

# FROM THE DRAFTING TABLE TO THE LAUNCHING PAD

## Transition Tips When Planning for High School

By Cathy Healy

The move to high school from middle school for all students is an anxious time but when the student is one with special needs there is greater cause for concern. Parents of students with disabilities understand all too well the threats that transitions of any kind pose to their family's equilibrium and their children's sense of well-being. It is not unusual for parents to want to know how to prepare for the changes that certainly will follow when a student leaves middle school and enters high school.

The very words HIGH SCHOOL conjure an image of a larger than life super-sized imposing structure that is at best cold and impersonal and at worst institution-like. Middle schools represent smaller more supportive environments where adults and students know each other personally. Educators at the middle school level are skilled at providing a steady and reassuring learning culture. Parents too are supported by the school community where their involvement is expected and is spelled out in middle school policies. These educational settings, somewhat nurturing and somewhat predictable, foster a sense of security in the midst of chaotic adolescent growth. Is it any wonder that the thought of leaving this safe place strikes fear and trepidation in students and their parents?

Research suggests that parents can and do play a significant role in helping their students transition from middle school to high school. "The importance of parents being involved in their young adolescent students' transition from middle school can hardly be overestimated. When parents are involved in their student's transition to high school, they tend to stay involved in their child's school experiences (Mac Iver, 1990); and when parents are involved in their child's high school experiences, students have higher achievement (Linver & Silverberg, 1997 Paulson, 1994), are better adjusted (Hartos & Power, 1997), and are less likely to drop out of school (Horn & West, 1992)."

Veteran high school principal and assistant superintendent for VA's Alexandria City Public Schools John Porter describes the developmental differences between middle school students and high school students from the perspective of educators. "Yes, high school is different, but so are the students. In middle school we (educators) feel like all we are doing is pulling the kids off the walls where as in high school we spend time pushing them to climb new ones." Porter cautions parents about wanting to make the high school experience too easy for students. "High school is a time we want and expect students to really

begin stretching and begin preparing for adult life. The building is larger, more people are involved, and high school provides an opportunity for exploration and limit testing."

As children age their parent's involvement takes on new forms. This is especially important for the parents of students with disabilities. Once the advocates and the chief decision makers, parents must consciously and thoughtfully begin to step down and encourage students to take a more active role in becoming self-sufficient and more responsible for themselves, and to actively participate in their IEPs.

High school may feel uncaring and even a bit impersonal but it presents an opportunity for students to meet some of their own challenges head on by themselves. Parents continue to be involved but it cannot be understated how this time should be viewed as an important training camp for the acquisition of important self-determination and self-advocacy skills. "As long as students are not being put in danger, let them experience some minor discomfort because it prepares students for real-world adult life", according to Porter.



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VA Dept of Education Transition Specialist Marianne Moore refers to it as “watchful neglect.” “Parents need to be watchful and encourage their students to do some problem-solving on their own. Everyone should have the 'dignity of risk' of having the right to make mistakes and sometimes the wrong choice.” Parents have a unique opportunity to use high school as a

time to foster independent thought, and independent action by their youth with disabilities.

Both Porter and Moore recognize that parents need to trust that school officials will provide growth opportunities in a safe environment. “It is so important for parents to develop relationships with adults in the high school that they can turn to for advice and support. They should identify a counselor, a case manager, a favorite teacher to turn to when in doubt” says Porter.

In addition to understanding their own changing role with respect to how to be involved in their student's high school experience it is wise for parents to listen to the concerns of their children. Recent surveys of high school students revealed what they feared most about

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moving to high school. Three dominant themes emerge that reflect concerns about social networks, academic challenges, and school geography.

Students are extremely fearful of being out of step with a new social network and some believe they could be the unwitting victims of bullies. Concerns about not seeing the friends they've known most of their lives or whether or not they'll know how to make friends with new people are at the top of the list.

The second most significant worry of transitioning middle school students is the fear that they will be unable to meet newer, more rigorous academic challenges. Will the homework load be more and if so, how will they handle this? With the pronounced culture of high expectations and high stakes testing students' anxiety may be real. While middle school offered opportunities for second chances and improving grades, the high school academic rigor may not be quite as forgiving.

“High school is fast paced and may not feel very nurturing. What happens in high school counts. If there are discipline issues they go on the record, same as academic problems,” according to Moore. Students with disabilities have an advantage and that is the gift of extra time. Federal legislation the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows for students to continue educational services through their 21st birthday or until they have received a standard or modified diploma. “I believe that a student can earn a standard diploma without passing the 8th grade SOL, if they earn their credits and verified credits,” reports Moore. “The problem comes when the student with an IEP works only for the standard diploma and reaches the 11th or 12th grade year without enough credits and verified credits to meet the requirements of the standard diploma. Then if they have not passed the 8th grade SOL they may not even be able to receive the Modified Standard Diploma.”

Moore continues, “It is really important to continue to remediate and take the 8th grade SOL during high school, but also to work for the standard diploma. In other words think of the Modified Standard Diploma as a fall back option (when a standard diploma is not possible) and not as a default diploma (because you have an IEP).” Parents knowing diploma options in advance of entering high school can help direct the development of the IEP. Encouraging their sons and daughters to do well parents can help students to see the value of achieving the appropriate high school diploma and to begin a plan for the future once high school ends.

The third most significant fear of transitioning students has to do with navigating a new building. Students worry that they will not find the cafeteria, gymnasium, resource class room, or their lockers. They may not be aware that the time they have between classes is shorter and that lunchtime may be less structured. Many local school divisions offer high school orientation programs for entering freshmen and their parents but they may not be specific enough to address the transitioning support needs of students with disabilities. The

National Association of Middle Schools recommends that parents view the differences between middle and high school categorically-academic, organizational and social- and plan accordingly.

### **Academic**

- What are the classes needed to achieve a diploma (standard or otherwise) and how is the IEP written to support this need?
- What are the homework and class work policies in high school?
- Have students been prepared for the rigor of secondary education?

### **Organizational**

- How do things get done in high school and what is the impact on the student? How does one find out about after-school activities, and what are the timelines? How is the annual school calendar different or alike?
- Who is the 'go to' person for answers to questions about discipline, academics, or social programs?
- What are the rules about leaving the campus during the day?

### **Social**

- What are the after-school extra curricula programs available and how can a student get involved?
- Are there special requirements for riding the late bus and how can a student find out about how to access it?

Still, there are some steps parents can take to improve the likelihood of a smooth transition from middle to high school. With the understanding that the transition process is not a one time activity parents and students can adjust to the new environment with greater ease. Middle to high school transition planning should begin before middle school ends in the spring, during the summer months, and during the first year of high school.

### ***In the spring before middle school ends...***

- Make sure the IEP team understands the long range plan and that the plan is being addressed.
- Try to visit the new high school while in session and take a tour.
- If it's possible and appropriate for your child, ask if the high school can accommodate your student shadowing another student for a morning or a day.
- If possible have your student experience how the cafeteria works. Students will not have the same level of supervision as they had in middle school unless it is planned for ahead of time.
- Help students play to their strengths. Reinforce interests and encourage students to identify after-school activities that the high school offers-clubs, sports, performing arts- and learn what the timelines are for joining.
- Meet with the student's case manager before school lets out if possible to exchange contact information and begin building a relationship.
- Think through the pressure points which are problematic for your child and help him or her develop strategies to offset a difficulty.

***During the summer...***

- Buy a locker lock and let the student practice opening it during the summer months. Locker locks come in varied shapes and sizes. If your student is not able to use a combination lock, look for keyed locks, laser locks or other methods to ease the use of lockers.
- Develop a social network through parks and recreation, church groups or other places where students with similar interests congregate. If you know current high school students, ask them if they would be a mentor or a buddy to your child.
- Pre-tour the school if possible just before school opens. Teachers have several work days leading up to the new school year. Ask if the new teachers can spare 10 minutes to say hello. Use this time to do a “walk-through” based on the students’ class schedule to help lessen the potential uncertainty of where to go when the bell rings.
- Begin to develop relationships with other adults in the school who you can go to with questions but also support your student in identifying who they can go to for help when:
  - taking medications,
  - purchasing supplies at the school store,
  - getting involved in after-school activities
  - arranging for transportation after the late bus leaves
  - navigating the way between classes
  - preparing for standardized tests
  - there are questions about the school schedule
- Familiarize yourself with the front office staff and know them by name. They are often the most important people who can help you learn what is going on in any given day and can help you get connected with key personnel quickly.

***During the first year...***

- Be available to your child to listen to their concerns and their successes.
- Help them keep the focus on their academics by supporting good study habits and continuing to be interested in what is going on in school.
- Attend parent meetings and find out what parent committees need your help.
- Get to know other parents and develop a support network.
- Encourage students to bring their friends home.
- Encourage your student to take on challenges and deal with the teacher they claim “doesn't like them, is too hard on them, or is boring.”
- Support your child's interest in after-school activities and activities in the greater community at large, such as recreational programs, church youth groups, employment, and specialized art or music classes.
- Model the behaviors for your child you want them to exhibit as adults.

- Expect your child to manage challenges and to problem-solve as independently as possible when things don't go as planned.
- Sustain involvement in your child's life by being their most ardent champion and critic.
- Provide the reality check that all children need during the good times as well as the bad.

“Too often, transition programs at schools end after making sure that incoming students can find the way to class and their lockers. Developing that level of comfort in the school is important, but it should not be the end.” Parents remain the one constant in their child's life. As their children transition from one stage to the next parents are also in transition and must continue being involved in less pro-active ways. Their involvement once a hands-on and in-charge role begins to shift. Stepping back and providing guidance to children in a shared decision-making role is a new and strange dimension for many parents. High school is the launching pad for adulthood and parents can and should support their students to begin practicing for that eventuality. Transition from middle school to high school is a time for parents and students to take on new responsibilities. Being aware of this change will help make the transition a bit smoother. The good news is that parents and students don't have to go it alone. School personnel are at the ready and want to join with you as partners to ensure the maximum success of your child. ■

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