Operation Jumpstart is a one-week summer program that helps relieve anxiety and stress for incoming sixth grade students (and their parents). Although it is designed specifically for at-risk students or those in special education programs, it can easily be adapted for any group of students making a transition to middle school.

Historically, teachers for the receiving middle level grade have spent an enormous amount of time helping their new students become oriented to the school as they learn how to read a schedule, open a locker, and understand what is expected from them. This is time that is taken away from instruction. For students with special needs or students who need more time to learn routines and expectations, Operation Jumpstart levels the playing field and gives these students a chance to be ahead of other students entering the middle level. It decreases or eliminates the orientation time during the school day and gives teachers a chance to focus on instruction starting with the first day of school.

A transition program for students entering middle school helps students who have special needs or are at risk adjust to new expectations and experiences and be ready to learn from the first day of school.
The objectives for Operation Jumpstart were designed to ensure that the student would be able to:

- Identify strategies for reading and writing in content area classes
- Read a schedule and locate each classroom
- Organize a binder and materials for a middle school day
- Open a combination locker
- Identify effective hallway routes for moving from class to class
- Identify strategies needed to stay organized

These objectives are accomplished throughout the week by carefully designed activities and lessons that make it fun for the students and help them master the many basic skills needed to be successful in the middle school setting.

Nuts & Bolts
Operating for three hours a day for five days, Operation Jumpstart can be available to as many students as the school has the finances to support. I ran the program during the last week of July for 25 students. The camp started at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 11:00 a.m. Each teacher was asked to arrive at 7:45 and remain until 11:15. They were paid for four hours each day, including a 30-minute planning period.

Transportation was provided by a local bus company with curb-to-curb service. The program was free for each student, but we asked for a $10.00 commitment fee if the student was riding the bus. (In the beginning years, we had too many parents back out of the bus service at the last minute and we were left paying for a bus with only 1 or 2 students aboard). We then used the money to offset the high cost of the bus service.

Starting with a staff of just two special education teachers, I asked several eighth grade students if they would like

TIPS FOR HELPING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Schools and teachers can provide assistance to new middle level school students with the following suggestions:

- **Schedule intentionally.** Program classes that are closer together and with full-time grade level teachers who are well aware of the needs of young adolescents.

- **Use signals.** Facilitate a nonverbal communication system so students can signal a need for help without consequences from peers (that certain facial expression or hand signal can make all the difference in the day-to-day classroom success).

- **Color code binders.** Some schools are on a block A/B day schedule. For some students a different binder for A days and B days is very effective.

- **Color code papers.** Some teams of teachers have used color-coded papers for each class. (All English teachers photocopy assignments on green paper, science on blue paper, etc.).

- **Keep textbooks at home and at school.** By ordering one extra set of books for the teachers to keep in their classes, the students are able to keep their textbooks at home and not have to bring them back and forth to school. This helps students, parents, and teachers.

- **Provide homework help.** Use the agenda or school planner to help the child learn to copy homework down each day in the correct section (this can also be used as a two-way communication between home and school).

- **Maintain a homework hotline.** Ask about creating a homework hotline if one does not exist. It relieves stress at home if a simple phone call can give all the homework instructions from teachers so a parent can verify the homework assignments.

Sometimes reading and writing homework assignments are too difficult or too lengthy for some students. Every school usually sets an average time that they feel a student should spend on homework. I ask parents to set a time limit for each subject each night and then to draw a line on the paper when the child has spent that much time and note the time spent on the assignment. This allows the teacher to start to differentiate the homework for the students and it creates an understanding of what is realistic and reasonable for a child in sixth grade to spend doing homework.

Teachers must ensure that they send home the information needed to complete the homework. In many conferences, I have heard parents state over and over that they would have helped the child, but they didn’t understand the assignment or couldn’t find the necessary papers in the child’s binder.

—C.J.
to volunteer to help. Not only were they delighted to be asked, but also we now have sixth grade students ask at the end of each year if they can come back and be volunteers for the program. The student volunteers add much to the program, and it boosts their self-esteem in more ways than can be measured. Each year, we have at least four student volunteers during the week, and many parents also add their support in different ways. (We also let the volunteers ride the bus, so we don’t have to ask their parents to provide transportation).

We could not have done the program without our student volunteers. They ran errands, helped all the students, coordinated the snack, and gave the “real scoop” to the students from their point of view. We took the volunteers out to lunch on the last day and give them a nice thank-you gift, but the most valuable reward for them was learning the important skill of giving of themselves to others.

Schedule
The routine and schedule are kept the same each day. The students who attend need a specific routine and thrive on the sameness that each day provides. Only on Friday did we change the routine slightly to add a parent visit. Monday through Thursday, after a quick morning drill, the students broke into two classes and each teacher taught a specific lesson. After 45 minutes, the students switched classes, and the teachers again conducted their lesson. When the classes were completed, the students moved to the gym for a 30-minute large group physical activity, followed by a snack time that gave students a chance to interact and get to know one another (we had three different feeder elementary schools). After snack, the students went back to the classroom for large group activity that completed the day. The students were dismissed to the bus or walked to the front door for dismissal.

Budget
Operation Jumpstarts’ program budget can vary according to students’ needs and staff availability. We operated the camp with only two special education staff members, but a regular education teacher would be a tremendous asset to the staff.

We provided a snack to the students each day, and we also provided all of the supplies for their binders if their family could not provide it. We asked that the supplies be sent in on the first day of the program so we knew what we needed to purchase for the students before we did the binder organization activity.

Our initial funding came from the federal third-party billing money. After the first year the program was funded by the general budget for the Office of Special Education.

Our budget was as follows (all costs are approximate):

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Timeline
An organized timeline ensures that communication occurs between the feeder elementary schools and the middle school. In late April or early May, the elementary schools were given information and registration packets for Operation Jumpstart. Permission slips were due by June 1 to the appointed teacher at the middle school. By June 15, a confirmation letter went to parents confirming their transportation request (bus, walker, or being picked up by the parent). We also stated whether we had received their $10 donation for bus transportation. On July 1, we confirmed the addresses and route with the bus company. Approximately two weeks before the program began, a letter went to each parent requesting that their child bring specific school supplies and a completed emergency form on the first day.

Motivation=Success
Each year when the camp is over, I always feel that it’s a shame we can’t teach the entire curriculum during that week. You have never seen such motivated, energized, and excited students as the ones that attend Operation Jumpstart. They want to see it all, learn it all, and know it all in one week. They leave with a sense of success and assurance that they can and will be successful in middle school. Of all the programs that I have been involved with in all of my years of teaching, I am the most excited about this one. It not only relieves stress and anxiety for the children, but also it offers them a chance to be leaders when school starts, for perhaps the first time in their life.

Parents complete an evaluation form on the last day of the program. One hundred percent of the parents have stated that this has been the best experience for their child to ease the transition and fear from elementary to middle school. One parent stated, “Operation Jumpstart gave my child confidence and the feeling that she was going to make it in middle school.”

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