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## Developing and Implementing Successful Transition Strategies for Middle to High School Students in Glenwood, Iowa

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DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING  
SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION STRATEGIES  
FOR MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENTS IN GLENWOOD, IOWA

An Educational Specialist Field Project  
Presented to the  
Department of Educational Administration  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of Requirements for the Degree  
Educational Specialist  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Russell E. Finken

December 2006

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EDUCATION SPECIALIST  
FIELD PROJECT ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College.  
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree, Education Specialist.  
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Abstract  
DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING  
SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION STRATEGIES  
FOR MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENTS IN GLENWOOD, IOWA

Russell E. Finken, Ed. S.

University of Nebraska, 2006

Advisor: Dr. Leon Dappen

The purpose of this study was to obtain perceptions from school staff of the eighth to ninth grade transitional issues that contribute to an increase in academic failures during the ninth grade year. Areas of focus included: teacher/school academic and behavioral expectations, teacher perceptions of concerns, programming and curriculum at each school, student academic preparedness, student social/emotional capabilities, student academic success, student attendance, and parental involvement.

Staff members from the middle (eighth grade) and high school (ninth grade) levels were gathered together to discuss transitional issues and develop an action plan to improve transitional challenges in the Glenwood Schools of Glenwood, Iowa. Separate focus groups were held for each grade level and then the groups were combined to develop

the action plan.

The discussion from the group illustrated similar themes as found research from around the nation: philosophical differences between middle and high school instructors, uncertainty on the student's part, at-risk students "falling through the cracks" once in high school, and a lack of actions taken to prepare students for the change.

The result of the discussion was the creation of a comprehensive action plan that reinforced existing programs and generated new proposals to address the transitional concerns. The core of these efforts was offering more information to the students prior to the start of school and providing them with a support network for their first crucial years of high school.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Elementary, middle, and high schools often become separate entities for students as they move through their educational experience. Each school has its own evaluation criteria, perception about student needs, and expectations of academic and behavioral standards; that is, each school has its own "culture." Even in the same district, schools serving different grades frequently don't coordinate well together. Schools that house different age groups rarely work together. Perhaps they are not encouraged to do so, perhaps there isn't enough time in the busy school year, or perhaps they may not know what to work on together to benefit the student. Thus, the transition between such differing institutions within a school system may not be as seamless as one would think. The transition from one building to another is a key process in the success of a child's academic career. Key people making transitions successful include the student, the parents, the teachers, and the administration. Educators' perceptions about transitions are both illuminating and guiding when troubleshooting the transition process.

The "middle school" approach, emphasizing the

student's needs, teams of teachers working together, and inter-disciplinary units is often drastically different from the "secondary school" approach, emphasizing the student's performance, compartmentalized teaching staff, and strict adherence to graduation requirements. Thus, there may be no greater disconnect than between the cultures of the middle and high schools. When transition to high school grows nearer for students, the stakes become higher as students begin to equate high school success or failure with perceived lifetime success. For students who already are struggling with academic, social, and emotional issues at the middle school level, high school success may seem impossible. Grades and attendance may decline in ninth grade, which leads to increased high school failure rates. In addition, 80% of students reported that ninth grade was much more academically challenging, and 25% reported feelings of isolation during ninth grade (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992). These statistics should alert parents and educators that the transitional issues of students today are significant and need examination.

The Glenwood Community School District in Glenwood, Iowa, has been experiencing the same transitional issues from eighth grade to ninth grade that have been common in

other schools. These transitional issues include increase in drop-out rates, increase in behavioral concerns, declining attendance rates, increased unhealthy lifestyle choices, and increased academic failure. The Glenwood staff has had frequent discussions regarding transitions issues. Given the increasingly more complex world in which the transition from middle to high school is taking place, the teachers with whom these students work on a daily basis are a vital and effective way to make the transition beneficial. Teachers readily see and influence what administrators and parents cannot readily see and influence: the daily school experience of the student. Gathering teacher perceptions about the transition is essential before implementing programming or structural changes for the transitioning student.

#### *Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this study will be to obtain perceptions from school staff of the transitional issues that contribute to an increase in academic failures during the ninth grade year. Areas of focus will include: teacher/school academic and behavioral expectations, teacher perceptions of concerns, programming and curriculum at each school, student academic preparedness, student

social/emotional capabilities, student academic success, student attendance, and parental involvement.

### *Research Questions*

Research questions that will be answered through this endeavor are: What are the primary concerns that teachers perceive regarding student transition? Do these concerns differ between Glenwood Middle School eighth grade teachers and Glenwood High School ninth grade teachers? What programs do eighth grade teachers need to develop to help students successfully transition to ninth grade? What preparations do the ninth grade teachers need to make in order to be ready to receive the incoming ninth graders? What are some goals that these teachers would suggest based upon the focus group discussion? How might these goals be developed into an action plan for improving student transition?

### *Definition of Terms*

*Transition:* the passage from one academic level to another (middle school to high school). Specifically for this project, going from 8th grade to 9th grade, involves a change of school building.

*Transitional Issues:* the social, emotional, and academic challenges faced by a student when making a passage from

one academic level to another.

*Social/emotional adjustment:* student adaptation to peer and community pressures which determine the health of his or her inter-personal relationships, self-perception, and support system.

*Systematic problems:* practices which are unique to a given educational organization which are reinforced with programming and policy, but are not productive.

*Developmental issues:* matters that concern the progressive behavioral changes in an individual.

*Programming:* a set of organized activities, services, opportunities, or projects planned by a particular school, usually designed to meet a specific need.

*Proven Practices:* programming or approaches which have demonstrated reliability and effectiveness over time.

*Academic failure:* receiving a failing grade in three or more core classes or the lack of adequate credits for promotion/graduation.

#### *Limitations*

This study will be limited to twelve faculty members at Glenwood Middle School and Glenwood High School. Six will be eighth grade teachers and six will be ninth grade teachers: therefore one cannot be certain that the findings

will be typical for other schools that experience transitional issues. The transitional issues faced in Glenwood Schools may be reflective of larger, societal issues and not fixable with local programming changes or academic approach adjustment.

In addition, this study does not focus on the more severe needs of certain student populations such as those with significant academic, emotional, or physical disabilities; students who are religious or racial minorities within their school district, and students who have had intense traumas in their past. While these groups of students experience most of the same transitional challenges, they may also have additional concerns which are not addressed within this study.

#### *Significance of the Study*

Students across Iowa, and the United States, are experiencing transitional difficulties. Nation-wide standardized testing is comparing school to school, and student to student, with varying degrees of success. Undoubtedly students are under more rigorous academic and complex social pressures than ever before, all the while competing in an increasingly globalized economy. Failure rates are much greater than parents, educators, and the

students themselves would like. Transition is a key to this success or failure - and making transition advantageous is vital to the success of these young adults.

Therefore, the significance of this study will be to understand the issues surrounding transition from Glenwood Middle School to the Glenwood High School environment. Using the focus group discussion, and reflecting upon Glenwood's current transitional programs, specific improvement areas can be prioritized. By understanding these topics, teachers can address concerns and implement an action plan that includes beneficial changes for the transitioning student.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The intention of this literature review is to provide the context in which the research is compiled. The review examines the following three areas, becoming more focused at each level: (1) the history and theoretical foundations of transition programs from middle to high school (2) obstacles facing and components of successful transition programs, and lastly, (3) the roles that classroom educators play in the transition process. The first portion sets the context for school transition in general, answering the basic questions about successful transition significance and the stakes at risk of unsuccessful transitions. The second portion becomes more focused in nature on the successful program portion, examining the key elements of transition programs that have met with success. The last and the most specific review, examines the part that classroom teachers play in this transition process. Given that the teacher role is the focus of this project, this element is essential to the research context.

#### *Transition History and Theoretical Foundations*

"...the transition into high school has never been more treacherous, nor the consequences more personally



disastrous for so many. All over America, thousands and thousands of ninth graders are and have been painfully failing" (George, 1999, p.6). . . While perhaps leaning toward the dramatic, the above statement clearly expresses the concern that educators, parents, and community members alike have in the American education system, our students are not successfully making the leap into the increased autonomy of high school. One step away from adulthood and being a productive citizen, this breakdown is of concern to many. As so succinctly expressed by Patrick Monahan (1992), "The consequences of failing to make the transition to high school successfully are both individual and societal. Given the current social and economic conditions, failure to graduate from high school can be costly to the individual, community, and the nation" (p.18). Helping young adolescents make a successful transition from middle school to high school is not a new concern for educators, but the solution appears to becoming more urgent, and elusive.

Hirschi's (1969) Social Bonding Theory provides a foundation for considering the success of a transition program. Hirschi defined a *bond* as an individual's connection to society. This bond is formed by four

processes: (1) attachment - in this case, a student's level of caring about others around them; (2) commitment - in this case, a student's interest in pro-social transition activities; (3) involvement - in this case, the amount of time and energy a student is willing to invest into the transition process, and lastly, (4) belief - the sense that the student cares about his or her behavior being morally right and productive. If a transition program can encourage these four dynamics, the student will become more bonded to the society in which the high school operates, and thus the likelihood of their success is increased. So what factors are preventing this social bonding from taking place? There are many aspects to answering this question.

One of the fundamental roles of the early middle level education movement was to decrease the transition roadblocks that typically occurred as students moved into the ninth grade, therefore providing a successful transition process (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; McEwin, 1998; Vars, 1998). Although for some students the transition from middle school to high school can be easy, many young adolescents experience a decline in grades and attendance (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991). According to Hertzog et al. (1996) they begin to view themselves more

negatively and experience an increased need for friendships. The trend over the past few years has been the development of more and more transition programs to address the unique needs of this population of students (Cognato, 1999; Thompson & Prisbell, 1999).

In spite of these efforts, adolescents are still finding it challenging to make a smooth transition to high school (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991; George, 1999; Herzog, Morgan, Diamond & Walker, 1996). A significant number of students drop out shortly after entering high school. Others fall behind academically and fail to graduate on time. While some reports indicate that the high school dropout rate in the U.S. is declining, as many as 5% of all high school students leave school early each year; and among certain student populations (e.g., rural and urban) more than 10% drop out each year (Bureau of the Census (Doc), 1997; National Center for Educational Statistics (ED), 1995). Furthermore, as many as 60% of the students identified as "at-risk" for failure leaving the eighth grade will not graduate with their class (Green & Scott, 1995). Transitions between middle and high school settings continue to be a challenge.

Regardless of widespread awareness of the problem, it is

clear that educators are not successful in creating a smooth transition ensuring secondary success. The challenge is still very real for educators to assist adolescents make a successful transition from middle school to high school. Knowing what it is like for a student to transition into a modern-day high school helps identify which areas contribute to success and which areas contribute to failure. When students transition into high school, many of them experience a larger, more impersonal, more competitive, and grade-oriented environment than what their experience had been in middle school (Eccles, Midgley & Adler, 1984). They also experience more diversity of staff and peers, and their choice of curricular and extra-curricular activities expands. Given this new environment, many students' grades and attendance tend to decline. They also develop a lack of self-esteem and feel an increased need for peer relationships (Hertzog, et al., 1996). The anxiety and fear based upon not knowing what the high school holds in store only exacerbates already existing adolescent anxiety.

Not all students are concerned as they transition into high school; some are excited about the changes as well. They look forward to things like more freedom, more choice,

more extra curricular activities, and more friendships. However, they are also nervous and scared about being teased or harassed, getting lost in a large, unfamiliar building, and making lower grades (Cognato, 1999; Maute, 1991; Mizelle, 1995; Phelan, Yu & Davidson, 1994; Wells, 1996). There is also a concern that high school teachers will be stricter and that homework will increase significantly along with its difficulty. Concerns and anxiety tend to outweigh, even if initially, excitement and anticipation for transitioning students.

However, once the transition to high school has occurred, many students find that some of their initial fears are unfounded. They also experience the fact that with expanded opportunities come expanded responsibilities (Cognato, 1999; Mizelle, 1995). For example, in late fall of their freshman year, students in Mizelle's transition study described high school as "different" - different from what they had expected and different from middle school. Contrary to their fears, upperclassmen did not bully freshmen or tease them as much as expected. There was some teasing but most older students were willing to help underclassmen and even made good friends. Their new environment did not seem nearly as large or as hard to get

around in as they had feared. There were few problems getting lost. Some aspects of the transition were not as bad as anticipated, and yet other aspects of high school presented un-anticipated problems. While students enjoyed the larger selection of classes and extracurricular activities, they were concerned about the difficulty of the academics and time management when being involved in extracurricular activities. School seemed more demanding and challenging than their middle school experiences. How to study and how to manage their time were major concerns once students had made their transition into the high school setting.

#### *Components of Effective Transition Programs*

"[Educators] need to recognize that helping young adolescents make a successful transition into high school involved elementary, middle, and high school educators working together with parents and students..." (Williams & Johnson in Mizelle, 2000, p.60). High school administrators, counselors, and teachers can do much to support, assist, and nurture incoming ninth-graders facing school transition. While negative peer pressure and societal expectations cannot be eliminated, they can be minimized through effective transition programs which focus

on all of the students, and tap into all available resources. Much effort and energy has been devoted to examining the dynamics of successful transition programs, so the field of research available is quite extensive. Mizelle and Irvin's (2000) article in the *Middle School Journal* offers exhaustive research and an excellent summary of the essential elements of successful transition programs. Their work offers an enormous platform from which other educators can leap to develop their own transition programs. Many of the ideas of Mizelle and Irvin are explored and developed further in the following section. The following are suggestions that should be considered for assisting ninth graders in their transition.

- (1) Share middle-school and high school buildings, teachers, and preparation time to facilitate a "seamless" transition. Eighth-graders could be invited to the high school periodically to participate in academic activities. Social events could be structured to include eighth-graders. Ninth-graders could work as tutors for middle school students. Through activities such as these, eighth-graders begin to view the high school as a non-threatening and inviting environment. Also, high school staff and students learn to appreciate and respect eighth-graders.

(2) Organize ninth-grade students and teachers into interdisciplinary teams. U.S. high schools have for decades, taught concepts in a fragmented and compartmentalized way. Few adults work in such a disjointed environment. The interdisciplinary approach teaches students concepts and facts that can be applied in solving real-world problems. Students' chances of success are increased when several teachers view the student's work and make adjustments and suggestions from different perspectives.

(3) Conduct regularly scheduled and planned advisory programs. Ninth-graders tend to enjoy their new freedom in high school, but they need guidance from adults to make positive academic and social choices. An advisory program can help adolescents make good choices that will last through their high school careers. Advisors can distribute information and facilitate dialogue among students about such topics as relationships with family and friends, drug and alcohol use, engaging in sexual behavior, and other negative behaviors.

(4) Assign upperclassmen as mentors for ninth-graders. Older students may take these most vulnerable students under their wing. In many cases these relationships result



in positive outcomes for the incoming students. A well-structured mentor program is a must if inappropriate or negative relationships are to be avoided.

(5) Provide maximum flexibility in instructional grouping. The ninth grade forms the academic foundation for the student's high school years. Students locked into lower academic courses during ninth grade almost always remain in those classes throughout the high school years. Ninth graders could be grouped and regrouped for instruction as often as necessary during the school year and levels of courses could be somewhat blurred. These groups should be heterogeneous in nature.

(6) Create opportunities for ninth-graders to participate in noncompetitive activities as a part of their school program. This provides an environment where 13 and 14-year-olds can act their age. For ninth-graders, having to win, be the tallest, strongest, best dressed, and best at everything causes feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and fear. These feelings can affect all students, but they seem especially strong as students transition from middle school to high school. Competition for ninth-graders should be balanced with noncompetitive, enjoyable activities in which all students can participate. Intramural as well as

interscholastic activities should be offered in order to allow students the opportunity to interact with other students in a supportive and nurturing environment.

(7) Students with learning disabilities need to be placed in classes where they will receive the appropriate support mechanisms. Because of the heavier academic requirements, students with disabilities are more likely to experience academic frustrations. Continuous monitoring and adjustment of the IEP's (Individual Educational Programs) by parents and staff is a must in ensuring the success of learning disabled students (Letrello & Miles, 2003). It is no surprise then, based upon these factors and common sense that the best middle school transition programs as viewed by administrators were those with a variety of activities (Mac Iver, 1990). In addition to Mizelle and Irvin's comprehensive checklist, there are other factors to keep in mind when creating a successful program.

*Attention to affective needs of transitioning students:*

The present research indicates that successful transition to high school requires programs that specifically address the transition period (Cognato, 1999; Felner, Ginter & Primavera, 1982; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999;

Hertzog et al., 1996; Mac Iver, 1990) along with middle school programs that challenge and support students (Belcher & Hatley, 1994; Bry & George, 1980; McAdoo, 1999; Mizelle, 1995; Oates, Flores & Weishew, 1998). Mac Iver (1990) found that students were more successful when they experienced a transition program with several, diverse components that address students' affective needs. Middle school principals also indicated that they expected fewer of their students to drop out before graduation when supportive advisory group activities and quality remediation programs were in place. It is essential to recognize that 13 & 14-year-olds have different social and emotional needs than older high school students. To avoid assuming negative behaviors of older students, ninth graders need opportunities to express their feelings and exhibit age appropriate behaviors in a safe and nonjudgmental environment (Jett & Pulling, 1995).

In a recent study of 56 Georgia and Florida high schools, Hertzog & Morgan (1999) found that schools with comprehensive transition programs have significantly lower failure and dropout rates than schools that provided fewer transition activities. Like Mac Iver, Hertzog and Morgan found that the most effective transition programs were

those that included a variety of activities that may relate to affective needs such as counseling, school visits, and special summer courses designed to help students understand the high school environment.

*Parental Involvement:*

Middle school students want to know what high school will be like, and so do their parents. They and their parents need to understand high school programs and procedures (Mizelle, 1995). Parents need to understand, and be actively involved in, the decisions that their eighth graders are making as they enter the high school arena (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Paulson, 1994). Understanding students' options and the long-term effects of these decisions is critical. When parents are involved in students' transitional activities, they tend to stay involved in their child's school experiences (Mac Iver, 1990). When this happens students achieve more (Linver & Silverberg, 1994; Paulson, 1994; Paulson, Marchant & Rothlisberg, 1998), are better adjusted (Hartos & Power, 1997) and are less likely to be dropouts. Unfortunately, the trend is that parental involvement typically declines as students move on and through their high school years. Encouraging parents to remain involved is vital to changing

this trend (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 1996). Middle level teachers and administrators must keep parents informed about all transitional activities and encourage them to participate. Schools need to work to keep parents involved in their child's educational experience throughout the middle school years so that they are comfortable and confident in their involvement and so that they are confident that they are making a positive impact on their child's success.

Parental involvement in the transition process should be encouraged through a variety of activities (Epstein, 1995). Examples of such involvement are: making visits to the high school with their son or daughter; spending a day at the high school to help them understand what their child's experience will be; taking part in a conference with the high school counselor to discuss schedules and curriculum; and possible involvement in planning transitional activities. Parents of current high school students are also good resources when encouraging parent involvement.

*Cross-Age Relationships:*

At a time in their lives when peer relationships are extremely important, transition to high school often interferes with such relationships (Barone et al., 1991).

Because of this, it is essential that transition activities include social aspects of the high school experience. Such activities give students the opportunity to know older students and possibly develop positive relationships with them (Cognato, 1999; Hertzog et al., 1996; Mac Iver, 1990). Cognato (1999) found that students who participated in a variety of social activities -- including meetings, letter writing, and picnics -- with older students received fewer failing grades and had better school attendance than those who did not participate in such activities. Some of these social interactions included: ninth grade students meeting with eighth graders to dispel common misconceptions about high school; eighth graders shadowing ninth grade students; and eighth graders writing to a high school buddy.

*Inter-school communication:*

Other success factors in transitional programs include activities that brought high school and middle school faculties together to learn about the programs, courses, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools (George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Hertzog et al., 1996; Mac Iver, 1990; Vars, 1998). When high school and middle school staff have a better understanding of curriculum requirements at both

levels it enables middle school educators to do a better job of preparing students for high school. In turn, it assists high schools to develop transition programs that meet the needs of their incoming students. High school and middle school educators need to work together to design and implement appropriate transition programs. It is not the sole responsibility of one or the other but a mutual responsibility. Students and parents should also be involved in the design.

Len Morgan, Co-chair of the Center for Transition Studies at Augusta State University and the State University of West Georgia, recommends that a transition program include (a) visits to eighth graders by ninth grade teachers and counselors; (b) visits to high school by eighth grade teachers, students, and parents; (c) professional development programs on the development of young adolescents for high school teachers; and (d) a high school design where freshmen can stay with the same group of teachers and remain somewhat separate from older high school students (cited in McAdoo, 1999).

*Middle School Experience Dynamics:*

Providing adolescents with a challenging and supportive middle school experience is just as important in the

transition process as transition activities (Belcher & Hatley, 1994; Bry & George, 1980; Mizelle, 1995; Oates et al., 1998). Mizelle found that students who stayed together with the same teachers through sixth, seventh, and eighth grade and experienced more hands-on, life-related activities, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning were more successful in their transition to high school. Students from the same school who had a more departmentalized middle school experience were less successful. The first group of students had higher grades in science, social studies, and language arts in ninth grade and were more likely to enroll in higher level math courses than the latter group of students. The first group indicated that their experience helped them feel more confident about their learning and helped them establish more positive peer relationships.

Both sets of students expressed stress concerning grades in the ninth grade because high school teachers expected them to learn more and faster and to do more learning on their own. These students also expressed the opinion that their middle school programs could have helped ease the high school transition by providing even more challenging curriculum. Another factor that could have helped in the



transition was more strategies for independent learning.

Similarly, in a comprehensive program at Sunrise Middle School in inner city Philadelphia, Oates and her colleagues (1998) found that students who participated in a Community for Living Program (CFL) were more successful in their transition to high school than those who had not participated in the CFL program. An emphasis on community and family involvement, support and training for teachers, and a learning management system designed to help middle school students develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and behavior (similar to the one suggested by the Group A students) were key components of the CFL program. Those students involved in the CFL program had more positive feelings about middle school, higher middle school achievement, fewer high school dropouts, and more were able to maintain their grade-level placement in high school than those who did not participate in the program.

It is the teachers who get to witness the growth, challenges, changes, and achievements of the students. The teachers are the ones who often are privy to seeing the warning signs of potential transition problems, and thus can be the first ones to initiate intervention. It is the teachers who are at the core of a successful transition

program.

*The Roles of Teachers in the Transition Process*

Teachers communicate information regarding the value of schooling and their expectation for individual students' success both directly and tacitly through behaviors such as grading, goal setting, and feedback. Not surprisingly, therefore, ...students' relationships with teachers are predictors of adolescents' motivation and adaptation in school (Midgley, et al., 1989; Murdock, in press; Wentzel, 1997).

Clearly, exhaustive research has been conducted into the need for successful transition programs. In fact, it seems that the very success of many high school students depends upon this process. The classroom teacher, whom the student sees more than any other school employee, is a fundamental piece of this process. It is not just daily contact which can influence student success, but the nature of the student-teacher relationship, which provides much of the data upon which student success is measured. Unfortunately, there is scant research into the teacher's perceptions and roles in the transition process.

As students enter into the more autonomous high school setting, their expectations of the teaching staff change

accordingly. Students expect to be treated with more respect from their teachers. Many students, in fact, find motivation from teachers who support and challenge them to act autonomously (Midgley, et al., 1989; Murdock, in press; Wentzel, 1997). More specifically, these newly arrived high schoolers want to be taken seriously as students by their teachers. In addition, students who were more academically engaged perceived their teachers to be fair and equitable (Murdock, 1999). Clearly, positive student-teacher relationships at the high school level are characterized by interpersonal warmth, but more importantly, a value on the student's learning and success.

The learning approach the teacher employs largely dictates how the student participates, and thus perceives, him or herself in the classroom. In a study on achievement goals through transition Anderman and Midgley (1996) propose that goal theory (or goal-task theory) is a more productive way to motivate secondary students than ability theory. They say that "goal theory is seen as a more qualitative approach to motivation. The focus is on how students think - how they think about themselves, their tasks, and their performance" (p. 407). Classroom teachers who use this goal-task approach to motivation have a

classroom which emphasizes task mastery, improvement, and intellectual development, rather than competition and mastery in relation to others' abilities, which is known as ability theory (Anderman & Migdley, 1996). Using the goal-task approach of motivation also maintains the engagement of students of varying abilities. A classroom which uses the ability theory approach tends to be particularly detrimental to students who, however able, perceive themselves with low ability - and these students are at the greatest risk of not making a successful transition into high school. A goal-task classroom approach was also found to be related to higher levels of academic efficacy, increasing academic success for students (Midgley et al., 1995). A goal-task type of classroom approach would then fit more appropriately in building the successful teacher-student relationships that seem to be so crucial to a student's success at the secondary level.

In fact, it has even been suggested that the student-teacher relationship may be key to understanding the process of alienation from schooling, as supported by the reports from dropouts who indicated poor relationships with teachers. These relationships were central to the students' decision to leave school (Farrell, 1990; Fine,

1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Studies of New York City schools provided that successful students reported that teachers were key in their excellence, while less successful students reported teachers as irrelevant, or even worse, adversarial, in their high school careers (Farrell, 1990, 1994).

The student-teacher relationship at the middle school level is inherently different than that at the high school level. The middle school teacher is expected to be different from the nurturing elementary school teacher, but the middle school student still has emotional and cognitive maturity to develop. Often this means the middle school student cannot operate within or create a respectful, professional teacher-student relationship. However, by the time that same student is ready for high school, they often have matured and have greater potential for a positive teacher-student relationship (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000). If incoming high school students can be adequately prepared for the high school level teacher expectations, workload, and inter-relationship, their transition success will, no doubt, be greater.

As students' understanding of expectations and values of what is required at the high school level become clearer,

they then are more successful. The most substantial aspect of these changes is with the students' understanding of their day-to-day interactions with their classroom teachers (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000). In addition, students highly valued the perception of their teachers about their own academic potential. In one study, student's views of their teachers' perceptions were better predictors of their future college plans than their own assessment of their academic abilities at the time (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000). Clearly, the teacher's expectation for students is a highly valued piece of the secondary school success puzzle.

High school teachers who can treat their students with respect and encouragement are a key element to those students' success (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000). As students progress out of the middle school age, their needs as students become more sophisticated, thus high school educators who tap into the greater maturity and self-consciousness of their students can help ensure success. As incoming high school students mature, their expectations for teachers to be educators may replace expectations for teachers to be warm and fuzzy nurturers. In addition, students become more competent in solving interpersonal

conflicts, leading to a decrease in discipline referrals (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000). Thus, as the student becomes more mature, their interpersonal problem solving skills develop as well, making it possible to create a self-reinforcing cycle of academic success with their teachers.

If positive teacher-student relationships breed more positive results, the key is laying the foundation for those positive teacher-student relationships to be built in the first place. Much effort and attention has been invested in creating transition programs, which are met with varying degrees of success. Gleaning out the successful components of these programs is the first step in developing a program for a specific school district. Clearly, this means an effective transition program which addresses all of the involved factors: teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

#### *Summary*

From this examination of the history of transitions between middle and high school levels, it is clear that this time can be both challenging and traumatic for students. Anxiety about the unknowns of the new school community, academic and behavioral expectations, and inter-

personal relationships all contribute to this being a time of intensity in an adolescent's life. Classroom teachers who get the chance to interact with students intensely during the school year can be a key factor in the student's success based upon treating the student with respect and academic encouragement. Yet in order for a student to successfully enter secondary school classrooms, an effective transition program must be in place. The most recent research related to eighth graders' transition to high school indicates that educators at both levels need to be involved in the process. The activities should be the result of cooperative planning by both middle school and high school staff. Educators must understand that successful transition activities include the overall middle school program as well as specific transition activities at the time they are needed (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; McEwin, 1998; Vars, 1998; Williamson & Johnston, 1999).

It is key to recognize that helping young adolescents make a smooth and successful transition to high school involves all levels of educators working with parents and students to structure their program and curriculum so that young adolescents experience a faultless conversion between schools. An African proverb says that "it takes a village



to raise a child" - this is no less true for that time in a child's life in which they are making the enormous leap into the autonomy of high school. Such a significant period in a person's life should be given the respect it is due with an effective transition program, of which teachers are a crucial piece. Because the research shows the importance of teachers in this transition process, they will be asked to prioritize the survey questions for this study. Data will be gathered and analyzed from their responses to the questions about the primary transitional concerns, differences at middle school and high school levels, goals, and plans for implementation.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

A school district wishing to improve the transition for students from intermediate to secondary schools has taken on a daunting task because the possible areas for improvement are many. In order to be the most productive with valuable time and resources, it is vital for a district to identify a few key areas for improvement, and then attempt to make changes within these areas. This chapter focuses on the development of an action plan based on the focus group discussion.

#### *Teacher Participants*

For this study six participants were selected from the middle school and six from the high school: one instructor from each of the core academic areas of math, language, science, and social studies; one specials instructor; one counselor.

#### *Instrument*

The data collection process will employ a focus group format. The questions will be on paper format for the participants to collect their thoughts before sharing with the group (Appendix A). In this focus group, each team of teachers will answer the following key questions:

- What are the primary concerns that teachers perceive regarding student transition?
- Do these concerns differ between Glenwood Middle School eighth grade teachers and Glenwood High School ninth grade teachers?
- What programs do eighth grade teachers need to develop to help students successfully transition to ninth grade?
- What preparations do the ninth grade teachers need to make in order to be ready to receive the incoming ninth graders?
- What are some goals that these teachers would suggest based upon the focus group discussion?
- How might these goals be developed into an action plan for improving student transition?

#### *Procedure*

The eighth and ninth grade teachers in the focus group will be given the task of discussing the research questions and reporting back to the larger group. Based upon this discussion, concrete, practical, and feasible goals will be developed into an action plan for implementation. The groups will meet and discuss separately their priorities and concerns. Once they have shared these with the whole

group, the discussion will turn to developing these interests into solutions.

The solutions, when listed, will be prioritized, and the most important solutions be transferred into an action plan. Consensus between the two groups will be essential for the action plan's effectiveness. The written action plan (Appendix B) includes the following categories: goal, program, people involved, resources needed, timeline for implementation, and indicators of success.

Care will be given to making the atmosphere of the meeting one of collaboration and productivity. The group discussion may be video taped as well as documented by a recorder who will write the groups' ideas on large paper as they proceed. A feasible and effective improvement plan will be drafted as a result of this discussion.

### *Analysis*

The questions listed above will drive the discussion and problem-solving for this group of teachers. Because the primary goal is practical and effective transition programs, the action plan will incorporate those elements upon which the group has reached consensus and finds the most feasible to implement. These consensus items will be drafted into an action plan. Conscientious implementation

of the action plan will be monitored by the "indicators of success" and "timeline for implementation" components.

## Chapter 4

### Survey and Focus Group Results

The purpose of these focus groups was to determine, discuss, develop alternatives, and an implementation plan for middle to high school transition of students in the Glenwood, Iowa schools. This chapter will describe the participants and review the responses to the discussion questions.

The respondents included the following members of Glenwood schools: six eighth grade teachers and six ninth grade teachers (including core teachers and guidance counselors.) The group was broken into grade-level teams to brainstorm questions one through four and then the large group re-convened. The participants had a paper format to develop their thoughts before sharing them with the group. After reviewing and explaining the small groups' brainstorming, the large group then turned their attention to developing goals for improvement. Lastly, the discussion was narrowed to create an implementation action plan, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The research questions focused on the primary concerns that teachers perceive regarding student transition.

1. What might eighth grade teachers do to help students

successfully transition to ninth grade?

2. What might ninth grade teachers do to help students successfully transition to ninth grade?

3. Do these concerns differ between Glenwood Middle School eighth grade teachers and Glenwood High School ninth grade teachers?

4. What are some goals that these eighth and ninth grade teachers would suggest based upon the focus group discussion?

Results from the discussion groups are arranged by question, with the eighth grade instructors' responses followed by the ninth grade instructors' responses. The general brainstorming thoughts are written at the end of this chapter.

Question 1: What might eighth grade teachers do to help students successfully transition to ninth grade?

Eighth grade teachers' responses:

- Use more of the Jim Fay "Love and Logic" philosophy making sure that the student accepts more of the responsibility for his/her success.

- Adopt high school policies regarding academic expectations (such as late work, homework, etc.) for the last quarter of the eighth grade year.
- Use a universal grading scale between both schools.
- Continue the Junior Buddies program and the tours of the building.
- Ninth grade teachers do team building exercises with the incoming ninth grade students.

Ninth grade teachers' responses:

- I have no idea how to help them.
- With better curriculum mapping, the ninth grade teachers could provide guidelines for students to follow during the fourth quarter of the eighth grade year.

Question 2: What might ninth grade teachers do to help students successfully transition to ninth grade?

Eighth grade teachers' responses:

- Better knowledge of curriculum at eighth grade level would help ninth grade teachers know what the students have been taught.
- Study of the research on brain growth and development would better prepare ninth grade teachers to understand the typical adolescent.



- Establish a regular homeroom time with one teacher who follows the students for four years.
- Stress study skills and accountability expectations early in the school year.
- Make regular and frequent progress reports available to the parents.

Ninth grade teachers' responses:

- Supply more academic support early in the year.
- Articulate advisor/advisee program.

Question 3: Do these concerns differ between Glenwood Middle School eighth grade teachers and Glenwood High School ninth grade teachers?

Eighth grade teachers' responses:

- YES! Especially in terms of the day to day support that the students are accustomed to in the middle school, it is feared that the students are more on their own at the high school.
- Do the high school teachers perceive that the middle school teachers are sending "babies" to the high school?
- There seem to be more "second chances" at the middle school level, whereas the high school level is much more cut and dried.

Ninth grade teachers' responses:

- Yes!
- Eighth grade teachers seem to be more *student* focused and ninth grade teachers seem to be more *subject* focused.

Question 4: What are some goals that these eighth and ninth grade teachers would suggest based upon the focus group discussion?

Eighth grade teachers' responses:

- Understand that many ninth graders are still developmentally immature for the high school setting.
- Provide a caring atmosphere that makes students feel comfortable.

Ninth grade teachers' responses:

- Establish a "Freshman Only" day in the fall.
- During the large group discussion, eighth grade and ninth grade teachers agreed on the importance of the following:
  - Improving communication between schools is essential.

This must include aligning mission statements and providing a common grading scale.

- Administrative support is essential in creating common meeting and collaboration times.

- Establish a Freshman Only day on first day of school year. Freshmen students would have the opportunity to meet teachers and familiarize themselves with the building.
  - Fine-tune the Junior Buddies program making them more available during the school year. Revise the admission requirements for being a Junior Buddy.
  - Create curriculum mapping in all discipline areas.
  - Eighth and ninth grade teachers observe each other, team-teach and trade teaching assignments during the fourth quarter of the eighth grade year.
  - Continue and improve the activities fair.
  - Reinstate the common planning time for the Freshman team.
  - Utilize the ninth hour study room all year long.
- Brainstorming thoughts for the eighth grade teachers about teacher perception regarding student transition:
- Are the students prepared in the areas of content knowledge, study skills, and expectations they will need to follow for academic success in high school?
  - How much "enabling" are we doing and does it mesh with the student accountability expected at the high school?

- There seems to be a lack of communication between the high school and middle school in terms of most areas of students' lives (grading scale, expectations, policies, concerns, etc.)
- Do the students understand that high school prepares them for college or post-high school plans and that the choices they make in high school have far-reaching impacts?
- Do the mission statements differ between the middle and high schools?
- How can the middle school teachers assist students in making appropriate choices in the complex social system at the high school (friends, classes, clubs, etc.)?

Brainstorming thoughts for the ninth grade teachers about teacher perception regarding student transition were:

- Students are not academically prepared.
- Students lack a sense of belonging.
- There is no district-wide curriculum continuity.
- Students lack good study habits.
- Students are not prepared to make good choices in peer groups.
- Students need to be taught to focus on academics.

- There are different expectations and attitudes by teachers between schools.

On this in-service day, the teachers from each building met separately with their grade levels. They were given the questionnaire (Appendix A). Each instructor completed the form independently, then with a group facilitator leading a discussion, the groups' thoughts were written down. The two groups then combined and presented their collective thoughts to the whole group, circling common ideas and experiences. Discussion about what actually happens at the neighboring building cleared up many misconceptions. Once the discussion presented the basics, the group focused on what could be done to improve the transition from middle school to high school in the Glenwood Schools. The dialogue was fruitful as the groups designed a feasible implementation plan to improve the transition between schools. Appendix B is the actual implementation plan developed out of these discussion groups.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions

The discussion between the two teams from each school was fruitful and valuable to all involved. The communication echoed what the research provided. The same concerns are present in Glenwood, Iowa, as are present around the nation.

The philosophical approach between middle and high school teachers was addressed. During the grade level discussions, the teachers were very much aware of their own philosophical differences. The eighth grade teachers admittedly "babied" the students and used a variety of support systems to help students be successful. The ninth grade teachers realized that they were more academically focused and less inclined to give second chances.

The academic preparedness of transitioning students was of great concern to the ninth grade teachers. The eighth grade teachers were aware of the students' lack of preparedness but were uninformed as to the steps needed to correct it. The ninth grade teachers suggested that better curriculum mapping between middle school and high school would help. The teachers stressed the need for more time to work together in specific curricular areas.

The eighth grade teachers felt there were better support networks for students at the middle school level. The ninth grade teachers, however, did not have as many support networks in place for these same students as they transitioned to the high school. This seemed to be a major reason in the cause of students being at risk of an unsuccessful transition.

Both eighth and ninth grade teachers agreed that the prevalence of negative peer pressure is greater at the high school as the students get older and have more freedoms and mobility. Both groups agreed upon the importance of students building a bond with at least one adult at the high school to help counteract the negative peer pressure. The focus group found agreement in the steps necessary for themselves and the students in dealing with the increasingly complex pressures at the high school level.

The eighth grade teachers were able to generate significantly more constructive ideas about successful transition steps than were the ninth grade teachers. Given the structure of today's middle schools and high schools, this was not a surprise. In spite of the differences, there was a general air of cooperation between the two groups. As the two smaller groups combined for the larger

focus group, the grade level teams were able to work well together and come to consensus about a plan of action.

At the close of the meeting, the teachers remarked how valuable this time together had been. Several said it was the best use of staff development time they had ever experienced. It was the hope of all involved that the suggestions made for the action plan would be implemented for the next school year.

The action plan (Appendix A) is the culmination of the team's thinking and application of the research to Glenwood's situation. Designed to be usable and feasible, it builds upon existing programs and creates some new approaches to successful transition.

This action plan was presented to the Glenwood Board of Education at the regular May 2006 meeting. The Board members enthusiastically supported the suggestions brought forward from the focus group. The members voted to implement Freshman Only Day. The Board also encouraged the administration to carry out the other suggestions as outlined in the action plan.

The research and efforts involved with this study will bring benefits for the Glenwood School District. By giving specific attention to the new approaches for successful



transition facing students entering high school, the schools can improve the chances for success for all students in years to come. As both the research conducted and the goals of the Glenwood action plan indicate, it is only through a combined effort of many parties that the transition process can be more rewarding for the students. Time will tell the true fruits of these labors.

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6. How might these goals be developed into an action plan for improving student transition?

**Appendix B:**  
**Action Plan for Effective Student Transition between**  
**Glenwood Middle and Glenwood High Schools**

Developed May, 2006

Identified Goal (desired outcome)	Program Name or Location	People involved (responsible for carrying out goal)	Resources Required	Timeline for Implementation
"Freshman Only" Day	GHS	Administration High school teachers Junior Buddies	Time Lunch Transportation for students	Fall of 2006
Curriculum mapping	GMS GHS	Administration Teachers to create the map	Release time Substitute teachers	2006-2007 year
Improve communication between MS & HS levels	GMS GHS	Administration	Release time Substitute teachers	2006-2007 year
9 <sup>th</sup> Hour Study Room	GHS	Administration Junior Buddies Homeroom teachers	Scheduling support	2006-2007 year
Reinstate Freshman Team	GHS	Ninth grade teachers Administration	Common planning time	2006-2007 year

Continue and improve High School Activities Fair	GHS	Counseling Dept. Administration Sponsors Students	Time Booths Publicity	Spring of 2007
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**Continue the following existing programs with Glenwood Schools:**

- High School Tours at Outdoor Education
- Orientation in eighth grade classroom
- Parent night in the spring
- One on One registration
- "Freshman Night" in the autumn - speaker, then tours with actual schedule