

New Beginnings: Transitions to and from California Elementary Schools

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Executive Summary

Successful entry into kindergarten and transitions into middle grades school are crucial to academic success, high school graduation, and post-secondary outcomes. An array of studies have revealed the contribution that transition strategies have made in reducing student dropouts, in enhancing academic performance, in alleviating student and family stress, and in increasing high school graduation rates, all of which are vitally important to success in adult life.

Last year, the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) at WestEd completed a study with the California Department of Education (CDE), which focused on the transition from the middle grades into high school. This study, *Making the Move: Transition Strategies at California Schools with High Graduation Rates*, is available at http://www.cacompcenter.org/pdf/CA_CC_Transitions_Report_Final.pdf. Building on this prior work, this new report focuses on student transitions into and out of elementary school.

Drawing on the nine high schools from our previous study, we determined their primary feeder middle grades schools. Eight middle grades principals and eight corresponding district administrators were interviewed. In addition, we interviewed seven feeder elementary school principals (identified by the middle grades principal and using data from the CDE). This report presents examples and themes of how selected schools and districts support transitions into and out of elementary school. However, we do not claim that these sites are necessarily exemplars due to a lack of state-wide data through which strong transition outcomes can be identified.

Themes were identified as “key” when three respondents from different districts mentioned the topic as a key factor or as a major challenge in supporting elementary transitions. The following key transition themes were identified through these interviews:

- The emphasis on student transitions into and out of elementary school appears to be growing.
- Schools and districts use orientation activities and initiatives to support elementary student transitions.
- Feeder patterns may impact transition—more complex feeder patterns, where students from a single elementary are divided among multiple middle grades schools, may exacerbate efforts to streamline transition.
- Vertical articulation supports transition through creating a common understanding of academic expectations and also facilitates sharing student information between levels.
- Schools use student data to facilitate appropriate student placement and identification of at-risk students.
- Setting academic and behavior expectations eases student transitions.
- Counselors may be instrumental in supporting student transition.

Participants also reported a variety of challenges in supporting student transitions. The current fiscal climate was mentioned as having a significant negative impact on the strategies used and resources available. In addition, the following challenges were noted: obtaining reliable data to use for student placement; setting appropriate expectations for students prior to their transition into or out of elementary school; finding time for vertical articulation; and changing feeder patterns.

Five considerations for policy and practice were identified in the prior report (Parrish et al., 2011). These implications also apply to transitions into and out of elementary school:

- Facilitate opportunities for students to connect with the school (e.g., orientation days for students and parents). Respondents in this study discussed the importance of orientation activities and initiatives as a way to ease student transitions.

- Promote staff collaboration within and between schools. Several participants mentioned vertical articulation as a way to support student transitions.
- Simplify school feeder patterns to allow more staff coordination between schools and reduce student disruption facilitates transition.
- Offer multiple paths for students to obtain academic support. Through collaboration and sharing student data, staff are able to better identify struggling students, facilitate appropriate student placement and provide academic assistance.
- Motivate schools to attract and retain students through healthy competition.

Transitions are critical times for students. Additional research on the following topics could support school, district, and state education agency staff as they work to support student transitions: how to organize school grade configurations and simplify school feeder patterns to best support student transitions; given that transition into elementary school is a student's first entry into formalized education, what does research tell us are the best ways to support students as they establish their academic lives; and what are the most effective practices for supporting students as they strive to attain post-secondary goals.

Introduction

As a partner in the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, American Institutes for Research (AIR) released *Making the Move: Transition Strategies at California Schools with High Graduation Rates* in 2011. This report presented findings from our study of graduation rates and transition strategies in nine districts throughout California. Based on feedback, the California Department of Education (CDE) asked AIR to conduct a similar study focusing on student transitions into and out of elementary school.

This report presents the findings from this second project. Its purpose is to present examples and themes of how selected schools and districts support elementary school transitions.

Due to a general lack of state-wide data through which strong transition outcomes can be identified, we do not claim that these sites are necessarily exemplars. The key themes discussed derive from interviews with school and district administrators on how they are supporting student transitions. The samples of districts and schools for both studies are largely the same (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Selected Middle Grades Schools and Elementary Feeder Schools

School District	Middle Grades School	Selected Feeder Elementary	Percentage of Entering Students at the Middle Grades School from this Feeder	Count of Entering Students at the Middle Grades School from this Feeder
Holtville Unified	Holtville Junior High	Emmett S. Finley Elementary	81.90%	86
Mendota Unified	Mendota Junior High	McCabe Elementary School	93.14%	190
Buena Park Elementary	Buena Park Junior High	Beatty Elementary School	15.75%	97
Garden Grove Unified	Fitz Intermediate	Newhope Elementary School	20.05%	80
Riverside Unified	University Heights Middle	Highgrove Elementary	17.69%	78
Livingston Union Elementary	Livingston Middle	Selma Herndon Elementary	27.78%	80
Sacramento City Unified	Sam Brannan Middle	Caroline Wenzel Elementary	11.59%	40
Elk Grove Unified	Samuel Jackman Middle	Prairie Elementary	22.33%	117
Caruthers Unified	Caruthers Elementary	K-8 school		

In short, respondents reported an increasing recognition of the importance of successful transitions in helping students stay and succeed in school. Even in this time of fiscal constraint, although some reductions in transitions support were noted, a number of respondents mentioned heightened attention and new activities to support students as they entered elementary school or transitioned from this school level to the next.

Literature Review

This review focuses on programs and strategies for the successful transition of students to and from elementary school, and also draws from the larger body of transition research. The following summarizes the information gathered through online scans on EBSCO, ERIC, and Google Scholar as well as information and recommendations from the CDE staff, which is broken down into the three subsequent sections: academic, social and emotional challenges; collaboration and relationship building; and school feeder patterns and grade configurations.

Academic, Social and Emotional Challenges

Successful transition into middle grades schools is critical to future school success. The new experiences students must navigate include interactions with older students, increased academic rigor, and greater autonomy. The difficulties associated with this period are reflected in the finding that students' perceptions of the quality of school life decline as they progress from elementary to secondary school, with the largest decline occurring during the transition to a middle grades school (Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 1998). Students also reported decreased engagement in middle grades schools compared to elementary school, and a need for greater support, such as more individual time with teachers, more teacher empathy for their developmental needs, and stronger relationships with teachers (Schmakel, 2008).

Due to these changes, some students resort to leaving school. In the 2010–11 school year, 3,876 California seventh graders dropped out of school—an increase of 871 students from the prior year (CDE, 2012). In addition, a study conducted by Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) in New York State determined that changing schools resulted in lower student performance—a strong predictor of dropping out of school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Increases in students dropping out in the middle grades, decreases in academic performance, and decreases in reported student perceptions of the quality of life indicate this to be a pivotal time for students, requiring attention from schools and districts. Attention to successful transition is one of the leading factors attributed to high middle grades academic performance in California by surveyed teachers, principals, and superintendents (Williams, Kirst, Haertel, et al., 2010).

Collaboration and Relationship Building

In the California Department of Education's report *Multiple Pathways to Student Success*, a number of suggestions for preparing students for transitions through their academic careers were provided. They include articulation and collaboration between schools to share best practices, measures, and materials; sharing data to track student progress and provide appropriate support; and career exploration through tours and job shadowing starting at the elementary level to ensure students are ready for postsecondary opportunities (CDE, 2010).

The literature reveals an array of strategies to facilitate transition for incoming students. The most commonly cited transition activities include meetings with new students and their parents, interactions between counselors and elementary school staff, and visits to middle grades schools for an informational session or assembly (Epstein & Maclver, 1990). In addition, Perkins and Gelfer (1995) developed a planning transition model that includes building a planning team, setting goals and identifying issues, writing strategic transition plans, gaining the commitment of all stakeholders in the transition process, and evaluating the process.

Entry into formal education, like many school transitions, causes both stress and stimulation (Niesel & Gribel, 2007). Five principles have been cited as the most beneficial for fostering successful transition into kindergarten for children, families, and schools: developing supportive, effective relationships for students; creating continuity from preschool to kindergarten; developing relationships between schools and families; tailoring practices to the individual needs of students; and forming collaborative relationships with all stakeholders in the transition process (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000).

Teamwork across middle grades and elementary schools can maintain an atmosphere of support for students and create a sense of cohesion. The alignment of curriculum and increased communication among school staff about instructional strategies were cited as key transition factors (Kowal, 2002). Additionally, it was found that teachers at higher-performing middle grades schools more commonly worked collaboratively with teachers at their feeder elementary schools to ensure they could support the needs of at-risk students and to develop appropriate intervention strategies (Williams et al., 2010).

School Feeder Patterns and Grade Configurations

How students are directed and organized as they move into and out of elementary school also plays a role in how well students transition. Those making a pyramid transition (multiple elementary schools feeding into a single middle grades school) tend to experience greater achievement loss than their counterparts who make a linear transition (one elementary school to a single middle grades school) (Alspaugh, 1998). As social integration is a crucial component of continued academic success and persistence (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001), eliminating or reducing the need for students to renegotiate social relationships when entering a new school may be beneficial. Langenkamp (2009) found that students transitioning into a new high school with their peers earned a higher predicted GPA in the first year of the transition period. Schiller (1999) also found that students who excelled in the middle grades benefited from attending the same high school as a majority of their classmates. However, students who struggled academically in the middle grades appeared to benefit from starting afresh at a high school with a new cohort of students. While these studies focused on the transition into high school, there could be a similar dynamic for the elementary to middle grades transition.

Recent studies indicate that creating K–8 schools, and therefore eliminating the elementary to middle grades transition, is beneficial. Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) and West and Schwerdt (2012) found that in the year in which students moved to a middle grades school, their state standardized test scores fell substantially in math and English relative to their K–8 counterparts. Additionally, students with below-median state achievement levels in grade 3 for math experience substantially larger declines in achievement after the initial transition into the middle grades (Schwerdt & West, 2011).

Grade configurations also appear to have longer-term effects on students. Compared to their K–8 peers, students attending a middle grades school showed an achievement drop through 10th grade and were also likely to have greater absences and 10th grade dropout rates (Schwerdt & West, 2011). Engagement was also problematic for students attending middle grades schools. While some students started to disengage before the transition to high school, it was less pronounced for students in K–8 schools than it was for those attending a middle grades school (Eccles, 2008). Student engagement and school connectedness are crucial to students remaining in school. Half of students who dropped out report that they did so because they felt disengaged from school (Bridges et al., 2008).

Across the full range of transitions research, there is relatively little focus on students entering and exiting elementary school. The purpose of this report is to provide examples of how a small number of schools and districts are implementing these strategies and easing student transitions into and out of elementary school.

Methodology

This study uses the same sample of districts as our prior study, which focused on successful transition leading to high school graduation. As we were seeking exemplars for this prior work, the sample was selected based on identifying high schools with substantially higher-than-statistically-predicted rates of graduation. These analyses were based on publicly available data from the CDE from the school years 2005–06 to 2008–09 (the latest year of available data at that time). The predicted graduation rates were developed using ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression, which controlled for the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; percentage of enrolled Asian, Hispanic, or African American students; percentage of female students; percentage of students receiving special education services; percentage of English language learners; and the level of school mobility.

A high school was identified as performing better than statistically predicted if its graduation rate was higher than other schools serving similar student populations. In addition, selected high schools had an Academic Performance Index (API) Similar Schools Rank of at least 8 (out of a possible 10). Based on these criteria, nine high schools were selected that varied by location, size, and urbanicity (Parrish et al., 2011). More specific information about how this sample was selected can be found in the final report of this prior study.¹

Study Sample

For this study, our sample included nine district administrators, nine middle grades principals, and nine elementary school principals. When applicable, we re-interviewed the same district administrator from the previous study. The point of contact at the district level was the district superintendent, the associate superintendent, or his or her designee.

Using the prior sample of high schools, the primary feeder middle grades school for each was identified. Four of those middle grades schools had been selected for the prior study, and the remaining five were identified using data from the CDE. For the middle grades schools, we interviewed the principal and also asked for a recommendation of a feeder elementary school to include. Based on this, we then conducted an interview with that elementary school's principal. In situations where the middle grades principal did not report a substantially different relationship with a particular elementary school, we selected the predominant feeder elementary school based on data from the CDE or suggestions provided by the district administrator.

One of the middle grades schools from the prior study is a K–8 school (Caruthers) with a new structure allowing for two principals within the K–8 school (K–5, 6–8). The district administrator requested that we not interview school principals at this time. Another district administrator did not respond to interview requests, and one elementary school principal asked to not participate. In total, we interviewed 23 participants; Exhibit 2 shows the number of completed interviews by role and also identifies the participating district and/or school. The interviews for this study were scheduled to last for 60 minutes. In some instances the participant requested an abbreviated interview of 45 minutes.

¹ The previous study can be found at http://www.cacompcenter.org/pdf/CA_CC_Transitions_Report_Final.pdf

Exhibit 2. Completed Interviewees and Corresponding Schools and Districts

Interviewee Role	Completed Interviews	Districts/Schools
District administrators	8	Mendota Unified School District, Buena Park Elementary School District, Garden Grove Unified School District, Riverside Unified School District, Elk Grove Unified School District, Sacramento City Unified School District, Livingston Union School District, Caruthers Unified School District
Middle grades principals	8	Mendota Junior High, Holtville Junior High, Buena Park Junior High, Stephen R. Fitz Intermediate, University Heights Middle, Samuel Jackman Middle, Sam Brannan Middle, Livingston Middle
Elementary school principals	7	McCabe Elementary, Emmett S. Finley Elementary, Beatty Elementary, Newhope Elementary, Prairie Elementary, Caroline Wenzel Elementary, Selma Herndon Elementary

Study Limitations

The sample was originally picked based on substantially higher-than-statistically-predicted graduation rates, and highlighted graduation and transition supports for students in these high schools. Because these sites were selected based on data providing clear evidence of unusual success, they were viewed as exemplars.

This study continues the investigation on transition supports from and into elementary schools. However, as the original sample selection was based on graduation rates, this current study is looking into a concept that is somewhat removed from the original basis for selection. Thus, although the selected sites are in districts featuring strong rates of graduation, the argument of evidence that their elementary transition strategies may serve as exemplars is more tenuous. For this reason, we present the practices at these sites as examples rather than viewing them as exemplars. “Exemplary” sites could not be selected for this study due to the lack of data at the state level allowing comparison of transition success at one site as opposed to another.

Another limitation to this study is the duration and quantity of interviews. Unlike the prior study, for this one we were unable to conduct site visits to interview additional school staff or students to probe more deeply and observe how the sample sites were implementing transition supports for students. Additionally, there was only time to conduct phone interviews with one person at each school or district.

Contextual Factors

Throughout the interviews, respondents mentioned contextual factors that impacted their transition success. These included the size and demographics of the district, the structure of the district and schools, how long administrators had been in their current leadership roles, and open enrollment policies.

For example, two of the sample districts are rural (Mendota and Caruthers), with student enrollments of 1,326 and 2,873, respectively. Respondents indicated that their small size allowed them to be quite familiar with their families, sometimes knowing students before they enter kindergarten.

Size also impacts their school feeder patterns.² For example, while some larger districts reported efforts to simplify feeder patterns as a strategy to support transitions, in these two districts clean feeder patterns resulted from the small number of schools.

District and school structures also impact transition supports. In this sample, seven of the nine districts are unified, spanning grades K–12. Our sample included various elementary and middle grades school structures and grade configurations: two schools are K–5; one school is K–8; four schools are K–6; one school is grades 3–6; two schools are grades 6–8; and six schools are grades 7–8.

Also, district administrators and school principals reported being in their current role from six months to nearly nine years. This length of time might impact the degree to which schools and/or districts were implementing transition strategies, or the degree of historical insight respondents were able to provide.

A final contextual factor to note pertains to open enrollment.³ The sample included districts with and without open enrollment policies. Respondents from districts with open enrollment seemed to place greater emphasis on competition as a factor motivating transition supports. That is, in a competitive environment, the focus on retaining expected feeder-school students appeared heightened.

Key Themes

This section describes the various themes for transitions to and from elementary school that were mentioned in the interviews. These themes are often interrelated, but are discussed separately as a way to provide examples. Our interviews identified the fact that many schools and districts are implementing similar supports for students transitioning into as well as out of elementary school.

In order to be identified as a key theme, three people from different districts had to mention the topic either as a key factor or as a major challenge in supporting elementary transitions. In addition, the CDE staff requested the inclusion of questions pertaining to the use of counselors. This theme was mentioned by three people as a key factor, but not from three different districts. However, based on the specific interest in the topic, it is included as a key theme.

The key themes from the interviews include a growing emphasis on these transitions, the impact of feeder patterns, vertical articulation as a way to support transition, the use of specific strategies to enhance transition, data use to facilitate appropriate student placement, expectation setting, programs from middle grades moving into elementary as a transition support, and the use of counselors. Below, each theme is presented with a brief explanation on implementation, which includes school and/or district examples as well as reported benefits and challenges. Key themes that are broader concepts are discussed first, followed by themes that are more concrete, finishing with a discussion on counselors.

² Upon graduation an elementary school may send students to multiple middle grades schools; similarly students attending the same middle grades school might go to different high schools. The “path” that students take between elementary to middle grades and middle grades to high school are called school feeder patterns, and are considered “clean feeder patterns” if there is a single school that all students attend after moving to the next school level.

³ Open enrollment allows students and parents to choose what school to enroll regardless of their permanent address.

Growing Emphasis on Transitions

Throughout our interviews, six respondents from four districts mentioned a growing emphasis on transitions into and out of elementary schools. Respondents reported that historically the focus was mainly placed on the transition into high school, but there has been a shift, and entry into school and onto the middle grades has slowly increasingly gained their greater attention as well. Some participants related this new focus on transitions at these lower levels of schooling to accountability measures:

I think just in the last few years we've focused more on the [transition from] sixth to seventh. I don't think we ever saw that as a rough transition for certain students. And I think if you look at the dropout numbers for seventh and eighth grade in California, it really smacks you in the head because it's appalling—the kids that are dropping out at seventh and eighth grade in our state. When we really focused on that, it made us begin to focus on that transition.

Another respondent connected this new focus to heightened competition for students, saying that the new emphasis on supporting the transition into elementary school was due to “the competition for student enrollment.”

Statewide, added emphasis on transition is indicated in California's new transitional kindergarten initiative. This stems from SB 30, The Kindergarten Readiness Act (signed in September of 2010), which changes the age requirement for students entering kindergarten. Based on SB 30, students need to be five years old at the beginning of kindergarten starting in school year 2014–15. The fall of 2012 begins the first year of a three-year phased statewide implementation of transitional kindergarten.⁴ In the first year, students eligible for transitional kindergarten are those born between November 2 and December 2, 2008. The eligibility for students in the next two years includes students born after October 2, 2009, and September 2, 2010, respectively. Following a year of transitional kindergarten, students will then enroll in traditional kindergarten.

Transition Strategies

Participants referenced using orientation activities and initiatives to ease elementary school transitions. All of the respondents mentioned using orientation activities to support students' transition into and out of elementary school. These activities varied in complexity. For example, one school created a mock day for incoming students at the school that introduced students to schedules and changing classrooms for classes. Other schools hosted an orientation session with an administrator talking to incoming students about attending the new school with a campus tour. In some of the sample schools, these orientations for students were scheduled so that parents could also participate. One principal explained the benefits of the orientation day:

It is helpful when kids visit the classrooms they're going to be in [next year]... Some of the kids had the added benefit of meeting their teacher... And when they walked out, it was a very different feel and tone than when we sat and welcomed them. And then four hours later we dismissed them. It was like a different kid.

Interviewed staff at all levels (district, elementary, and middle grades) mentioned the benefits of these transitional supports. They said that the orientation activities allowed students to become familiar with the layout of the new school and also provided an opportunity for students to ask questions and feel more comfortable about the transition to a new school. As one principal explained,

⁴ More information pertaining to transitional kindergarten can be found at <http://www.californiakindergartenassociation.org/transitional-kindergarten/>

I think the bigger adjustment for kids is that they're going from a school of 450 kids to sometimes a school of 1,200 to 1,600, all seventh and eighth graders. So I think the sheer size and then the choice element of getting to pick electives, sports, friends, I think that's one of the largest adjustments in that they leave the safe cocoon of a small sixth grade class and are thrown into a much larger environment.

Transition strategies cited as supporting students entering elementary school included “Kindergarten Round Up,” open houses, and transitional kindergarten. A district administrator discussed the strategies in place for students’ transitioning into elementary school: “Every [elementary] school... has some kind of kindergarten orientation where the parents and kids come... they tell them what to expect and what the standards are.”

Transitional kindergarten is designed to provide developmentally appropriate instruction that includes an introduction to kindergarten standards but does not require student mastery of those standards. According to estimates, once transitional kindergarten is fully implemented, “120,000 students will receive an additional year of preparation to boost K–12 success” (California Kindergarten Association, 2011).

Two interviewed participants mentioned transitional kindergarten as a transition strategy. One district administrator said, “Transitional kindergarten will focus primarily on student development, student responsibility, and English language acquisition. It is more about taking kids who are four on the cusp of five and still need to learn how to handle themselves within a classroom.”

Administrators at all levels mentioned the use of various programs to support student transitions. Programs were selected based on the needs of the students. For instance, several schools mentioned using After School Education and Safety (ASES), a California Department of Education program that allows schools to fund afterschool academic and enrichment programs, as a way to provide additional academic support to identified students.⁵ Two participants also mentioned the importance of providing Gifted and Talented Education programming (GATE) as transition supports.

Livingston Middle School has been an AVID national demonstration site since 1998. In preparation for the 7th and 8th grade, sixth graders participate in an elective tutorial on AVID to gain familiarity prior to having the opportunity to enroll in an AVID elective in 7th grade.

Twelve participants referenced the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program as a mechanism to support transitions. AVID is, “an elementary through postsecondary college readiness system, designed to increase schoolwide learning and performance” (AVID, 2012). While all students can benefit from AVID skills, the primary target population is students in the “academic middle”.⁶ Three elementary principals mentioned embedding AVID skills in elementary grades so that students entered the middle grades school with an understanding of AVID strategies. Challenges associated

with these programs expanding into the lower grades included funding, staffing, and time for implementation.

Respondents were asked what advice they would provide to other principals and administrators regarding elementary student transitions. Over a third of respondents (7 out of 20) suggested creating a

⁵ More information about ASES can be found at the CDE website: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ba/as/>

⁶ More information about AVID can be found at: <http://www.avid.org>

connection with students as a strategy for supporting students transitioning into or out of elementary school. A middle grades principal said this:

Get to know the kids as early as possible. Know their backgrounds. Know where they come from. Know their families. Talk to the kids and make them feel as welcome as possible as early as possible. I think that's the first and most important step before any other strategy.

Other suggestions provided by respondents included providing visitation days for students and parents to familiarize themselves with the campus and get to know teachers, providing opportunities to learn more about expectations at the new school, and having a range of clubs or sports activities in which students from both elementary and middle grades can participate.

School Feeder Patterns

Complex school feeder patterns complicate student transitions. School feeder patterns are the paths that students take as they transition from lower to higher level schools. One school is said to “feed” into another if students from the originating school enroll in the next level school upon graduation. These feeder patterns can be important because they can affect the degree of dispersion among a student group as it transitions. The greater the number of schools sending students to a higher level school, the more these feeder patterns are considered complex.

As feeder patterns become more complex, it is increasingly challenging for staff from multiple schools to coordinate and communicate regarding transitions. Splitting groups of students who have spent many years together in the same elementary school at this time of transition may also increase their anxiety. Thus, feeder patterns may impact a student’s academic career. These patterns can be designed to largely move students together as a group or to disperse them among different schools as they move from one school level to the next.

Removing elementary schools with less than 1 percent of the destination middle grades school’s population, the number of feeder elementary schools per middle grades school in this sample ranged from 1 to 17.⁷ The feeder patterns described by respondents fall into one of four categories: a) one district has already simplified feeder patterns (Elk Grove); b) three of the districts have clean feeder patterns due to local context (Caruthers, Holtville, Mendota); c) one district has complex feeder patterns and recognizes difficulties associated with simplifying the patterns; and d) four have complex feeder patterns but did not mention considering changing these patterns.

Elk Grove simplified its feeder patterns by organizing its schools such that all students from a particular elementary school are strongly encouraged to go to the same middle grades school and then on to the same high school. Feeder school principals within Elk Grove collaborate to create a seamless educational experience from kindergarten through 12th grade. Respondents reported that this has not only simplified the feeder patterns, but has also fostered increased emphasis on graduation and postsecondary enrollment. The Elk Grove elementary principal explained,

We’ve had the middle and high school principals and vice principals come over and give out T-shirts to all of our students, mentioning that they are going to be part of this college-going culture. We have slogans at all

⁷ Including all students, the range of elementary feeder schools is 12–94 based on data provided by the CDE.

the elementary schools that talk about... 'go to Prairie, go to Jackman, go to Valley, go to college.' Those sentences are printed everywhere—just so the students can start getting it engrained in their minds that they have a very good chance of going to college if they stick with these feeder patterns.

A district administrator in another large district discussed interest in trying to simplify the district's feeder patterns:

We have had a task force all year working and they've just come forward with their recommendations...It's been many years since we've looked at our attendance boundaries. Currently they're not clean feeder patterns. You will have students sitting in the same [elementary] classroom that because of their address might be assigned to different middle schools. We're contemplating cleaning that all up... so if you're in an elementary, you know that you're going to this middle school and you're going to this high school.

The administrator acknowledged, however, that changing feeder patterns will be challenging due to resistance from community members who have purchased homes based on the school, and due to needed support from school board members.

Having complex feeder patterns can also exacerbate challenges associated with vertical articulation and orientation strategies. This district administrator illustrated the complexity:

There are two or three K–8s and three middle schools that currently feed into one high school. So to do articulation between the ninth grade teachers at this school and its feeder schools is a little daunting. Teachers will do articulation but not if they have to go to two or three schools.

Vertical Articulation

Collaboration between the higher level school and feeder school staff can be an effective way to share student information and assist with the articulation process as students make the transition into the next level. Twelve school principals and four district administrators discussed the importance of vertical articulation (discussions on standards, curriculum, and instructional practices) as a way to support student transitions. The Mendota Unified administrator explained how the principals encouraged opportunities for vertical articulation:

This year, at the request of the elementary and the junior high principals, they'd like an opportunity for their sixth grade teachers...at the elementary site and the seventh grade teachers at the junior high site to collaborate not only about the transition but also about courses. This will include the commonalities and the differences and allow...sixth grade teachers to cover content that will be expected of incoming seventh graders.

The differences in vertical articulation strategies were largely centered on how many grade levels were included and the frequency of conversations. One district has created opportunities for school staff for grades K–12 to discuss articulation across grades by buying out staff time, while in other districts the vertical teams only include two grades (the sending grade and the receiving grade). In terms of frequency, some schools and districts are scheduling staff release days on the same day to facilitate this process; other participants mentioned not having enough opportunities but striving to make the best use of available time for this purpose.

In addition to the vertical articulation occurring with teachers and support staff, similar efforts were happening with school administrators. The Holtville Junior High principal spoke of an effort that bought out school administrators' time for a 2-day cross-district meeting to discuss staff development, assessments and coordinating in-service training for teachers. Such efforts are designed to create a more seamless transition for students moving between schools through greater continuity and a reduced need for remediation.

The principal at Samuel Jackman Middle School spoke of the value of having regional principal meetings that doubled as a professional learning community. These meetings assisted with not only creating a sense of community within the district, but ensured that everyone was on the same page in terms of academic expectations, instructional best practices, and the use of common writing rubrics.

Eight respondents mentioned vertical articulation as one of the biggest challenges the district faces pertaining to successful transitions. A district administrator discussed the need for increased focus on vertical articulation to support students entering elementary school: "our students are coming unprepared into kindergarten...and that is a big area that we identified just this year as something that we're going to try to develop." The challenges in vertical articulation include complex feeder patterns, and limited staff time and opportunities. If middle grades schools have a large number of feeder schools, this presents more of a challenge in creating the opportunity for vertical articulation to occur. Another district administrator mentioned that it was a challenge "for teachers at the next level to have a deep understanding of what the kids have actually learned." This administrator went on to say,

We've been recently doing vertical instructional rounds where we've had administrators from elementary, intermediate, and high school touring different schools. We've seen a lot of things taught in elementary school being taught again. So sometimes there's a lack of understanding of the level of depth in which students have been instructed.

Data Use to Facilitate Appropriate Student Placement

Five administrators and 15 school principals referenced data use as an important component to transitions, and also discussed the benefits of using data to help facilitate appropriate student placement and identification of at-risk students. The data shared between levels includes academic data and data on behavior, attendance, and additional student support. An elementary principal explained,

It's very important that we share the right data. I'm talking about achievement and proficiency data...to make sure that the children we are sending them are placed in the right programs. We have some children involved in intensive counseling programs, so we share that data.

McCabe Elementary School uses profile cards for each student which contains testing and other pertinent information. The card stays with the student and each successive year teachers get the profiles. The school also uses Data Director which allows access to current and previous student achievement data (formative and summative). The platform facilitates organizing, disaggregating, and communicating student data.

School staff members often send writing and math notebook samples to the transition school so their new teachers have an idea of what students have done before they arrive.

Two principals stated that the student information

system was the predominate tool used to share student information. Three principals from different districts mentioned using the commercial online data management system, Data Director.⁸

During the interviews, administrators mentioned the importance of accurately placing students into appropriate classes. These conversations (often with the counselor) addressed not only academic placement in terms of classes, but also in providing supports for at-risk students. An elementary principal emphasized the school's focus on placement:

We communicate [the importance of accurate placement] very clearly with our middle school staff. We want to make sure that all of our students are appropriately placed and have the supports that they need... Conversations happen between the classroom teachers, the staff at the middle school and our intervention teachers, special education teachers and other staff at the middle school. And those conversations also happen between the administrative teams.

The principal of Sam Brannan Middle School made course selection a component of a family orientation night. Incoming seventh grade students took part in a meeting with their parents and a counselor to discuss which courses they are interested in, and which classes would be most appropriate for them. This allowed the feeder school staff to begin working on their course schedule on the student's last day of 6th grade, gave the student and their family an opportunity to get acquainted with the campus, and begins to build relationships with school staff.

For students transitioning into elementary school, one principal mentioned the lack of student data for this population as a consequence of funding cuts. Prior to the funding cuts, the school was able to provide pre-kindergarten programming to a larger number of students, and therefore had opportunities to collect data on students prior to their enrolling in elementary school. Given current funding limitations, the school has had to significantly scale back the pre-kindergarten program, and reported now having less data to facilitate the transition.

When asked to provide advice to others, three interviewees recommended using data to place students in the appropriate classes and to identify effective supports for students. One elementary school principal explained her practice of assessing every student who transitions into her school by the second week as imperative to providing students with effective supports.

Expectation Setting

Eight principals mentioned establishing high student expectations as an important factor in assisting student transitions into and out of elementary school. One principal discussed the importance of establishing high expectations, saying that the principal's school focused on "setting the expectations from the beginning, when we meet with the parents in [kindergarten] and we talk to the parents and emphasize the importance." Another principal said:

I treat my fifth graders differently than I do with my fourth grade. Especially the second semester, I start being a little stricter with them because that's the expectation they're going to have at the middle school. They know there's a change and I communicate to them the expectations they're going to be facing when they go to the middle school.

⁸ More information on Data Director can be found at <http://www.riversidepublishing.com/products/DataDirector/>.

Another principal discussed including college preparation when setting student expectations during transition into a middle grades school:

The students are already exposed to what their expectations are when they move on to middle school. Because students focus so much on the social aspects, we also make sure that we talk to them about the academic aspect of it and why it's so important for them to really concentrate on their academics besides all the enrichments and the clubs that are provided for them after school. And also, just bringing in students who talk about how they are preparing to go to college. The minute that students reach sixth grade, I visit every single class and talk to them about how important this year is going to be because we want them to do well on the CST so they can be placed in the appropriate classes.

Challenges associated with expectation setting include complex feeder patterns. Respondents at schools that had complex patterns, with incoming students arriving from many different schools, mentioned the difficulty in finding the time to establish expectations with multiple schools and with specific students within schools.

Use of Counselors

During the interviews, participants provided basic information about how counselors supported students' transition into elementary school. In the sampled middle grades schools, six principals reported having a full-time counselor in the school, one school had a part-time counselor, and in one school the principal (a certified counselor) also acted as the counselor. For the sampled elementary schools, five principals mentioned having access to a part-time counselor/psychologist shared among the district, and one principal indicated not having access to a counselor. Seven out of nine interviewees indicated that the fiscal climate had reduced the number of counselors in the district and/or school. In schools without a full-time counselor, principals reported that other staff members had taken on responsibilities previously assumed by the counselors. These staff included school psychologists, the principal, and classroom teachers.

Responses varied regarding how counselors were being used to support students' transitions out of elementary school. Four participants indicated that counselors helped place students in appropriate classes at the middle grades school. All of the eight middle grades school principals provided examples of how counselors supported transition by visiting students at the elementary school and talking about topics pertaining to middle grades school (e.g., changing classes for subjects, grades and grading policies, dress codes, course selection and extracurricular opportunities). For example, one principal explained, "They [the counselors] do classroom visits when the students are seventh graders; they actually go out to the science classrooms and spend a day giving a presentation on social emotional skills."

Conclusion

Research identifies attention to successful transitions as one of the leading factors in middle grades academic performance in California (Williams et al., 2010). Respondents were asked what advice they would provide to other principals and district administrators regarding student transitions into and from elementary school. The most common suggestion (made by 10 participants) was collaboration with the feeder schools in order to ensure alignment of curriculum and that proper expectations are set for students prior to the transition. One elementary school principal stressed that it is important that "curriculum is aligned, that you know where they're going and where they're coming from. If you can do that your kids are going to be pretty well prepared."

Another suggestion, given by four respondents, was communication between school staff, students, and parents. A middle grades principal explained, “Good communication with all parties, making sure your staff is communicating well and parents are receiving the information as well as students...I think that’s the key piece.”

Furthermore, two participants indicated that this collaboration should start with leadership teams, both at the site and district level. As one district administrator stated,

I think the first thing would be, as a district leadership team, to define your purpose, define your goals. Build that beginning with your site leadership. Site leaders are the ones who really drive the district’s big picture. And from there, be very inclusive of the teachers who are involved. Target teachers who are the hubs of communication for other teachers. Build teacher leadership capacity around that common purpose, common goals. I think that would be a starting point, to have those conversations and move in a unified direction.

In this study, we heard of a growing emphasis on transitions for students entering and exiting elementary school from respondents. Additional key themes included the impact of feeder patterns, vertical articulation as a way to support transition, the use of transition strategies, data use to facilitate appropriate student placement, expectation setting, programs extending from middle grades into elementary as a transition support, and use of counselors.

The previous report identified five considerations for policy and practice: 1) facilitate opportunities for students to connect with school, 2) promote staff collaboration within and between schools, 3) simplify school feeder patterns, 4) offer multiple paths for students to obtain academic support, and 5) motivate schools to attract and retain students through healthy competition (Parrish et al., 2011). We believe these considerations also apply to this study, and illustrate those connections below.

Facilitate Student and School Connections

School respondents reported using a variety of orientation activities to support transitions through building relationships with students and their families prior to their first day of school by familiarizing them with the school campus, staff, programs, activities, clubs, and other resources at their disposal. District administrators can encourage the use of transition programs or strategies by providing resources to help implement these orientation days, including transportation for students to and from these activities.

Promote Staff Collaboration Within and Between Schools

Vertical, instructional, articulation was reported in both studies as a key factor in supporting student transitions. Districts can help facilitate vertical articulation by providing professional development opportunities for K–12 teams to discuss instructional articulation or by protecting time allocated for schools to collaborate internally or with feeder schools.

Simplify School Feeder Patterns

Research indicates that students attending a K–8 school had greater academic achievement, lower absences, lower dropout rates, and stronger student engagement than students who attended a middle grades school (Schwerdt, 2001; Eccles, 2008). Schools that lack this K–8 structure may be able to capture some of its benefits through the use of simpler feeder patterns. That is, having only a few elementary schools feed into the same middle grades school allowing students to stay together, and easing the ability of teachers across these schools to collaborate, may reduce student disruption and provide some of the benefits reported for K–8 settings.

Offer Multiple Paths for Student Support

We heard that schools and districts implemented a number of programs and strategies to provide students with timely access to academic supports based on student need. Through collaboration, sharing student data, and teacher feedback, staff are better able to identify struggling students, facilitate appropriate student placement, and provide academic assistance. Districts can encourage feeder schools to implement programs and/or strategies that are showing positive academic outcomes at the next level. For instance, respondents mentioned implementing strategies in elementary schools from programs that were successfully supporting middle grades students.

Motivate Schools through Healthy Competition

Finally, a number of participants mentioned how competition for students prompted efforts to attract students and families into schools through increased methods to ease their transition. Recognizing that districts have different policies towards open enrollment, school and district administrators may wish to leverage competition to implement practices that better support student transitions.

In conclusion, this study provides examples of how selected districts and schools are supporting student transitions into and out of elementary school. Even within the current challenging fiscal climate, respondents reported that they were now paying more attention to and ramping up transition strategies. It appears there is increasing recognition of the importance of these critical junctures in assisting children to be successful, stay in school, and graduate.

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