

Transition to High School: Added Risk Factors

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Abstract

For many students, the journey from middle school to high school is marked by significant social, emotional, and behavioural changes. Undetected student needs and lack of parental engagement can contribute to a negative transition experience. When students struggle to adapt to new challenges and demands without supports, they are at a greater risk of failure. Although the transition to high school can be a formidable time, when teachers and guardians intervene in a timely manner by identifying student needs and providing support and engagement, there is an increased likelihood of smooth adjustment and academic success.

The transition from middle school to high school can be a daunting experience. Social, emotional, and behavioural changes make it challenging for students to adjust to a new environment (Longobardi et al., 2016). If their academic abilities and needs are not detected early, they can be placed into the wrong programming. Lack of parental engagement can also contribute to a negative transition experience, leading to reduced student regulated learning (SRL) and lower achievement levels (Thomas et al., 2019). The passage from middle school to high school can be a critical factor in projecting a student's overall success, and must not be overlooked by educational systems.

Identifying and Responding to Changes

The transition from grade 8 to grade 9 can pose to be a very challenging period marked by socio-emotional changes, friendship changes, and academic changes (Benner et al., 2017). During this transition, a student's adaptive motivation and achievement goals can also be put to the test (YoonJung & Kim, 2019), with students reporting that they have more expectations placed upon them, with commensurate added responsibilities (Corbett, 2019). Additional factors include moving away from friends and family in home communities, navigating a new school, the development and loss of friendships, adjustment to new teachers, faster paced curriculums, and new ways of assessment such as a credit-based acquisition system.

Not all students cope well with the challenges, stressors, and anxiety that can accompany the transitional changes from middle school to high school. Poor mental toughness can make a student's transition a debilitating experience (St. Clair-Thompson et al., 2016), and can create apprehension over grades (Strand, 2020). Adolescents can perceive imminent school transition as a threat, while others may perceive it as a challenge (Roder & Muller, 2020). High school transition may also trigger a decreased sense of school belonging and an increased sense of depression and loneliness for students who have fewer friendship supports (Benner et al., 2017). When students transition to a new school, they may lack trust and express hesitancy in reaching out for support as a result of previous negative school experiences (Yeager et al., 2020). It is critical that teachers are cognizant of the many changes and additional risk factors that can impede a student from experiencing a smooth transition to high school.

Educators who recognize and validate the changes and challenges that students face during their transitional journey to high school will be more successful in supporting their students during this vulnerable period (Longobardi et al., 2016). Students who have the required tools to cope are more successful at controlling their emotions and physical symptoms of anxiety, and are more likely to have a positive transition (St. Clair-Thompson et al., 2016). In addition to teaching individual social competencies and academic skills, teachers can benefit by

striving to establish a welcoming environment and a positive classroom management style (Roder & Muller, 2020). Teachers and support staff can model resilience and perseverance, and assist students in setting goals in order to help boost their mental toughness, which will help them to manage their newfound academic workload as they begin to feel more comfortable in a high school setting (St. Clair-Thompson et al., 2016). When students establish trust in their teachers, they will be more likely to discuss their emotional state of well-being and their future aspirations (Yeager et al., 2020). Educators who recognize and respond to students' social, emotional, and behavioural changes can play a monumental role in their students' positive transition to high school.

Effective Communication and Programming

Unfortunately, students can be placed into the wrong programming if middle school teachers and high school teachers do not have the opportunity to collaborate in order to discuss student needs and plan necessary adaptations. Students who are misplaced experience greater stress and frustration during the transition process (Strand, 2020), and they may view their new teachers as impersonal and unsympathetic of their needs, creating a perceived lack of support and understanding (Longobardi et al., 2016). Students with special education requirements can have a concerning low level of goal achievement, adding another level of vulnerability to the transition process. Sadly, schools are not always prepared to meet the diverse needs of students in advance, which can make it difficult to place students in the programming that they may require. When teachers are not familiar with ninth grade academics, or are not confident in their teaching assignment, this can cause friction and contribute to a rough transition period for students (Somers & Garcia, 2016). High school transitions can also be hampered by increased waiting time and added frustration when a student has transferred from a different school division and the cumulative file has not yet been received by the new school. When programming requirements are not met, students can lose self-confidence and trust, and have more difficulty coping with the transitional experience.

When grade 8 and grade 9 teachers have an opportunity to collaborate prior to students entering high school, teachers can be much more prepared to meet the academic and emotional needs of the students, starting on day one of their arrival. Interdisciplinary teaching teams can subsequently benefit ninth-grade educators by convening regularly to coordinate class work, instruction, and behavioural management practices to enhance students' academic performance and engagement (Somers & Garcia, 2016). Students' relationships with teachers and peers can be improved when teachers are prepared in advance for the students that they will be welcoming into their class (Longobardi et al., 2016). The most successful students are often those that are guided by individuals who are caring, personal, and motivational (Yeager et al., 2020). Teachers can benefit by gathering information regarding students' academic history and the previous adaptations that may have been made for them (Mackenzie et al., 2012). It is important for teachers and support staff to take advantage of all opportunities to collaborate with one another, because lack of communication and improper programming can impede smooth high school transitions.

Parental Engagement

When parents and guardians are not engaged in their child's education, they are not equipped to identify their child's academic and emotional stress (DeSpain et al., 2018). Students who have reported that their parents have had less engagement with their learning have also reported lower autonomous motivation and academic efficacy (Thomas et al., 2018). There is an alarming negative relationship between the number of students who are strained during their initial year of high school and the quality of provision programs offered to parents and guardians during this transition period (Mac Iver et al., 2015). Teachers often grapple with how to build

strong partnerships with students and their families (DeSpain et al., 2018). Some schools fall short of effectively communicating information to parents in regards to student course requirements, student progress, and available student supports, causing more difficulties for students as they transition into high school (Mac Iver et al., 2015). Healthy parental engagement is a significant component of a positive high school transition.

Schools can use many strategies to enhance parental engagement. Although some parents tend to take a step back with the expectation of their children to be more independent as their children transition into high school, parental involvement can play a large role in adolescents prevailing over critical moments that may be characterized by trepidation, uncertainty, and peer shortcomings that are often associated with the transition to high school (Muscara et al., 2018). It is important for guardians to show interest in their adolescents' education by being informed and initiating discussion, rather than controlling their academic work (Strand, 2020). Parental influence can also depend on a family's socio-economic position, subjective characteristics, and cultural status (Ule et al., 2015). Mindful of the diversity and range of students who may participate, schools can provide informal campus tours and welcoming activities such as barbecues or meet-and-greet activities in order to help facilitate parental involvement (Chambers & Coffey, 2019). Communication with parents and guardians via newsletter, synervoic messages, and positive phone calls home can be very effective in keeping parents informed, which can increase understanding, support, and engagement (Chambers & Coffey, 2019). Automated weekly memos, classroom apps, podcasts, and up-to-date school websites can also inform parents about upcoming events and deadlines, student assessments, and community supports. Schools have the capacity to support parental engagement and can assist in building positive relationships between students and their parents.

Conclusion

The transitional journey from middle school to high school can be a challenging aspect of development for many adolescents. Imminent changes, communication and programming, and parental engagement must all be taken into account when students transition from middle school to high school. A negative transition experience can be a catalyst for added social, emotional, and behavioural stress, whereby students find themselves struggling to cope with new adaptations and developmental tasks. If students have difficulty navigating their way through their initial year of high school, they may find themselves at an increased risk of academic distress and failure, consequently veering off track for graduation. Although the transition from middle school to high school can be a precarious time for many students, when educators and guardians intervene early in this journey by identifying individual student needs and providing support and engagement, there is a greater likelihood of student success.

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About the Author

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