

SPRING 2004

Families Support Successful Transitions

School transitions present critical crossroads for many students. Some sail into a new school and flourish, while for others, anxiety and apprehension interfere significantly with learning, weakening confidence, grades, and self-esteem. This sometimes triggers a downward spiral that could end in school failure. Although worries about making new friends or finding classes may seem trivial, the stakes are high for student success.

Carefully planned transitions help students feel positive about school and perceive themselves as competent, resulting in increased academic achievement. Successful movement between schools is thus an essential educational goal, and one that schools can do a lot to facilitate. Families are the natural and strongest allies in these efforts.

Students are strongly influenced by parental attitudes. When parents are confident that children will succeed, student worries are calmed. But parents often feel ambivalent about approaching changes and growth. To best support their children, parents must have the confidence that comes from information about the new school and specifics about what lies ahead. Families must feel welcome at the school and secure that their questions and concerns will be addressed.

How to Involve Families. Whether children are entering kindergarten, moving from middle school to high school or from one district to another, understanding the power of families to help students negotiate transitions is key to many successful strategies.

Find out what parents want to know. Talk to parents who have already made the transition to find out what was helpful and what else they wish they had known or done. Provide multiple opportunities for parents to ask questions. Include strategies that do not require families to come into the school, speak English or read well.

Share information widely. Communicate in a variety of ways. Meetings, home visits, handbooks, school fairs, websites, phone calls are only a few possibilities. Work with parents to design and implement strategies that meet their needs. Individual contact is especially welcoming. Link incoming parents with more experienced families. Provide maps to the school and invite incoming parents to school activities the entire year before their children enroll. Translate all material carefully. Repeat relevant information throughout the school year.

Successful transition programs:

- Recognize the key role families play in helping students move smoothly from one school to the next;
- Include parents in transition planning;
- Collaborate with community resources, for example by holding information sessions at the mall or library;
- Ensure that parents receive an abundance of information and have multiple opportunities to get answers to their questions; and
- Roll out the welcome mat to families long before the students begin at their new school.

Make expectations clear. Design transition efforts to help prepare families for differences in philosophy, teaching style, expectations and structures at the new school. Provide information about curriculum, academic standards, student assessment and how to help children at home. Take advantage of transition times, when parents tend to be more open to outreach from schools.

Evaluate. Ask students and families to fill out anonymous surveys evaluating their transition experiences. Use the results to revise activities for the coming year.

For Highly Mobile Students School Transitions are Critical

The US Census Bureau estimates that approximately one-fifth of all Americans move every year. Students are considered highly mobile if they move six or more times in the course of their K-12 education. These students come from a variety of backgrounds. Divorce and child-custody issues are common causes of student mobility. But the problem is probably most common among children experiencing homeless situations, children of migrant workers, families experiencing domestic violence, and among military and immigrant families.

High mobility can have severe academic consequences. It can take six months for mobile students to recover academically from a move, and they are half as likely to graduate from high school as non-mobile peers. Mobile students are twice as likely to repeat a grade. Many students experience isolation after each move, which may significantly affect both school attendance and performance.

The military has devised strategies to effectively address these challenges. Although 32-50% of highly mobile students of military families qualify for free or reduced price lunch, and 94% of children of enlisted military personnel have parents whose highest education is a high school diploma, these highly mobile students, including minority students, consistently achieve academically at a level equal to or surpassing the national average for public schools. The military strategies look familiar and can be used elsewhere: establishing family and educational support networks; encouraging parental involvement; and maintaining an organizational culture that supports families and encourages strong school-family-military partnerships.

Teachers and staff in schools with a significant population of highly mobile students benefit from in-service training on the issue. Many methods that ease transitions into new schools in less mobile communities also work well for highly mobile communities if they are tied to well-planned outreach. Such strategies include:

- Parent education that acquaints new parents with expectations and procedures at the new school;
- School welcome committees and tour guides for new students and their families; and
- Classroom buddies for new students and family contacts for new families.

Planning, Planning, Planning

Transitions from Special Education to Adult Life

Planning is the key to effective transitions, and there is no place this is more evident than in helping students with special needs move from school to adult life. In high school, transition planning becomes a formal part of the Planning and Placement Team process, included in the student's Individualized Education Program. But even before this, the move from middle school to high school provides a perfect opportunity for family, student, and special and general educators from both schools to meet and discuss the future. The student's participation in transition planning provides important practice in self-advocacy that helps the student learn to effectively share his/her interests and strengths in academic and vocational areas.

Tools for effective transition planning include interest inventories, person-centered planning, job shadowing, situational assessments, and community work experiences. If this seems overwhelming, there are numerous resources to help, for example, the transition manual *Building a Bridge*, developed for students and parents by The Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, with the Connecticut Transition Task Force. Planning is critical to developing student ability to obtain and maintain satisfying employment; live as independently as possible; and make meaningful contributions to their community.

Building a Bridge (2001) is available on SERC's website, www.ctserc.org. For more information, contact Karen Stigliano, Transitions Consultant at SERC: stigliano@ctserc.org or (860) 632-1485.

transition

A Recipe For Success: Multiple Communication Opportunities

Becoming comfortable in a new school is an ongoing process, not a single event. For this reason, **Vinal Technical High School** in **Middletown** plans a variety of parent involvement activities to ease the transition throughout students' freshman year. Most importantly, they ensure planned, systematic *information sharing* between school administrators, counselors, staff, students and parents.

- Transition activities begin with *presentations* to eighth graders at the middle schools by a team of counselors, teachers and students. Middle school counselors and students receive handouts to share with parents.
- *Open Houses* for incoming students and parents are held during the students' eighth grade year. Parents and students tour the school and talk with staff and current students.
- To allay anxieties that accompany a move to a new school, *Student/Parent Orientation* is held prior to the start of the year to share information about programs, expectations, schedules, and support services, and to answer questions.
- *Two Parent-Teacher Conference nights* are scheduled. A *Career Night* prior to student selection of a specialty helps parents understand student options and the long-term effects of their choice. In addition to the *six grading reports* sent each year, parents of freshman receive *eleven technology progress reports*.
- Along with multiple opportunities to come into the school, the *Vinal website* provides an alternative two-way source of information. *SchoolNotes.com* allows parents to view individual teacher websites, and makes it easy for families to correspond with teachers and administrators by email.
- Throughout the year, the importance of parent-teacher partnership is stressed through newsletters with information about school initiatives and events.
- In addition, the *School Messenger system* is programmed each day to call student homes with information about major events and attendance.

East Haven Welcomes Kindergarten Families to School

As gateways to the public school system, **East Haven's two early learning centers** make it a priority to welcome children AND their families before they enter the school system. After kindergarten registration in late winter, parents are invited to an *Orientation* to learn about the school's programs, available parent supports and what families can do to help their child prepare for kindergarten. Parents go home having met most of the staff. They also take with them several handouts and answers to many of their questions.

The central transition event is held *the day before school starts*. Parents and children ride the big yellow buses together. Parents meet the bus driver and experience the bus route with their children. This makes the bus ride on the first day of school much easier for both parents and children! At school, parents and children meet the principal, school nurse, secretary and custodian, and have a chance to talk with their teacher and explore their classroom. Later children gather in the gym to learn about bus safety, while parents meet with the classroom teacher. Sharing information early on, before school starts, rather than at a traditional mid-September open house helps children and parents feel more at ease on the first day of school. It is also a good start for relationship building, setting the standard for open communication for the rest of the year.



CT School-Family-Community Partnerships, a project of the State Department of Education, helps educators, parents and community members develop partnerships by providing training and resources that promote effective local policies and practices, and increase public awareness of the positive impact of school-family-community partnerships on student learning.

Project Partners:

Connecticut State Department of Education, CREC, CT Parents Plus at The United Way of Connecticut, & SERC



Resource Materials on S-F-C Partnerships

Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families & Schools. Pianta, R.C. & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). A guide to field-tested methods used in diverse schools and communities to create smooth transitions to kindergarten. This book contains information and resources for developing and implementing a successful transition plan. Many of the reproducible surveys and checklists could be tailored for use by middle or high schools.

Available at the SERC Library. Explore SERC's extensive collection of resources available for loan free of charge. Located in Middletown, the library is open to the public Monday through Saturday. Call (860) 632-1485 for directions or hours. You may also request annotated bibliographies on a variety of topics including school-family-community partnerships. The collection of books, journals, videos and other material covers a broad spectrum of issues helpful for administrators, teachers and family members alike.

The Transition to Kindergarten: A Review of Current Research & Promising Practices to Involve Families. Bohan-Baker, M. & Little, P.M.D. (2002). This paper from the Harvard Family Research Project discusses the importance of smooth transitions to school success and ideas for reaching out to parents. Available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/bohan.html.

It's Harder Than You Think: Making the Transition to Middle School Successful. Elias, M.J. (2001). This NAESP article describes special concerns and tips for easing transitions to middle school. Available at www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentid=519.

The Pivotal Year. Black, S. (2004). From the February issue of the American School Board Journal, this article on the importance and difficulty of easing transitions into 9th grade is available online at www.asbj.com/2004/02/0204research.html.

Enclosed: *State Board's Revised Position Statement on Partnerships*

The revised position statement on school-family-community partnerships places new emphasis on the importance of family literacy and the home learning environment. It renews attention to the importance of respecting and addressing families' diverse interests, needs and strengths, and reflects the State Board of Education's commitment to school-family-community partnerships as an effective strategy in closing the achievement gap. We encourage you to use the enclosed statement to support your partnerships for student success. Please feel free to copy, distribute, and discuss with your partners.

A printable version is available at <http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Family/SFCP/index.htm>.

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