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Making the Change From Elementary to Middle School

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Abstract

The transition from elementary to middle school is a critical time that is considered to be one of the most difficult for students due to environmental adjustments, psychological distress, and developmental changes. The following study explores whether a basic transitional program, in comparison to a minimal transitional program, would be beneficial to students transitioning from elementary to middle school. Public, aggregated attendance records, office discipline referral records, and students' Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) math and reading scores were examined using a convenience sample of two comparable middle schools' sixth-grade classes in Middle Georgia. A chi-square was used to see if implementation of a basic transitional program was statistically significant. Two out of three null hypotheses were rejected: The first hypothesis, regarding the positive impact of a basic transitional program on academics, was very statistically significant, and the third hypothesis about the effect of the basic transitional program on students' suspension rates was also extremely statistically significant.

Keywords: transition, middle school, school counseling, comprehensive, collaboration, implementation, and orientation

The transition from elementary to middle school is a critical time that is considered to be one of the most difficult for students (Lyons & Woods, 2012). They can experience several negative effects during the transition, including anxiety, stress, fear,

and apprehension; however, schools can make the transition easier and more comfortable for rising students by creating excitement and providing opportunities for students to tour and explore the middle school prior to the beginning of sixth grade. Implementing a comprehensive transitional program can be beneficial for incoming middle school students, leading to an increase in student attendance, academic improvement, and a decrease in discipline referrals.

Issues Students Face

According to Shoshani and Slone (2013), students transitioning from elementary to middle school demonstrate “a drop in self-esteem, declines in competence and perceived self-efficacy, lower achievement and academic competence, and increases in anxiety symptoms and absenteeism following the transition to middle school” (p. 1164). Choi (2012) stated how transitioning students are fearful of being bullied, anxious about getting lost in a larger and unfamiliar environment, and concerned about the new demands academically and behaviorally. Adding to the complexity of the external changes, their bodies are also changing as puberty begins (Dillon, 2008). The challenges sixth-grade students are facing with emerging adult bodies in a new environment with new expectations can lead to lowered attendance, lowered academic achievement, and an increase in discipline referrals (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). Jenson, Brisson, Bender, and Williford (2013) stated the issues in the following manner:

Young people experience a number of physical and emotional changes during this time, and the resultant move from elementary to middle school is challenging for many students. This transition generally requires students to move from a small and supportive school to a larger and less personal educational setting. It also means they need to establish new friendships at a time when peer acceptance is extremely important. (p. 362)

The stress and anxiety fifth-grade students may encounter while transitioning into sixth grade may become overwhelming; therefore, middle schools that incorporate a comprehensive transitional program can help ease students’ apprehension.

Why a Comprehensive Transitional Program?

Incorporating a comprehensive transitional program is valuable for students transitioning to middle school. Examining the changes rising sixth-grade students may encounter include the following: environmental adjustments, psychological distress, and developmental changes. These topics will be discussed further, as well as why they are considered significant.

Environmental Adjustments

The new environmental factors students contend with when transitioning from elementary to middle school are difficult for some sixth-grade students. Andrews and Bishop (2012) discussed the changes in expectations and surroundings rising sixth-grade students encounter. The curriculum becomes more difficult and students have to manage multiple classes and teachers (Choi, 2012). The increased difficulty level of assignments and number of teachers leads to the need for sixth-grade students to learn organizational

and time management skills (M. Williams, 2014). Additionally, the responsibility of lockers, gym uniforms, and alternating schedules can create stress (M. Williams 2014).

Psychological Distress

According to Choi (2012), sixth-grade students may feel anxious about making friends, getting lost, and fearful about being bullied in their new school environment. Sixth-grade students are faced with many new changes from a larger environment, changing classrooms with different teachers who have new and different expectations, and lockers. Students may become overwhelmed with stress, fear, and anxiety. Increases in depression and a decline in self-esteem emerge among some adolescents as they transition from elementary to middle school (Akos, 2006).

One concern for some sixth-grade students is meeting the older students in the seventh and eighth grade. Akos (2006) stated how “prior to the beginning of middle school, students often fear that they will be picked on, teased, and victimized by older students” (p. 1). Students want to be accepted and feel a sense of belonging. Research shows sixth-grade students report having difficulty making friends and experience feelings of loneliness (Akos, 2006). Wormeli (2011) stated how “belonging is one of the primary concerns for new middle-level students; addressing it is crucial for a successful transition” (p. 49). However, fitting in or being accepted by peers is not always easy.

Developmental Changes

The period during middle school is not only a time of environmental, social, and emotional changes, but a time when middle school students’ bodies are changing physically. Sparks (2011) stated, “The onset of puberty can exacerbate normal transition problems for younger students. . . . You’re looking at students making a transition during a time when tremendous physical, cognitive, and emotional transitions are going on at the same time” (p. 23). These changes can cause stress and fear for many students.

Comprehensive Transitional Program

As discussed previously, incorporating a comprehensive transitional program in middle school can help sixth-grade students with the following: learning how to handle the stress of a changing environment and body, discerning ways to adapt to the expectations of multiple teachers with increasingly larger and more difficult workloads, and acquiring coping strategies for stress, fear, and anxiety. The following section will describe a comprehensive transitional program, discuss the components, and address implementation.

Description of a Comprehensive Transition Program

Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) defined effective transition programs as “ones that improve student attendance, achievement, and retention” (p. 18). Effective transitional programs consist of more than one event (L. Williams, 2015). Cauley and Jovanovich further stated how “research suggests that effective transition programs have five or more diversified activities” (p. 18). Comprehensive transitional programs are long term and provide activities prior to the beginning of middle school and continuing through the sixth grade (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Effective transitional programs require

“communication, cooperation, consensus, and commitment” between schools and stakeholders in order to help ease students’ transition into middle school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 19).

Components of a Comprehensive Transition Program

A comprehensive transition program should include multiple opportunities and activities in which upcoming middle school students are offered a chance to explore their new school and all the new challenges added in a middle school setting. These opportunities should be given over an extended period of time, typically starting during the spring semester of students’ fifth-grade year and continuing well into their first year of middle school. A long-term commitment and recognizing the importance of a comprehensive transition program by all stakeholders involved at both the feeder elementary schools and the middle school is an indicator of the program’s success (“Transitions to,” n.d.).

Students and parents can be given the option to attend an orientation, tour the school, meet the teachers as well as administrators and school counselors, become familiar with the school’s expectations academically and behaviorally, and practice using lockers. Niesen and Wise (2004) stated the following:

Encourage students and their families to tour the school during the summer before entering. Provide information about the school as well as, for example, maps and class schedules. Virtual tours and an orientation session may also be appealing to students and their families. It may be useful to have students who have already made the transition successfully speak at the orientation about their strategies. (p. 165)

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD; 2011) noted the importance of allowing sixth-grade students the opportunity to begin school a day earlier than the seventh- and eighth-grade students. This can offer students the opportunity to practice opening lockers, become familiar with the school, and provide time to meet teachers and other students prior to the first day of school.

Jacob and Rockoff (2012) discussed how teachers from the elementary school can exchange information with the middle school teachers on the needs of particular students in order to create a more manageable transition. Establishing teacher collaboration between the elementary and middle school levels and encouraging parental involvement are ways to help aid students’ transition into middle school (ASCD, 2011).

The use of peer support can also be beneficial to a sixth-grade student’s transition due to “peers becoming increasingly important and influential during adolescence” (Lyons & Woods, 2012, p. 8). Adams (2008) discussed how adolescent students seek information and advice from their peers and how utilizing student ambassadors as part of an effective transitional program can help rising sixth-grade students “learn the ropes.” Having supportive peers can provide students with extra support and comfort when facing the new challenges of middle school and the stress that may occur from the transition (Lyons & Woods, 2012).

Providing students and parents the opportunity to become familiar with their new school environment, responsibilities, and expectations are all features that can be incorporated in a comprehensive transitional program to help reduce anxiety, fear, and

apprehension for upcoming sixth-grade students and ultimately ease their transition. Next, implementing a comprehensive transition program will be discussed.

Implementation

Creating a leadership team made up of multiple stakeholders in order to discuss and determine the needs of the school's transitioning students can prove beneficial. The team should examine what type of long-term implementation is realistic for their school. The components, such as those previously discussed, integrated in a school's comprehensive transitional program are unique depending on what the school implements. Creating and implementing a well-designed and well-managed transitional program, regardless of the school's individual design, will help students adjust and become successful in their transition to middle school ("Transitions to," n.d.). Although every school's program is diverse, multiple factors need to be incorporated for a beneficial program. Andrews and Bishop (2012) stated the following:

In each region, we found that the best and most comprehensive transition programs employed a multifaceted approach in preparing students to change schools. Two characteristics, in particular, were common to programs we considered "comprehensive." First, planners involved multiple stakeholders in the program, including students, families, and teachers. Second, planners developed programs that were longitudinal in nature, planning transition-related events to begin months before the new school year and to continue well past the start of school. (p. 10)

Incorporating multiple components to a transitional program including various stakeholders over a period of time is what constitutes the transitional program as comprehensive.

Integrating a comprehensive transitional program helps guide upcoming students through a successful middle school experience. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) stated, "Comprehensive transition programs that include numerous activities geared toward the needs and concerns of students, parents, and teachers can be effective in helping students transition to a new school with less anxiety and more academic success" (p. 23). A successful student transition from elementary to middle school is a team effort and involves multiple stakeholders, including school counselors, teachers, school administration, students, and parents. Creating an environment that feels safe and exciting connects students on an emotional level, brings awareness to the difficulty of transitioning into middle school, and provides ways to handle the changes, enhancing students' academic performance, encouraging attendance, and decreasing the number of discipline referrals.

Research Method

This study will examine whether utilizing the transition techniques discussed above will help students perform better during their sixth-grade year. It is proposed that as a result of having a basic transitional comprehensive transition program for students coming into the middle grades, they will have better Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) reading and math scores, better attendance, and fewer disciplinary referrals than those students who have a minimal transition program. In the following section the

null hypotheses will be presented along with discussion about the sample, measurements, and transitional programs implemented by the schools represented in this study. The independent variable is the transitional program; the dependent variables are academic performance, attendance, and disciplinary referrals.

Null Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. As a result of a basic transitional program, academic performance will not improve.

Hypothesis 2. As a result of a basic transitional program, attendance will not improve.

Hypothesis 3. As a result of a basic transitional program, number of discipline referrals will not improve.

Sample

A convenience sample of two comparable middle schools' sixth-grade classes in Middle Georgia was used. The number of sixth-grade students in each middle school being examined, as well as the school's attendance records, office discipline referral records, and students' Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) math and reading scores were studied. Since the Georgia Department of Education and Georgia Applesed databases were used to obtain information, the data acquired did not involve any individual student information because the data is aggregated and public. The programs and activities incorporated in School A and School B to help ease students' transition from elementary to middle school were provided by the school counselors from both schools examined. The elements included in a basic transitional program (School A) versus a minimal program (School B) were researched to determine whether a comprehensive transitional program could be beneficial for students.

Before collecting data, it was determined that School A and School B were two comparable schools within the same county in Middle Georgia. According to the Georgia Department of Education database, during the 2013–2014 school year, School A had 880 total students with 315 total sixth-grade students. School B had a total of 844 students with 294 total sixth-grade students. Both School A and School B were Title 1 schools with School A having 86% of their students classified as receiving free and reduced lunch and School B having 93%. In 2011, neither school demonstrated Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Although School A is a magnet school, through utilizing the Georgia Infinite Campus database, it was determined that, as of December 2014, only 2% of students in the sixth-grade class were there solely for the magnet aspect.

Measurements

Data collected derived from Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) math and reading scores, the percentage of students who missed between six to 15 days of school, and the percentage of students who had at least one out-of-school suspension during the school year. The data collected for the CRCT math and reading scores, as well as the percentage of students who had at least one out-of-school suspension, were only for sixth-grade students during the 2013–2014 school year. The data collected for the percentage of students who missed between six to 15 days was for the entire middle school, sixth through eighth grade, for the 2013–2014 school year. Since public,

aggregated data was examined in this study, the attendance represented sixth- through eighth-grade students due to the limitations of the data available.

In order to retrieve these records, Georgia Infinite Campus, the Georgia Department of Education Web site, and the Georgia Appleseed Web site were utilized. A chi-square was used to see if implementation of a basic versus minimal transitional design was statistically significant. Although permission was not required from the schools being studied due to using aggregated and public data, school counselors from School A and School B were informed.

Transitional Programs Implemented

This study examined whether incorporating components of a comprehensive transitional program discussed earlier would help ease students' transition into middle school. According to the literature review, the transitional programs implemented in the two schools researched would not be considered comprehensive due to only having one to two activities planned and not extending the transitional program through students' sixth-grade year. However, the transitional programs integrated in both schools included multiple components that can be beneficial for students rising to the sixth grade.

For the purpose of this study, the school hosting one event for rising middle school students will be considered minimal in design (School B) and the school hosting two events will be considered basic in design (School A). The impact a minimal transitional program has in comparison to a basic transitional program will be explored further, but first the events hosted by School A and School B will be discussed.

“Smooth Move.” During the spring of the 2013–2014 school year, School A and School B both hosted an event called “Smooth Move.” This event allowed fifth-grade students from the feeder elementary schools to visit the middle school campus for a few hours during the school day the year prior to beginning middle school. Parents of the students were also welcome to attend the event. School buses were provided to transport students from one feeder elementary school per scheduled day and time to visit the middle school. School counselors from the elementary and middle schools collaborated in order to schedule the day and time most convenient for each school during the fall or spring semester.

Fifth-grade students were given tours throughout the school by current students in order to become familiar with the layout of the middle school. A presentation was given by the school counselors on the expectations of transitioning into middle school to start preparing fifth-grade students for the sixth grade. Different elements of the middle school were introduced, including the school's mission statement, options for class electives, and clubs in which students could participate. At the end of the presentation, students and parents were given an opportunity to ask questions.

“Saturday Mock School Day.” In addition to “Smooth Move,” School A hosted a “Saturday Mock School Day” where fifth-grade students and their parents were given the opportunity to spend Saturday morning at the middle school. During the mock school day, upcoming students and their parents viewed a PowerPoint presentation of what to expect, practiced rotating to different classes, discussed with academic teachers the sixth-grade curriculum and classroom expectations, practiced locking and unlocking lockers, toured the middle school, and ate lunch provided by the school.

School A, hosting “Smooth Move” and a “Saturday Mock School Day,” represents a basic transitional program for upcoming sixth-grade students. Although hosting “Smooth Move” incorporated many essentials that can help elementary school students transition more easily, for the purpose of this study, a single event does not categorize the transitional program as basic. Therefore, School B’s transitional program would be considered minimal.

Results

A chi-square was used to calculate the accumulated data to determine whether having a basic transitional design compared to one that is minimal was statistically significant regarding academics, attendance, and behavior. The results are demonstrated below.

Null Hypothesis 1

As a result of a basic transitional program, academic performance will not improve. A chi-square statistic was used to compare students’ CRCT reading scores during the 2013–2014 school year where a basic transitional program was present (94%) and where a minimal transitional program was present (94%), $X^2 = 0.00$ ($df = 1$) and a two-tailed $P = 1.00$ and a one-tailed $P = 0.50$, which means there is no difference.

A chi-square statistic was used to compare students’ CRCT math scores during the 2013–2014 school year where a basic transitional program was present (72%) and where a minimal transitional program was present (56%), $X^2 = 10.39$ ($df = 1$) and a two-tailed $P = 0.0013$ and a one-tailed $P = 0.00065$, which is to be considered very statistically significant. The chances of these improvements occurring are less than 1 time out of 1,000. It appears having a basic transitional program compared to one that is minimal does improve students’ academic performance. Since one of the two CRCT scores is very statistically significant, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Null Hypothesis 2

As a result of a basic transitional program, attendance will not improve. A chi-square statistic was used to compare students’ attendance during the 2013–2014 school year where a basic transitional program was present (24%) and where a minimal transitional program was present (30%), $X^2 = 1.714$ ($df = 1$) and a two-tailed $P = 0.1904$ and a one-tailed $P = 0.0952$, which is to be considered not statistically significant. It appears having a basic transitional program compared to one that is minimal does not improve students’ attendance. The null hypothesis is retained.

Null Hypothesis 3

As a result of a basic transitional program, behavior will not improve. A chi-square statistic was used to compare students’ discipline referrals during the 2013–2014 school year where a basic transitional program was present (15%) and where a minimal transitional program was present (31%), $X^2 = 11.97$ ($df = 1$) and a two-tailed $P = 0.0005$ and a one-tailed $P = 0.00025$, which is considered to be extremely statistically significant. The chances of these improvements occurring are less than 1 out of 1,000. It appears

having a basic transitional program compared to one that is minimal does improve students' behavior. The null hypothesis is rejected.

Through the collection of data and use of a chi-square statistic, this research demonstrates that incorporating a basic transitional program compared to a minimal transitional program will improve students' academics and behavior but not students' attendance. Two out of three null hypotheses have been rejected.

Discussion

Through research and the collection of data, this study supports the benefits regarding attendance, academics, and behavior by incorporating a basic transitional program for the promotion of elementary school students to middle school. For further discussion, this section examines the implications of the hypotheses, limitations of the study, and a rationale for a comprehensive transitional program.

Implications of Hypotheses

When comparing a school with a basic transitional program (School A) and a school with a minimal transitional program (School B), the data shows the school implementing the basic design demonstrates a statistically significant difference. The implication for each hypothesis will be discussed in this section.

Hypothesis 1. As a result of a basic transitional program, academic performance will not improve. The first hypothesis, through the use of data collection and a chi-square, was found to be very statistically significant. The data collected demonstrates how effective incorporating a basic transitional program can be for sixth-grade students in regards to the math and reading CRCT scores. School A implemented more activities and provided upcoming students with more opportunities to help ease their transition, which is reflected in the CRCT scores examined. Although the CRCT reading scores are the same for both School A and School B, School A had a higher percentage of students who met the requirements for the CRCT math scores.

There are several possibilities why the CRCT reading scores were not affected by the presence of a basic transitional program compared to a minimal transitional program. The passing rate for both School A and School B was 94%. There is not a lot of room for improvement due to the high passing rate in both schools. What the teachers and administrators emphasize may possibly differ between schools due to one focusing more on math than the other. The skills sixth-grade students established in relation to math and reading during their primary education may also be a factor since middle schools' sixth-grade classes are often drawn from multiple elementary schools.

Hypothesis 2. As a result of a basic transitional program, attendance will not improve. The second hypothesis, through the use of data collection and a chi-square, was not statistically significant. Keeping in mind the data collected was for sixth- through eighth-grade students and not solely sixth, the data demonstrates that incorporating a basic transitional program does not improve students' attendance. Although the percentage of students who missed between six to 15 days of school during the 2013–2014 school year was lower in School A, where a basic transitional program was implemented, it was not enough of a difference to be considered statistically significant.

The percentage of students who missed between six to 15 days in School A was lower by 6% and therefore not significant. A statistical significance may have been present if the data came solely from sixth-grade students as opposed to sixth through eighth. Due to this restriction when acquiring data, this study does not show with certainty whether sixth-grade students' attendance was affected or not by implementing a basic transitional program. Also, the administration's focus may differ between School A and School B in relation to attendance, which can be a factor.

Hypothesis 3. As a result of a basic transitional program, behavior will not improve. The third hypothesis, through the use of data collection and a chi-square, was proven to be extremely statistically significant. The data collected demonstrates how effective incorporating a basic transitional program can be for sixth-grade students in regards to behavior and the number of discipline referrals. School A implemented more activities and provided upcoming students with more opportunities to help ease their transition, which is reflected in the number of discipline referrals. School A had a lower percentage of students who had at least one out-of-school suspension during the school year. Therefore, the difference was extremely statistically significant.

There are several possibilities why the percentage of students who had at least one out-of-school suspension was lower in School A. Administration in one school may enforce chronicling discipline referrals more or less than the other school. What each school determines as inappropriate behavior leading to consequences may differ between the schools when contemplating out-of-school suspension. Also, one school may have a zero tolerance policy for certain behaviors where the other school is more lenient of those same behaviors.

Limitations of the Study

The greatest limitation for this study is the sample population. Due to the research design and the time restraint, only one county was examined. Although the data collected was from two comparable schools, the study still includes two separate schools with varying students and possibly different levels of parental involvement.

Differences between the schools' administration is another limitation. The variation in administration can affect the outcome of this study in regards to discipline referrals and attendance. One school's administration might encourage teachers to more actively document discipline referrals. Also, in comparison, one school may establish a school-wide incentive program for positive behavior or attendance. These are the types of considerations that may arise when studying two schools, although comparable, that show the limitations to this specific study.

Another limitation to this study is the difference between what each school considers important and a priority. The school counselors and administration at School A and School B may focus their time and energy on different aspects, depending on what they feel is an immediate need in their school. One school may consider a comprehensive transitional program more imperative than the other school. This possibility and the different approach both schools' counselors have in regard to their counseling program may also affect the outcome of this study.

The last limitation of this study is regarding attendance. The data obtained was from sixth through eighth grade and not solely sixth grade. Due to this restriction, a clear

representation of the impact or lack of impact a basic transitional program may have in terms of attendance in comparison to a minimal transitional program was not present.

Rationale for a Comprehensive Transition Program

Transitioning from elementary to middle school can be difficult for many students, generating psychological distress and angst during a time when their bodies are also physically changing. Some students are anxious about getting lost, fearful of being bullied, concerned about the increased number of teachers, nervous about shifting from class to class, apprehensive regarding lockers, and worried about adjusting to the school's expectations. Providing opportunities and creating excitement for students and parents requires commitment and collaboration between the feeder elementary schools and the middle school. These opportunities should begin prior to the start of sixth grade, typically the spring semester of their fifth-grade year and continuing well into their first year of middle school. Incorporating a comprehensive transitional program can help ease rising students' anxiety and fear, therefore leading to an increase in student attendance, academic improvement, and a decrease in discipline referrals.

Conclusion

By implementing a comprehensive transition program, middle schools and school counselors can help ease students' anxiety, fear, and apprehension during an important transition. Components of a comprehensive transitional program include the following: developing a leadership team made up of multiple stakeholders, creating excitement, communicating with feeder elementary schools, and implementing opportunities for students and their parents to become oriented with their new school beginning the year prior to middle school throughout their sixth-grade experience.

The effectiveness of establishing a basic transitional program is present due to two out of three null hypotheses being rejected. Although both School A and School B's transitional programs are not considered comprehensive, comparing a basic design and a minimal design still proved to be statistically significant, impacting students' academics, attendance, and behavior. In addition to the acquired data studied, the review of literature affirmed how implementing a comprehensive transitional program can be beneficial for rising sixth-grade students.

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