

# Transition from Middle School into High School

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*I urge the next generation of middle school educators to help save the ninth grade. The middle school concept has, too often, not been able to fulfill its announced intention to make the transition to high school a smooth and successful experience. In fact, the transition to high school has never been more treacherous nor the consequences more personally disastrous for so many. All over America, thousands and thousands of ninth graders are and have been painfully failing. ... We can no longer allow all the good work you do in middle schools to evaporate in the first six weeks of high school. (George, 1999)*

Helping young adolescents make a successful transition into high school is not a new concern for middle level educators. In fact, one of the fundamental functions of the initial middle level education movement was to articulate young adolescents' transition into high school (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; McEwin, 1998; Vars, 1998). Furthermore, in recent years more and more middle schools are developing transition programs to address the particular needs of their students (e.g., Cognato, 1999; Thompson & Prisbell, 1999).

Nevertheless, young adolescents today frequently have a difficult time making the transition into high school (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991; George, 1999; Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond, & Walker, 1996). Many drop out, often shortly after they enter high school, or they fall behind and fail to graduate on time (Bureau of the Census (DOC), 1997; Green & Scott, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics (ED), 1995; Schwartz, 1995). While there is some indication that the dropout rate in our country is declining, as many as 5% of all high school students leave school each year; and among certain student populations (e.g., rural or urban) more than 10% drop out annually (Bureau of the Census (DOC), 1997; National Center for Education Statistics (ED), 1995; Schwartz, 1995). In addition, as many as 60% of those students who are identified as "at-risk" for failure going into high school will not graduate with their class (Green & Scott, 1995).

So the challenge remains for middle school educators to help the young adolescents we nurture and teach in the middle grades make a smooth and successful transition into high school—to consider the transition needs of our students, to respond appropriately to those needs, and to have all, not just a few, middle schools involved in this process. What do young adolescents experience as they make the transition into high school? What are appropriate articulation practices for students making the transition into high school? This article will summarize some of the research that relates to these two questions and, thereby, help middle level educators respond to the need for exemplary middle to high school articulation practices for all young adolescents.



### WHAT DO YOUNG ADOLESCENTS EXPERIENCE AS THEY MAKE THE TRANSITION INTO HIGH SCHOOL?

As they make the transition into high school, many young adolescents experience a larger, more impersonal, more competitive, and grade-oriented environment than they experienced in middle school (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984). They experience a greater diversity of teachers and peers, and they have more choices to make in their curricular and extracurricular activities. In this environment many young adolescents' grades drop, and they do not attend school as regularly as they did (Barone et al., 1991; Reyes, Gillock, & Kobus, 1994). They also develop a more negative view of themselves and feel an increased need for peer friendships (Hertzog et al., 1996).

Studies that have included students' thoughts and feelings about moving into high school reveal that eighth grade students are both excited and concerned about going to high school. They look forward to more freedom, more choice, the opportunity to participate in more extracurricular activities, and the opportunity to develop friendships. However, they also admit to being "nervous" and "scared" about older students teasing them; getting lost in their larger, unfamiliar school; and making bad grades (Cognato, 1999; Maute, 1991; Mizelle, 1995; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994; Wells, 1996). They are concerned that high school teachers will be more strict and that teachers will give them much more and much harder work than they had in middle school.

However, once young adolescents make the transition into high school, they may find that some of their initial fears are unfounded and that some of their opportunities carry a lot of responsibility (Cognato, 1999; Mizelle, 1995). For example, in late fall of their freshman year, the young adolescents in Mizelle's transition study described high school as "different"—different from what they had expected and different from middle school. Contrary to their fears, the older students did not "bully freshmen" or "stand around laughing at them." There was some teasing, but most older students were willing to help them and even made good friends. The school did not seem nearly as large or difficult to get around in as they had feared. They really did not have problems getting lost. While they liked being able to choose their classes and extracurricular activities, they were concerned about how difficult the classes were and how to manage their time when they got involved in extracurricular activities. School seemed a lot more difficult and demanding than it had in middle school. How to study and how to manage their time were major concerns once these young adolescents made the transition into high school.

### WHAT ARE APPROPRIATE ARTICULATION PRACTICES FOR STUDENTS MAKING THE TRANSITION INTO HIGH SCHOOL?

The research indicates that facilitating young adolescents' transition from middle school to high school requires programs that specifically address the transition period (Cognato, 1999; Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Hertzog et al., 1996; Mac Iver, 1990) as well as middle school programs that challenge and support students (Belcher & Hatley, 1994; Bry & George, 1980; McAdoo, 1999; Mizelle, 1995; Oates, Flores, & Weishe, 1998). Mac Iver (1990) found that fewer students were retained in the transition grade when middle school students experienced a high school transition program with several, diverse articulation activities. Middle school principals also indicated that they expected fewer of their students to drop out before graduation when the school provided supportive advisory group activities or responsive remediation programs (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).



More recently, in a study of 56 Georgia and Florida high schools, Hertzog and Morgan (1999) found that schools with extensive transition programs have significantly lower failure and dropout rates than schools that provided students few articulation activities. Like Mac Iver, Hertzog and Morgan concluded that the best transition programs were those that included a variety of activities—in particular, counseling, school visits, and special summer courses to help students understand their new school.

### TRANSITION PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

According to Mac Iver (1990), the middle level transition programs that school administrators viewed as best at helping students succeed during their first year following transition were those programs that used a number of different articulation activities. They were programs that included activities that (a) provided students and parents information about the new school, (b) provided students social support during the transition, and (c) brought middle school and high school personnel together to learn about one another's curriculum and requirements.

#### Activities that provide students and parents information

Middle school students want to know what high school is going to be like (Mizelle, 1995), and they and their parents need to know about and understand high school programs and procedures (Mac Iver, 1990; Phelan et al., 1994; Sansone & Baker, 1990). What is a vocational class? Should I take College Prep Algebra I or General Algebra I? How should I know, and what can I do if I get in the wrong class? Providing students and parents the answer to these and many other questions should be a central component of a high school transition program. In particular, parents need to understand and be actively involved in the decisions their eighth graders are asked to make about classes they will take in ninth grade (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Paulson, 1994). Parents need to understand students' options and the long-term effects of the course decisions.

Parent involvement in young adolescent students' transition from middle to high school is critical. When parents are involved in students' transition to high school, they tend to stay involved in their child's school experiences (Mac Iver, 1990); and when parents are involved in their child's high school experiences, students achieve more (Linver & Silverberg, 1997; Paulson, 1994; Paulson, Marchant, & Rothlisberg, 1998), are better adjusted (Hartos & Power, 1997), and are less likely to drop out of school (Horn & West, 1992). The concern for educators is that, typically, parent involvement in young adolescents' school related activities decreases during the transition from middle school to high school, *unless* schools and teachers work to encourage their involvement (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 1996). At the middle school level, teachers and administrators need to inform parents about all transition activities and encourage them to participate. Perhaps more importantly, they need to work to keep parents involved in their child's education and school activities during the middle school years so that they are comfortable "coming to school" and confident that their involvement makes a difference in their child's academic success.

Parent involvement in the transition process to high school should be encouraged through a variety of activities (Epstein, 1995). Parents may be invited to participate in a conference (at the high school or, preferably, at the middle school) with their child and the high school counselor to discuss course work and schedules; they may be invited to visit the high school with their child in the spring and/or in the fall; they may be invited to spend the day at the high school to help them understand



what their child's life will be like; they may even be invited to help design and facilitate some of the articulation activities for students. In planning activities for parents, high school educators should remember that parents of students who are already in high school are an excellent resource for other parents and may also help to encourage new parents to be more involved in school activities.

### Activities that provide social support

At a time when friendships and social interaction are particularly important for young adolescents, the normative transition into high school often serves to disrupt friendship networks and, thereby, interferes with students' success in high school (Barone et al., 1991). Thus, it is vital for high school transition programs to include activities that provide incoming students social support: activities that give students the opportunity to get to know and develop positive relationships with older students and other incoming students (Cognato, 1999; Hertzog et al., 1996; Mac Iver, 1990). In one such program, Cognato (1999) found that students who participated in a number of different interactions—including meetings, letter-writing, and a picnic—with older students received fewer failing grades and missed fewer days of school than students who did not participate in such programs. Furthermore, females in the treatment group benefitted more from the program in terms of socialization, self-esteem, and academic performance. The social interactions in this program included ninth grade students meeting with eighth graders to dispel some of the misconceptions about high school; eighth graders shadowing a ninth grade student; and eighth grade students writing to a ninth grade buddy.

### Activities that bring middle and high school educators together

Underlying successful high school transition programs are activities that bring middle school and high school administrators, counselors, and teachers together to learn about the programs, courses, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools (George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Hertzog et al., 1996; Mac Iver, 1990; Vars, 1998). Activities that create a mutual understanding of curriculum requirements at both levels and of the young adolescent learner will enable middle school educators to do a better job of preparing students for high school and will help educators at both levels develop a high school transition program to meet the particular needs of their students. Designing and implementing activities for a particular high school transition program also involves middle and high school educators working together. It is not the sole responsibility of the middle school or the high school educators, but their mutual responsibility. Designing these activities should include input from students and parents at both levels. Coinciding with these ideas, Lena Morgan, co-chair of the Center for Transition Studies at Augusta State University and the State University of West Georgia, recommends that a transition program include (a) visits to eighth graders by the ninth grade counselors and teachers; (b) visits to high school by eighth grade teachers, students, and parents; (c) professional development programs on the development of young adolescents for high school teachers; and (d) a high school design where freshmen can stay with the same group of teachers and remain somewhat separate from older high school students (cited in McAdoo, 1999).



### Middle school programs that support a successful transition

While providing young adolescents with activities that relate directly to their transition into high school is important, providing young adolescents with a challenging and supportive middle school experience is equally important in their making a successful transition into high school (Belcher & Hatley, 1994; Bry & George, 1980; Mizelle, 1995; Oates et al., 1998). For example, Mizelle (1995) found that students (the Delta students) who stayed together with the same teachers through sixth, seventh, and eighth grade and experienced more hands-on, life-related learning activities, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning groups (the Delta Project) were more successful in their transition to high school than were students (the Non-Delta students) from the same school who had a more traditional middle school experience. In ninth grade the Delta students had higher language arts, science, and social science grades and were more likely to enroll in higher level mathematics courses than the Non-Delta students. The Delta students also said that being involved in the Delta Project helped them make the transition into high school because it helped them feel more confident about learning and helped them get along with their peers.

At the same time, the Delta and Non-Delta students recognized that they were stressed about their grades because the high school teachers expected them to learn more and faster and to do more learning on their own. Upon reflection, these students indicated that their middle school program would have eased their transition into high school if it had provided them with an even more challenging curriculum, and if teachers had held students more responsible for their learning, and taught them more about strategies for learning on their own.

Similarly, in a comprehensive program at Sunrise Middle School in inner city Philadelphia, Oates and her colleagues (1998) found that students who participated in a Community for Learning Program (CFL) were more successful in their transition into high school than students who had not participated in the CFL program. Key components of the CFL program were support and training for teachers, a learning management system designed to help middle school students develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and behavior (similar to the one suggested by the Delta students), and an emphasis on community and family involvement. As a result of their participation in the CFL program, the one student group had more positive feelings about middle school, higher middle school achievement, fewer high school dropouts, and more students who were able to maintain their grade-level placement in high school than the non-participating students.

### CONCLUSION

Current research related to young adolescents' transition into high school suggests that it is time for educators to reemphasize articulation as a function of middle level education. While schools in the middle often do seek to ease the transition of their outgoing students into their new school, the time and effort invested in this aspect of their program is limited (Mac Iver, 1990; Vars, 1998). According to Mac Iver's report of the survey, "Education in the Middle Grades," the average middle level school used only three to four articulation practices (significantly fewer than they used with incoming students) to bridge their students' transition into high school. Furthermore, many young adolescent students still do not experience a smooth and successful transition into high school, even though there is compelling research about appropriate articulation practice.



The research also indicates that it is time to rethink practices within middle level schools. Educators need to understand that articulating young adolescents' transition into high school involves the total middle school program as well as specific articulation practices at the time of the transition (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; McEwin, 1998; Vars, 1998; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). They need to recognize that helping young adolescents make a successful transition into high school involves elementary, middle, and high school educators working together with parents and students to structure their program and curriculum so that young adolescents "experience a seamless transition and articulation between schools" (Williamson & Johnson, 1999, p. 16).

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