Easing the middle school to high school transition:
a guide for schools
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Statistics show that more students fail ninth grade than any other year in school. The reasons for this dip in student achievement are varied and complex. Eighth graders contemplating the move to ninth grade worry about a variety of issues: getting picked on by older students, harder work, earning lower grades, getting “lost” in the crowd, etc. And, research has shown that at the ninth grade students do, in fact, show a decline in grades and attendance and have a more negative view of themselves, all the while having an increased need for friendships and social interaction.

So, what can schools do to help increase achievement and performance of ninth grade students at this crucial time in their lives? They can institute transition programs. Research has shown that when students take part in transition programs that consist of a variety of articulation activities, significantly fewer freshman fail and are therefore retained. (Kerr, 2002 and McIver, 1990). Research also indicates that the more extensive the transition program, the lower the dropout and retention rates fall. (Hertzog and Morgan, 1999).

So, what are the components of successful transition programs? What might this look like played out in high school and middle school settings? Following is a list of program components and implementation ideas that could start alleviating some fears and encouraging success in this distinct student population.

Key Components of Successful Transition Programs:

1. Provide parents and students with essential information about the new school.

   *This includes orienting parents and students to a new building, new expectations, routines, etc. in order to allay some of the initial fears they might be feeling.*

   Possible activities:
   - high school tours, preferably student led
   - “shadow” a high school student in the spring
   - older student panel discussions at middle school
   - planning and forecasting with high school counselors
   - high school teachers trade places with 8th grade teachers for a day
   - pen pal or e-pal relationships between middle and high school
   - academic or skill summer camp for incoming 9th graders
   - inviting 8th graders to supervised social/athletic events
   - newsletters and websites about high school programs, etc.
   - parents of 9th graders serve as ambassadors to incoming parents

2. Provide opportunities for social support and peer interactions with current students.

   *This allows students to begin building new relationships, obtain reliable information from “insiders” and feel welcomed to the high school community.*

   Possible activities:
- orientation and mentoring programs, such as Link Crew, Bridges, etc.
- pair small groups of incoming students with upperclassmen for support
- open house for 8th graders, hosted by current 9th graders
- supervised attendance at 8th grade/9th grade social functions
- “newcomers festival” for all new students before school starts
- separating lunches by grade level
- scheduling regular open hours with counselors, or regular counselor visits to 9th grade classes
- 9th grade hotline to counselors or administrators for parental contact

3. Provide opportunities for communication between middle school and high school teachers, counselors, administrators and support staff.

   This will help ensure that both groups have a realistic understanding of the programs, requirements and expectations at each level, so that a sense of articulation and alignment can be encouraged.

   Possible activities:
   - create a “transition team” of teachers at each level who meet regularly for discussion and revision of the transition program
   - invite middle school teachers to team or department meetings, and vice versa
   - schedule an annual joint faculty meeting to identify concerns and successes
   - create departmental liaison positions
   - K-12 curriculum planning meetings

4. Provide opportunities for parent involvement.

   Although possibly one of the most challenging pieces to facilitate at the high school level, studies have shown that parental involvement and support in a child’s education can be an essential factor in student success.

   Possible activities:
   - seek parent volunteers to be involved in daily school activities
   - develop a 9th grade newsletter that parents begin to receive when their child is still in 8th grade
   - invite parents to spend a day at the high school
   - involve parents in planning and implementing articulation activities
   - provide conversation opportunities for parents of new students with parents of current students
   - arrange increased phone contact, (quarterly, monthly, etc.) so parents feel more informed and involved
   - create learning opportunities for parents and children to engage in together, such as computer training, college planning, etc.
• middle school teachers and counselors inform parents about transition activities and encourage them to get involved

**Existing Programs:**

Good news! There are several tested and established comprehensive freshman transition programs out there. Schools wishing to implement programs don’t necessarily have to start from the ground floor building their program from scratch. Below you will find links to information about several existing programs.

- **Link Crew:** [www.linkcrew.com](http://www.linkcrew.com)
- **Freshman Solutions:** [www.freshmansolutions.com](http://www.freshmansolutions.com)
- **Ignite:** [www.ignite4schools.com](http://www.ignite4schools.com)
- **Chicago GEAR UP Alliance:** [www.gearupchicago.org](http://www.gearupchicago.org)

**Conclusion:** The transition to high school can be a relatively seamless adjustment if efforts are taken to provide students, parents and teachers tools and opportunities to build connections at their new school.

**Works cited:**

