Taking it in Stride: Successful School Counseling Strategies to Help Students Transition from Elementary to Middle School

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Abstract

Transitioning from elementary to middle school creates unique demands and/or implications for a student during a pivotal time in his or her life. To address this important issue, implementation of a comprehensive transitional program at the middle school level can promote positive transitional results in school and at home. A structured, comprehensive program is essential for the success of any student’s transitional period. This thesis explores how a program to support the transition between elementary and middle school might successfully impact student achievement, motivation, and behavior through the implementation of a yearly transitional program through use of a comprehensive guidebook.
Taking it in Stride: Successful School Counseling Strategies to Help Students Transition from Elementary to Middle School

The transition from elementary to middle school can be an exciting time in a young adolescent’s life which marks a sense of accomplishment and a rite of passage into middle school. Upon making the transition, students experience more independence and associate positive changes with middle school. According to research, increased independence, scheduling and changing classes, opportunities to make new friends, and creating positive relationships with teachers have been documented as the top four reasons students prefer middle school to elementary school (Forgan & Vaughn, 2000).

Although this transition is an exciting time for adolescents, for most students this period of school transition also creates a certain fear of the unknown which can cause considerable distress resulting in “declines in their self perceptions, academic performance, school related behaviors, and grade-point average” (Forgan & Vaughn, 2000, p. 33). This thesis analyzes the process of the elementary to middle school transition, identifying contributing factors which influence how a student may respond to the transition, possible interventions, and finally, a model guidebook which can be used to create a comprehensive transitional program.

**History**

**Analysis of the Problem**

The middle school transition is characterized as a shift from the supportive, nurturing environment of elementary school to the more challenging and complex format of middle school. Students encounter multiple teachers, changing classes, and heightened academic rigor. Students must also learn to adapt to time structure and changes in authority and discipline (Greene & Ollendick, 1993, p. 162). New demands associated with middle school, specifically the academic environment, may lead students to experience “a lack of predictability and increased ambiguity
about the criteria for evaluation and success” (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001, p. 929).

Other factors contributing to the difficult middle school transition concern developmental changes such as identity discovery and consolidation, peer relationships and emerging (pre) romantic involvements. These changes can adversely affect a student’s self esteem, social engagement, attitudes towards learning, and academic achievement during a time of vulnerability. In addition, exposure to unfamiliar peers, more teacher imposed discipline and control, and less personal student-to-teacher relationships are all documented as stressful factors contributing to the middle school transition (Card, Little, & Vanlede, 2006). According to Elias, Gara, and Ubriaco, authors of *Sources of Stress and Support in Children’s Transition to Middle School: An Empirical Analysis* (1985), there are specific tasks that accompany life transitions, and the middle school transition involves each of these tasks in a particularly intense way. The tasks include:

(a) shifts in role definition and expected behaviors; (b) shifts in membership in and position within social networks; (c) a need to reorganize personal and social support resources; (d) a restructuring of ways of looking at one’s world that is “cognitive reappraisal,” and (e) management of stress resulting from uncertainty about expectations, goals, and one’s ability to accomplish the tasks (1985, p. 112-113).

Historically the middle school transition is also a time when a student’s interpersonal, emotional, cognitive, physical, and biological attributes are in a state of flux (Elias, Gara, & Ubriaco, 1985). Peers tend to become a more important factor and reference point for adolescents, while relationships and interactions with adult figures over issues of dependency, independence, and conformity are in conflict.
Despite this pivotal transition during an adolescent’s life, much research has found that generally after a few weeks of middle school, most students’ initial concerns with the physical layout and academic routines begin to slow. Although most students successfully resolve the transition to middle school through effective coping skills, prevention programs provide services to all students regardless of need. Included in the transition are six factors that negatively or positively influence a student during his or her middle school transition.

Social Factors

The first set of influential factors is social factors. Green and Ollendick’s research supports the general belief that “social support during adolescence can reduce problems with drugs, work, health, personal and family relationships, and emotional distress during young adulthood” (1993, p. 164). With the transition to middle school, students experience more independence, which includes more time to socialize with peers, teachers, and school administration and/or staff. Effective use of socialization includes mingling with peers during passing time, free time during class, lunch and recess periods, and before or after school. Socialization during classroom instruction time can have a reverse affect on academic performance and progression, as well as developing relationships with teachers and peers.

Organizational Factors

Organizational factors, the second group of important factors, influence a middle school student on multiple levels. A student is expected to maintain an effective organizational method for each class. This includes organization of books, assignments, and materials. Not only is he or she expected to maintain effective academic organization, but locker organization is important as well. Because a student changes from class to class, and no longer uses a personal desk for
storage as in elementary school, he or she is expected to bring the necessary and appropriate supplies to each individual class.

Without effective locker organization, a student is unable to maintain academic organization for his or her classes. Organization is perhaps one of the most influential factors in success at the middle school level. Without it, a student will be unable to keep track of assignments completed and handed in, which directly affects his or her grade. For many students, middle school is the first time such organization is required and expected in order to be successful.

Organizational factors also include school structure elements. According to the article *Helping Students Move On: Tips for Elementary School Counselors*, by Otten and Akos, (n.d., p.1) “most middle schools address organizational needs in a systematic way for all students with orientation programs by manipulating the school environment to match developmental needs.” In this way, schools have the ability to organize daily class schedules to fit the needs of their students. For example, teachers and administrators could incorporate a study hall or flex period at the end of the day for all sixth grade students so that the students have an opportunity to meet and work with teachers on homework, re-take or make up tests, and work on assignments.

**Motivational Factors**

Motivational factors is the third group of influential factors for a transitioning middle school student. A study conducted by Rudolph et al. (2001) examined the role of maladaptive self-regulatory beliefs as a vulnerability factor for academic and emotional difficulties during the middle school transition. This study concluded that “the transition experience was found to interact with preexisting maladaptive self regulatory beliefs that formed the basis for depression vulnerability” (Rudolph et al, 2001, p. 941). In other words, an adolescent who believed he or
she did not exert much control over his or her success in school and who showed small amounts of investment in academic success, reported more school related stress and became more depressed when he or she experienced a transition to middle school.

Another study conducted by Vanlede et al. (2006) identified which features of young adolescents’ action control system (i.e. how they view themselves and coping behaviors) best predicted adjustment. The research goes on to state that “positive self beliefs, such as a strong self-concept facilitate positive adjustment and feelings of self-worth across the transition to middle school… on the other hand, psychological risk factors such as maladaptive action-control dimensions (e.g., antisocial coping strategies) are associated with negative adjustment” (Vanlede et al., 2006, p. 112).

**Intellectual/Academic Factors**

Intellectual or Academic factors are the fourth group of factors addressed due to the fact that middle school curriculum often requires more rigor, higher standards, and stricter grading policies. In turn, this requires a higher level of thinking and enhanced effort from students. According to research by Midgley and Urdan, (1992) “after the school transition, many students feel less positively about their academic potential and the value of schooling, they give up more quickly and put forth less effort, and their grades decline” (p.5). Forgan and Vaughn (2000) write that academic competence, or a student’s belief in his or her control over academic outcomes, tends to decrease during the sixth grade year to the beginning of seventh grade.

What causes these declines in academic and behavioral competencies? Research points to changes in the classroom and school environment which include teaching styles and student teacher relationships. In middle school, teachers are more likely to display “higher levels of
control and discipline more frequently,” (Forgan & Vaughn, 2000, p. 33) and less likely to form interpersonal relationships with students.

Research by Greene and Ollendick, (1993) suggests that students who experience poor academic transitions tend to display greater behavior problems before entering the middle school. Upon entering middle school, these same students who act out or appear withdrawn may not receive the same immediate discipline, attention, and understanding from middle school personnel as compared to the elementary level. A main contributing factor is the complexity of the middle school system compared to the elementary school, where the student works with one teacher throughout the day who experiences his or her behavior all day long and has the ability to correct or work with the student toward a more in depth response.

Peer/Family Factors

As a student makes his or her transition to middle school, the support system, which is the fifth factor group, begins to shift from mainly family support during the elementary years to peer support. Healthy individuals incorporate a pattern of support that includes friends as well as close family members as important support providers, while others may experience difficulty maintaining peer support. The transition to middle school creates new networks of students joining for the first time, or reuniting from previous schools. As these networking friendships take place, some students may experience trouble maintaining friendships, which may result in a shift to reliance on family support instead of a balance between friends and close family members.

According to Levitt et al., “Children with fewer support resources initially may have difficulty expanding their support base in adolescents” (2005, p. 414). Without close family or peer support relationships, a student may have a hard time making and/or meeting new friends
when making the move to middle school. Levitt et al. also reports that a balance of support from multiple resources is best for adolescents transitioning into middle school. Family-focused and friend-focused relational types, compared to the “loner” types tend to experience better adjustment as well (2005).

Parents and other close family members serve as important sources of social support but can also be sources of conflict. Supportive sources outside of the family circle such as peers can assist in times of family conflict when the family support is compromised. Levitt et al. (2005) also noted that increased family conflict during times of adolescence may account for stronger associations between multiple resource support patterns, such as peer groups.

Peers and social groups are perhaps the largest motivational factors for a student wanting to transition to middle school. In the article, *Peer Experience as Predictors of Adjustment Across the Middle School Transition* by Kingery and Erdley, (2007), the authors note that “peer acceptance and friendship quality and quantity play significant yet somewhat different roles in predicting loneliness and school involvement across the middle school transition” (p.73). It is suggested that peers have a substantial influence over school adjustment including school attitudes, academic achievement, and school involvement. Kingery and Erdley report that “adolescents’ perceptions of social support from peers predict increases in self-worth and decreases in symptoms of psychopathology across the middle school transition, and high quality sixth-grade friendships predict increases in sociability and leadership across the transition to junior high” (2005, p.74). The author’s findings support the theory that peer and group relationships have significant impacts on student adjustment during the transition to middle school.
Mobility

The sixth and final group of factors influencing the elementary to middle school transition period is mobility. Cardenas, Taylor, and Adelman, (1993) associate transitional failure stemming from factors related to the environment, the person, or both. Adolescents arriving from other school districts, states, or countries vary in his or her capabilities and motivation with respect to psychological transition into the new school. According to Cardenas et al. (1993), some adolescents do not want to move or emigrate, some may fear losing his or her familial and cultural identity, and some are insecure and/or intimidated.

High mobility students with initially positive attitudes and enabling skills may “encounter situations that are more demanding and hostile than they had anticipated and are capable of handling…problems that arise in relation to acculturation efforts often are exacerbated by pre-immigration problems and common problems of minors” (Cardenas, Taylor, & Adelman, 1993, p. 204). For a highly mobile student, navigating a new school, learning school and classroom policies, and making new friends become major challenges. Problems achieving these can manifest themselves in misbehavior, low academic achievement, and attendance issues.

Interventions

Strategies at Home

Understanding that this is a difficult time for adolescents, parents and close family members can offer continual support for the transitioning middle school student. Parents should be informed about young adolescents and their developmental issues and stages so they are better equipped to handle situations at home. This may give parents insight on issues such as depression, drug use or experimentation, and the warning signs of each.
Communication is perhaps the best strategy for parents and close family members. It is important for parents to ask their child how he or she is handling the transition period, and help them understand that they are available for support. Parental involvement in the child’s activities, including sports, clubs, or other school events, are other forms of interventions that can aid in the middle school transition process. Finally, it is important for parents to attend school events like a parent night or open house. By keeping themselves informed, parents are better equipped to deal with transitional difficulties that may arise. Supporting and encouraging his or her child during the middle school process is a parent’s most important role.

**Strategies in School**

Because the transition to middle school is such a complicated time in an adolescent’s life and can create lasting effects which negatively affect his or her academic and social progression, it is essential that schools develop effective interventions and strategies. A well designed transitional program is comprehensive and restores the strong sense of belonging the new middle school student felt at his or her elementary school. The young adolescent must feel encouraged, successful in school, cared for and respected as a person. Finally, he or she must have opportunities for self-expression and decision-making (Lorain, n.d.).

A comprehensive approach is necessary when implementing a transitional program. It is built upon a commitment to teamwork and collaboration between educators, parents, and students. In another article by Lorain entitled *Transition to Middle School*, the author recommends that a comprehensive program should include the following three components: “helping students form a realistic expectation of what middle school will be like, providing a positive and successful first impression, insuring a successful introduction to the middle school
experience” (n.d. p.2). Lorain later states in the article that attributes of a successful transition program include the following:

- A sensitivity to the anxieties accompanying a move to a new school setting
- the importance of parents and teachers as partners in this effort
- the recognition that becoming comfortable in a new school setting is an ongoing process, not a single event. (n.d., p. 2).

Lorain discusses the importance of elementary and middle schools working together to provide opportunities for students at each level to be involved in the transition process. “Schools must reach out to parents, helping them to become more knowledgeable about young adolescents’ developmental needs and concerns, and encouraging ongoing parental involvement in their children’s education” (Lorain, n.d. p. 2).

According to the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools, school transition interventions must do the following:

- promote and maintain positive attitudes during the transition
- anticipate and prevent problems
- provide special assistance to those whose problems make it highly likely that the transition will be difficult to negotiate
- monitor transitions in order to respond at the first indications a student is having transition problems. (2005, p.1).

Both the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools and Lorain emphasize the importance of promoting and maintaining positive attitudes and recognizing and providing assistance to individuals who experience difficulty with the transition process.
Welcoming strategies. One important element of a transitional program is making the student and his or her family feel welcome in the new school. One specific intervention incorporating welcoming strategies may include giving the student a welcome folder. This would include welcoming materials and information about the school and community. Another strategy is to assign a peer buddy to the new student so that he or she has someone to help navigate the school, sit next to at lunch, and initiate friendships at recess, lunch, or social settings (UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2002).

Preview Day strategies. Another intervention for a comprehensive school transition program includes giving fifth grade students the opportunity to meet middle school teachers and incoming students in their elementary schools. The students who are transitioning should also have an opportunity to visit the middle school and meet staff, students, and future sixth grade teachers. According to LaVava, author of Facilitate Transitions (2005) it is important for fifth grade students to practice going from place to place when visiting the new middle school. Further, “during the summer before the transition, [the school should] have the student and his or her family visit the new school and staff again” (LaVava, 2005, p.47).

Fifth grade students should be allowed to dialogue with current sixth grade students in order to ask questions and build positive relations between peers. In addition to these interventions, middle school leaders and staff should hold multiple events for students, teachers, and parents that involve promoting the middle school in a positive light. The events could be informative for parents regarding changes that early adolescents experience, including developmental issues (Lorain, n.d.).

School support strategies. For students who experience transitional difficulties, it is important to provide early identification and offer additional school support. School support may
include informal counseling, monitoring, and encouragement regarding the student’s academic and/or personal/social struggles.

The school counselor is essential in offering school support strategies. He or she can arrange individual counseling sessions with students or develop a group for students struggling with the transition to middle school. Group curriculum should be focused around discussions, and emphasize various elements of the middle school transition such as academic rigor or difficulty, problem-solving, organizational skills, social skills, and making friends (Greene & Ollendick, 1993). This type of “social support during adolescence can reduce problems with drugs, work, health, personal and family relationships, and emotional distress during young adulthood” (1993, p.164). It is important for school counselors to collaborate with other educational professionals in the school to help identify students who may be struggling with the middle school transition in order to provide him or her with appropriate support services.

Comprehensive Guidebook

In order to ensure implementation of a comprehensive middle school transitional program and to assess effective transitional strategies and practices, a guidebook has been developed. Using research from this paper, it was evident that a systematic approach be put into place to help students make a successful transition from elementary to middle school. Indeed, Schumacher writes that “effective and comprehensive transition programs help (1) build a sense of community; (2) respond to the needs and concerns of the students; and (3) provide appropriate, faceted approaches to facilitate the transition process” (1999, p.1). Therefore, the guidebook includes a monthly breakdown of appropriate transitional activities and example documents which aim to meet the needs of a comprehensive program.
Chapter 1: January-March

Chapter One of the guidebook discusses transitional practices during the months of January through March which include developing a welcoming committee, setting up middle school teacher visits to elementary schools, peer buddy letters, and sending out student and parent letters to fifth grade families. Other transitional practices included in the chapter are school counselor and administrator visits to elementary schools as well as sending out invitations to fifth grade parents for the first of two parent nights held at the middle school.

Application of Chapter One activities is especially important for the school counselor to establish a strong starting point for the elementary to middle school transition. By introducing middle school staff and personnel in the current fifth grade classrooms, the student has an opportunity to address possible challenging and/or intimidating information, while asking questions in a safe environment to which he or she has become accustomed. Inviting fifth grade parents into the middle school for the first of two parent nights is also an important step in initiating the middle school transition. “Parents should attend school meetings to learn about the concerns and questions their children have and will have. They should talk with their children about the upcoming school year and emphasize the positive aspects of attending middle school” (Lorain, n.d. p.2).

Developing a peer buddy system allows the fifth grade student to establish a connection with a current middle school student. Through written dialogue, the fifth grade student not only has the opportunity to ask questions to alleviate anxiety, stress, curiosity, and excitement about the transition, but he or she develops a potential friendship or mentorship with someone already in the middle school.
According to the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools (2002), the welcoming committee is established to adopt and modify welcoming strategies for new students and their families that already fit with what the school is doing. The committee also provides leadership for the group. The welcoming committee consists of administrators, support service personnel, (such as the school counselor), teachers, an office staff representative, and parent volunteers. Interventions may include developing a welcoming packet of information for new students and families, as well as providing social supports and facilitating involvement for the new family.

**Chapter 2: April-June**

Transitional strategies included in Chapter Two consist of the first scheduled parent night, a preview day for fifth grade students, and a second parent night to inform parents of transitional struggles students may encounter when moving to middle school. The first parent night allows parents of the current fifth grade student to understand the importance of the upcoming transition through a PowerPoint presentation given by the school counselor. Parents also have an opportunity to tour the middle school, meet their son or daughters’ teachers, and participate in a question and answer session.

In May, fifth grade students also have the opportunity to visit the middle school for a day to talk with teachers and observe current sixth grade students. Research indicates that an important element of a successful transition program is allowing the future student an opportunity to explore the new school (Akos and Otten, n.d.). They suggest that setting up a time where students can take guided tours of the prospective middle school proves beneficial to further acclimate students to the school. The preview day also allows fifth graders to meet the middle school counselor and be introduced to programs and activities offered at the middle school.
A second parent night to inform parents of transitional struggles his or her student may encounter throughout the transition to middle school includes a PowerPoint presentation on adolescent changes presented by the school counselor. By keeping parents informed of physical, emotional, and other developmental changes their son or daughter may experience, they will be better equipped to deal with this change and continue to build relationships with their child (Lorain, n.d.).

Chapter 3: July-September

The first transitional strategy in chapter three is the middle school open house held in August. An introductory letter for new students and families of the district will also be sent out inviting them to attend the middle school open house, and informing the parents of events like the New-to-District student testing day. This event invites parents of all middle school students to tour the school, meet his or her student’s teachers, receive the student’s class schedule, make deposits for lunch accounts, and purchase any items required by the school, such as gym t-shirts.

The last event to be held in August is the sixth grade orientation, where the incoming sixth grade student takes his or her regularly scheduled bus to school. The student has a chance to go through a shortened class schedule, meet teachers, view his or her locker and take home the assigned lock to practice the combination, and finally complete a treasure hunt around the school. Akos and Otten (n.d.) highlight the importance of allowing the new student to experience being left on his or her own to navigate around the school and through his or her class schedule. They also discuss the importance of having the counselor available to orient the students to major locations in the school.

On the first day of school the incoming sixth grade student will begin and end the day with special welcoming activities in the gym to promote a sense of belonging at the middle
school. He or she will also spend extra time in advisory class doing team building activities. A student who is new to the school district will receive welcoming packet the first day of school as he or she meets with the school counselor briefly in the morning. The school counselor will also send out the first issue of the Counseling Corner, a newsletter for parents regarding counseling issues and/or solutions to common problems their student may be experiencing in middle school. During the month of September the school counselor will begin a transitions group consisting of students who are struggling with the transition to middle school. This group will meet weekly to help students overcome intimidation or other factors negatively influencing his or her transitional process.

Chapter 4: October-December

In chapter four, transitional strategies include welcoming committee meetings to continue monthly throughout the rest of the school year. Also, the school counselor will continue to welcome and initiate new students throughout the year with the established new student process. Finally, teachers and staff refer to the school counselor any student who is struggling with the transition.

During October, the school counselor will begin going into sixth grade classrooms to teach transitional guidance lessons. The school counselor will also send home a parent letter to all new students explaining his or her role as a school counselor. In December, the school counselor will continue to send out monthly issues of the Counseling Corner, which will help keep communication open between parents of transitioning students and the school counselor.
Conclusion

Young adolescents transitioning from elementary to middle school experience many different types of change during this pivotal time, including changes in physical, intellectual, moral/ethical, emotional, psychological, and social development. During this time, they increasingly rely on peers for support and advice but may lack judgment in making moral and social choices (U.S. Department of Education, Mentoring Resource Center, 2008). Most adolescents complete the middle school transition with little anxiety or complications, but for others the transition can be detrimental to his or her self-esteem, motivation, behavioral or social patterns, and academic achievement. Regardless of difficulty handling the transition process, all students can benefit from a comprehensive transitional program designed to make students feel welcome, supported, and successful in a new school setting.

Use of a comprehensive guidebook, such as the one provided in this project, can provide school counselors with a starting point to implement a transitional program. With careful evaluation of designed implementations and tools within the guidebook, the school counselor has an opportunity to assess and reflect upon the outcomes of the comprehensive transition program, and make future modifications for improvement. All of these efforts work towards the betterment of students.
References


