

# IMMERSE

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## Exit Strategy

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Check out the map of a typical youth ministry and you'll discover at least two islands. The island of middle school is isolated in the waters of fun, high energy, and relational chaos. Off in the distance is the high school island, positioning itself within the tides of reflection, leadership, and relational depth. If a college ministry is present, it's often separated even farther.

These islands' inhabitants are comfortable and secure—until time for a transfer. At a specified time each year, the older inhabitants of the middle school island stand on the shore. A student's gaze settles on the huge island of senior high as her youth leader says, "It's been fun having you! We love you and will miss you." As the child looks out with fear, she's slapped on the back and hears, "Just swim. You'll be fine!" as she's pushed into the cold water. It may even be worse for high schools students transitioning into college ministry or that nebulous time known as young adulthood.

For two or three years, these students have been under our compassionate care. One of the most important ways for us to communicate our passion for them is to assure them of a positive, natural transition from our program to the next. Instead, many of us have found a warped satisfaction when students flounder in the in-between waters. It somehow proves they need us, they can't survive without us, and thus we have value.

I'm certain none of us means to send our kids out to drown in the waters of transition; we just don't understand the need for an intentional exit strategy. So if we changed our philosophy and resolved to send our students off to succeed, what would the exit strategy look like? Here are some things that have worked for us in helping middle schoolers transition into the high school ministry.

### **Create a Special Village by the Beach**

Your oldest students have matured a great deal since they were 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> graders, and they're ready for a special challenge. We developed an optional doctrinal class we call A.U.G. (Approved Unto God), comprised of just our outgoing students—a little village of their own. This class involves digging deeper into issues of the church, orthodoxy, and the Bible. Although it takes extra time and effort for the students who choose to participate, we have an amazing turnout each year.

The option doesn't have to be a doctrinal class. Veteran students could be invited on a weekend retreat, asked to be a part of the youth group leadership team, allowed to go on a more intensive summer mission trip, or given some kind of exclusive alternative to your normal mid-week program. All of these opportunities will communicate, "We acknowledge you're at a different level, and we want to treat you that way."

### **Send 'em off with a Bang**

Our junior high group consists of 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and we've found our 9<sup>th</sup> graders often need a little extra motivation to finish their final year in the middle school group. So we reward our A.U.G. kids with Project Colorado (P.C.). P.C. is a 14-day trip that's half missions, half adventure. At the end of the summer, we travel by bus to the Colorado Rockies and spend two weeks serving a camp and community while taking time to white water raft and rock climb. During our time away, leaders and students are challenged on many levels—relationally, physically, and spiritually.

The trip is viewed as the climactic experience for the graduating A.U.G. students. After three years together, we celebrate our experiences, relationships, faith, and memories. From the time they enter the program, students look forward to the trip. It has become a rite of passage for these kids. We arrive back home on a Saturday evening and 12 hours later, they're in the high school group. Although the initial letting go is difficult, they walk away with satisfaction and, hopefully, a strong foundation.

As much as this generation seems to live in the moment, they long for something to anticipate, something to look forward to. A climactic event like this helps fulfill that longing.

### **Give Them a Tour**

For many middle school students, their only experience of the high school program consists of a quick fly-by each week. Big, hairy boys and voluptuous girls darken the doorways, and their world seems so mysterious. Help your kids combat any fears they might have by setting up a time when they can observe a full evening of the senior high program. Coordinate with the leaders of the senior high so they can prep their students for the purpose of the

night. With the proper challenge, the upper classmen will be open and inclusive. We choose a night in April, not wanting to have our students focused on the next step too early and avoiding the craziness of May. The 9<sup>th</sup> graders meet in our normal room and are escorted to the senior high by some of the staff. For the remainder of the night, they live in the world of senior high. When they return to complete their time with us, the anxiety has often been replaced by comfort and expectation.

### **Let Go of Your Own Fears**

Early in my ministry to junior highers, I spent the last few months with my 9<sup>th</sup> graders in denial. When students would reference the transition, I'd cover my ears and say, "I don't know what you're talking about! You aren't going anywhere!" Half of me was joking, but the remaining half was scared and sad. I found that if I ignored it, it seemed easier.

A few years ago, I was talking with a former student, Chris. He said, "Remember how you never wanted to talk about us going to the senior high?" I nodded. He continued, "That was hard for me. I was so scared and confused and needed to process it, but you never gave me the chance." I was convicted. Ever since that conversation, I've allowed individual kids to process with me and planned structured group time to share concerns, excitement, and questions. This isn't just good for them; it's good for me too.

### **Bring in the Other Chiefs**

One of the main reasons students drown in the waters of transition is because they don't know to whom they're swimming. The senior high pastor and staff seem distant and intimidating. Inviting them over to your island for a day or evening can help quell their fears.

Connection can happen through the teaching of a lesson, the sharing of a faith story, or just hanging out. The middle schoolers are on familiar turf so their comfort level is higher, allowing them to be more relaxed. As simple and logical as it sounds, most of us don't take this step. If we would, we'd find it blesses everyone involved.

When we realized how many of our students were drowning, we racked our brains to solve the problem. Our first attempt at a lifeline was inviting four high schoolers to be a part of our Colorado trip. We worked with the senior high staff to find students who would be inclusive, take initiative, and develop helpful relationships with the incoming sophomores.

The results were incredible! Not only did these former junior highers step up to the leadership plate, they simultaneously built friendships with the younger class. When that first Sunday in the senior high group rolled around, the new sophomores walked with confidence into the senior high room, knowing they weren't out there alone.

### **Keep Your Island Open**

Since bringing high schoolers in to help transition our younger students, we've created roles for senior high students in our junior high summer camp and local summer mission trip as well. It does a junior high pastor's heart good to see her students want to give back and offer a hand of friendship to their slightly younger peers. These students often have a tremendous impact on the junior highers. I often hear students say, "I totally remember how cool my counselor was! He helped me understand so much about my faith. I just want to be able to do the same thing with younger kids."

Because 17-year-olds can sometimes lack the high level of discernment needed to work with younger students, instruction and boundaries need to be clear. Each student I appoint to a lead position over my junior highers attends planning meetings and a special junior counselor session, and is given written expectations concerning boundaries with the younger students. Although these steps don't eliminate all problems, it gives us a conversation to come back to and guidelines to enforce.

### **Avoid Merging**

Some would argue for the need to just merge the two islands into one landmass by allowing all the students to be together. That's not the answer.

Developmentally, socially, relationally, and spiritually, junior and senior highers are different. If critical mass will allow it, their youth ministry experiences need to reflect that difference. What we can do as the leaders of the ministries is build a solid bridge to connect the two islands.

Letting my kids go will never be easy. My heart mourns the loss for months after their departure, but one of the greatest things I can do for the health of the church is to present the senior high with a grounded, prepared sophomore class.