Parents discussed concerns about racial discrimination, student safety, and methods to work constructively with their children’s high school teachers. Administrators and teachers in the district mirror the concerns of parents. Comments like, “If only middle school teachers did a better job, minority students would be more successful in the high school” or “We do our part in the middle school and everything falls apart when the students move on to high school” are common. The transition program and the parent’s discussion group in particular created an opportunity for increased dialogue and collaboration between middle and high school staff.

Finally, the ropes course provided an opportunity for the students to develop a group identity. The course was provided for a reduced fee by the physical education department of a local university. Students spent the afternoon engaged in physically challenging activities that required cooperation and trust. Newspaper reporters photographed the event and interviewed the students.

Results
Everyone involved with the Culbreth Communities-In-Schools High School Transition Initiative expressed satisfaction with the program. Students were highly invested as evidenced by their attendance, active participation, and willingness to plan the program. Plans are in place to continue and expand the transition program. Some possibilities include: enhancing the peer-mentoring component to allow for an on-going relationship to develop between the eighth graders and successful high school students; broadening the types of careers represented in addition to careers in which the students are interested to expand the students’ ideas about what types of work opportunities exist; incorporating discussions about pregnancy prevention, handling racial conflict, and substance abuse prevention; and increasing work with parents on how to support their children in high school.

Recommendations for Future Efforts
Because of the ecological perspective unique to social work, an intervention of this type is ideally implemented by school social workers. School social workers have the training to build the collaborative relationships among members of different parts of a system. They know that building trust between parents and school personnel can enhance a student’s educational experience significantly. This effort was conceptualized and implemented by a social
work student, his faculty field supervisor, and the school social worker. A student’s presence may motivate school administrators to try something new in deference to the student’s learning needs. However, a transition program can be implemented whether or not a student is present. The key factor in the success of this initiative was the trust that had developed between the school social worker, the students, the CIS staff, and the school principal. In addition, the program was not imposed on the school: All had concerns about how the students were making the transition to high school without extra support.

The transition program is an outgrowth of an on-going collaboration between a school of social work and a school district interested in meeting the needs of at-risk students. The faculty supervisor has been collaborating with both the school district and the CIS program for several years and advocated for a student intern to be placed in the program. It appears that a key to creating and testing innovative practice approaches is the establishment of an on-going relationship with an agency or, in this case, a school district (Chapman & Richman, 1998). The relationship spawns the trust needed to try something new.

This program was planned and implemented quickly, giving little time for reflection or evaluation. Others seeking to build on the ideas presented here would be well-served to include a detailed evaluation related to the goals of the intervention. In addition, it would be helpful to follow students over time to see if they perceive that the intervention made a positive difference for them in the high school environment.

The middle to high school transition may be a critical intervention point for school social workers. When students have been receiving additional support in one environment, it is crucial that social workers consider the effect of what happens when that support is withdrawn. A high school transition program is one way to link students and their parents with supportive others to ensure that gains made in middle school will not be lost in high school.

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References


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