Developing an Effective Transition Program for Students Entering Middle School or High School

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Making a transition to a new school causes anxiety in students and can challenge the coping skills of many adolescents, especially those at risk. Typically the move to a new school includes changes in school climate and size, peer relationships, academic expectations, and degree of departmentalization among peers. When adolescents move into middle school or high school, the anxiety is complicated further by other normative changes such as puberty, social and emotional development, the growing importance of peer relationships, and the development of higher order cognitive skills. Students who experience the stresses of numerous changes often have lower grades and decreased academic motivation, and they eventually drop out of school. Schools can prepare students for the transitions by becoming aware of students' needs and by taking a proactive role in addressing those needs.

The transitions into middle school and high school each pose particular challenges to students. Weldy (1995) observes that the transition to middle school is especially unique because the organization of elementary schools and middle schools is so different. Students move from one primary teacher to a departmental program in a larger school with several teachers, a complex schedule, more students, and more involved rules and policies.

Although the transition from middle school to high school often is given less attention than that from elementary school to middle school, the risks are often more notable. The Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta, GA, documents many of the concerns teachers and administrators have about the transition to ninth grade. For example, they found that:

- More students fail ninth grade than any other grade of school.
- Poor and minority students are twice as likely as others to be retained.
- Among fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds who struggle with basic reading and mathematics skills, 20 percent drop out of school within two years.
- A study of fifty-six Georgia and Florida high schools found that schools with extensive transition programs had significantly lower failure and dropout rates than those schools that did not offer comprehensive programs (Bottoms 2002).

Clearly, students making the transition into middle or high school face challenges that may derail their school careers. Schools can do a better job of preparing students for the challenges ahead. This article reviews the developmental needs and challenges of young adolescents and the concerns that they and their parents have about moving into a new school. Then we consider how transition programs can address the characteristics of effective transition programs that have been identified in the literature and present activities that may help schools provide effective transition programs that meet the needs and concerns of students and their parents.

Developmental Needs and Challenges Facing Students Entering Middle School and High School

Eccles and Wigfield (1997) documented the developmental issues students face as they transition to middle or junior high school and noted that few developmental periods have as many changes in as many areas

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as early adolescence. At this age, students experience the hormonal and physical changes associated with puberty. With girls experiencing pubertal changes approximately eighteen months earlier than boys, students of the same chronological age are at different points physically and socially, complicating social interactions in the middle grades (Eccles and Wigfield). In addition, students’ cognitive abilities take a great leap during these years as students grow in their ability to think abstractly and hypothetically.

Eccles and Wigfield (1997) also noted that during early adolescence the importance of peer-related activities, peer acceptance, and physical appearance increases. Cliques become especially prominent, and students engage in gossip, teasing, and bullying to maintain social status. The importance of social acceptance also relates to an increase in peer conformity. Perhaps most distressing is the decline in many students’ intrinsic motivation and academic self-concept, interest in school, and grades.

Eccles and Wigfield (1997) suggested that the motivational problems seen during the transition to middle or junior high school may be a result of the change in the school environment. They summarized research that suggested the fit, or rather the lack of fit, between the needs of adolescents and the nature of the middle school environment could account for the declines seen in motivation. They argued that at a time when adolescents have a heightened self-consciousness, schools emphasize competition and social comparison, especially with regard to academic grades. Schools reduce opportunities for student decision making as students’ desires for autonomy are growing. While students’ higher-level thinking skills are developing, teachers emphasize lower-level cognitive strategies; in a final contradiction, the school structure disrupts peer relationships at a time when teens are especially concerned with those relationships (Eccles and Wigfield). When seen in this light, the declines in achievement motivation and interest in school seem understandable, and many of the contributing factors can be addressed.

Developmentally, incoming middle school students are coping with many issues. Making an easy, worry-free transition that assists them in coping with some of these changes can help students feel that their new school cares about them and their successes.

Many of the developmental tasks begun in middle school culminate in high school. With regard to physical maturation, late-maturing boys enter puberty, and many of the pubertal changes are completed for other students. Students need to adjust to a new physical self (Potter et al. 2001). Along with physical maturity comes new sexual concerns, and high school students, in particular, need to learn to manage their sexuality and adopt a personal value system (Potter et al.). For most high school students, cognitive advancements such as abstract thinking become increasingly generalized and consolidated. Students whose cognitive skills do not develop as quickly as the norm may become frustrated as academic demands increase (Potter et al. 2001).

During high school, students also become more autonomous and self-reliant. They depend less on parents and can be influenced more by peers. In fact, peer conformity has been found to peak at ninth grade. Relationships with peers expand and more intimate friendships are established (Newman et al. 2000). In addition, students begin the search for identity and explore and experiment with different possibilities.

The developmental changes and challenges facing students beginning middle school or ninth grade include advances in cognition, concerns about physical and sexual changes, making and keeping friends, and desires for more autonomy. Often the school environment exacerbates adolescents’ concerns. An effective transition process is sensitive to these changes and supports students and parents as they deal with them.

**Concerns of Students and Parents about Moving into the Next Level of Schooling**

Students and parents alike have many fears about moving to the next level of schooling, as each subsequent level seems to be more impersonal and intimidating. The concerns that students raise about the transition from elementary to middle school come from numerous sources, including ones not controlled by the school. For example, Arowosafe and Irvin (1992) found that incoming middle school students often heard parents, peers, and siblings express concerns about fighting and safety at the new school.

The concerns that preteens have about entering middle school can be grouped into three categories: academic, procedural, and social. Academic concerns deal with schoolwork and teacher expectations, such as having a tough teacher or teachers who expect too much; having harder schoolwork (Elias 2001); having too much homework (Elias; Odegaard and Heath 1992); having more responsibility for their work (Allen 2001); and knowing how to get extra help from the teachers (Diermant 1992). Students want to be successful academically.

Procedural concerns are about day-to-day worries about getting around the school, including knowing travel patterns, finding the way to classes, getting to class on time, and finding the lunchroom and restrooms (Diermant 1992; Odegaard and Heath 1992; Schumacher 1998). Other student concerns are about finding their locker or forgetting the locker combination (Allen 2001; Elias 2001). Additional concerns center around being prepared for class, and including having the right books and supplies (Diermant; Elias...
Schumacher). Some worry about getting on the right bus to go home (Schumacher). Finally, students worry about the rules in the new school, including knowing the school rules and consequences for breaking them, and how they are expected to behave in each class (Diemert). Some procedural concerns are short lived, and others can continue through the fall semester.

Social concerns deal with peer and teacher relationships, especially making new friends and getting along with teachers. With regard to friends, students worry about not seeing friends from elementary school (Elias 2001), knowing how to make new friends (Diemert; Elias), not being in the “in group,” and dating (Elias). With regard to teacher relationships, students worry about getting along with teachers (Elias) and knowing a teacher they could go to if they were confused about something (Diemert). Some concerns also center around safety issues, including having possessions stolen, being bothered by older students, and peer pressure to drink, use drugs, and/or smoke (Elias). They also worry about being safe, getting into fights and knowing what to do in a fight situation (Elias; Diemert; Odgaard and Heath 1992; Schumacher 1998). Students need to know who to talk to if there is a problem with another student (Diemert).

Diemert’s (1992) research found that one strength of transition programs was that students generally felt that their procedural concerns were satisfactorily addressed. In contrast, a weakness of most programs was that students felt that their social concerns were not receiving enough attention. She noted that friendship took on a special significance in the middle grades: students were more concerned about making friends and dealing with peer rejection. Diemert also pointed out that students who have the support of a best friend or social group were more successful in the transition than students who did not. Incoming middle school students also worried about the ramifications of less contact with teachers because of departmentalization, which would enable teachers to spend less time with individual students, and more time with groups. In addition, middle school teachers did not know the students as well as the students’ elementary teachers did. Diemert discussed research that found that teachers who engage themselves with students and also teach students the skills to be autonomous were more successful with this age group.

As students moved into high school, the concerns of middle school reappeared in somewhat different forms. Students typically reported being both excited and scared. Their worries and fears continued to center around academic, procedural, and social concerns. From an academic perspective, both students and parents wanted to know what high school would be like, and they wanted to understand high school programs, choose the right courses, and understand the long-term implications of their choices (Mizelle and Mullins 1997). Students moving into high school found that there were more assignments and more distractions; they worried about the expectations of the teachers, amount and nature of homework, taking tests, and getting good grades (Potter et al. 2001).

From a social perspective, high school is more anonymous than middle school. Being in the right group, making friends, getting along with older students, and dealing with bullies have renewed concern (Potter et al. 2001). Ninth graders also worried about joining clubs and sports, liking their teachers, and dressing up or taking a shower in physical education (Potter et al.).

Moving into a new high school raised similar procedural concerns as moving into middle school, including finding classes, having enough time to get to classes or to eat lunch, and opening their locker (Potter et al. 2001). High school students were also concerned about knowing the school and classroom rules, and the procedures and consequences for breaking them (Mizelle and Mullins 1997; Potter et al.).

The large, bureaucratic nature of most high schools often is not supportive of incoming ninth graders with weak social and academic preparation (Letgers and Kerr 2000). Furthermore, Letgers and Kerr directly linked academic failure during the transition to high school to the probability of dropping out. Low-income minority youth often showed declines in academic motivation and performance (Newman, Myers et al. 2002).

The impact of an impersonal bureaucracy on the successful transition to high school was also evident in a study by Newman, Lohman et al. (2000) and Newman, Myers et al. (2002). Eighth grade students in the Young Scholars Program (YSP) of Ohio State University perceived teachers in high school as expecting them to be more mature and responsible and as needing less monitoring of schoolwork (Newman, Lohman et al. 2000). In a subsequent study, the students also reported that high school was harder than eighth grade and that some teachers were unapproachable, too busy, and belittling (Newman, Myers et al. 2002). In fact, all of the YSP students who were struggling in ninth grade made negative comments about their teachers. Some students perceived this negatively, as though the teachers did not care about them, and other students were motivated by the high expectations.

Mizelle and Mullins (1997) noted that successful high school transition programs also brought together middle and high school teachers, counselors, and administrators to create a mutual understanding about the respective programs, courses, and requirements. For example, ninth graders reported that they would have been better prepared for high school had their middle school teachers challenged them more, held
them responsible for their learning, and taught them strategies to learn on their own.

Effective transition programs address the academic and procedural concerns of students, as well as their very real social concerns. Academically, students worry about increased academic expectations and look for ways to be successful. Procedurally, they also worry about negotiating the rules and environment at the new school. And socially, they worry about having friends and getting along with peers and teachers. While schools generally understand the need to address academic and procedural concerns, they seem to ignore the social concerns. However, social goals of students will not go away, and if the schools do not address these social needs, students will put energy into dealing with those issues. Ultimately, concerns about social goals will detract from the academic focus of students.

**Elements of Effective Transition Programs**

Effective transition programs typically are defined as ones that improve student attendance, achievement, and retention. To address the needs of the various constituencies, research suggests that effective transition programs have five or more diversified activities (MacIver 1990). The most common activities are bringing the incoming students to visit the new school, hosting meetings with administrators of both exiting and receiving schools to discuss programs and articulation, and having counselors from both levels meet. Typically schools with large numbers of poor or at-risk students have fewer activities (MacIver). However, Letgers and Kerr (2001) found that when urban schools made a concerted effort to improve the transition to ninth grade, including implementing a “school within a school” for ninth graders, the effectiveness was clear—there was an increase in promotion rates, a reduction in the number of dropouts, and increases in pass rates for the functional math test given by the state.

Second, the most effective transition programs are comprehensive and target activities to students, parents, and teachers (Smith 1997; Rice 2001). Students and parents have concerns about the academic environment and social community of the new school, as well as school procedures. All of these should be addressed to ease the fears about transition. Because they are an important support system for students, teachers and parents need to be knowledgeable as well. The research suggests that typically the social concerns of students are not well addressed in transition programs (Diemert 1992). In addition, the research suggests that transition activities should span the spring and summer before entry into the new school and continue during the fall (Arowosafe and Irvin 1992; Rice). Typically, transition programs end as soon as school starts. The literature suggests that much can be done to support students during the first quarter, and perhaps throughout the ninth grade, for at-risk students (Diemert 1992).

Third, Bottoms (2002) noted that an effective transition system involved continuous planning among teams of teachers and school leaders. He suggested that communication between the two levels of schools should focus on the rising expectations for students, the necessary amount of academic preparation, and the high expectations and additional help that low-performing students may require to meet the standards. Furthermore, as the transition plan is developed, it needs to be implemented with the most receptive teachers. The transition committee should meet regularly to review, evaluate, and revise the program.

Fourth, effective transition programs attend to those students who are likely to have greatest difficulty with systemic transitions: girls, students with behavior problems, low achievers, and minority, or low socioeconomic status (SES) students (Anderson et al. 2000). Girls had difficulty primarily because they place greater importance on peer relationships which prove to be disruptive during transitions. They also have a greater drop in self-esteem during a transition than boys (Anderson et al. 2000).

Students with prior problem behaviors have difficulty successfully negotiating transitions because typically they do not have the social skills to adjust successfully to the new environment and continue getting in trouble.

Of the four groups, students who had the greatest difficulty were those who were not academically prepared. Students with GPAs in the lowest quartile were most at risk for continued low achievement and eventual dropping out, and low-SES minority students, especially boys, were at-risk for dropping out. We speculate that part of the problem for low-SES minority students is the lack of parental support.

Anderson et al. (2000) suggested that students who were not adequately prepared prior to the transition would have difficulty making the transition. They identified four dimensions of preparedness: academic success, independent and industrious work habits, conformity to adult standards, and coping mechanisms for such activities as keeping track of assignments and resolving conflicts. How well prepared students were would determine the type and extent of support they would need during transition. The authors maintained that in general students needed support from parents, teachers, and peers for a successful transition. That support needed to be “informational, tangible (e.g., provision of resources or services), emotional, and social (e.g., having friends in the same school)” (Anderson et al., 331).

During the transition process, Anderson et al. (2000) suggested that administrators look for indicators that students were not transitioning successfully: student grades, appropriateness of classroom behavior, hostile or inappropriate relationships with peers, and engage-
ment in academic work were good indicators. As Anderson et al. noted, students who were not well prepared for the transition would need more supports, and students with academic deficiencies would need support such as a summer program, assignment to the strongest teachers, tutors, and after-school homework assistance. Students with behavior problems might need counseling or social support from peers.

Newman, Lohman et al. (2000) interviewed low-income, urban, academically promising students, some of whom were considered high performers and some who were low performers when they entered high school. They found that the low performers had a more narrow range of support people; typically, they did not have parents who provided the monitoring and encouragement needed. These students looked to school personnel, especially teachers, to fill the void. High performers typically also had peers who supported their academic goals, whereas low performers seemed to become caught up in social goals and worried more about peer relationships.

Newman, Lohman et al. (2000) also noted that the challenges that urban students face often went beyond what typical teens might encounter. The challenges included both more universal concerns about friends, peer pressure, and academics, and issues particular to their community, such as gangs or neighborhood violence, and unique personal problems like the death of a family member or friend, and other family problems. The transition support systems should be adaptable to address a wide range of needs. These students also have to know that an adult at the school is committed to helping them be successful. “If high schools are serious about student achievement, they need to make sure that every student has at least one important adult who is committed to his or her academic success and knows how to support the child’s learning” (Newman, Lohman et al., 411).

In sum, students who were prepared academically had independent and industrious work habits, conformed to adult standards, and had coping mechanisms for keeping track of assignments and resolving conflicts were most likely to make a successful transition (Anderson et al. 2000). Students not transitioning successfully were students who showed one or more of the following characteristics: little or no academic engagement, dropping grades, inappropriate classroom behavior, or hostile or inappropriate relationships with peers. Urban students also had unique concerns about gangs, violence, or death that should be addressed.

Transition activities can target students for additional help academically, behaviorally, or socially during the spring and summer before the transition and follow up in the fall when they are in the new school. Assuring that every student has an adult in the new school committed to his or her success can often make the difference in whether a student succeeds or not (Newman, Lohman et al. 2000).

**Tasks for the Transition Planning Team**

Successful transition programs depend on “communication, cooperation, consensus, and commitment” (Weldy 1991, 13; 1995, 5). The sending school must communicate about each student-his or her subject area achievement, special needs, and behavior problems. The receiving school needs to communicate to the incoming students and their parents information about its building, programs, services, policies, and expectations. Specific feedback about the effectiveness of programs needs to be shared as well. Cooperation involves joint planning with administrators, counselors, teachers, students, and parents. Consensus needs to be achieved among the key people about what needs to be done and who will be responsible. Finally, Weldy (1991) argued that everyone involved must be committed to follow through on communications and expectations.

The transition planning team, then, needs to be composed of administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and students from both schools. When developing its plan, the transition planning team should consider three dimensions of transition programs: student needs and concerns, timing of activities, and audience.

**Conduct a Needs Assessment**

A needs assessment should be conducted to determine the particular concerns of the transitioning students and their academic needs (Bottoms 2002). In addition, students and teachers at the receiving school should be surveyed to determine weaknesses in students’ preparation and in programs. Some questions to consider include: Who is failing in ninth grade? What courses are they failing? Who is struggling in eighth grade? Who has behavior problems?

**Identify Transition Activities and When They Should Occur**

Transition activities need to address the entire set of academic, developmental, social, and procedural concerns of students (Black 1999; Schumacher 1998). Mizelle and Mullins (1997) noted that because the transition to high school often disrupts social networks, schools need to include transition activities that help incoming students meet others and develop positive relationships. Big sister and big brother programs, spring socials, pen pal programs, and freshman awareness groups, where students discuss common problems, are a few ways high schools can provide social support.

Finally, Anderson et al. (2000) suggested that transition programs should be comprehensive, involving parents and creating a sense of community and belonging in the new school. White-Hood (2001) noted that even at the high school level, parents have important
TABLE 1. Suggested Transition Activities for Academic Challenges Faced by Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue/Concern</th>
<th>Strategy/Intervention</th>
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| Students not understanding scope of work at next level | • In the spring, provide information about academic programs, courses, etc., through school counselors and administrators of visits<sup>a,b</sup>  
• In the spring, invite students to visit school and shadow students at next level<sup>c,d</sup>  
• In the spring and fall, host presentations by teachers at new schools about expectations, homework, responsibilities, etc.<sup>e</sup>  
• In the spring, hold an open house for students and parents to showcase current students and activities—band, choir, art displays, typical math and science lessons, technology demonstrations, etc.<sup>f</sup>  
• In the spring and fall, provide coping skills curriculum: good study skills, organization skills to get homework done, etc.<sup>g</sup>  
• Encourage/require students to attend summer programs<sup>d</sup>  
• Assign weak students to strongest teachers<sup>d</sup>  
• Assign tutors and/or after school assistance<sup>d</sup>  
• Reduce course load for struggling students<sup>e</sup> |
| Assisting weak students                             | Notes. <sup>a</sup>Shoffner and Williamson 2000; <sup>b</sup>Mizelle and Irvin 2000; <sup>c</sup>Mizelle and Mullins 1997; <sup>d</sup>Anderson et al. 2000; <sup>e</sup>Newman et al. 2002 |

TABLE 2. Suggested Transition Activities for Procedural Challenges Faced by Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue/Concern</th>
<th>Strategy/Intervention</th>
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| Introduce school procedures during the spring before entering | • Invite students to visit school and shadow students at next level<sup>b</sup>  
• Host orientation programs: tour new school, classrooms; meet students to learn about life at new school<sup>b,c,d</sup>  
• Provide presentations by students from new school regarding how to be successful, to answer questions, etc.<sup>c,d</sup>  
• Organize visits by middle school guidance counselors and administrators to elementary schools to provide students with specific details about the school and a "typical school day"<sup>a</sup>  
• Work with teachers and students to develop and present an "Introduction to Middle School" program, which can include video, chat groups with current middle school students, and a handbook of typical concerns and coping skills<sup>d</sup> |
| Support following new procedures with incoming students | • A week prior to school beginning, distribute school handbook to each family with phone numbers; teachers identified by grade level, team, and subject; bell schedules; lunch procedures; etc.<sup>f</sup>  
• A week prior to school beginning, invite parents and elementary students to "locker night" to tour school, receive locker and combination to practice, receive schedules, and find classrooms<sup>d</sup>  
• During the first week, be ready to address concerns about logistics, locker organization, finding classes, etc. (e.g., older students can be resources, guides or counselors can visit classes to answer questions)<sup>b</sup>  
• Hold a freshmen-only first day<sup>f</sup>  
• Use student ambassadors to establish personal links<sup>e,f</sup> |
| Notes. <sup>a</sup>Shoffner and Williamson 2000; <sup>b</sup>Mizelle and Irvin 2000; <sup>c</sup>Mizelle and Mullins 1997; <sup>d</sup>McElroy 2000; <sup>e</sup>Schumacher 1998; <sup>f</sup>Allen 2001; <sup>g</sup>Lindsay 1997 |

Ward in their student's education. They can work with their children to resolve developmental issues and serve as mentors and tutors, especially through the transition process. Mac Iver (1990) reported that when parents were involved in transition programs, they were more likely to stay active in their child's education. Because families are often an important support system for high school students, parents need to be involved in transition activities. Families need to be informed about the challenges and demands of the
high school curriculum, strategies that will help students succeed, and strategies to help their students cope with the challenges of transition (Newman, Lohman et al. 2000).

Comprehensive programs also engage communication among administrators, teachers, and counselors at the exiting and incoming schools. For example, counselors can identify students who are at risk for transition problems and send that information to counselors at the next level.

Some activities may take place in the winter or spring before transition, such as parent orientation, visits to the new school, and discussions with current students. Others should take place in the summer. For example, administrators might meet to discuss articulation, or summer classes like "So This Is Middle School," run by sixth-grade teachers could be offered. While there are formal evaluations of some programs, it is important for schools to evaluate the programs that they have in place and redesign them if necessary. Teachers, students, parents, and administrators should be involved in the evaluation (Shoffner and Williamson 2000).

Mizelle and Mullins (1997) argued that the strategies to promote the successful transition of early adolescents out of middle school fall into two categories: easily implemented events and programs, and larger changes in curriculum and instruction. The more easily implemented activities are presented in tables 1 through 5, more extensive changes in curriculum and instruction are discussed in the following section.

**Comprehensive or Intensive Approaches**

*School Within a School* or Ninth Grade Academy

Identifying ninth grade as a critical transition period, several school districts have created ninth-grade academies or schools within schools. Aldine Independent School District in Houston has four ninth-grade centers where freshmen are prevented from "getting lost in the corridors and classrooms of already massive high schools" (Reents 2002, 357). The academies or centers provide much-needed support and academic attention at a critical time when many students fall between the cracks. Having a separate academy with separate teachers and schedules gives students "the literal and psychological space they need to mature" (Allen 2001, 166), allowing for closer relationships with teachers and more personalized attention.
### TABLE 4. Suggested Transition Activities for Parents

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<td><strong>Transition Activity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Introduce parents to differences in the academic and social environment of the next school level</strong></td>
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</table>
| • Invite parents to meet with administrators and counselors during the spring before transition (smaller groups are better) to discuss school curriculum, policies, etc.  
  **a,b,c**  
  • Host meetings between parents and older high school students to learn about challenges ahead, insight into peer culture, etc.  
  **d**  
  • Over the summer, provide an open house, picnic, or breakfast for students and parents to meet teachers, counselors, and administrators. Students can ask questions, tour the building, visit classrooms, and meet teachers  
  **d**  
  • Invite parents to visit new school with students and participate in conferences with counselors  
  **e**  
  • Mail school newsletters to incoming parents  
  **f**  
  • Provide each parent with a notebook before entry containing freshmen course offerings, cocurricula options, registration forms, checklists, brochures, newsletters, list of school personnel, parent support group information, etc.  
  **g**  
  • Host a parent coffee or tea each week during the first grading period to discuss policies, problem solve, etc.  
  **h**  
  • Design parent-education programs such as “Understanding Your Middle Schooler,” “Strategies for Maximizing Homework Completion,” etc.  
  **i**  
  • Hold PTA meetings, retreats, or coffees to discuss major issues and present key information about the school community  
  **j**  
  • Conduct sessions for parents of ESL students in areas with non-English-speaking students or parents. Arrange them by language with competent translators  
  **k**  
  • Ask PTA members to call families and welcome them to school  
  **l**  
  • Invite parents to visit new school with students and participate in conferences with counselors  
  **m** |
| **Support parents as they help their students adjust to the new level** |
| • Host a parent coffee or tea each week during the first grading period to discuss policies, problem solve, etc.  
  **n**  
  • Design parent-education programs such as “Understanding Your Middle Schooler,” “Strategies for Maximizing Homework Completion,” etc.  
  **o**  
  • Hold PTA meetings, retreats, or coffees to discuss major issues and present key information about the school community  
  **p**  
  • Conduct sessions for parents of ESL students in areas with non-English-speaking students or parents. Arrange them by language with competent translators  
  **q**  
  • Ask PTA members to call families and welcome them to school  
  **r**  
  • Invite parents to visit new school with students and participate in conferences with counselors  
  **s** |

Notes:  
- **a** Marshall 1992;  
- **b** Shoffner and Williamson 2000;  
- **c** Mizelle and Irvin 2000;  
- **d** Newman, Lohman et al. 2000;  
- **e** Mizelle and Mullins 1997;  
- **f** Lindsay 1997;  
- **g** Morgan and Hertzog 2001;  
- **h** White-Hood 2001;  
- **i** Schumacher 1998

Sometimes ninth-grade centers are created in response to burgeoning high school classes and corridors, such as a school in Alexandria, Virginia. However, the benefits of this this approach at this academy, Minnie Howard School, and its emphasis on developing trust and support for the students, made a practical, temporary fix into an eight-year success. There was a reduction in truancy and suspension rates and an increased participation in honors classes (Rourke 2001). Furthermore, staff felt their students better managed the minefield of emotional and academic difficulties of ninth grade and that the students were better prepared for tenth grade.

**Freshmen-only First Day of School**

At Worthington Kilbourne High School in Columbus, Ohio, freshmen have the school to themselves on the first day. They meet in the auditorium for an assembly where the faculty, student body president, and administration are presented. They are introduced to the rules, rituals, and values of the school. Welcome banners escort students to their homerooms where teachers review the handbook, discuss expectations, and help with lockers. Freshmen follow their schedule and meet their teachers. At lunch, a cookout allows students to socialize with each other and with their teachers. The whole day is videotaped and a ten-minute compilation is played for students at the end of the day and again that night at a parent/student assembly. Students complete an evaluation of their first day (Lindsay 1997).

**Special Courses**

Bland and Breslin (2005) reported that the Manchester High School Success Program, in Chesterfield County, Virginia, has resulted in reducing the failure rate for ninth graders from 10.3 percent to 2.7 percent and increasing scores on the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests. In fact, they report that in the most recent year Success students scored a minimum of 70 percent on each SOL test. In addition, administrative referrals are down and attendance is up. The sophomore failure rate has been reduced by about two-thirds.

The program identifies at-risk students and puts them in a special sociology class that teaches study skills, organizational methods, self-discipline, tolerance and diversity awareness, anger management, and other relevant topics. All students also are expected to make a contract with the instructors. In the second year, stu-
dents enroll in a special study-skills class where half of the class time is spent on academic study and the other half on community service with the school's severely disabled population. In years three and four, many of the students return as mentors to the ninth graders.

Summer Programs

Parkway Northeast Middle School in Creve Coeur, Missouri, developed a program for students, "So This Is Middle School," run by the sixth-grade teachers. For four weeks during the summer, the class meets two hours a day for four days a week. The students get a feel for the school, use lockers, and experience sample lessons. About 25 percent of students took advantage of the program (Allen 2001).

Supportive Middle School Program

Mizelle and Mullins (1997) discussed the Delta Project, in which middle school students stay together through sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and experience curriculum with more hands-on, life-related learning activities, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning. The students in the project made a more successful transition to high school than other students in the same school who had a more traditional middle school experience. They suggest that a challenging curriculum that helps students learn strategies and be responsible for their learning helped them feel more confident about high school.

Similar results were found for the Community for Learning Program developed by Oates, Flores, and Weishew (1998) at Sunrise Middle School in inner-city Philadelphia. Key components of this program were three "houses" of students, where each house had a dedicated teaching team with common preparation time, data-based staff development, a learning management system that focused on developing student responsibility for learning and behavior, and an active program of family involvement. The researchers found that students in the program were significantly less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to maintain their grade level placement.

Conclusion

Comprehensive transition programs that include numerous activities geared toward the needs and concerns of students, parents, and teachers can be effective in helping students transition to a new school with less anxiety and more academic success. A wide variety of activities have been identified in the literature and are also summarized here. Schools can choose those that fit their communities best; our recommendations for an effective transition plan are summarized in table 5.

Effective transition programs improve attendance, achievement, and retention. The research suggests that effective programs include five or more diversified activities (Mac Iver 1990). While Mac Iver found that
TABLE 6. Recommendations for Successful Transition Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Suggested Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Transition committees need to meet regularly to plan, evaluate, and revise the</td>
<td>• Hold meetings of administrators across levels to discuss articulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>program; effective transition programs involve continuous planning and</td>
<td>• Plan cross-curricular meetings with teachers to discuss curriculum and instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>communication among teams of teachers and school leaders</td>
<td>practices and expectations between levels (including special education)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Share information between counselors who need to become aware of students at risk</td>
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<td>Focus transition activities on social concerns as well as academic and</td>
<td>• Create pen pal programs between students or classes</td>
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<td>procedural concerns; students have many academic, procedural, and social</td>
<td>• Create subcommunities of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>concerns, and social worries are often not adequately addressed</td>
<td>• Sponsor a cocurricular fair, and encourage involvement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Identify ways to ensure that students will be comfortable in new school (e.g.,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ensure that a friend is in each class)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Target various constituencies and needs with a mix of activities. Effective</td>
<td>• Create support groups to discuss friendship, problems, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>transition programs have, on average, five different activities</td>
<td>• Reduce course load for struggling students</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Transition programs typically end as soon as school starts; students may</td>
<td>• Assign weak students to the strongest teachers</td>
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<td>need support, especially with social concerns into the fall</td>
<td>• Establish support groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Girls, students in academic difficulty, students with behavioral problems,</td>
<td>• Identify students with behavior problems and provide needed counseling or social</td>
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<td>and low socioeconomic status minority students have the greatest difficulty</td>
<td>support from peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>with transition; include activities and supports that target high-risk groups</td>
<td>• Invite parents to meet with administrators and counselors to discuss school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Include activities to meet the needs of parents</td>
<td>curriculum, policies, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intensive efforts, such as “school-within-a-school,” have been effective at</td>
<td>• Create a “school-within-a-school”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increasing test scores and retention in urban schools</td>
<td>• Develop special courses for at-risk students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


urban schools often offered fewer transition activities, the literature suggests that urban students often have greater needs for support from the schools and teachers (Anderson et al. 2000; Newman, Lohman et al. 2000). Sometimes intensive efforts, such as a ninth grade “school within a school,” can be effective, especially in urban environments where students have greater needs (Letgers and Kerr 2000).

The transition activities should target students, parents, and teachers (Smith 1997) and span the spring and summer before transition and continue through the fall of transition (Arowosafe and Irvin 1992). Activities should address the academic concerns of students such as courses to take, amount of homework, and how to get help from teachers. They should address procedural concerns such as where the lunchroom, restrooms, and lockers are located and how to open

lockers. Social concerns are often neglected, but they comprise much of teenagers’ worries. Activities should also address student concerns about being safe, making or maintaining friendships, getting along with peers and teachers, and dealing with peer pressure.

Students who earn poor grades or demonstrate inappropriate classroom behavior or hostile or inappropriate relationships with peers are most likely to have difficulty with transition. These students will need more intensive supports both before and after transition.

As students transition into middle school, we begin to see declines in student achievement motivation. There is a mismatch between the developmental needs of students and most middle schools. Furthermore, students who move into high school with academic deficiencies and/or behavioral issues are at greater risk for failure in the ninth grade, and for dropping out.
Students in low-income urban environments have the additional concerns of the safety of themselves, friends, and family. Effective transition programs are one piece of the solution. While all students benefit from transition activities, students who are most at-risk need the additional support from teachers, counselors, and administrators to integrate successfully into the new environment, maintain satisfactory attendance, and work hard at more difficult academic subjects. As Newman, Lohman et al. (2000) wrote, every student needs to know that there is an adult in the school committed to his or her success.

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REFERENCES
Bottoms, G. 2002. Improving schools are trying new approaches to raise achievement of struggling students. In Opening doors to the future: Preparing low-achieving middle grades students to succeed in high school, 41–56. Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board.