

From Survive to Thrive: The Importance of Transition

Mary Beth Campbell and Micah Jacobson

As Chris Endicott, assistant principal of Dakota Hills Middle School in Eagan, Minnesota, was cleaning up after his monthly "Parent-Bagel" meeting, a parent pulled him aside. The parent had a sixth grader named Lucas at the school who had come home one day last week excited to tell her about his day.

Lucas was being teased by some older students in the locker room about something he was wearing. He admitted he was on the verge of tears, when his eighth grade WEB (Where Everybody Belongs™) small group leader stepped in, defended Lucas, and put a stop to the teasing. The eighth grade WEB leader then walked with him down the hall, talking to him and making sure he was okay.

The parent said that Lucas felt really good about what happened. She added that without that eighth grader stepping forward, it could have been his worst day at middle school. Instead it turned out to be one of his best.

Much is made about the transition into high school, and although this transition is important, the transition year into middle school, whether it is fifth, sixth, or seventh grade, is one of the most difficult that many students make. It is this transition that often leaves lasting scars.

Transitions of all kinds require us to seek out and navigate the same three components: safety, information, connection. For every transition we go through in life, no matter the magnitude, these three elements make repeated appearances.

Think about it: when we move into a new community we ask, "How safe is it? Where is the nearest grocery store? Who are my neighbors?" Whether you are a young person facing middle school for the first time or an adult taking a new job, you want to feel safe, gain an understanding about the situation, and have someone to turn to.

Many schools are adept at focusing on at least one and sometimes two of these three components. Rarely, though, does a school provide equal access to all three for their transitioning students.

When schools create a comprehensive transition system that provides these elements, students are not only guided toward success in that transition, but in the ability to handle later and likely more significant transitions down the road. Furthermore, providing students with the means to have successful transitions



can change an entire school culture from disjunctive and frightening to supportive and welcoming: a culture where kids like Lucas don't just survive the middle school experience, but thrive in it.

To create and implement an effective and comprehensive transition program, there needs to be a common understanding of the basic components and, in some cases, a mind shift in the commonly held beliefs about what those components mean and how they are best integrated into the transition process.

Safety

In many middle schools, the focus is on keeping students safe by keeping bad things from entering the school environment. As a result, money and resources are invested in security to seal off the campus from the outside.

Every school shooting generates the predictable media interviews with security firms and emergency preparation officers as well as the scrutiny of whether enough was done to prevent such an incident in the first place. These incidences feed the frenzy and panic around whether our students are truly safe at school.

Those inside our middle schools, however, know that the far greater issue for students is keeping them safe from the negative forces within the school walls and halls. Bullying, rumors, isolation, and harassment are far more likely to pose safety risks on the average campus than external violence.

We should not stop our efforts to keep kids safe from outside violence, but we must expand our notion of what constitutes student safety. Having a truly safe campus means that kids are able to show up each day and not fear physical or emotional violence, whether it's the rare occasion of a stranger with a weapon or the more likely event of physical intimidation or name calling.

Students need to feel that they are not going to be accosted or otherwise assaulted during their school day. And, should something happen that makes them feel unsafe, they need to have the confidence to know that they have somewhere to go, someone to talk with, and the resources on campus to cope should an incident occur.

Information

To make a successful transition, we need the what, where, how, and when to aid us on our journey. In schools, this translates into students needing to know what classes they have to take, where those classes are, what rules are important, what opportunities are available, and where they have to be when.

For most schools, the challenge comes in getting this information to the students in an accurate and timely manner. Many schools gather large groups of new students and parents together and talk at them. They also post the information everywhere they think parents or students might look: newsletters, Web sites, and bulletin boards.

In reality, research shows that large group lectures are among the least effective means of reaching people and printed material is only useful if people actually read it. These methods may be efficient for the administration, but they aren't effective in reaching students or parents.

Students and parents in transition need to be able to access the right information at the right time. Schools need to critically assess what information is most relevant to which populations at any given time. Once they know what information they are trying to disseminate and to which parties, schools must find distribution strategies that ensure that the most important information reaches and is digested by every member of the community.

Connection

Even when students feel safe and informed, they may not successfully transition into a new school if they do not develop a sense of connection. In every transition in our lives we need to feel a sense of connection to the new situation. This is true whether we are connecting to a new job, a new child, or a new reality in our own lives.

The more connected students are to their new school, the better they will do in all the measures that are important in tracking their success: grades, test scores, attendance, and discipline. All these measures are positively affected when students are connected.

What does it mean to feel connected? A brief reflection in our own lives can often provide more information than the very best research studies. Connection is a personal thing. Some of us connect to the rigor of a challenging curriculum while others feel connected to a tradition of excellence in athletics. While the "what" might change, the "who" never does. Students and teachers and parents and administrators, no matter our age or situation, all seek connections.

Schools try to promote this crucial component of transition by offering cocurricular activities, athletics, and special events in the hopes that kids will connect. Unlike the two other components to a successful transition, this one is left to chance. Even the most robust cocurricular programs only involve a percentage of the students.

The challenge for schools is to create structures that ensure kids create multiple connections at different levels with peers, teachers, administrators, and community members, and that these connections are as deliberate and available as the safety and information provided.

Some Suggestions

How do schools continue to help students feel safe, get the right information, and feel connected long after the beginning of the school year?

As with most lasting initiatives in education, the answer is different at every school. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating a perfect transition. Instead, schools must look at their students, their staff, and their community and build a program that meets their needs.

Most successful transition programs incorporate some or all of the following approaches:

Orientation for students: The most successful approaches schedule a new- students-only first day to ensure that every new student gets the same information and opportunities. Rather than lectures, this day should encourage participation and involvement and offer critical information delivered in a way students understand and can get excited about.

Orientation for parents: Educators should understand this is not just a transition for students, but often times for parents as well. Parents need the same three elements provided for them as they usher their children into this new phase of their lives.

Older student mentoring: Empower your upper grades students to become mentors and leaders to the incoming students. This creates a cadre of continuous support for new students—not just during orientation, but throughout the year. An effective ratio for middle schools is one mentor for every five incoming students.

Train your upper grades students in listening skills and small group facilitation and then create structured opportunities for them to spend time with the new students.

Peer mediation and conflict resolution: A comprehensive peer mediation and conflict resolution program can be powerful in maintaining a collective sense of safety and connection. Continue to invest in and utilize this important resource all year long.

Ongoing parent connection: Regular parent meetings like the morning bagel talks that Dakota Hills Principal Chris Endicott promotes is a great example of the kind of ongoing communication necessary to help parents transition along with their students. In addition, many schools hold separate orientation evenings for parents.

Again, the key is not to spend the entire evening talking at parents, but to find ways to break parents into small groups, possibly with experienced parents as leaders, to help address parent concerns one by one.

Consistent educator transition practices: Although the staff is often coming back to the same building and maybe even the same job, every year feels brand new to the students. Find practices that the staff can embrace to make them active participants in the transition. These could include common opening day approaches, advisory or homeroom curricula, or standard behavior practices like greeting each student by name at the classroom door for the first week.

Ultimately the approach to transition that your school creates will have to work for you. How will you know? Create your transition goals up front and then hold yourselves accountable for demonstrating tangible results. If it works, you'll know both in the data and, more importantly, in the tears of gratitude of parents like Lucas's mom.

Mary Beth Campbell and Micah Jacobson are co-founders of The Boomerang Project, which produces the nationally recognized WEB (Where Everybody Belongs) middle school transition program. For information, visit www.boomerangproject.com

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the boomerang project
you get back what you give

~ Micah Jacobson ~ NCSA 2015 Buffalo, NY

A *Meet The Pros* session on the importance of transitions

1. Why Does Transition Matter?

- ~ Initiates growth
- ~ Defines patterns of behavior

2. What Happens in Transition?

We experience emotional range: excitement, fear, anxiety, joy, hope, sadness, loss, gain, delight

3. How Do We Commonly Find Success?

Time, perseverance, positive attitude, friends and family, a mentor, the internet, faith

The 3 Keys to Transition

1. SAFETY
Physical + Emotional.
2. INFORMATION:
The *Right Information* delivered at the *Right Time* and in the *Right Way*.
3. CONNECTION:
Above all else, self-reported feelings of connection indicate all manner of positive outcomes.

How Schools Get it Wrong

1. SAFETY:
They focus first and foremost on physical safety when emotional is more relevant
2. INFORMATION:
They focus on efficiency (mail, website, assemblies, lectures) rather than effectiveness
3. CONNECTION:
Schools often use a "fingers crossed" approach...generally through extra-curricular programs (sports, clubs, activities).

A Good Transition Model:

- ~Initial Orientation (Peer leadership based)
- ~Immediate individual follow up
- ~6-8 follow up events in the first 3 months (mix of one on one, small group and large group)
- ~Evaluation metrics for effectiveness

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