

Viewpoint: Helping students transition to middle school

by Michael Cali, Principal of the Holten-Richmond Middle School

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As spring approaches and we set our sights on closing out the current school year, we also begin to direct our attention to the transition fifth-grade students make as they move from elementary to middle school. After five or six years of growing up in, and becoming familiar with, their elementary school environment, it is not uncommon for students to be anxious about moving to middle school. This article presents a summary of the programs that are in place at Holten-Richmond Middle School to assist students and parents in making this important transition.

In general, middle schools are configured to deal with the uniqueness that young adolescence presents. Our students are not simply older elementary students or younger high school students. In addition to academic and social changes, middle school students face a variety of physical and emotional changes that are unsurpassed by all developmental milestones except those experienced from birth to age two. As such, our school's educational programs and "team" approach help to address the dramatic changes that occur during this time in students' lives. A team consists of four or five teachers and a group of students they commonly instruct. Each team of teachers is responsible for teaching all core academic subjects. These smaller groups within our school enable students and teachers to interact daily, supporting the development of relationships that are vital to creating a healthy learning community.

The transition from elementary to middle school invokes many questions and can be the source of much anxiety for both students and parents. A different building, a new configuration of students, and an unfamiliar group of adults all present students with unique challenges and expectations. In addition to the thought of having to get used to a new peer group, students in elementary school generally do not switch teachers throughout the day. The fear of getting lost and not being able to find a class on time are real concerns for students entering middle school. Feedback from past parent and student surveys indicates that our transition program takes the above issues into account and provides students with a variety of experiences to ease their anxiety and familiarize them with life in the middle school.

At Holten-Richmond, a multi-step approach is utilized to ease students' transition to our school. This year, prior to February vacation, all fifth grade students visited the Middle School to hear our sixth grade chorus and band students perform. In March, a group from the Middle School consisting of the principal, assistant principal, sixth grade teachers, guidance counselors and sixth grade students will visit each of the five elementary schools to talk with fifth grade students. These visits provide elementary school students with an introduction to life in the Middle School. A typical day is outlined with an emphasis on the courses sixth-grade students take. The "team" concept, as well as individual teacher and whole-school expectations, are discussed. Visiting grade six students share their experiences at Holten-Richmond to allay the fears that fifth-graders may be feeling.

Continuing in March and leading into April, meetings are held with the elementary and middle school special education staff members to review special education students moving from grade five to six. During this same time period, the middle school principal meets separately with each of the elementary principals to review all grade-five student profiles. Following April school vacation, fifth-grade students from each of our five elementary schools visit the middle school on

five separate days. During their visit to Holten-Richmond, fifth-graders are taken on tours of the building led by current sixth-grade students. All areas of the building are visited, including many sixth-grade classrooms. The fifth-grade students' final visit to Holten-Richmond occurs this year on May 7th, and consists of a meeting in the multi-purpose room. A student-made video highlighting many aspects of the middle school is presented to the fifth-grade students. Following the video, all fifth-graders proceed to the cafeteria for a snack before departing for their elementary schools.

Our fifth- to sixth-grade transition program culminates each year with a very important parent meeting. This year the meeting will take place on May 7th at 7 p.m., in the multi-purpose room at Holten-Richmond. This meeting provides parents with an opportunity to learn about the Middle School in more detail. Items discussed include the "team" approach, the sixth-grade curriculum, exploratory courses, extra-curricular offerings, PowerSchool grade reporting, and the daily schedule. Parents in attendance will have an opportunity to ask questions and speak with school administrators.

The transition to middle school is both an exciting and stressful time for students and parents. The goal of our transition program is to provide students with a variety of opportunities that are welcoming and supportive. As students move through their middle school years, they rely on the support of parents, teachers, and friends. Working together, we can better understand students' social and emotional needs so that they can respond with extra effort to the academic challenges they face.