Examining Student Transition Programs through an Invitational Lens

Ronald D. Williamson
Eastern Michigan University

Marie F. Shoffner
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Moving to a new school, while frequently exciting, is also filled with stress and anxiety for students and their parents. Nowhere is this more deeply felt than during the transition from elementary to middle school. Increasingly schools are modifying their transition practices to assure that students are better informed, and feel more secure in their new setting. This paper uses the construct of Invitational Education to identify ways in which school personnel can modify both formal and informal transition activities to assure that students see their new school as welcoming and inviting.

During a recent parent meeting in a western school district one parent described the transition to middle school this way: "It's like moving to another country: the language is different, there are different rules, the culture is different, and you aren't sure you have the proper documents to navigate the border successfully"(Williamson, 1997, p. 3).

Moving from elementary to middle school can be stressful for both students and parents. A recent study of parent concerns about middle level programs found that transitions (between schools and between grade levels) were one of their most significant concerns (Johnston & Williamson, 1998). School transition programs are frequently organized and led by school counselors and school administrators. Their roles lend themselves naturally to frequent and occasionally intense contact with students and parents before, during, and after the transition to a new school.

Concern for the transition of students has been a consistent theme for middle grades programs (Alexander & George, 1981; Carnegie Council, 1989). Given its importance in the life of the middle level school, how is it that the transition from elementary to middle school continues to raise serious concern among parents and community members (Johnston & Williamson, 1998)? What strategies and approaches might be considered to assure that schools become more vigilant in assessing the formal and informal messages telegraphed to students and their parents during the transition to middle school?

Contemporary middle schools are faced by conflicting demands from parents and the community (Beane, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). They often feel pulled between calls for increased accountability and heightened student achievement and the need to provide developmentally responsive educational experiences for students. Emerging from this milieu is the continuing need, expressed by students and parents, to feel supported during a time of high anxiety: the transition to a new school (Johnston & Williamson, 1998; Shoffner, 1997).

During the past thirty years middle level schools became increasingly concerned with modifying their practice so that a program more aligned with the developmental needs of early adolescent students was adopted. One method endorsed by many schools was Invitational Education, an approach to school life that recognizes that every aspect of the regularities of school life send subtle messages to parents and students (Purkey, 1978).

The Invitational Education Model (Purkey, 1978; Purkey & Novak, 1984, 1996; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987, 1990; Purkey & Stanley, 1991) proposes that the five areas of people, places, policies, programs, and processes create the environmental framework in schools. "People" assesses respect, caring, and the honoring of diversity and refers to the positive or "inviting" influence of the teachers and staff in the school. "Places" relates to the physical aspects of the school. "Policies" refers to the inviting aspects of school rules and regulations. "Programs" refers to preventative programs that emphasize non-violent means of negotiation (e.g., mediation and conflict resolution). "Processes" refers to values and attitudes of school staff. Each of these five areas has a vital effect on in-

74

fluencing student behavior and views (Purkey, 1978; Purkey & Lehr, 1997; Shoffner & Vacc, 1999).

Middle level school personnel are sensitive to these needs and to the changing dynamics in which they operate. They understand that when students feel cared for and are a respected part of the school, they achieve. They recognize that providing parents with lots of information about their child's school provides an environment that fosters successful learners. A wide range of approaches to the transition of students from elementary to middle school has emerged. Examining these practices through an invitational lens offers one vehicle for greater understanding and sensitivity to the impact of changing schools on the lives of students. The work exemplified by these practices, and that of countless other middle grades educators, can enlighten and inform school practice.

Starting with Core Beliefs

Building broad support among school constituents for changes in school practice is a central theme in middle level education (Clark & Clark, 1994; Williamson & Johnston, 1991). It is especially critical when undertaking an examination of school transition practices.

The presence of clearly articulated beliefs about the schooling of early adolescents, a clear vision for the school, and a distinct sense of mission and purpose provides clear guidance for school programs (Sergiovanni, 1990). Such clarity has been found to be present in effective middle level schools (George & Shewey, 1994). Without agreement and affirmation of these shared commitments, accountability for school programs and success remains low; there are no principles that guide individual and collective action, and individuals remain free to interpret activities undertaken as part of transition programs in a variety of ways.

To examine their operations many middle level schools have convened groups of parents, community members and faculty to examine and reach agreement on the role and function of the school (Williamson & Johnston, 1998). Such diverse groups often hold disparate ideas about a school's practice. As they work together, gather information, debate and discuss their varied points-of-view, they invariably reach some

75

agreement on a statement of beliefs (Williamson & Johnston, 1998). While neither novel nor unique, the statements represent the interests and needs of the group. Such agreement is critical to cultivating support for revising one's program.

Delineating a set of core beliefs about schooling can be helpful in refining school programs. These values, central to all organizations, serve as the foundation for adopting practices that make school more appealing and welcoming for students (Johnston, 1995; Purkey & Novak, 1996).

The Five "P's" and Transition Activities

The emphasis of the invitational model on developing a comprehensive set of school practices offers a useful model for examining school transition activities. Each of the five components: people, places, policies, programs, and processes incorporates important approaches to reducing the anxiety inherent in changing schools and in establishing the new school as one which is welcoming and caring.

People

One of the most visible ways a school expresses its core beliefs is through the action of the people who work there. These individuals clearly personify organizational values and reflect the most cherished and treasured beliefs of the school. Understanding the power of personal connection, middle level schools have adopted several transition activities that nurture this important relationship. Successful strategies include the following:

• Faculty and staff learn and use student names. Be visible in school lunchrooms and hallways and engage students in conversation about school activities and their personal lives.
• Encourage teachers to welcome students by creating classroom displays that identify students by name and recognize their accomplishments (National Middle School Association, 1998).
• Provide opportunity during the first days of the new school year to talk with other students, getting to know them, their interests, and their hopes about middle school (Williamson, 1993).

76

• Assign each new student a "buddy" from a higher grade. This "buddy" can act as a "big brother/big sister" to the incoming student and serve as a mentor and role model. Recognize the buddy for their service (Brazee, 1987).

• Bring small groups of elementary students (20-30) to the middle school and allow each one to shadow a student for the entire day. Be sure they stay for lunch so they can become comfortable with cafeteria procedures (National Middle School Association, 1998; Siehl & Gentry, 1990).

• Create classroom groups in the spring and have middle school teachers send postcards or notes to each student in the incoming class during the summer (Williamson, 1993).

• Provide independent time for personal journal entries where students can write about their experiences, apprehensions, concerns and hopes for entering middle school (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

Places

Even before their first interaction with school personnel, students and parents form opinions about the school's operation. As they approach the school by either car or school bus they notice the surroundings: the presence or absence of litter, general repair of the building, and the condition of the grass and landscaping. Upon entering an inviting school they notice the presence of friendly signs welcoming visitors and offering directions, the absence of graffiti, the visibility of student work. The physical appearance of school can reduce or induce anxiety about attendance.

Many middle schools are attentive to these details and offer these suggestions for making schools inviting places:

• Hold a scavenger hunt in the school during the orientation session so students can become familiar with the facility (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

• Have students participate in a building trivia contest to familiarize themselves with the school and its facilities on opening day or during the orientation program (Williamson, 1993).

77

• Have welcoming signs and posters, clean hallways, neat displays of student work (Kaiser, 1995).

Policies

Another clear indicator of school priorities is the day-to-day routines. They are comprised of the regular on-going activities of school life and send clear messages about what is valued. Policies serve another useful role; they establish a framework that guides the regular routines of school personnel. Policies are explicit in establishing priorities. Examples of transition activities that reflect policies include the following:

• Keep parents of new students informed by adding them to the mailing list for school newsletters throughout their final year in elementary school (Cooke, 1995).
• Engage parents (both incoming and outgoing) and faculty in continual planning and evaluation of the transition program in order to build support and commitment (Weldy, 1995).
• Assign students to teams and advisory groups with at least one friend from elementary school (Williamson, 1993).
• Talk with students to identify commonly asked questions. Let current students prepare responses and share those with incoming students (Combs, 1993).
• Acknowledge the contributions of parents and teachers who help with transition activities (Kaiser, 1995).
• Provide every family with a school handbook that includes phone numbers, school history, yearly schedule, teachers, schedules, lunch procedures and other practical information (Schumacher, 1998).
• Recognize and reward current students who assist with the transition program (Kaiser, 1995).

Programs

Often the most tangible indicator of school priorities is the programs offered to students. Programs that set high expectations for the success of all students, exclude no one, and maximize opportunities for students to develop both academically and socially reflect a commitment to an inviting environment.

78

Transition programs for students and their parents are often the first opportunity for interaction with a school. The perceptions they create have lasting impact on a student's success. Examples of successful practices that administrators and school counselors can develop to create an inviting school climate include:

- Attend elementary school award nights and acknowledge the contributions of incoming students (Kaiser, 1995).
- Meet with elementary teachers to identify their concerns and help them shape the transition of their students to middle school (Williamson, 1993).
- Pair each elementary classroom with a middle level class and have the students write letters or e-mail one other (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).
- Conduct evening open houses where the middle level students display their work or participate in performing groups.
- Use parent information sessions to convey positive messages about the school and its programs (Kaiser, 1995).
- Send a box of locks to the elementary school so that students have an opportunity to practice opening a lock (National Middle School Association, 1998).
- Conduct an unstructured open house prior to the beginning of the school year so that parents and students may tour the building, locate classrooms, open their locker and become familiar with the setting (Schumacher, 1998).
- Have the middle school counselor conduct interviews with each elementary student and follow up with a letter to parents (Siehl & Gentry, 1990), thus making each student a hero or heroine.
- Schedule regular "parent development" sessions that provide parents with information about the school but respond to issues and concerns they have about the new school (e.g., Understanding Your Early Adolescent, Helping Your Child Make Informed Decisions) (Combs, 1993; Cooke, 1995; Shoffner, 1997).

Processes

Schools convey their most significant messages and transmit their most important beliefs by the way they make decisions. The degree to

79

which students, parents and community are involved in identifying needs and designing strategies to meet those needs represent a school's commitment to processes which are democratic and respect the interests and needs of its constituents. Schools might use the following approaches to enhance their transition programs:

• Provide for a comprehensive transition plan, one that encompasses the entire school year (Kaiser, 1995). Be attentive to needs for information and support once students enter their new school.

• Routinely gather information from parents and students about the effectiveness of the transition program (Siehl & Gentry, 1990)

• Offer parents meaningful roles in school governance (Cooke, 1995).

• Reach agreement among the faculty on opening day routines and procedures for incoming students. Be cautious about overloading students with too much detail and information, thus provoking a negative response to the new school (Kaiser, 1995).

• Talk with faculty about the awards and accomplishments of the incoming students.

• Challenge long-standing beliefs about middle school students by sharing information about the contributions and work of incoming students in elementary school (Midgley, 1988).

• Provide an opportunity for middle school faculty to visit elementary schools, meet the teachers, learn about the program and develop an appreciation for the work of elementary school teachers. Provide similar opportunities for elementary staff to visit middle schools (Brazee, 1987).

• Place significant responsibility for transition activities in the hands of school counselors and teaching staff thus expanding responsibility for the transition (Weldy, 1990). Honor and recognize their contributions.

• Hold meetings at varied times and locations to accommodate the work schedules of parents (Morgan & Hertzog, 1999).

• Mail a schedule of orientation activities to each student's home so that parents and students are aware of the opportunities to learn about their new school (Morgan & Hertzog, 1999).

• Become knowledgeable about student concerns by surveying incoming students during their last year in elementary school (Leiderman & Terzopolos, 1991; Weldy, 1995)

Formal school transition programs are only one means of helping students bridge the gap from elementary to middle school. They convey important information and perceptions of school life. Of even greater importance, however, are the more subtle, more informal, messages conveyed to students through the regularities of school life: the people, places, policies, programs and processes. Sound transition programs recognize the importance of complementing traditional transition activities with others that utilize the attributes of Invitational Education to telegraph to students that they are supported, cared for, and welcomed in their new setting.

Conclusion

All school personnel, but particularly school counselors and administrators, play critical roles in supporting sound student transition programs. Their leadership can mold and shape school-wide activities that enhance the work of the entire staff in developing and implementing effective transition programs. Invitational Education can serve as an important vehicle to strengthen school-wide efforts to assure that students, and their families, make a smooth transition from elementary to middle school.

It is essential that those most often charged with shepherding transition activities, the counseling and administrative staff, work together, as a team, and collaboratively with the larger school community to support students in their transition to middle school. A collaborative effort, built on a sound understanding of the needs of early adolescent students, is critical.

The transition from elementary to middle school is a significant event in the lives of most early adolescents (Mac Iver, 1990). Together, all school personnel can assure that students receive the information, understanding, and support essential to assure success in their new school. Through greater understanding of school culture and the many formal and informal ways in which culture is transmitted, school leaders can make the transition to a new school more inviting and supportive for students.

References

Alexander, W. & George, P. (1981). *The exemplary middle school*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Beane, J. (1999). Middle schools under siege: Points of attack. *Middle School Journal, 30*(4), 3-9.

Brazee, E. (1987). Moving into and out of the middle level school. *Schools in the Middle*, April 1987, 1-4.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Author.

Clark, S. & Clark, D. (1994). *Restructuring the middle level school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Combs, H. J. (1993). A middle school transition program: Addressing the social side of schooling. *ERS Spectrum, 11*(1), 12-21.

Cooke, G. (1995). Choice not chance: Strengthening school transitions. *Schools in the Middle, 4*(3), 8-12.

George, P. & Shewey, K. (1994). *New evidence for the middle school*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

Johnston, J. H. (1995). Climate: Building a culture of achievement. *Schools in the Middle, 5*(2), 10-15.

Johnston, J. H. & Williamson, R. (1998). Listening to four communities: Parent and public concerns about middle level schools. *NASSP Bulletin, 82*(597), 44-52.

Kaiser, J. (1995). Eight months of activities: Unity through purpose. *Schools in the Middle, 4*(3), 15-18.

Leiderman, J. & Terzopolos, S. (1991). Assisting the transition to middle school. *Principal, 70*(4), 56-57.

Mc Iver, D. (1990). Meeting the needs of young adolescents: Advisory groups, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and school transition programs. *Phi Delta Kappan, 71*(6), 458-464.

Midgley, C. (1988). The transition to junior high school: From student to stereotype. *Principal, 68*(1), 50-52.

Morgan, P. L. & Hertzog, C. J. (1999). How to create successful transition activities. *Tips for Principals*, December 1999.

National Middle School Association (1998). Transitioning students in and out of middle school. *Classroom Connections, 1*(3), 1-2.

Perkins, P. & Gelfer, J. (1995). Elementary to middle school: Planning for transition. *The Clearing House, 68*(3), 171-173.

Purkey, W. W (1978). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching and learning*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Purkey, W. W. & Lehr, J. B. (1997). *Creating SAFE schools through Invitation Education*. Greensboro, NC: The Alliance for Invitational Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Purkey, W. W. & Novak, J. M. (1984). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching and learning* (2nd ed.), Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Purkey, W. W. & Novak, J. M. (1996). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching, learning and democratic practice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Purkey, W. W. & Schmidt, J. J. (1987). *The inviting relationship: An expanded perspective for professional helping*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Purkey, W. W. & Stanley, P. H. (1991). *Invitational teaching, learning, and living*. Washington, DC: National Educational Association.

Schumacher, D. (1998). *The transition to middle school*. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Sergiovanni, T. (1990). *Value-added leadership: How to get extraordinary performance in schools*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.

Shoffner, M. F. (1997). Supporting students in transition. *Middle Matters, 5*(3), 6.

Shoffner, M. F. & Vacc, N. A. (1999). A psychometric analysis of the Inviting School Safety Survey. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling, 32*, 66-74

Siehl, P. & Gentry, M. (1990). From elementary to middle school: Suggestions for a comprehensive orientation. *Middle School Journal, 21*(3), 20-22.

Weldy, G. (1995). Critical transitions. *Schools in the Middle, 4*(3), 4-7.

Weldy, G. (1990). Stronger school transitions improve student achievement, *NASSP Bulletin, 74*(523), 60-73.

Williamson, R. (1993). *Scheduling the middle level school*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Williamson, R. (1997*). Issues with student transition programs*. Technical Report 97-005. Tampa, FL: Center for High Achieving Schools.

Williamson, R. & Johnston, J. H. (1991). *Planning for success: Successful implementation of middle level reorganization.* Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Williamson, R. & Johnston, J. H. (1998). Responding to parent and public concerns about middle level schools. *NASSP Bulletin, 82*(500), 73-82.

Williamson, R. & Johnston, J. H. (1999). Challenging orthodoxy: An emerging agenda for middle level reform. *Middle School Journal, 30*(4), 10-17.

Ronald D. Williamson is in the Department of Leadership and Counseling at Eastern Michigan University.
e-mail: ron.williamson@emich.edu.
Marie F. Shoffner is in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
e-mail: mfshoffn@uncg.edu

Guidelines for Authors

The *Journal for Invitational Theory and Practice* promotes the tenets of invitational learning, self-concept theory, and perceptual psychology. Articles that examine and expand the theory of invitational learning and development, investigate the efficacy of invitational practices, and relate these beliefs and findings to other theories of human development and behavior are encouraged.

The journal uses an anonymous review of articles and final decisions regarding publication are made by the Editor. On publication, authors receive two copies of the journal. Authors are asked to follow these guidelines when submitting articles for publication:

1. Prepare manuscripts in APA style. Refer to the Publication Manual, 5th Edition of the American Psychological Association.
2. Include an abstract of 50-100 words.
3. Double space everything, including reference, quotations, tables, and figures. Leave generous margins on each page.
4. Use tables and figures sparingly, and place them on separate pages. All artwork and diagrams should be camera-ready.
5. Place authors' names, positions, titles, mailing addresses, and email addresses on the cover page only.
6. Lengthy quotations require written permission from the copyright holder for reproduction. Authors are responsible for obtaining permissions and providing documentation to the journal.
7. Avoid the use of the generic masculine and feminine pronouns.
8. Please do not submit material that is currently being considered by another journal.
9. Authors whose manuscripts are accepted for publication will be requested to provide a copy of the manuscript on a 3.5" computer disk, preferably IBM formatted.
10. Please include email address, home phone number, and business phone number so that the editor may contact you quickly.
11. Send three copies of the manuscript to:

Phillip S. Riner, Editor   Phone: (904) 620-2610
College of Education and Human Services FAX: (904) 620-2522
University of North Florida   email: priner@unf.edu
4567 St. Johns Bluff Road, South   http://www.prenhall.com/riner
Jacksonville, FL 32224-2645