FOR FRESHMEN ONLY

By Joseph E. Haviland
Although most students welcome moving to high school, many are anxious about how they’ll fare in the larger, more impersonal, more competitive, and grade-oriented environment.

PREVIEW

During a one-day summer transition program, rising freshmen tour their new high school, meet staff members, and interact with successful upperclassmen.

Upper-class volunteers lead school tours and study-skills workshops and answer questions about how to succeed in high school.
Casting Our Nets
Arlo Guthrie says that finding a good lyric is a bit like fishing: You just sit on the river bank, and when you see a good one swimming by, you cast your net and haul him in. In this one respect, school innovation is a bit like song writing, a bit like fishing. Just toss out your net when you see a good idea swimming by—and haul it in. So it was when we went fishing for ideas to improve our transition strategies.

Like many schools, we had been conducting transition activities for years. For as long as anyone could remember, we had offered tours to rising freshmen and their parents; had sent delegations of teachers, counselors, administrators, and students to the middle school to speak with eighth graders; had visited the middle school’s parent group; had invited parents and students to a course selection night to speak about the curriculum; and had bused eighth graders to the high school for a cocurricular activities recruitment fair. We had reason to think that our transition activities were sufficient—but whenever parents are wondering aloud about the high school, it’s time for those who care about the high school to go fishing. And so we cast our nets.

The fish we landed we called “For Freshmen Only.” It caught our eye because of its possibilities. It could serve as a worthwhile service that juniors and seniors could offer incoming freshmen; it could offer opportunities for ninth graders to develop positive relationships with upperclassmen; it could give participants a leg up as they entered the more competitive, more grade-oriented high school environment; it could ease anxiety and better equip ninth graders to navigate unfamiliar surroundings. And it would do these things in a form that would be sustainable over the long haul.

For Freshman Only looks like this: One day during the summer between eighth and ninth grades, rising freshmen are invited to spend a full day at the high school. Teams of upperclassmen, recruited from the local chapter of the National Honor Society (NHS), guide small groups of “newbies” about the school. By the end of the day, participating students feel comfortable navigating from point A to point B in the large high school. And as these groups tour the school, freshmen pepper their upper-class tour guides with questions after question. And all of this is purposeful. The tour is an opportunity for kids to ask kids questions they might not ask in the presence of adults. And if helping kids feel “in the know” helps ease their transition, then providing lots of time for students to be alone with upper-class students is an important ingredient in a comprehensive transition program.

After the tour, the freshmen rotate through a series of workshops that have been designed and are taught by successful upperclassmen. Teams of NHS volunteers, serving as workshop leaders, identify one of the skills described in Jean Snider’s book How to Study in High School and offer examples of how that specific skill might be used to advantage in this high school. Workshop leaders are encouraged to be as specific as possible. How might the skill be used successfully in Ms. Jones’ class? What kinds of tests is Dr. Payne likely to give and how do successful students prepare for them? Does Ms. Wheatley really check the homework? Students teach the skills from their own experiences in the high school, with the very same curriculum and with the very same faculty members that the rising freshmen will encounter in September. The teaching done by the NHS volunteers can be uneven, but it’s always relevant, always authentic.

Combs (1993) argues that transition activities should be planned to acquaint students with the system they are about to enter but they should also aim to make students feel important and cared for. Is there a surer way to make teenagers feel cared for than to feed them? The newbies get snacks throughout For Freshman Only. Cokes and juice and water, donuts, muffins, bagels, and fruit are provided throughout the morning. Of course, there is lunch. And we serve a mid-afternoon snack. If students get thirsty as they travel from one workshop to another, they can help themselves to chilled drinks from the ice chests that are positioned throughout the school.

We didn’t want the cost of one innovation to spell the demise of another. Tight budgets too often force innovators to choose between pursuing their new ideas or retaining their old ones. So, after consulting with the high school’s parent group (a wonderful resource), we decided to charge a
participation fee. For a charge of $25, each participant receives a copy of Jean Snider’s How to Study in High School and lunch, drinks, and munchies throughout the program. Our parent group advised that in our community, if students were thought to be benefiting from this program, a $25 charge would be considered a bargain. However, our middle level and high school guidance counselors make every effort to ensure that no student is turned away because they cannot pay the participation fee.

The Same Needs Everywhere
Pantleo (1999) asked freshmen in Pueblo, CO, what they wished their high school might have offered to help make their transition from middle school more successful. A tour of the school, information about cocurricular activities, help in selecting courses, and study skills instruction head the list. Kids in Colorado, it would seem, are much like kids in our hometown.

Thanks to For Freshmen Only, when incoming freshmen get off the bus in September, those who participated in this program will see more than one or two familiar faces. And they are welcomed by the principal, the freshman counselor, and the faculty sponsor for the National Honor Society. They’re introduced to the principal’s secretary, the assistant principals, the office staff, the security guard, and the head custodian.

As with any program that is sustained over time, For Freshmen Only has been tweaked a time or two. Is our how-to-study book better than another? Can we offer the program for less? These and other questions have prompted us to make changes, but fundamentally, the fish that we landed has stayed caught. For the 10%–15% of each rising freshman class that choose to participate, it’s a program that builds connections, extends a welcoming hand to newcomers, and offers valuable insight into how to navigate the building and how to accommodate the academic demands and opportunities presented in this high school. And it signals to parents that the high school faculty is a partner in support of their children’s academic and social adjustment to the high school. PL

References

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