



# Transitioning Students with Disabilities from Middle to High School

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## Abstract

Many students with disabilities entering the 9th grade express concern about getting lost in the larger high school environment, being picked on by older students, and having more challenging academic classes. The transition from middle-to-high school process for students with disabilities at Westminster High School in suburban Los Angeles is a school-wide collaborative approach involving parents, students, middle and high school academic and special educators, and middle and high school administrators. Key components of the Westminster High School transition process include collaborative scheduling of visits by regular high school academic special educators to middle schools; collaborative scheduling and holding of 8th grade spring semester IEP meetings at Westminster High School; personal and group parent and student tours of high school campus during 8th grade spring semester; and an eight-week summer orientation program.

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## Keywords

transition, students with disabilities, middle school, summer school, academic teacher, parent

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Many adolescents approach high school with mixed feelings. They look forward to having more choices and meeting new people. At the same time they express concern about getting lost in a larger school, being picked on by older students, and having more challenging work. These apprehensions are often manifested in declining academic achievement and school attendance and students viewing themselves more negatively (Cognoto, 1999). Nationally, each year about 23% of all school dropouts are 15-16 years old (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004).

While the transition from middle to high school is challenging for all students, the transition is even more so for students with special needs. About 27% of all 15-16 year old students receiving special education services drop out of school each school year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Alarming, the national dropout rate for all students receiving special education services ages 15 to 22 years of age exceeds that of non-disabled students by more than 50% (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

Recent research has identified that some of the negative effects associated with transitioning into high school can be reduced by initiating middle to high school transition programs. Akos & Galassi (2004) and Mizelle & Irvin (2000) reported that effective transition programs involving all entering high school schools focus on developing bridging activities that provide information about the high school; socially supporting the student in planning the transition; and bringing together

middle and high school educators. Linver & Silverberg (1997) found that the addition of parental involvement in transition to high school activities is positively associated with higher academic achievement. Hertzog and Morgan (1999) study of 56 Georgia and Florida high schools found that students participating in transition programs have significantly lower failure and lower dropout rates than schools that did not have such programs.

Although investigations have produced useful information about middle to high school transition program characteristics for the general education population, these studies are noticeably lacking with information about the involvement

of students with disabilities. More specifically, there is a paucity of dropout prevention research related to students with disabilities that provides a description of the intervention, expected outcomes, and contexts that would enable easy translation of this research into practice (Cobb, Sample, Alwell, & Johns, 2005). The low cost and easily replicable middle to high school transition program described below addresses this deficiency.

*Transitioning Students with Disabilities from Middle School into Westminster High School.* The middle-to-high school transition program at Westminster High School in suburban Orange County Los Angeles was recently identified in a US Office of Special Education Programs funded research report (Phelps and Frasier, 2007) as an exemplary school-wide collaborative effort that produces positive educational results for students with

*We have dramatically reduced social and academic adjustment related problems of freshman students with disabilities by scheduling student and parent transition related activities at our school during the spring months of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year.*

---Director of Special Education

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disabilities. Initiated in the mid-1990s, the practice engages middle school and high school special educators and academic faculty, parents, school administration, and guidance counselors in a multi-step transitioning effort during the spring months of each school year.

*Planning and Scheduling Transition Activities.* The process begins in March when the District's Office of Special Education, in consultation with special education case workers at each of the District's three middle

schools, generates a list of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students with disabilities who will be attending Westminster High School. After names are received from the District's Office, the high school principal sends a personally signed letter on official school letterhead to each of the three middle school principals. This letter informs each principal about the Special Education Director's intention to begin scheduling transition planning activities with the middle school's special education staff. The letter also includes a brief list of major activities and target dates.

**Westminster High School  
Huntington Beach Union High School District  
Orange County, California**

Westminster High School is the only Title I school in the Huntington Beach Union High School District located in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan Area. Over the past several years, approximately 58% of the 2,600 students enrolled each school year participate in the free or reduced price breakfast and lunch programs. In the 2005-06 school year, one percent (1.4%) of the students are African American, 4.2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 39.6% Asian, 14.4% Caucasian, 1.3% Filipino, 37.3% Hispanic, and 1.5% Pacific Islander. Each school year, about 300 (11%) students receive special education services. Ninety and seven-tenths (90.7%) per cent of the students entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade graduated in June 2005. The annual drop-out rate over the past 4 years has been below 2.0 %.

The Education Trust report *Dispelling the Myth...Over Time, May 2002* identifies Westminster High School as a high-poverty high school that has multiple years of high performance on national and/or state assessments. Westminster High School has also received recognition as a National Distinguished High School by the U.S. Department of Education and a Distinguished School by the State of California.

Immediately after the letter has been received by each middle school principal, the Director of Special Education sends a letter to each of the middle school special education staff members with a copy to their respective principal and the District Director of Special Education. The letter provides a schedule of

target dates for visits to each middle school and explains the visits will be to gather information from general education staff and special education staff in order to more fully understand the needs of each student.

*Visiting Middle Schools.* During late March, the Director of Special Education and

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high school special education staff make several visits to each of the three middle schools. During these visits, they observe their future students in classroom settings, talk with individual academic teachers about each student, and meet with small groups of their perspective students for the purpose of providing an overview of the upcoming transition activities. Professional staff and students are informed about upcoming transition planning activities that will include a student tour of the high school before the spring IEP meeting with their parent, parent attendance at the spring IEP meeting held at Westminster High School, and the possibility of students attending summer school if they decide to do so. At these meetings, students are also given a map of the high school campus and a high school pencil and notebook. At the end of each small group meeting, each student is given a letter to take home to their parent(s) that provides information about all transition planning activities and the importance of the parent(s) attending the spring IEP meeting that will be held at the high school.

During April of each school year, an orientation is given to heterogeneous groups of 20-25 students with and without disabilities by Westminster High School guidance counselors at each of the three middle schools. These orientation sessions inform students about the various academic programs, faculty expectations regarding student behavior in-and-out of the classroom, and the year-long career explorations program attended by all incoming freshman. The guidance counselors also explain how the

high school academic experience will be different than their middle school experience.

In addition, an orientation about the English Honors Program is given to heterogeneous groups of students with and without disabilities by Westminster English Honors teachers at each of the three middle schools. At least two visits are made to each of the three middle schools in an effort to secure participation of students in the English High Honors Program. Those students who are accepted are provided with a summer work project with an English teacher. The project becomes a baseline writing sample for inclusion in the student's portfolio.

*Scheduling Spring Eighth Grade IEP Meetings at Westminster High School.*

Throughout April, May and June, IEP meetings for all incoming freshman students who will be receiving special education services (as well as the spring IEP meetings for all students with a disability enrolled in the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades) are scheduled by the high school special education staff. Availability dates and times of middle school case workers and other support personnel are negotiated and scheduled by Westminster High School special education staff.

Each parent of an incoming freshman student receiving special education services receives a letter from the Director of Special Education with a date and time for their child's IEP meeting. The letter informs each parent that their child's case worker from the middle school will be in attendance, requests

*I felt everyone at the IEP meeting really listened to me about my autistic son. We brought his IEP, I told them how well he can do at certain things. He met his new case worker. They even had flowers on the table with some snacks for us. It really helped me – and him – feel less afraid about his coming to this big high school.*

---Parent

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that their child be present, lists items that will be discussed, identifies who will be present from the high school special education staff, and identifies any other individual who will be invited to attend. A copy of the letter is also sent to the student's middle school special education case worker.

Each middle school case worker receives a schedule from the Director of Special Education detailing the date, time, and who will be in attendance at each of the IEP meetings. To place special emphasis on the importance of the spring IEP meeting, the middle school case worker sends a note home with each child the week before each scheduled IEP meeting to remind the parent and child. In addition, the day before each scheduled IEP meeting, the parent is telephoned by a member of the high school special education staff reminding them about the meeting. When a parent does not come to a meeting (which does happen but only very rarely), the parent is contacted by either the middle school case worker or the Westminster Director of Special Education and a new date and time is set for the IEP meeting.

*Eighth Grade Spring IEP Meetings at Westminster High School.* At each of the 85-90 IEP meetings

help each spring for incoming freshman, a snack and beverage are provided by the high school Special Education Department. When the school farm flower garden is blooming, fresh flowers are set at the food table. Particular attention is given to making a special "welcome to Westminster High School" atmosphere for each parent and child. The effort is to make the occasion special, informative, and a pleasant experience for the parent and child.

At the IEP meeting each parent is personally invited to the annual Open House for all incoming freshman and their parents. The Open House is held during June in the evening on the same day that their child will have been with all other incoming freshman taking a school-wide tour of the campus and classrooms. The goal is to have the parent and child come to the high school campus together for a minimum of two times in the spring of the student's 8<sup>th</sup> grade school year; once for the IEP meeting and a second time for a tour of the school on parents' night.

*Touring Westminster High School.* During June, a scheduled tour of Westminster High School for all of the incoming 8<sup>th</sup> graders, school-by-school, is hosted by the

*Taking the tour of East with my friends was kind of scary at first. I didn't know what to expect. The student guide was really nice.*  
*She took us around and ate lunch with us. When I came back with my mom and dad I showed them all around.*  
--- Student with a disability

*The Gateway Program really helped my son. He was always known to the special education director and the vice-principal in charge of school discipline before he got to high school. He always had someone to go to that knew him before he would explode or get into a fight. I think it also helped him to know what was expected of him and what would happen when he started school that fall.*  
---- Parent

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guidance counselors who led the middle school orientation meetings. Students walk about the campus accompanied by volunteer student guides. Classrooms are visited and brief overviews of academic and career facilities are provided by each team of student and guidance counselor tour leaders.

On the same day as the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from a middle school tour Westminster High School, the parents and students are invited to an open house in the evening. This is a general orientation meeting for parents of students with and without disabilities. As with the student orientation earlier in the day, parents and students visit classrooms and brief overviews of academic and career facilities are provided by the tour leaders.

*Special Summer Orientation.* In addition to the above described transition process for all students receiving special education services, a special six-week “Gateway Program” is held during the summer for a group of 20-25 incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. This program is an in-depth orientation for students with and without disabilities who are at risk of not graduating because of discipline problems related to social and/or personal behavior. Although students are identified by their respective middle school principal in the spring of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year as potential Gateway Program enrollees, student participation is voluntary. Enrollment of students

with disabilities in the Gateway Program is discussed with the parent/caregiver and student and determined during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade spring IEP meeting held at Westminster High School.

Gateway Program classes are held daily from 7:30 am to 12:30 pm. at the high school and are co-taught by the Director of Special Education, the Vice-Principal of Supervision (i.e., Discipline), and the Social Studies Department Chair. Classes are broken into several components and cover a wide range of topics such as study skills; school discipline policy and procedures; participation in extra-curricular activities; review of school handbook; student conduct at school activities (such as sports competitions and club meetings) and functions (such as school dances and field trips); review of core academic

graduation requirements; planning for and selecting one of the five career paths; visit to the five acre school farm and tour of the 57.1 acre campus; and review of academic teacher expectations for homework, in-class behavior, and grading procedures.

*Acknowledging Those Who Helped.*

Before the end of the school year, the Director of Special Education sends a handwritten “thank you” note to each of the middle school special educators who attended the IEP meetings. The Director also sends a letter to each principal, naming their respective special educators who were involved, complimenting

*The major benefit for me is that I get to know the students on a very personal level during the Gateway Program. I watch them interact during class sessions that are taught by the social studies teacher. They get to know me, too. So, when I do see them at school the first week, I say ‘hello’ and stop to talk with them. If a Gateway student is sent to my office, well, I already know a lot about the student and I can react to the situation with a lot of personal knowledge about the student.*

--- Vice-Principal for Supervision

them on their professionalism, and thanking them for their participation. A copy of each principal's letter is sent to the District Special Education Director and the Superintendent of Schools.

In addition, the Director of Special Education sends an individualized letter to the

District Director of Special Education and the Superintendent of Schools complimenting each middle school's special education staff for their participation and their support of their respective principal. A copy of this letter is sent to each middle school principal.

**Table 1. Westminster High School Transition Program Timeline**

Activity	Mar	April	May	June
District Office provides list of 8 <sup>th</sup> grade students with disabilities				
High School Principal letter to middle school principals				
High School Special Ed. Director letter to each middle school Special Ed. Staff member				
High School Special Ed. Director and Special Education Staff visit middle schools				
High School Guidance staff give orientation to all middle school students				
High School English Honors program explained to all middle school students				
IEP Meetings at High School scheduled by high school special education case workers				
Letter to each middle school case worker from Special Ed. Director with schedule of all IEP meetings dates, times, and who will be attending each meeting from high school				
Letter to each parent from high school Special Ed. Director with cc to each child's middle school case worker before each IEP meeting				
Middle school case worker sends reminder letter to parent just before IEP meeting				
Middle school case worker calls parent to remind him/her just before IEP meeting				
IEP meetings held at high school with all incoming 8 <sup>th</sup> graders who will received special education services				
High school tour for all incoming freshman				
High school all parent & all child open house				

**Table 1 (Continued)**

High School Special Ed. Director sends “hand written” thank you letter to each middle school special education teacher				
High school Special Ed. Director sends thank you note to middle school principals with cc of each letter to District Special Ed. Director & Superintendent of Schools				
High school Special Ed. Director sends letter to District Special Ed. Director & Superintendent of Schools with cc to each middle school principal				

**Summary**

The Westminster High School middle to high school transition process for entering students with disabilities minimizes cost and staff time by maximizing the existing framework of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting. By intentionally partnering with their middle school counterparts and personalizing communications among professionals as well as parents *before and after* the intervention, Westminster High School Special Education professionals annually involve students, parents, general education teachers, middle and high school special educators, and middle school principals to support the transition into high school of entering freshmen students with disabilities. Highlights of each student transition experience are many and include: in-class middle school visits by high school special education and academic teachers; special orientation meetings with groups of students receiving special education services; all student information meetings about the high school held at each middle school; spring of 8<sup>th</sup> grade school year IEP meeting at the high school; participating in summer academic courses; and the parent and student orientation night.

*For more information* about the Westminster High School middle to high

school program, contact Westminster High School Special Educators Carla Homes, Phone: 714-893-1381 Ext. 4203; or Jill Holterbach, 714-893-1381-4193.

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