When students start thinking about their next year in school, they often feel anxious and even afraid. But when students are in a transition grade, these feelings of anxiety reach new heights and are especially prevalent among students who are in their final year of middle level school and anticipating their first year in high school.
transition from middle level and high school personnel. This instrument was distributed to all of the eighth and ninth grade students in four northwest Georgia school systems during the 1998–1999 academic year (approximately 1,400 students in each grade in six middle schools, grades 6–8 and four high schools, grades 9–12). These schools were selected because their administrative and guidance personnel expressed interest in learning more about transition processes.

The instrument was administered in a class setting with 94 percent of the students enrolled in the eighth grade and 92 percent of the students enrolled in the ninth grade in the four school systems participating in the study. From the usable returns (81 percent), approximately 400 from each grade level were randomly selected and analyzed to determine student concerns regarding transition from the middle school to the high school.

Although the responses were anonymous, school officials supplied demographic information about their respective student bodies. The typical eighth grade student in these schools ranged from 13 to 15 years of age, and the typical ninth grade student ranged from 14 to 16 years. Each of the grades had balanced numbers of males and females. Approximately 60 percent of the students were Caucasian, 30–35 percent were African-American, and less than 10 percent represented other races. Approximately 52 percent of the students in the schools received free or reduced-price lunch.

Ten categories were developed from the students’ responses. The responses were rank ordered on the basis of the number of times the category was mentioned. Because of the nature of the instrument, students could describe more than one concern under each question. Table 1 (on page 12) represents student responses to the first question by grade and in rank order; Table 2 (on page 13) represents student responses to the second question by grade in rank order.

To gain further insight into the students’ responses, we visited two of the middle schools and two of the high schools to conduct focus groups with the students. Each focus group included 8–12 students per grade level. The first five responses in both grades were almost identical with regard to what the students were “looking forward to” and “not looking forward to” about their move to the high school. Based on these responses, we grouped student concerns related to transition into five categories: curriculum, facilities, safety and discipline, teachers and administrators, and general concerns.

Educators (primarily counselors and administrators) should develop programs to address each of these areas.
and give students positive, nonthreatening activities to deal with these concerns.

All too often, transition program activities are developed with little or no input from the students who will be affected. To correct this, counselors may choose to meet with students in small groups (using questions similar to those used in this study as well as the focus group technique) to determine the transition concerns of their students and develop tailored transition programs. Ideally, sessions to determine student concerns should begin in the fall of the eighth grade year to support eighth grade students as they prepare to move to high school and continue throughout the ninth grade to help students acclimate to their new environment.

The following suggestions have been field-tested in various schools across the country and can help school leaders design transition programs that address student needs. These suggestions are meant to be used as springboards and are not meant to be inclusive; additional activities or topics should be added on the basis of information obtained from the students and their parents.

The Five Categories of Concern

There are questions that eighth grade students frequently ask about their five areas of concern. Answering these questions can help formulate some focused transition activities.

Curriculum. How hard is it at the high school? What is a credit? What is College Prep? How long are the periods? How much homework do they assign? The following activi-
ties may address these and other questions related to the ninth grade curriculum:
• Host a panel discussion at the middle school about high school requirements conducted by high school teachers and counselors
• Discuss registration procedures in small groups and make it clear that there is no such thing as a stupid question
• Develop packets of sample high school tests, homework assignments, and student work for eighth grade students to examine and question
• Provide eighth grade students with copies of the high school bell schedule
• Practice the high school bell schedule in the eighth grade so students experience the length of passing time and class time
• Make ninth grade textbooks available for eighth grade students to examine.

Facilities. What do I do if I get lost? Will my locker be on one side of the school and my classes on the other side? Where are the rest rooms? The following activities are suggested to address these and other questions related to the high school facility:
• Arrange for and conduct a building tour (note: although many schools use this activity, many eighth grade students report that tours raise their anxiety because they feel that they will have to remember where all the rooms are when school resumes in the fall)
• Give students a map of the high school to study before the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>WHAT ARE/WERE YOU MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO AT THE HIGH SCHOOL?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eighth Grade Responses</td>
<td>Percent of Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite Sex</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Classes/More Classes</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocurricular Activities</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Want To Leave Middle School</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Out of Middle School</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tour and to take with them during the tour
• Hold an end-of-eighth-grade celebration dance, hosted by sophomores, at the high school and include a tour of the building
• During orientation days, plan an eighth grade treasure hunt through the high school building in which students must locate various rooms and items
• Distribute high school newsletters to eighth grade students.

Safety and Discipline. Is the high school safe? Is there really a drug problem at the high school? What happens if a student brings a gun to school? What is the dress code at the high school? What happens if I am late to class? The following activities are suggested to address incoming student concerns about their safety and discipline rules at the high school:
• Distribute and review the high school discipline code with eighth grade students
• Implement the high school discipline code for the second semester of the eighth grade
• Host a question-and-answer session with high school students to discuss the discipline policy
• Establish an eighth grade and eleventh grade student luncheon to provide incoming ninth grade students with face and name recognition of rising seniors
• Establish an orientation session that meets prior to the start of school in the fall and is designed as a half-credit course to prepare incoming students for their new school.

Teachers, Counselors, and Administrators. Who are the teachers? What do they look like? Is Mrs. or Mr. (fill in the blank) really mean? Will we be with a team like we are in the middle school? Who teaches (fill in the subject)? Who will be my guidance counselor? Will my counselor help me decide about electives?
• Provide a list of ninth grade teachers, including names, pictures, interests, and subjects taught
• Swap a ninth grade teacher and an eighth grade teacher for one day so the high school teacher can talk with eighth grade students about high school and the eighth grade teacher can reconnect with students from the previous year
• Host a “Meet the Teachers” reception for eighth graders and their parents
• Conduct a panel discussion with ninth grade teachers and counselors at the middle school, followed by a luncheon with the eighth grade students
• Establish an eighth grade and eleventh grade student luncheon to provide incoming ninth grade students with face and name recognition of rising seniors
• Establish an orientation session that meets prior to the start of school in the fall and is designed as a half-credit course to prepare incoming students for their new school.

General. What’s the food like? How much is lunch? Which bus will I ride? How many times can I be absent each grading period? How is the high school like the middle school? The following activities are suggested to address these and other questions of a general nature about life in the high school:
• Conduct an open question-and-answer session at the high school with ninth grade students, teachers, counselors, and administrators

Table 2
WHAT ARE/WERE YOU NOT LOOKING FORWARD TO ABOUT GOING TO THE HIGH SCHOOL?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eighth Grade Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
<th>Ninth Grade Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More/Harder Work</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>More/Harder Work</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upperclassmen/Being Bullied</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Being Bullied</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Being a Freshman</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean/Hard Teachers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Mean/Hard Teachers</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of the Building/Getting Lost</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a Freshman</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Size of the Facility</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline/Violence</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Longer Classes</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation from Current Friends</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Discipline/Violence</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer Classes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Finals</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Bad Grades</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents who were involved during their child’s elementary school years are eager to stay active in their children’s education; however, too often the only avenues open to them are in areas related to fund-raising.

- Develop a counseling unit on how to make successful transitions
- Provide small orientation sessions hosted by counselors
- Host a cocurricular fair at the high school to showcase the school’s nonacademic offerings
- Establish small groups that meet with high school counselors for registration activities
- Sponsor a “Don’t Wear This to School” fashion show, conducted by upper classmen to let freshmen know what clothes are unacceptable for the high school.

Focus on Ninth Grade Students
Transition activities should not end when the eighth grade students arrive at high school in the fall. Rather, transition-related activities should continue throughout the ninth grade year, culminating in a spring meeting with students, their parents or guardians, and their counselors or academic advisors. This meeting should establish a four-year plan for each student to carry him or her through the high school experience and into the first year of postsecondary options.

The following activities may be used at the beginning of the academic year to help incoming ninth grade students adjust to their new environment. Schools that have used such activities as these have reported decreased student absence in the first days and weeks of class, improved student behavior, and greater student success as measured by higher grades. Once again, these suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive.

- Identify “safe” students at the high school to whom ninth grade students can turn for assistance during the first two weeks of school
- Label hallways with room numbers and teachers’ names so ninth grade students can find classrooms more readily
- Conduct two meetings between high school administrators and ninth grade students during the first week of school to go over rules and regulations within the school and to determine how the students are acclimating to the school
- Divide the high school into clusters, houses, or academies that are interdisciplinary and provide ninth grade students with teachers who teach only ninth grade students
- Hold a practice pep rally just for ninth grade students so they can become familiar with the cheers and the songs used during pep rallies at the high school
- Enlist faculty members to develop ninth grade advisories that help students adjust to the high school
- Have at least one ninth grade counselor.

Include Teachers and Counselors
Faculty members at middle level and high schools are often overlooked in transition program design. Given the high stakes involved in education today, these two groups of teachers must work together to ensure a smooth, less stressful transition for ninth grade students. The following activities can help teachers and counselors become aware of the problems students encounter:

- Host an eighth and ninth grade faculty luncheon so the two groups can get to know each other socially
- Develop an ongoing dialogue between eighth and ninth grade faculty members related to curriculum mapping
- Conduct an eighth grade faculty orientation to the high school given by the ninth grade faculty
- Provide high school faculty members with staff development opportunities to learn about the nature of the 14-year-old student (ninth grader)
- Enlist eighth grade (and other middle level) teachers and ninth grade (and other high school) teachers to develop curriculum articulation between the two schools.

Welcome Parents
Often, middle level and high schools fail to involve parents when planning transition programs. Parents who were involved during their children’s elementary school years are eager to stay active in their children’s education; however, too often the only avenues open to them are in areas related to fund-raising.

By including parents in the design of a transition program, schools gain valuable allies in helping ease students’ anxiety about the move. The following ideas can be used as discussion starters when designing a total transition program that includes parents:

- Invite parents of incoming students (groups of 15–20) to a coffee or a tea hosted by high school administrators (held once each week throughout the first grading period) to discuss high school policies and procedures
- Encourage ninth grade parents to host a coffee or tea with parents of incoming students (groups of 15–20) to discuss issues related to students’ adjustment to the high school
Host a parent’s night or carnival at the high school for the parents of incoming students, complete with booths dedicated to curricular and cocurricular activities.

Conduct sessions for the parents of ESOL students in areas with non-English-speaking students or parents. Arrange these by language and be sure to include competent translators.

Although the activities for the parents and the teachers provided here are not as extensive as those for students, remember that a successful transition program must include this adult component.

The Effect on Student Success?
Educational professionals at middle level and high schools must stop blaming one another for perceived shortfalls in instruction and work together to help students find success as they move from one level to the next.

Schools with nine or more transition practices built into an overall transition strategy have statistically significant reductions in the retention-in-grade rate of freshmen students and high school dropout rates (Morgan and Hertzog 1998). When a considerable number of practices are in place for students in transition from eighth to ninth grade, the faculties and administrators in the sending middle schools and receiving high schools are working together to ensure success for their students in transition.

Only 40 percent of students in K–12 who are retained in grade once and 10 percent of students who are retained in grade twice graduate. When these data, are examined in relation to the national dropout data the importance of middle level and high school educators working together to design and implement a transition program that helps students succeed is apparent (USDOC 1998).

Evaluate the Program
The final piece of a well-designed transition program is a mechanism to evaluate its effectiveness. Many counselors and administrators across the country indicated that they had been using their transition activities for several years. But when asked to provide data to support the continuation of their programs, they had no response. Evaluation of a transition program should not be delayed until the end of the program; various benchmarks should be established along the way so the transition leadership team (counselors and administrators) can reflect on the students’ success and make adjustments as needed.

To determine the degree of success for the program, baseline data needs to be established for existing transition...
activities, because it is against these data that the newly developed program must be measured. In addition, a transition program that is designed using the techniques included in this piece may not be successful for the next group of transitioning students. Therefore, it becomes imperative that administrators and counselors develop a separate transition program for each group of students, gathering data from the students and parents and moving forward with the transition team approach (teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, and students).

Assessing Your Program’s Effectiveness
Obviously, retention-in-grade rates and dropout rates are chief indicators of a successful transition program. In addition, student participation in school-sponsored activities, parental participation in school-sponsored programs, student failures in various subject areas (math, science, social studies, and English) must be tracked. Student achievement measured by standardized tests (using raw scores or standard scores as the measure) must also be considered in determining a program’s success. When these areas are examined and input from all stakeholders is considered, the result is a transition program that is designed to make a difference in students’ school and future success.

References

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P. Lená Morgan is dean of Instruction at Pensacola Junior College, Pensacola, Florida. Morgan and Hertzog are codirectors of the Center for Transition Studies at Slippery Rock University and Pensacola Junior College and have been conducting research and writing on the effects of student transition since 1994.

Whitefish Bay (Wis.) Middle School and High School staff members became concerned about what they were hearing from students in transition: fear of hazing, homework overload, stress of final exams—sound familiar? By combining their efforts, they developed a plan for easing the transitions and the minds of incoming ninth graders.

Transition Project
One of the first things the Whitefish Bay Transition Team learned as they began their transition project was that no one person or group in the middle school or the high school owned the process to assist students in making the transition from the middle school to the high school. Counselors, principals, eighth grade students and their parents, eighth grade teachers, ninth grade counselors, and secretaries worked together to assist incoming students. Although many individuals were involved in the process, no one person or group held the responsibility for ensuring that eighth grade students became ninth grade students without the trauma associated with a change of educational cultures.

Eighth grade students and parents completed a survey, and the transition team used the results to reinforce and clarify the perception of the cultural differences between middle school and high school. Further, middle school
and high school teachers were surveyed to give the transition team insight into the problems incoming students faced. After analyzing the data from the surveys, the team arrived at several general conclusions pertaining to transition. Although the following statements were obtained from the Whitefish Bay Schools, they express universal concerns voiced by all students involved in a transition process:

- Significant differences exist between the middle level philosophy of early adolescent education and the high school's college preparation program. As a result of these differences, the middle school faculty considered the high school faculty to be subject-centered, and the high school faculty complained that the middle school faculty were too affectively oriented.
- Although hazing was not condoned at the high school, incoming students were concerned about rumors of hazing that circulated through the schools. In addition, sophomore and junior students who had been hazed as freshman deemed it their right to haze the ninth grade students.
- Eighth grade students perceived that all high school students had constant access to alcohol and drugs, and as new high school students, they feared they would be confronted with these temptations in and out of school. The perception of incoming students was that every visit to the restroom was a drug confrontation.
- Homework and testing policies created a crisis in ninth grade. Unlike many of the middle school classes, homework assignments were completed. Ninth grade teachers used for determining final grades; and each course had a final examination. This was unlike the middle level philosophy of drill, practice, and evaluate.
- Middle school guidance and advisory structures developed student self-concept. This approach was enhanced through exploration and experiential learning, whereas competition and differentiation were the basis for most high school guidance and advisory efforts.

As a response to these generalizations, the transition team identified the following areas as essential to the creation of a successful middle level to high school transition program:

- Leadership
- Communication
- Articulation
- Response

**Leadership**

Few things are accomplished successfully in any school without the leadership of a principal and a group of active teachers. The responses from the surveys and other comments from students, teachers, and parents prompted the middle school and high school principals to organize a transition team of counselors and teachers to study the situation.

The transition team examined the problems students were encountering and developed a plan to improve student preparation for high school, enhance staff relations between the two schools to coordinate curricular articulation between them, and establish an ongoing dialogue among the two schools and their students and parents about transition issues. During a summer retreat, the two principals, the counselors, and the volunteer teachers laid the groundwork for a transition plan.

A transition steering committee, composed of volunteer faculty members from both schools who represented all curricular areas, formed during the retreat to organize and manage a multiyear plan to provide a smooth transition from grades 8–12. As the students moved through these grades, the committee focused on the academic and the social and emotional aspects of curriculum progression—the programs, the beliefs, and the attitudes—in accordance with the district's philosophy of education. With the director of instruction serving as the facilitator and convener, the committee developed an annual calendar of transition events, identified transition topics, and planned and designed inservice programs related to student transition. Members gathered data to plan transition activities and evaluate the programs, coordinate public information related to transition activities, evaluate and monitor the students' progress as they proceed through the school, and identify the characteristics of successful transition practices.

Strong leadership from the two principals was key to the success of this part of the project. The principals also committed financial assistance for supplies, secretarial support, released time for teachers, and funds for food and refreshments for team meetings. In addition, teacher inservice activities—designed to train teachers who work with students in transition—greatly enhanced the program.

**Communication**

Today in the Whitefish Bay Schools, middle level and high school teachers share a schedule of joint faculty inservice activities. The schools hold combined staff development meetings once each quarter for the presentation and discussion of pedagogy related to early adolescent education. Occasional after-school meetings also assist teachers in helping transitioning students develop the academic study skills necessary for success in the high school; assist students with the schedule of nightly homework at the high school; and teach students how to study for and take high school academic tests. Eighth grade teachers have worked with ninth grade teachers to develop approaches to ensure that homework assignments are completed. Ninth grade teachers
have worked with freshmen to help them assume personal
responsibility for their homework assignments. The meetings
alternate between the middle level and high school buildings
and include a social time for snacks and small talk between
the two faculties.

Articulation
Curriculum articulation usually refers to the linear progres-
sion of the scope and sequence of K–12 curricula. When
transition processes were developed, transitional articulation
came to mean that each grade level teacher told the teacher
of the preceding year what a student would be expected to
do to find success in the coming year, and each current year
teacher told the succeeding year teacher the level of student
achievement thus far. Within team-led meetings, eighth and
ninth grade teachers blended their curricula so the last
assignment of the eighth grade year looked like the first
assignment of the ninth grade year.

As a spin-off from the curricular articulation, principals
and counselors charted the attendance, grades earned, and
standardized assessment progress of each ninth grade student,
comparing ninth grade performance with eighth grade per-
formance. A graphic display of student performance over
two years helped teachers identify clusters of students who
needed special interventions to bring them closer to grade
level standards. These interventions included nomination to
the homework club, placement in special courses for empha-
sis in reading skills, 504 plan consideration, special counsel-
ing, and parent progress reporting.

Response
A significant aspect of successful student transition is
responding to students' and parents' concerns. For example,
school staff members investigated complaints of hazing
immediately, and guilty students were disciplined. Students
and parents concerned about homework were referred to the
freshman homework center where ninth graders participate
in a supervised study period after school, during which time
teachers help students begin their homework assignments
while they are still on campus.

The transition team also employed response factors in
planning staff development. When the high school faculty
revealed that they did not understand the middle school
advisory program, for instance, a special joint meeting was
held to teach high school teachers about the role of advise-
ment in the middle school philosophy.

A significant part of the response function was the transi-
tion team's ability to monitor its interventions and create
appropriate second responses. Information about student
success is vital to the team's monitoring of student progress.
The responses from the staff's mid-year survey helped the
team determine the content of subsequent staff inservice ses-
sions and keep parents informed of changes occurring in the
middle level and high school environments.

The second phase of the transition project requires mon-
itoring the program, and the team consulted with the mid-
dle school and high school faculties to evaluate. Feedback
from the professional staff is instrumental in the team's cre-
ation of timely and content-specific inservice programs. Fac-
ulty perceptions of how the transition process is advancing
provides the transition team with insight into the motivation
and reinforcement required to keep the project viable.

Teacher feedback also informs the team's progress reports to
the school board.

At the conclusion of the school year, the transition of
Whitefish Bay students from middle school to high
school had become a nonissue for students, parents, and
faculty. Parents still shared their eighth grade student's
concerns about “fitting in” at the high school, and stu-
dents and parents continued to voice concern about
issues of drugs and alcohol. However, for eighth grade
students and their parents, the focus was no longer on
the environmental barriers that had once existed between
the two schools. Parents no longer talked about high
school teachers not understanding middle school stu-
dents or the middle school faculty not preparing students
for academic success in high school. There was no longer
talk about a curricular breakdown between the middle
school and high school that impeded student success.
Finally, middle school and high school faculty members
no longer saw themselves as separate components in the
K–12 educational program.

Excerpted and adapted from: Hertzog, J. C., and P. L. Morgan.
1999. Transition: A process, not an event. Reston, Va.: NASSP. Copies of this monograph can be purchased from
NASSP Sales, (800) 253-7746, item #2100010, $8 for
NASSP members, $10 for nonmembers.