

Helping 8th Graders Make a "Smooth Move"

Teachers at a middle school in Louisville, Kentucky, have established a series of rituals for 8th graders that help ease them into the unknown world of high school.

Making the transition from middle school to high school is a major event in the life of students. To an 8th grader, high school can be scary and full of unknowns.

To develop a transition program for 8th graders, we obtained a grant from a staff development incentive program, "Invitation to Invention," sponsored by Gheens Professional Academy in the Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, Kentucky.

With the help of the high schools, we conducted a survey to determine what had contributed to the success or problems of freshmen. We tallied the results of 450 completed questionnaires. Even more helpful than the objective statistics were the students' written comments. Later, we spoke with the 9th graders to obtain more detailed views.

To get teacher input, we questioned high school teachers about the performance levels of freshmen and observed in both 8th and 9th grade classrooms to see if differences in teaching techniques or classroom environment might have a major impact on student adjustment. The information we collected enabled us to identify what our program should include.

Lines of Communication

First, to open lines of communication, we scheduled inservice sessions where 8th and 9th grade teachers shared ideas. Also, at the beginning of the year, we created a telephone directory of 8th and 9th grade teachers with their subject areas noted to facilitate dialogue among teachers. Middle school teachers could get feedback on what their students had mastered, and

high school teachers could avoid dwelling on material already introduced.

Believable Informants

Next, we found ways of opening lines of communication between students. High school students were ready to tell "the way it is," and middle school students were ready to listen to them.

● *Letter writing/buddy system.* Our students began to write letters to students at the high school they would be attending. These letters were distributed to freshmen willing to answer. Several high school students who responded to letters offered to act as "buddies" the following year to show new 9th graders the "ropes."

● *CHAT (Come Have a Talk).* CHAT was initiated to dispel some of the mystery surrounding high school. A few high school students loved to come back to their middle school to discuss their new experiences. We scheduled panels for this purpose after school. Topics were suggested by middle school students, and video or audio tapes were made for those who could not attend.

● *Visits and reunions.* Field trips to the high schools relieved self-doubt and gave the middle school students a concrete idea of what to expect. And the "Shooting Star Family" hosted their "family reunion," which drew high school students back to visit. The event helped the 8th graders realize they could mix easily with the more "adult" high school students.

Emotional Impact

Leaving a place and people with whom we feel comfortable causes both sad-

ness and excitement. We found that caring middle school educators in communities across the country have established rituals to help students express these emotions.

● *Celebrations.* Many middle schools hold an 8th grade banquet or dance where achievements are celebrated, awards given out, and farewells said.

● *Saying goodbye.* Some teams also hold informal ceremonies, where funny awards are distributed and laughter is expected. The students perform skits that evoke common memories and express common feelings. Together, they begin to put the events of middle school into the past.

● *Thank-yous.* Often students express their deepest feelings in writing. Ross M. Burkhardt, of the Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, New York, encouraged our students to write thank-you letters to teachers, family, and friends who had created special memories during middle school. (For more information about the unit Mr. Burkhardt shared with us, see his "How Do We Say Farewell?" in *In Transition*, the journal of the New York State Middle School Association, Fall 1985.)

The growth we encourage means growth away from us, beyond the middle school. But we can rest assured that we have helped our students make a "smooth move" toward their futures. □

Ann Rosa is Family Leader for the 8th grade interdisciplinary team that conducted this study. **Marty Vowels** is Writing Program Coordinator for the school. Both teach at Thomas Jefferson Middle School, 4401 Rangeland Rd., Louisville, KY 40219.

Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.