

Seven ways to prepare for middle and high school transitions

by [Ann Schimke](#) on August 23, 2013

Q: What can I do to help my children make the transition to middle school and high school?



Whether it's sixth grade or ninth, graduating to a new school level usually means bigger school buildings, larger student bodies, more choices and more freedom. Along with excitement, students can feel anxiety, frustration and isolation. We spoke with several veteran middle and high school educators who gave us the following advice for how parents can help their children make a smooth transition.

1. Logistics are the hardest part

Let's start with middle school, where students' first hurdles are logistical — needing to remember a locker combination, learning the building layout and getting to class on time.

"It's all those little things that at their stage of development become everything to them," said Sandra Bickel, principal of Webber Middle School in the Poudre School District.

One safeguard is early exposure. Jessica Fiedler, principal of Westlake Middle Schools in Adams 12, urged parents to make sure their kids visit their future middle school as fifth-graders and attend any orientation or kick-off activities prior to the start of school.

2. Let them handle challenges on their own

Both Fiedler and Bickel emphasized the importance of giving children the space to handle challenges on their own. That could mean letting them fiddle with their combination lock without stepping in to help. Or, if they come home with a complaint about an assignment or class, pushing them to problem solve for themselves.

Instead of stepping in with a solution, Fiedler said, parents might ask, "Have you spoken with your teacher?"

Bickel said homework is another area where parents should show support but not take over. She said parents can help by focusing their praise not on talent or natural ability, but the hard work their child is doing.

"Praise the effort," she said. "Parents can let their kids struggle through some of that and not enable [them]."

3. Don't end your involvement; change it

Parent involvement is still important as children grow older — the form just needs to change, middle school educators said. Classroom volunteering is usually not appropriate after middle school, they said, but parents can show interest by having dinner with their children, asking about their day and monitoring their phone use and social media presence.

“If parents just wash their hands of it and give them free reign...it can be very damaging to kids,” said Bickel. Sixth-graders “want to be treated more like young adults...but they’re not.”

Jen Holm, a counselor at Webber, noted that extracurricular activities, whether at school or in the community, are also very important to students’ success. She said while parents should let their children pick activities themselves, she suggested parents say, “You need to be involved in something every quarter of the year.”

4. In high school, establish routines

When it comes to the high school transition, “the absolute number one thing that’s different is the amount of freedom,” said Pam Smiley, principal of Horizon High School in Adams 12.

Students have to adjust to not being part of “teams” as they might have been in middle school, having a broader spectrum of peers and a wider range of movement within the school building. In addition, she said, “The rigor amps up a little bit. The amount of work amps up a little bit.”

For some students, the demands of high school can bring about feelings of loneliness and isolation, she said.

She said parents can help their new high-schoolers by setting up after-school routines at home to ensure homework gets done at and students stay organized.

5. Monitor progress

Smiley also recommends that parents monitor their students’ grades and attendance if the school offers some type of online parent portal showing students’ progress. One system used at some Colorado schools is called Infinite Campus.

If parents see poor grades or attendance, it may be a sign that the student is wasting study time, battling disorganization or struggling in some other way. Smiley also suggested that parents push their students to monitor their own progress on Infinite Campus or whatever system their school uses.

6. Keep track of friends

At both middle and high school, educators recommend that parents keep track of their child’s friends. Smiley said parents should be wary if their ninth-grader starts hanging out with 11th- or 12th graders, whether in a romantic relationship or a platonic friendship.

“It’s usually never a good thing,” she said, noting that older students sometimes take advantage of the younger ones.

7. Red flags to watch for

At the middle school level, Bickel and Fiedler said red flags that may indicate the transition isn’t going well include students complaining of headaches, stomach aches, sleeplessness or simply not wanting to go to school.

“That’s definitely a time when parents need to say, ‘What’s going on?’” said Fiedler.

Smiley recommended parents not only watch for any out-of-character behavior, but also any mismatches between how students say things are going and what their grades or other indicators suggest.