

SPECIAL EDUCATION SPRING 2019 NEWSLETTER

This newsletter is dedicated to the topic of transitions. While acknowledging that transitions from home to preschool, from one school to another, and from high school to college or career, are all important, this newsletter focuses on a few areas, such as autism, middle and high schools.

Transition is defined as “a passage from one state, stage, subject or place to another (change); a movement, development, or evolution from one form, stage or style to another” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary online 2019). We all participate in transitions, especially given typical developmental milestones and busy schedules. For those of us in our 50’s, a common experience is a mid-life crisis. This is a transition that often brings reflection and change.

For our children and students, we recognize that transitions can be tricky, especially for students with autism or emotional issues and for students in the lower grade levels. Therefore, we provide instruction, reinforcement and support on a daily basis as they transition from one class to another and from one geographical location such as home to school, one classroom to another, academic setting to lunch or recess on a daily basis. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) recognizes that students with autism need this extra support during transitions, and have created a checklist to make sure that educational staff are considering how the student with autism may need strategies such as social stories and/or pre-warning of changes, and ensuring that these needs are reflected on the IEP. We know first-hand that a student with autism relies on predictability and schedules. It can trigger an emotional melt-down if the school lunch menu states chicken nuggets, but the menu is changed last minute! Likewise, we need to prepare our students when there is a schedule change or a personnel change such as a substitute.

Even for students without disabilities (and their parents), transition can be anxiety-provoking. In my experience as an educational administrator in various school districts, this is particularly vexing for parents as their children transition from elementary/intermediate schools to the middle school. As children become adolescents, they often experience hormone changes, become more independent from their parents, and start to value the opinions of their peers over that of their families. No wonder that this can be troubling to parents! However, these students are ready for more independence and the Middle School is set up to use these developmental changes and interests in a way to improve learning incomes. Students are often taught through cooperative learning groups (where peer collaboration is essential). Teachers may teach in teams and convene “advisory” periods to build that sense of team work. Students no longer need active supervision during daily transitions such that they are in charge of their own materials (aka lockers) and passing independently in the hallways. The NIS and CPS teachers, staff and administrators work together to make sure that their students have ample opportunities to be prepared for the transition to middle school. We also provide the extra support whenever needed for our students with and without disabilities. Furthermore, we have two school counselors and will have a full-time social worker at CPS next year to provide additional social-emotional supports, not only as students adjust to a new school, but as they are adjusting to adolescence. As a parent, if you feel that your child needs additional coaching in this area, do not hesitate to reach out to the counselors, principal, or myself.

Another big transition for students is moving from 8th grade to the High School. Again, students are expected to be more independent. They will have increased, but age appropriate expectations in academics and in behavior. Plus, the stakes are higher with the emphasis on passing MCAS and successfully completing required courses in order to graduate. A recent article in the Education Week Online May 2019 Newsletter provided tips for educators to facilitate a positive transition from the 8th grade to the 9th grade which results in successful outcomes, specifically, graduation from High School. While geared to educators, I find that it is also relevant to parents, particularly on attendance, expectations for higher grades, and teamwork. I have provided an excerpt from that article:

Focus on attendance data. Attendance is the precursor to engagement, learning, academic success, and, yes, graduation. The consortium found that each week of absence per semester in 9th grade is associated with a more than 20 percentage-point **decline in the probability of graduating** from high school. In light of this, schools must work to help students and families understand the cost of frequent absences, closely monitor attendance, and provide support from teachers and staff to get students to class.

Embrace collective responsibility for academic success. Attendance improves when teachers take collective responsibility for the success of the whole school, not just their individual students. A school culture that stresses collective responsibility for absences and academic success might include team meetings around real-time attendance reports or shared outreach when students do not show up to class. At the K-12 University of Chicago Charter School, which in 2015-16 had **an attendance rate of 97 percent** at one of its four campuses, educators created charts and graphs of attendance for hallways and highlighted its school attendance importance at assemblies and morning announcements.

Raise the bar to "Bs or better." Ninety-five percent of students who **earn Bs or better** and have a GPA of 3.0 in 9th grade go on to graduate from high school. With a C average, however, the rate slips to 72 percent. For freshmen with a D average, only half will go on to graduate. Conveying the importance of good grades and strong GPAs early in students' high school careers can keep them from scrambling to catch up when it might be too late.

Foster supportive relationships to ease transitions. The transition from the middle grades to high school can lead even good students to struggle—a dramatic drop in grades, attendance, and academic behavior is a common warning sign of this strain. In high school, it's easier to skip class and harder to figure out how to get help with coursework. But high school doesn't have to be impersonal. Teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, and friends can make a concerted effort to reach out to students when they show signs of falling behind or disengaging, find out why they are struggling, and get them the academic or emotional support they need. (Gomberts & Nagaoka, 2017)*.

I hope this provides information and ideas about ways to improve transitions for students. If you have any questions, you may contact me at the Office of Special Services.

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*(Gomperts & Nagoka, 2017). *Six Ways to Improve High School Graduation Rates: Students are more likely to earn a diploma if they do well in 9th grade.* In Ed Week 5/28/19