A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND FAMILIES MOVING INTO MIDDLE SCHOOL

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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By

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this Graduate Project to my husband, Hector Carrillo and our two sons; Hector Josiah “JoJo” Carrillo III and Joaquin Hezekiah Carrillo. To my husband, thank you so much for your endless love, support, and encouragement. You gave me the strength to reach for the stars and chase my dreams. I could not have done all this without you. To my boys, I hope and pray that you both are able to follow your dreams and do what you love. Mommy did all this for you because I want you both to become life-long learners and to understand how important education is. I love the three of you with all my heart. I would also like to thank my parents for your understanding and support in my journey. I hope I have made you proud.
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ABSTRACT

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MOVING INTO MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

Verisha Carrillo

Master of Arts in Education, Elementary Education

The transition from elementary school into middle school can be a very challenging time for students. This is a time of great change; mentally, socially, emotionally, and physically. Most students whom move into middle school look forward to this change because it signifies a bridge between childhood and adulthood. Transitioning into middle school also indicates more independence and responsibility being placed on these sixth-graders. At the same time, there are students whom do not feel comfortable with this sudden increase of change. These students whom do not transition well tend to exhibit an academic and behavior downfall. This downfall is associated with new and higher expectations set upon them. This transition program was designed to assist teachers, students, and their families make a smooth transition into middle school. Furthermore, this document offers a framework for designing and implementing a transition program that is suitable for the middle school population needed. It is important for school districts to have a complete and synchronized transition program and to adapt it as changes occur in student populations, school personnel, and community resources.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Early adolescence is a time of rapid individual change and a transfer from elementary school to middle school. Most students go through this confusing stage without great stress or serious problems. Others, unfortunately, begin a downward spiral that results in academic failure and, for too many, resulting in dropping out of school. For many, the early adolescent years are a time when they experience gradual declines in several areas, including school grades, personal development, motivation, and family interactions. An alarming decline has been seen in some early adolescents’ school grades as they move from elementary to middle school. The magnitude if the decline in students’ grades has also been found to predict subsequent failure and dropouts. In fact, in the 2011-2012 school year, between 10% and 20% of students in California dropped out of high school before receiving their high school diploma (California Department of Education, 2012).

According to Galton, Gray, and Ruddock (1999) dropouts are more likely to have struggled academically; receiving low grades, low test scores, such as fails in English or math in middle school, resulting in these students falling behind in course credits as they enter high school which is associated with lower chances for graduation. Furthermore, other factors of dropouts also depend on the students’ ethnic group and socio-economic status (Galton et al., 1999). More specifically, sixth-graders, whom fall in these categories, had only a ten percent chance of graduating within four years of entering high school and only a twenty percent chance of graduating a year late (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005).

Furthermore, all sixth-grade students in California perform rather poorly in Language Arts, resulting in 40% of students scoring at or below Basic on the California Standards Test in the 2011 – 2012 school year. Math CST scores are even lower; resulting in 45% of students
scoring at or below Basic (CDE, 2013). When comparing the sixth-grade score to the fifth-grade scores there is a significant drop in both scores. Additionally, these scores reflect that the transition from elementary school into middle school is difficult for students. Furthermore, Galton, Gray, and Ruddock (1999) estimates that seven percent of 11-year-olds “unlearn” reading, mathematics, and language skills during their first year of secondary school. The extent of the decline in students’ grades has been found to forecast subsequent school failure and dropout.

While transitions can be complicated at all levels of schooling, moving into the middle school grades comes at a time when learners themselves are going through significant social, emotional, cognitive, and physical changes, and these changes can amplify many of these difficulties. Ryan, Shim, Makara (2013) found that early adolescence is widely characterized as a challenging time for youth. A child in the beginning and/or middle stages of puberty may act more irrationally and make irresponsible decisions, affecting his/her overall academic achievement. Additionally, at this period in time, adolescents’ interest in school, self-esteem, and confidence in their academic abilities also tend to decline, especially after the first school failure in middle school.

Students’ motivation is also an important influence on learning. Motivation is of particular importance for those students transitioning from elementary school into middle school. Although, considerable research has shown a decline in motivation and performance for many students as they transition into middle school (Midgley, 1993). The nature of motivational changes in these early adolescents depends on the characteristics of the learning environment in which students find themselves. Also seen are age-related increases in negative motivational and
behavioral characteristics. During this time of transition, peer culture undergoes significant changes in result of declining motivation in academics. Peer support for aggressive and deviant behavior increase, whereas peer support for academic behavior decreases. Some studies report stronger association between aggression and popularity status in middle school than in elementary school (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Students in elementary school tend to have a greater acceptance of their peers in upper elementary grade levels compared to the first couple of years of middle school (Bukowski, Sippola, Hoza, & Newcomb, 2000). When transitioning into middle school, the decline in peer acceptance results from students whom do not have a strong social network in late elementary school (Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). This may result in other declines; such as academics and family life.

Although most students do not experience major disruptions in their family lives, there often is a temporary increase in family conflict during early adolescence. As students move into middle school, they find more opportunities for independence outside the home, unsupervised contact with peers, and exposures to different families (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Mac Iver, 1993). To be successful in school and in life, early adolescents need trusting and caring relationships. They also need opportunities to form their own identities, engage in independent self-expression, and take part in challenging experiences that will develop their competence and self-esteem (Eccles et al., 1993). Middle school students’ desire autonomy, independence, and time with peers, but at the same time, they continue to rely on guidance from parents and other adults (Steinburg, 2001). Family involvement in academics and learning remains important in the adolescent years.

Unfortunately, family involvement in education tends to decrease across middle and secondary school, due in part to adolescents’ increasing desire for autonomy and in part to
changes in school structure and organization (Steinburg & Morris, 2001). Yet family involvement in education remains a powerful predictor of various adolescent outcomes. In order to adjust and to explore new opportunities for growth, students transferring into middle school need a safe, comfortable, intellectually challenging environment. For this reason, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of positive transitional programs and support to all new 6th grade middle school students (Van Ryzin, Stromshak, & Dishion, 2012).

Most schools provide some kind of transition program for students in their fifth grade year of elementary school. These programs consist of a parent/student night, followed by a tour of the middle school for students sometime in the spring. These are exceptional activities for incoming 6th graders, but these two activities are usually the only activities in the whole transition plan. More importantly, they do not tackle the questions and fears these students have (Loraine, 2002). A significant element of the research shows that in order for a student to have a smooth transition from elementary to middle school, schools with an all-inclusive "Transition to Middle School" program help incoming middle school students be positive and look forward to the coming year.

This type of program consists of middle school teachers, as well as parents, providing consistent support, structure and positive social opportunities to assist children through the stages of this transition. Moreover, the problem continues because many middle school teachers have so many students; it is hard for teachers to provide this type of support for each student in their classroom and most parents work fulltime, so they are not able to monitor children’s behaviors in order to guide them towards making healthy choices and flourishing academically and personally.

When schools, parents, and students work together, the transition from elementary to
middle school can be an opportunity for tremendous development. Conclusive research finds that students who feel comfortable in their new environment are more likely to learn and grow effectively, resulting in higher scores in not only sixth-grade but in sequential grades as well.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The intent of this project is to provide educators and students, for whom are entering middle school, with a tangible framework for the transition process into middle school. Material to obtain and organize student information, as well as to inform and effectively involve students and their families in the transition process is included in this project. There is a significant body of research that strongly suggests systematic, thorough, and ongoing transition programs benefit students both academically and socially.

Effects of a Positive Transition into Middle School

Every year, millions of elementary school students across the country take the big leap to middle school. Most students look forward to this time in their life because it is their launching pad toward adulthood. Also, it is a shift into increasing independence and a chance to redefine themselves in their new surroundings. At the same time, many are fearful about this step into the unknown.

Research shows that an important indicator of a flourishing middle school experience is a smooth and positive transition from elementary school into middle school (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). Regrettably, transitions can be complicated for everyone but for a young person the most difficult transition is the one from elementary to middle school (Anderman & Anderman, 1999). While these young fifth-grade students are adapting to their own hormonal changes including physical, emotional, cognitive changes, they abruptly enter a new educational environment that is less nurturing, much larger, more competitive, having to adapt to having five or more teachers, and more demanding academically (Kralova, 2012). Furthermore, middle school students are usually expected to be more independent and take on more of the responsibility for their own academic success. The question remains, are these students ready for middle school?
Galton et al. (1999) found that middle schools where the students’ transitions are smooth and positive are the ones in which a well-planned, systematic transition program involves all the people involved; students, school personnel, and parents. This means that students are aware of their responsibilities in middle school, school personnel provide support, and parents are involved. This is significant because middle school is new and filled with more complicated social situations, increased academic pressure and more teachers to deal with, and a seemingly vast array of opportunities to succeed or fail. Although the transition into middle school is problematic for some students, other aspects; such as motivation, can influence how the student moves from elementary to middle school.

**Student Motivation and Increased Opportunities to Learn**

According to Haselhuhn, Al-Mabuk, and Gabriele (2007), educators believe that motivation has a significant influence on student learning. In addition, Alderman (1999) states that student motivation is an essential element that is necessary for quality education. Motivation is a concern for many middle school teachers because student motivation declines in the transition from elementary to middle school. Some educators think this decline is associated with changes in the adolescents during puberty. Because of these changes in students, the transition from elementary to middle school should be as smooth as possible for the student. Poor transitions from elementary to middle school tend to show a decline in students’ academic achievement and an up rise in behavioral issues (Wentzel, 1997).

Haselhuhn et al. (2007) found that teachers have a lot to do with their students' motivational level. A student may enter the classroom with a certain level of motivation. But the teacher's actions and teaching style, the makeup of the course, the nature of the assignments and
informal interactions with students all have a huge effect on student motivation. In addition to general strategies, the information found in this research addresses successful instructional behaviors, how to organize a course to motivate students, taking the emphases off grades and responding with other types of feedback to students, and providing tips to encourage students to complete assigned homework or assignments (Wentzel, 1997; Anderman & Midgley, 1997).

Haselhuhn et al. (2007) goes on to state that in order to foster essential motivation, creating learning activities that are based on topics that are relevant to your students' lives keeps students engaged and wanting to learn. Some of the strategies mentioned were to include using local examples, teaching with events in the news, using new technology such as iPods, cell phones, and YouTube videos to teach, or connecting the subject with students' background, outside interests and social lives.

It was found that students have an increased motivation when they feel some sense of independence in their learning process, and that motivation declines when students have no voice in the class structure (Haselhuhn et al., 2007). By giving students options such as letting them pick their group partners, being able to select from alternate assignments, or help in creating the assignment rubric and given the opportunity to determine their own due dates and assignments can all boast the motivation of students (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987; Maehr & Midgley, 1991).

Moreover, Duchesne, Ratelle, and Poitras, et al., (2009) found that students have a fundamental need to feel connected or related to other students. In an academic setting, research shows that students who feel they “fit in” have an elevated level of motivation and academic confidence. According to students, their sense of “fitting in” is encouraged by their teachers demonstrating kindness and honesty, encouraging student to participation by creating a safe
learning environment, are enthusiastic, friendly and helpful, and are prepared for class.

The research continues to illustrate that students perform best when the level of complexity is somewhat above their present ability level. If the lesson is too easy, it endorses boredom and possibly will communicate a meaning of low expectations or a belief that the teacher considers the student incapable of better work (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). On the other hand, tasks that are too complex can be perceive as being beyond their reach, may weaken confidence, and create anxiety. Anderman and Midgley, go on to state that scaffolding is one instructional practice where the challenge level is gradually raised as students are capable of more complex tasks. This is beneficial when keeping sixth-grade students motivated and on the right track in continuing their success in middle school. While motivation is a key factor in a positive transition into middle school, students also need to be aware of their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical changes during this time of transition and how these factors can affect their success in middle school (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Pintrich, 2000).

**Student Social, Emotional, Cognitive, and Physical Changes during Middle School**

Kralova (2012) found that middle school students are experiencing dramatic changes in physical development, although the rate at which this development occurs varies individually. Changes in height, weight, and in body chemistry are taking place, along with rapid sexual development. These heightened physical growths, together with their inclination to be very active, cause low energy in early adolescence. Kralova goes on the state that many of them find it difficult to cope with the many changes taking place in them and compare themselves harshly to their peers. At the same time, they are often worried about their ability to learn and whether or not they can meet the expectations of parents and teachers. Research in classrooms has revealed that student engagement and willingness to exert effort on academic tasks can be enhanced by
social motives, such as the desire to work with friends and peers, to please parents, and to please the teacher (Wentzel, 1999; Urdan & Turner, 2005).

Research shows that with this growing social world of an adolescent comes the introduction of friendship. Friendships become ever more important throughout the middle school years (Kravola, 2012). During the earliest years of childhood, students do not put a lot of thought into choosing or making friends. In most cases, their choice of friends during these early years is mostly an issue of proximity. The students are in the same place at the same time. While these adolescent students’ depend on their parent’s relationship and enjoy spending time with siblings or relatives; they also become more interested in building relationships with other people outside the family unit. Learning how to make and keep friendships is a vital part of the developmental process during this time (Ryan et al., 2013).

Ryan et al. (2013) found that students of the adolescent age are sensitive and have a strong need for approval from others; therefore, hurtful comments or criticism from their peers sometimes have devastating effects. On the other hand, these students are frequently inconsiderate and cruel in their relationships with their peers. Students are mostly concerned about peer approval and acceptance, and they need close friends their own age who can provide the comfort and understanding they find hard to get from the adults in their lives.

Duchesne, Ratelle, Poitras et al. (2009) found that cognitive abilities such as concentration and memory progress considerably during the middle years. Students at this age have improved attention spans than they did in early childhood and they are more capable of remembering information for longer spans of time. Not only is their ability to pay attention for longer periods much better, their selective attention has also improved. Duchesne et al. continues to state that this means that students are capable of tuning out inappropriate distractions in order
to concentrate only on significant information. This ability is of particular importance in the classroom since students can start to ignore the distractions presented by their classmates in order to pay attention to teachers and the lesson at hand (Wentzel, 1999).

Anderman and Anderman (1999) found that during the middle school years, students who have the opportunity to enjoy team sports, thrive on competition, work hard at ideal athletic skills, and value good sportsmanship have great success in middle school as well as their high school years. These students are usually excitable, easily motivated, creative, curious, and eager to discover new things; but if these students are not active participants in learning situations, they may easily drift into daydreams which results in a decline in their academics as well as behavior issues (Pintrich, 2000).

Behavioral Issues

Research suggests that even through adolescence, students maintain a strong emotional response to ethical issues where the effects on another person are clear. Students still know it’s wrong to hit or bully other students but once they hit middle school age, however, they become less bound by societal conventions (Theriot & Dupper, 2010). This means that when their ethical decisions have only indirect effects on other people, they become less likely to do the right thing. For example, even though they wouldn’t actually steal from someone’s backpack, they are less likely than younger kids to return money they find on the street. In that case, the indirect nature of the problem does not encourage their moral instincts, and we cannot count on them to adhere to societal conventions like they did when they were younger (Van Ryzin et al., 2012).

Theriot and Dupper (2010) continue to assert that middle school students have just spent the first 11 or 12 years of their lives following the rules. All of a sudden, they wake up to the fact that these rules were set by adults and are somewhat subjective. Developmentally, they haven’t
yet understood why these rules were developed in the first place. They typically won’t make that connection until they are about 15 or 16 years old. As a result, their behavior often falls in an ethical gap between the reliability to the rules they showed as young kids and the more difficult ethical reasoning they develop in their late teens which consequently damages students success in middle school.

Decline in Academic Success

Research found indicates that the decline in student performance is due to a mismatch between young adolescents’ needs and the opportunities afforded them in many middle grades school settings (Anderson & Midgley, 1997). Every now and then, the assumption is made that these declines are related to physiological and psychological changed associated with puberty and they are to be expected. As stated above, the transition from elementary to middle school coincides with several major changes for young adolescents. Most are in the development stage of puberty and are becoming more self-aware and self-conscious, and their thinking is growing more critical and more complex. At the same time, adolescents are often in a stagnant mode when it comes to academic motivation and performance (Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Eccles et al., 1993).

On average, children's grades drop dramatically during the first year of middle school compared to their grades in elementary school. After moving to middle school, children become less interested in school and less self-assured about their abilities. Compared to elementary schools, middle schools are more controlling, less cognitively challenging and focus more on competition and comparing students' ability which contributes to students’ downfall (Duchesne, Ratelle, Roy, 2011). With this information, it seems necessary to establish a program that will help all students with the transition process from elementary into middle school.
Elementary to Middle School Transition Programs

Kralova (2012) found that high-quality elementary/middle school transition programs contain teachers that minimize the fear in the minds of their students by stressing the positive aspects of moving ahead to middle school. These teacher who make an effort to teach coping strategies, at all grade levels, encourage their students to think of the transition to middle school as a challenge and an opportunity for intellectual and social growth. In other words, 5th grade students with elementary school teachers who slowly prepare students for the academic challenges of middle school tend to have a much easier time transitioning into 6th grade (Anderman et al., 2009). These teachers prepare students for middle school academics by gradually increasing the amount of independence they expect of students in completing assignments. Their teachers take the time to explain this to them in a rather calm manner. For example, an elementary teacher might say, “As you move to middle school and to high school, you’ll be expected to take more responsibility for getting work done without a lot of reminders. I’m going to try to introduce this gradually in our daily routine so you’re ready for that responsibility when the time comes. I have confidence that you will all be able to handle the increased responsibility.”

Duchesne, Ratelle, and Roy (2011) found that educators in both; elementary and middle schools, that provide activities for students with the intention of easing their concerns, build students’ confidence and lessen their anxiety. What's more, incoming middle school students who are involved in a variety of activities, preparing them for middle school, have a propensity in making the transition into middle school much easier. Furthermore, students who have the opportunity to visit the middle school in the spring and meet the staff and students, particularly the teachers, tend to feel more comfortable when starting 6th grade which results in higher
academic achievement and positive behaviors throughout their time in middle school (Duchesne, Ratelle, Roy et al., 2011; Midgley & Stewart, 1993).

According to Anderman and Midgley (1997) elementary schools with excellent transition programs tend to have teachers who encourage students and their families to tour the school during the summer. During these tours, school personnel provide information about the school as well as, for example, maps and class schedules. Virtual tours and an orientation session may also be an option for parents and students. Even more, it is useful to have students who have already made the transition successfully speak at the orientation about their strategies. These students paint a realistic but not overly fearful view of the school that is more relatable. Duchesne, Ratelle, Poitras, and Drouin (2009) point out the importance of addressing the specific concerns that students and parents may have and allow time for questions and answers, either orally and in writing. Moreover, when schools provide opportunities for students to meet each other it results in beneficial community learning. When students from several schools merge into one middle school, this effort is made to help the students get to know each other early in the year.

Galton et al. (1999) found that middle school teachers who encourage parental involvement provide varied opportunities for parental involvement in the schools which result in positive changes in student achievement. Teacher who communication with parents in meetings, through the internet, in notes or postcards from school to home, in phone calls, and in periodic newsletters create an open communication line that most parents appreciate (Duchesne, Ratelle, and Poitras, et al., 2009). Middle school teachers do not limit contacts with parents to occasions of student misbehavior or other bad news.
Recommendations for Further Study

Despite the above findings, there has not been much research on the dropout rates of middle school students that do not succeed in throughout that time in their educational life. There would be more of an impact in the study also focus on the individual factors that predict whether students drop out from middle school or high school because of the decline in educational performance, behaviors, attitudes towards teachers and peers, and their socio-economic background. If several aspects of educational performance had been widely identified in the research literature it would have provided much stronger predictors of dropping out or graduating.

The above studies could have been a lot stronger if a wide range of behaviors both in and out of school have been shown to predict dropout and graduation. Some researchers did touch on one of the most important that of student engagement, which includes students’ active involvement in academic work and the social aspects of school. Research did find that students not involved in these areas in school are associated with academic decline but did not mention if these declines result in higher dropout rates. Furthermore, another factor that falls short in the research are the misbehaviors that start in middle school and follow students into high school as well as delinquent behavior outside of school may be significantly associated with higher dropout and lower graduation rates. In addition, the research does not correlate the use of drug or alcohol during middle school and high school years with higher dropout rates.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

About the Project

This project has been developed to provide fifth-grade and sixth-grade teachers, students, and their families with an understanding of the middle school transition process, to implement activities to ensure engagement of middle school students and their families, and to develop a plan for students to transition into middle school effectively. This plan will focus on areas of social and emotional behaviors, academic development, organizational and environmental skills, as well as college and career readiness. Teachers will introduce tangible resources that can be applied within the classroom and at home. Furthermore, teachers will use the transition planning process to guarantee that all students transition from elementary school to middle school with sufficient support from school, family, and the community.

There are four sections in the project: overview, parent section, student section, and teacher section. Each section includes materials to assist teachers in assessing their fifth-grade students, creating a variety of resources for students and their families, and developing a body of evidence as part of the student’s transition plan. These activities and resources are examples of materials teachers will use or give to their students and families as they work together to help their future middle school students have a smooth transition into middle school.

The overview of this project provides teachers, students, and families with an understanding of why school transition programs are so vital for incoming middle school students. The overview of the project focuses on the school transition process that involves four aspects: (1) Prepared schools, (2) Community participation and support, (3) Family knowledge and involvement, and (4) School and educational settings committed to preparing incoming middle school students. It is important for all parties involved to understand that school
transitions should not be explored from only the viewpoint of students and their families, but rather should involve the viewpoints of families, students, teachers; both in the fifth-grade as well as the sixth-grade, administrators, and community members as students move from one level of their education to the next. This transition program was designed to be completed in a variety of time frames; depending on the activity. The correlation between the state standards and this transition program is that the program is designed to help students build a sense of community, students will understand the impact that these transition activities have on their future success, encourage students to ask in-depth questions and seek assistance in times of need, and to enjoy the opportunities and increased freedom that comes with entering middle school.

The following chart provides an “At a Glance” framework of what this transitional program has to offer and the resources available:

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<th>SECTIONS</th>
<th>PROGRAM AIDS</th>
<th>RESOURCES/ACTIVITY TIME</th>
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<td>PARENT SECTION</td>
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<td>• Family Involvement</td>
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<td>• School Information</td>
<td><a href="http://www.focusonthefamily.com">www.focusonthefamily.com</a></td>
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<td>• Incentive Plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>STUDENT SECTION</td>
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<td>• Suggestions for a Successful Transition</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pbskids.org/itsmylife">www.pbskids.org/itsmylife</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Orientation Day</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org">www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org</a></td>
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<td>• First Day of School</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pamf.org/preteen">www.pamf.org/preteen</a></td>
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<td>• Bell Schedules</td>
<td><a href="http://www.teens.drugabuse.gov">www.teens.drugabuse.gov</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Clubs and Activities</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cccoe.net/social">www.cccoe.net/social</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ways to Make Friends</td>
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The parent section offers parents tips, strategies for supporting their child’s learning, incentive plans, school information, and other resources that will provide families with the essential information needed for a successful school year. In addition, the student section offers students a list of frequently asked question, suggestions for a successful transition, first day of school information, clubs and activities offered, ways to make friends, and how to make the most out of middle school.

Furthermore, the teacher section includes information about the transition team and plan and fifth-grade and sixth-grade middle school transition activities. This section is designed to guide and develop activities that help students, families, and the community support a successful transition process. The transition team also studies the policies and procedures as well as funding and resources for transition activities to make sure teacher, students, and families are well-versed on activities that are best suited for incoming sixth-graders. The school transition team and plan
is also set in place to focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student to facilitate their movement from elementary school into middle school.

The school transition team and plan allows teachers to acquire the skills needed to ensure they are creating a trusting and caring classroom environment through smaller learning groups, teacher and student teams, and personal advisement with students and families. It is also aimed to encourage critical thinking, healthy lifestyle, and active preparation for fifth and sixth grade students. Teachers, students, and families actively participate in events that provide opportunities for all students to be successful by the end of their fifth-grade year as well as their transitional year into middle school.

The implementation of the sixth-grade middle school transition activities is necessary because the sixth-grade year can be the most challenging year during their time in middle school. Students are going through major changes; not only academically but mentally as well. Therefore, it is important for teacher and parents to be involved with all facets of the sixth-grade students’ life. These five engaging activities will provide students with skills that will support them with the transition into middle school. Students will improve their academic understanding of the difference between elementary school and middle school, students will exercise their skills in remaining organized and focused with the new demanding workload, and students will successfully complete some of the culminating activities as they finished their elementary education and move into the sixth-grade. The following goals are quantifiable considering the outcomes of the application of this project.

**Project Goals**

The goals for this project are that teachers, fifth-grade students, and their families begin
to prepare for the transition into middle school during the last year in elementary school in order to ensure a successful transition. In order to accomplish these goals, teachers will also build and sustain relationships that will provide support to the schools, faculty and staff, families and students for implementing transition goals and strategies. Furthermore, teacher will plan the curriculum, goals and schedules for the fall transition to middle school. It is always a good starting point for the fifth-grade teachers to get information about the potential middle schools that their students will be filtering into. During the conclusion of their fifth-grade year, students will visit these school along with their parents to determine what school may be the best fit for them.

Another goal for this project is to ensure that the sixth-grade transition activities will result in students learning to stay focus, organized, and interested in school during the transition into middle school. These activities will enable students to have a better idea of what skills, personal capabilities, and educational experiences they must have in order to have a successful transitional year into the sixth-grade. Overall, the goal for students who complete these activities successfully are to minimize their challenges and to maximize their achievement their sixth-grade year as well as their future post-secondary academic years.

About the Author

As a middle school teacher, specifically a sixth-grade teacher, I feel that this project is beneficial because it provides effective methods for teachers, students, and families to use in order to ensure students are getting all the necessary resources for a smooth and positive transition into middle school. I have had the privilege of teaching at Frost Middle School in Granada Hills, California for three years now, where I teacher sixth-grade English Language Arts and Social Studies.
Frost Middle School has a very respectable reputation, and within the community, it is considered one of the top middle schools in the Northwest of the Los Angeles Unified School District. For the reason that, I have experience with many student who do not seem to have a problem with the transition from elementary school into middle school. They understand the new policies and procedures of their new school and abide by them. These students understand their teachers’ expectations and are able to maintain passing marks. The students that transition well are able to balance the heavy workload that is associated with being a middle school student, and most importantly, these student whom have a successful transition into middle school have parents that are involved whom also are aware of the schools policies, procedures, and expectations of the teachers.

But on the other hand, I have seen plenty of students; honor students included, that seem to struggle with the transition. They begin the semester strong but decline after the first month. The students that do not transition successfully tend to have excessive absences, missing assignments and homework, and low test scores. Subsequent, the parents of these students lack involvement. Even after parent conferences and interventions are set in place for these struggling students, they still tend to decline academically. After my first year at Frost, I have explored different transitional programs because I want to provide more for these incoming sixth-graders. Can a visit to surrounding middle schools really be all that is needed for these fifth-graders who will be entering middle school soon? What else can I implement that will help not only these students transition successfully, but will also help the families and the teachers involved?

The next chapter will offer a very detailed program for a successful transitional year for incoming sixth-graders, their families, and teachers. In this program, parents will be given information that will allow them to stay involved with their child’s education. Also, students will
be actively engaged in team-building activities, goal-setting exercises, orientation experiences, and academic preparation. These resources and activities are effective strategies that will help all incoming sixth-graders have a successful transition into middle school.
Overview

The transition from elementary school to middle school is a very significant, but scary time in a child’s life. This program was created to provide teachers, students, and families with the support needed in all aspects of the child’s education and well-being.

Creating a positive and successful transition into middle school is the first and most vital step to assure students entering the sixth-grade are not overwhelmed; resulting in a downward decline in their academics. A carefully planned transition program helps families and students...
have a greater preparedness by providing the foundation for a prosperous beginning of their new middle school experience.

This Transition Program was designed for Teachers, Students, and Families in order to:

- Ensure students form realistic expectations for what middle school has to offer.
- Provide a positive, safe, and encouraging environment for students.
- Support teachers, students, and parents by building a sense of community through meaningful relationships.
- Respond to the needs and concerns for incoming sixth-graders

*A Prepared Middle School*

In order for students to thrive in their new middle school’s environment, it is very important for the middle school to be fully prepared for these incoming sixth-graders and their parents. Orientation days are a good way to prepare new incoming sixth-graders for what to expect on the first day of school. Orientation day schedules may include:

- A welcome message from the principal.
- A meet and greet of all sixth-grade teachers and administrators.
- Student fall pictures taken and ordered.
- Student identification cards taken and distributed.
- Locker distributions and time to practice opening lockers.
- Class schedules, agendas, and textbooks distributed.
- Opportunities to discuss concerns with sixth-grade councilors.
- Time to become familiar with campus.
Creating a prepared middle school allows an easier transition for new incoming students and their parents making it easier to obtain information about school policy, traditions, and expectations. Transition programs also provide information for the parents about the new school, including its faculty, opportunities, challenges, rules and traditions.

**Community Participation and Support**

The community plays an important role in this Transition Program. The community must invest in the future success of their students and their families as this helps produce competent and creative citizens who will make the community flourish. Communities should support middle school transition programs through continuing partnership, exposing students to careers or technology, and/or serving as positive role models through school involvement or in after school programs. College and career readiness exploration is a dynamic factor at this point in a student’s academic career, and community members can help form the future of their young leaders by getting the most out of on their strengths and interests during this transitional stage.

**Family Knowledge and Involvement**

Transitions are often challenging for students, teachers, administrators, and families. When schools work together with families to provide structures and supports through these times, negative effects can be reduced and transitions can be positive experiences for students and families.

It has been shown that as student moves through their education, family involvement typically declines (Eccles et al., 1993). Involving families even before their students’ starts to attend the middle school is an important factor for a positive transition. It is also important to invite parents from surrounding elementary schools to tour the campus and to give them
information about what programs are offered, school policies and procedures, and school expectations. Both, the elementary school and middle school teacher should discuss with parents how they might help their child over the summer become prepared for the transition into middle school.

One goal for this transition program is to prepare families and students for the middle school transition process in order to provide ongoing guidance and support needed by students during this serious transition. Families should work together with the school to participate in the middle school transition activities offered, as well as learn and support information received to guarantee student academic and social success. Many of the activities and strategies provided throughout this transition program are to be applied within the school year, as well as in the home in an effort to strengthen the curriculum and support what is being taught and offered at school.

School and Educational Settings

In the spring semester, elementary schools should be invited to attend feeder middle schools in their area to tour the campus and participate in a few activities that will help students become familiar with the expectations and requirements of what it is to be a middle school student. This is one way for the middle schools to foster physical and psychological safety in order to build resiliency in these young students by maintaining an environment in which safe interactions and guided risk-taking are expected and supported.

Parent Section

Supporting Your Child’s Education

It is important for parents and families to play an active role in their child’s education. This transition program will provide the needed tools to help guide parents and families in the
direction that will help support and create a positive transitional year for their new sixth-grader.

This section was included to help create partnerships with parents and teachers through open and collaborating communication and foster an inviting atmosphere where parents’ involvement is valued and appreciated.

Ways to support your child transition into middle school:

- Explore the school’s website with your child. Search for announcements, schedules, and events.
- Accompany your child on campus tours and orientations offered to parents and incoming students. The better parents understand the school expectations and rules, the more you can help your child.
- Get a copy of the student handbook. Review rules and requirements; especially the school’s code of conduct, which describes consequences for violations of the most important rules. Ask the school staff questions about anything that’s unclear.
- Stay in contact with the school, especially with the teacher and school counselor.
- Continue with the set time for homework, and stay on top of grades. Do not wait for the teachers to contact you.
- Try not to rescue your child from consequences. Let your child suffer the consequences for their actions.
- Encourage your child to join sports teams, clubs, or other extracurricular activities.
- Talk about traits that make a good friend, talk about social skills and discuss how words and actions can affect other people, and practice skills needed for difficult social situations.
• Meet with teachers early in the school year in order to give them a profile of your child’s strengths and where they may need help.

• Encourage teachers to continue using strategies that have worked for your child in the past. If the school provides parents with a teacher website, make sure you and your child know how to use it.

• Help your child with time management skills. Work together on a schedule for study time, break time, chores, etc.

Using Positive Reinforcement at Home

Positive reinforcement at home is vital in supporting your child’s academic and behavior needs inside and outside of the classroom. Positive reinforcement is anything that occurs after a desired behavior that increases the likelihood of that the behavior reoccurring. Positive reinforcement is not only important in the classroom, but in the home as well because it provides consistency and structure for your child at a time where life in school is much more complex.

Ways to use positive reinforcement at home:

• Be consistent with rules that you have set in regards to their academic success in school.

• Pay attention and be involved with your child in a positive way. Ask your child open-ended questions about school and be aware of school functions. Participate when you can.

• Before the school year begins, set reasonable personal expectations and goals for your child so that all parties are on the same page when it comes to their academic success.

  o For example: Grade expectations; no grade lower than a C, join at least one club, find out about any potential obstacles and how they can be addressed.
• Communicate positively and effectively in order to understand when there is misbehavior or academic failure conducted at school.
  
  o For example: Stay calm and listen before reacting, catch them being good - giving attention for positive reasons, and set-up a conference with child and their teacher.

• Offer praise and rewards when your child exhibits the behavior that is expected in middle school.
  
  o For example: Display your child’s achievements, point out your child’s progress, and follow through with rewards; such as a special dinner out to their favorite restaurant.

Teacher Tips for Parents/Guardians

Parents are valuable partners in the educational process. This does not change when students enter middle school. Parent involvement is extremely important as students enter middle school. This is a crucial period of development for middle school aged students as they enter into adolescence, in addition to the transition to a new school. When teachers and parents work together in a positive manner, the success of the new incoming sixth-grader is much more apparent than those students whom do not have the support from their parents and/or guardians.

The following are tips gathered from teachers for parents and/or guardians in order to help their child have a positive transition into middle school:

• Check your child’s agenda or planner on a daily basis. This is where you will find homework, class work, and projects’ due dates.

• Communicate with teachers when you have a concern or question.
• Sign up for electronic notifications or newsletter in order to stay on top of what is going on in school as well as in the classroom.

• Become familiar with school’s policies and procedures; such as school bell schedules, absent procedures, and dress codes.

• Keep teacher’s syllabus on file for future reference. This is a contract that will be signed by parents and students that they agree to the teacher’s policies and procedures.

• Be aware of grading periods.

• Make sure your child is prepared for school by checking their backpack for homework, class work, projects, and school supplies.

• Speak to your child about bullying, substance abuse, and relationships with the opposite sex.

**Student Section**

*Student Clubs, Electives, and Activities*

Middle school is the perfect time to try new things, and becoming comfortable with taking positive risks is another critical skill in teen development. Some ideas for middle school risk-taking include:

• Try a new sport.

• Join a club or start a new one.

• Volunteer or start a new charity drive at school.

• Expand your circle of friends.

• Try a music class.
In most middle schools, information about clubs and activities can be obtained during the morning announcements and may also be posted on flyers that are in the hallways or posted in the classrooms. In addition, information about clubs can be found on the school website, including times and head teachers. Students who are involved in clubs and activities generally are motivated to do well in their academic classes, and they seem to enjoy school more than students who do not get involved. Do not hesitate to get involved!

Incoming sixth-graders will be given an elective at random unless already signed up for a music elective with parent and teacher permission before the new school year beings. Students do have an opportunity to change their elective only if there is conflicts with their core academic classes. Please see your guidance counselor for lists of offered electives.

_Wonderful Ways to Make New Friends_

You are at a new school and it may happen that all of your friends seem to have strayed from your original little group that once was your group in elementary school. Now it's time to make more friends, but it can be a bit awkward and hard to move from your own comfort bubble. You are not in elementary school anymore, and that's unsettling, but look around, it's not that different and you may even see some people from your old school.

Here are some ways to making new friends in middle school:

- Introduce yourself and strike up a conversation. Start by asking for their name and where they went to elementary school. Finding an interesting topic to talk about.
- Be nice to everyone no matter their cultural or religious background. It helps when you give people nice compliments.
Associating with all types of cliques and groups is a way to show others that you care about all people. Attending dances or other school function to showcase that you know how to have fun.

Make sure you care about what your friends say, and be a good listener! That is always a good way to make new friends or replacing old ones, and to make good conversation! But nobody is perfect so remember to forgive and forget.

Ways to Thrive in Middle School

Entering middle school is a big life change for any middle school student. It comes with increased academic requirements and a growing social life. In fact, middle school presents challenges that are not likely to come up in lower grades. So, what are some way to thrive and survive the next three years in middle school? Here is a list of ways that can help do just that:

- **Participate in Class** – even if it feels uncomfortable to talk in class, participating in classroom activities will help increase your understanding of the subject. Raise your hand and ask questions if you need explaining from the teacher, and partake in games and discussions. Likewise, it is important to pay attention in class when the teacher talks so you do not miss important concepts.

- **Take Notes** – taking notes is a great way to remind yourself of what you learned at a later time. Note taking can also emphasis your attention during class discussions so you do not drift off and become distracted. Notes also provide a good source of material for review when you are preparing for a test or some other class project or assignment.

- **Do all Class Work, Homework, and Projects Assigned** – even if you are busy with sports and other activities, it is very important to complete all assignments, homework, and projects and turn them in on time. Set aside time every day for completing you work,
and do it in a place where you don't have any distractions. When you are doing your homework, turn off your television, do not play video games, and do not engage in texting or spending time on social media. All of these things will distract you, making your work take longer to complete and possibly keeping the information you are trying to learn from becoming clear.

- **Study for Tests** – even if your teacher review before a test, studying on your own will help you be completely prepared. Don't wait until the night before to study for a test. Instead, study for ten or fifteen minutes each day in the days leading up to the test. You can also study with friends or in groups. This can be a terrific way to prepare. Quiz each other or have question and answer sessions. Just like when you do your homework, minimize distractions from cell phones, television, video games, and siblings when you study for a test.

- **Organize Your Notebooks** – keep notes for each class separate from other classes. You can do this by having a spiral notebook for every class, or by having a large binder with dividers for each class. Keeping old assignments can help you when you study for a test.

- **Have an Agenda or Planner** – some schools provide an academic planner/agenda for your use. If yours doesn't, it is very easy to make one. Print calendar or week-at-a-glance pages from the Internet, or keep a calendar on your computer or smartphone. Then, enter all assignments; whether it is homework, classwork, or projects along with their due dates on the appropriate date. Enter tests and quizzes as well. That way, you will always know what is due and be able to plan your time accordingly.

- **Be Prepared** – make sure you go to class with all the supplies you will need for that class. Keep a supply of sharpened pencils and pens in your locker, as well as extra
notebook paper and any special supplies you might need. You can have one shelf of your locker or a compartment in your backpack for extra supplies. Then, transfer a few pens, pencils, and erasers to your binder as soon as you run out so you'll never be caught unprepared.

• **Keep your Locker Clean** – if your school provides a locker, it is important to keep it cleaned and organized. A messy locker makes it very difficult to find what you need. Keep your locker tidy so you can quickly find the items, books, and notebooks you will need for your next class. Also, do not provide your locker combination to anyone; not even your best friend.

• **Dealing with Bullying** – experiencing bullying can make school very problematic. If you experience bullying during middle school, there are things you can do. Use counselors, parents and teachers to help you manage what to do if you find yourself being bullied. Do not be afraid to talk to an adult such as your parent or the school counselor, who can help you get through the situation. Know that if you are being bullied, you are not alone. There are people there who can help you.

• **Relationship with the Opposite Sex** – chances are you have really started to notice members of the opposite sex. You may have a crush on someone or really want a boyfriend/girlfriend. These feelings are perfectly normal. Be yourself and be open to friendship. It is important to remember, however, that boyfriends and girlfriends come and go. If your crush does not like you back, or if your relationship does not work out, it may feel terrible in the moment, but it is not the end of the world. Before long, you will find someone else who catches your eye.
• **Peer Pressure** – friends may be trying all sorts of different things in middle school. You may hear about other kids drinking, smoking, taking drugs, or engaging in other dangerous behaviors. Some of your friends may even ask you to participate. When friends push you to try these types of dangerous behaviors, it is called peer pressure. Giving in to peer pressure can have an effect on many areas of your life including academic, physical, emotional, and mental. If friends are pressuring you to participate in something that you know is wrong, it is important to take control of the situation. Know that people who do not like you because you do not party or engage in risky behaviors are not true friends. Your true friends would never push you to do something unsafe or uncomfortable. If you are feeling a lot of peer pressure, talk to an adult you trust such as your parents, the school counselor, teacher, or an older relative. They can help you develop strategies for effectively dealing with peer pressure.

Whether the challenges of middle school are academic or social, students can take control and make the experience productive and enjoyable. By using the above tips, students will not just survive middle school. They will thrive.

*FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)*

• **What happens on the first day of school?**

Depending on the school you go to, school may start as early as 7:50 AM. It is very important to print out the bell schedule for the school you are attending and memorize the schedule. It is also important to be on time; especially on the first day of school. Some middle schools have orientation days where students will receive their class schedules and lockers. If the school you are attending did not have an orientation day, your schedule will most likely be given to you during homeroom. Most teachers will not begin any lessons during the first day of school,
but rather inform students of the policies and procedures of the school and their expectations of their classroom. The first day of school can be a scary time of your life, but do not worry, you will be having a great time before you know it!

- **Academics? Do students receive grades? What is a grading periods?**
  Sixth graders will be each placed in a core set of classes Math, Science, Language Arts and Social Studies as well as an elective and physical education class. Middle school students receive grades four times each semester. The 5-week, 10-week, and 15-week grades are considered progress reports. The 20-week is considered the final report card where that grade will be recorded in the students’ file. The district will mail home the 20-week report cards.

- **How much homework will I have?**
  A standard expectation for middle schools is 30 minutes of homework per class each night. With four blocks daily for a child, there should be no more than 2 hours of homework nightly for a child.

- **Are there field-trips in Middle School?**
  Yes. Individual teachers develop their own field-trip plans, so all classes do not have exactly the same field-trips.

- **If I have a questions about an assignment, how do I contact my teacher?**
  Most teachers will provide their email or website address to students in their syllabus. Please write the email address or website address down in your planner or agenda. Most schools have a policy to have their teachers reply to emails within a 24-hour time frame. Please understand that if you email your teacher late at night, it is likely they may not respond until they check their email in the morning and that might be too late to help you. Be responsible; email or
speak to your teacher before, during, or after school about any problems or questions you have about an assignment. Do not wait until the last minute.

**Teacher Section**

*School Transition Team and Plan*

A school transition team is set in place in order to guide and develop activities that will help students, families, and the community support the transition of students entering middle school. A school transition team is typically made up of elementary and middle school personal; such as teachers, administrators, counselors, families, and students.

Once the team is formed, the following responsibilities are taken place by members of the team:

- Recruit volunteers to assist with middle school transition events and activities.
- Build relationships among teachers and students in order to identify their needs, goals, and resources.
- Develop a feedback or evaluation process to measure the impact of the transition policies and activities.
- Create an annual transition plan and calendar that establishes goals for transitioning students.
- Engage additional community members where appropriate.

The sole purpose of the school transition team is to plan, assess, and implement all the above strategies that will support the successful transition of students and their families into middle school. Teams should designate someone to serve as the middle school transition coordinator. This person is responsible for organizing meetings and coordinating activities. The coordinator may be the assistant principal, sixth-grade counselor, Title I coordinator, or teacher.
Furthermore, the school transition plan is designed and implemented in order to guide and achieve a successful transition for students entering middle school.

The plan may consist of the following:

- **Transition activities for fifth and sixth-graders** – What activities will be implemented?
- **Action Steps** – How and when will these activities be implemented?
- **Cost and Resources** – What materials will be needed to successfully implement the transition activities?
- **Transition Team** – Who will be in charge for the activities and their components?
- **Evaluation** – How will the success of the transition activities be measured?

A successful school transition team and plan is an evolving process and should not be limited to the ending of the fifth-grade year or the beginning of the sixth-grade year. It is an ongoing progression and the team should meet regularly in order to discuss the planning, application, and performance strategies. It is important for the school transition team to conduct an assessment of the plan and its activities to identify what is needed for students, families, and staff. The assessment will help strive to effectively meet those needs. The following transition activities can be used by the team

The following fifth and sixth-grade transition activities were designed to prepare fifth-graders and assist sixth-graders in the transition process into middle school. These activities will assist them in making better and more informed decisions regarding social, organizational, academic, developmental, and college/career awareness issues and concerns.
Fifth Grade Middle School Transition Activities

Activity #1: Field Trip to Middle School

Action: Elementary schools will come for a tour of surrounding middle schools. Middle school teachers, principals, and counselors will conduct information sessions with fifth-graders about the differences between elementary school and middle school.

Objective: Fifth-grade students will learn about middle school expectations and will become familiar with the campus. Students will participate in an open forum with current sixth-graders, teachers, administrators, and counselors to address any questions they may have.

Areas of Focus: This activity was designed to prepare fifth-graders with academic, social, emotional, organizational, and environmental changes that may arise when transitioning into middle school.

Procedure: Elementary schools will make arrangements with the feeder middle school(s) personnel to schedule a day and time to tour the school. A letter will go out to all fifth-grade families notifying them of the field trip and families should be encouraged to develop questions with their child regarding middle school.

In addition to the student questions, topics for the information session should be predetermined and discussed before going to the middle school. The subjects could include: (1) What to expect from teachers, (2) How will your academics change, (3) How does it feel to go to class with older students, etc.

Additional Activities: Ask students to create questions one week prior to the middle school visit as homework. Provide students with index cards to capture their questions. Document all
questions students ask and create a frequently asked questions manual or handout to use the following year.

Activity #2: Peer Mentoring

Action: Current sixth-grade students serve as peer mentors to offer support and guidance to fifth-grade students throughout their fifth and sixth-grade years.

Objectives: Students will gain awareness about middle school culture and student activities through mentors who have experienced activities and the middle school environment personally.

Areas of Focus: This activity was designed to prepare fifth-graders with academic, social, emotional, organizational, and environmental changes that may arise when transitioning into middle school.

Procedures: Feeder middle schools willing to participate in this mentoring program will agree to recruit students in the sixth-grade to mentor fifth-grade students. The mentor program will last for two consecutive years, with the mentoring program ending at the completion of the student’s seventh and sixth grade year. Middle school mentors should receive a brief orientation the first two months of the school year to prepare them for mentoring. The peer mentoring should be carried out in groups. Therefore, a group of middle school students will meet with elementary school students during specified planned meetings throughout the year. A member of the transition team will lead and support the sixth-grade mentors and the fifth-grade students from the selected feeder schools.

The elementary school should hold a “Meet and Greet” event at the beginning of the school year for elementary school students to meet the middle school students in a relaxed, non-intimidating environment. Families of the elementary school students should receive an invitation to this event and plan to attend to learn more about the peer mentoring program.
At the end of the “Meet and Greet,” families should have the opportunity to sign their child up for the program if they are interested.

Mentoring sessions should not disrupt class for students and mentoring activities should be driven by the sixth-grade students. Actual mentoring sessions should not be attended by adults but will be supervised by a member of the transition team in order to assist when necessary and facilitate the overall process.

Additional Activities: You may want to allow families to partake in the mentoring program but in separate areas to allow both students and families time to connect and network with one another as well as ease fears that are associated with transitioning into middle school.

Resource: Peer Mentoring Worksheet

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Peer Mentoring Worksheet

Let’s Get To Know Each Other

Pair the mentors/mentees. Let everyone know that they have twenty minutes to answer the following questions:

1. List 5 things you have in common physically
2. List 5 things that are different between you physically
3. What are 2 things you look for in a friend?
4. What are your 2 favorite movies?
5. What are your 3 favorite songs?
6. An ideal dinner menu for you would be…
7. The one food you dislike the most is…
8. Are you the only child? If not, how many brothers and/or sisters do you have?
9. What is your favorite thing to do on the weekend?
10. What is something that you are good at doing?
Activity #3: Pen Pal Program

Action: Sixth-grade classes adopt fifth-grade classes and exchange letters four times per year.

Objectives: Students will engage in creative writing as well as investigative thinking and develop increased writing skills. The process will allow the fifth-grade students to learn more about middle school through open and honest student perspectives.

Areas of Focus: This activity was designed to prepare fifth-graders with academic, social, emotional, organizational, and environmental changes that may arise when transitioning into middle school as well as engage both fifth and sixth-graders in creative writing.

Procedures: Fifth-grade elementary school teachers and sixth-grade English/Language Arts teachers should coordinate and pair students in their classes with one another for the pen pal program. Students will participate in the letter writing exchange four times throughout the year.

The first letter should come from the fifth-grade students telling the middle school students a little bit about themselves, focusing on interests and favorite subjects. Fifth-graders should also ask any questions that they have about middle school. The letters should be handwritten, placed in an unsealed envelope addressed with the recipient’s information, and reviewed by the classroom teacher before being sent.

Sixth-grade students should respond to the letters and have the opportunity to share information about themselves, share what it is like in middle school, and answer any questions that were asked. It is suggested that responses to each set of letters throughout the year are received by the fifth-graders within a two week period.

At the end of the school year a celebration social event could be held in order for the pen pals to meet each other. Students should bring the letters they have received throughout the year and wear nametags. An icebreaker could be planned to facilitate conversation between the
students and refreshments could also be provided. This part of the pen pal program is optional.

**Additional Activities:** Fifth-grade and sixth-grade teacher may provide a list of topics to discuss in each set of letters to spark student writing. The feeder middle school may ask to transition team, PTSA, or community to sponsor the end-of-year celebration event by offering space, volunteers, refreshments, prizes, or any other resources that may help in the transition of entering middle school for the incoming fifth-graders.

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*Sixth Grade Middle School Transition Activities*

**Activity #1: Principal’s Open Forum**

**Action:** The principal gathers separate small groups of sixth-grade students and their parents to address questions, concerns, and engage in conversation about the middle school transition process.

**Objective:** Parents and students have the ability to bring about change in future middle school transition activities for the benefit of future students and influence current school policies.

**Areas of Focus:** This activity was designed to prepare sixth-graders with academic, social, emotional, organizational, and environmental changes that may arise when transitioning into middle school.

**Procedure:** The Principal's Open Forum is a wonderful way to ensure that sixth-grade students and their families receive the support they need for a successful transition and also provide insight into how to enhance the transition experience for future students and families.

Parent roundtables should be held three times per year at various times. The school should notify parents at the beginning of the school year about the open forum dates and times for the year. The Open Forum’s should continue to be advertised throughout the school year,
especially two weeks before the event. Leading up to the open forum the principal should tape a
two to five minute video regarding the open forum transition topic and post on the school’s
website to encourage parent participation. Topics to likely address are whether the needs of
students have been met through the transition process and what additional supports are needed?

Student open forum’s will be held twice a year and will be conducted using a group of
selected students. During those two meeting times, the principal will conduct three sessions with
students in their homeroom group. The principal will use the time to discuss student middle
school transition.

Activity #2: Middle School Video

Action: Current middle school students create a video welcoming fifth-graders to their
new school. This activity could be completed in a sixth-grade English/Language Arts class.

Objective: Students will see their new school building and new school faculty, staff, and
administrators, experience what opportunities middle school offers, and hear from their peers
about the transition experience.

Areas of Focus: This activity was designed to prepare fifth-graders with academic, social,
emotional, organizational, and environmental changes that may arise when transitioning into
middle school.

Procedure: Have sixth-grade students at the end of their first year of middle school create a
video to welcome incoming sixth-graders and provide information needed to new students for
the first week of school. Pick a representative group of students to develop the video as a class
project or as part of an after-school project. This video project should take about two to four
weeks to create. With the help of a member or members of the transition team, allow students to determine the content of the video using poetry, rap music, or other creative means. Content that could be covered includes:

- Pictures and information on school leadership and important school staff to know
- A day in the life of a middle school student
- A tour of school showing important places and the people you will see there
- Student and teacher interviews
- Extra-curricular activities—clubs, sports, art organizations, etc.

Show the video over the summer orientation days or during an assembly on the first day of school. Also, post the video to the school’s website so it can be viewed by everyone.

Activity #3: Middle School Student Representatives

Action: Seventh and eighth grade students volunteer to assist sixth-graders during the first month of school to help them navigate the middle school scene.

Objective: New sixth-grade students will feel supported throughout their transition to middle school and know who they can turn to when questions arise. This is will help with any bullying or other fears that may arise when entering middle school.

Areas of Focus: This activity was designed to prepare fifth-graders with academic, social, emotional, organizational, and environmental changes that may arise when transitioning into middle school.

Procedure: Members of the transition team should recommend seventh and eighth-grade students to serve as representatives to sixth-grade students. Student representatives should receive an orientation that includes the “do’s” and “don’ts” of dealing with new students,
questions that should be directed to an adult, and topics that should not be discussed.

Representatives will be stationed throughout the halls before school begins, during class changes, during lunch, and after school and will wear buttons that read “Ask Me” so they are easily recognizable. In addition, representatives will participate in other middle school transition activities that take place.

When these activities are implemented the goal is for student to know their choices and options related to their academic program. Furthermore, student will understanding the options available to them in terms of academics and extra-curricular activities being offered. It is also important to mention that student will be connected to upper class students as well as connected to at least one caring adult. Students who are transitioning into middle school will benefit greatly when they know that people at their school care about them and their success as well as believing their new school will be a positive, safe, and secure learning environment.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this graduate project was to provide ideas and support for teacher, fifth and sixth-grade students, and their families as they transition from elementary school into middle school. Throughout my research for this project, the main reason for a development of a transition program between elementary and middle school rest on the fact that the transition from elementary to middle school has been the subject of much research during the last 30 years, especially in the area of academic performance. Although middle schools were established to provide an academic and social environment that would meet the changing needs of younger adolescents, there is substantial proof that student outcomes in a variety of areas decline as they enter middle school, and that the transition itself can have negative consequences.

As a middle school teacher, I felt that a well-developed transition program for incoming sixth-graders will bring back a strong sense of belonging that they once had when they were elementary school. This is a crucial component associated with the positive motivation these students must have in order to enjoy and more importantly, succeed in their new and more challenging academic tasks that come with being a middle school student.

Additionally, this graduate project was established because my belief as an educator is to create a more comprehensive approach in which teacher, administrators, students, and their families work together to design and implement the best transition program for assisting these students make a positive transition into middle school.

In summary, planning and implementing such programs to address the needs and concerns of students moving from elementary to middle school environments, it is clear that collaboration among all adults who share responsibility and concern for our students’ welfare is ultimately the most effective transition strategy that can be employed.
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