



Examples of 8th Grade Family Engagement Activities for the Transition to High School

Sharing Information at Events

8th Grade Family Gathering with Panel of Family Members Whose Students Transitioned to HS Last Year

One K8 school planned a family event in early spring that included a panel of family members whose students had attended 8th grade there and made the transition to high school. These family members shared their experience and were available to answer questions from current 8th grade family members.

8th Grade Family Gathering prior to registration for 9th grade courses in spring

Middle schools have held spring events for 8th grade families the evening before 9th grade course registration to help inform families about the course selection process and address their questions. Counselors from the high schools were in attendance to make short presentations and answer questions, and 8th grade families were able to visit their receiving high school and hear a presentation from its principal.

8th Grade Graduation including specific information and advice for families about how to support student success in high school

For middle schools and K8 schools that are able to host graduation events, this is probably the best opportunity to reach the most family members at once. Brief presentations focused on how to encourage success in high school could be included in the program, and helpful information could be available for family members to pick up.

Information-Sharing Activities that Do Not Require an Event

Sharing information with 8th Grade Families on School APP or Website

The Aki Kurose school APP can be downloaded from the Apple APP store and provides examples of how a school is using the APP to communicate important information with families.

Interactive activities for students to complete with a family member at home, focused on the high school transition

A set of four short activity sheets focused on the transition to high school is included under "Resources to Share with Families."



Examples of 9th Grade Family Engagement Activities for the Transition to High School

Sharing Information at Events

Partnering with feeder middle school in an 8th Grade Family Gathering prior to registration for 9th grade courses in spring -- Hold events for 8th grade families the evening before 9th grade course registration to help inform families about the course selection process and address their questions. (Including student performances or display of student work/projects can make these events more celebratory and draw higher attendance.) Counselors from the high schools should be in attendance to make short presentations and answer questions, and 8th grade families can visit the nearby high school to hear a presentation from its principal.

Spring welcome dinner for incoming 9th grade families -- Many high schools have a tradition of welcoming incoming 9th grade families with a special dinner (barbecue or other theme) in May or June. There are several ways that schools could see continuous improvement in these events: making special personal invitations to families who typically are under-represented in attendance, expanding translation services, including specific short presentations about how families can support student success, sharing written information (in multiple languages) about how families can support their students or giving specific important facts families need to know.

Fall welcome event for incoming 9th grade families -- Families who miss the spring event could benefit from another opportunity to experience the communication opportunities described above. Varying the times of events can ensure that more families have the opportunity to attend. Helping families learn how to navigate The Source/Schoology could be an important component of this event.

Fall meeting for families after first quarter progress report/report cards -- Providing opportunities for families to understand how 9th grade students can improve their achievement after the first report card can be important for improving rates of student success. Combining this event with another school event could help increase attendance.

Information-Sharing Activities that Do Not Require an Event

Sharing information with Rising 9th Grade Families on School APP or Website -- The Garfield HS APP can be downloaded from the APP store and provides examples of how a school is using the APP to communicate important information with families. Several high schools have lots of helpful information for families that is easy to find on the website. Short videos (possibly even made by high school students themselves) posted on a website or APP can be a helpful avenue to share ways that families can support student success.

Recorded telephone messages through School Messenger about the importance of attendance, the dates of progress report distribution, etc. could be very useful.



SAMPLER

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

**Moving to the next school—new experiences in sight!
School and family partnerships will help make it right.**

Making a smooth transition is a challenge that students meet at every school level. They wonder: Will I be prepared? Make new friends? Be happy?

Working with educators, parents can help ease students' transitions from home to pre-k, pre-k to kindergarten, elementary to middle, middle to high, and high school to post-secondary programs. Community partners also may provide guidance and resources to help students and families move successfully from school to school.

Changing schools is both frightening and exciting. Leaving a familiar, comfortable school to go to the next—often larger—school may create anxiety for even the most confident students. At the same time, progressing to the next level may bolster children's self-esteem—making them feel more “grown up” at each stage of schooling. When well-planned partnership practices for transitions are in place, the “feeder” and “receiver” schools can help alleviate students' and parents' concerns.

Parents should be invited to learn about the new school their child will attend *before* the transition takes place. They may attend welcoming activities at the new site, meet teachers and administrators, and learn about the curriculum, programs, and services. These simple activities, when well-planned and conveniently-scheduled, reduce parents' and students' worries about changing schools. Siblings and friends who attended the new school also may provide useful information and good guidance about the people and programs that await the incoming students and parents.

In addition to major transitions to new schools, all students make annual transitions to the next grade level and new teachers. Some make unexpected transitions if the family moves to a new community. Good partnership programs welcome all families at the start of each school year and newcomers at any time.

Transition activities should aim to maximize students' positive adjustment to the new school. This not only helps the student set a positive course for learning, it also helps teachers focus on instruction, rather than on students' distressed or distracted behaviors. Thus, it is worth working on transition activities to support students, parents, and teachers.

The activities in this *Sampler* were reported as promising partnership practices by schools that have worked with NNPS across the years. They illustrate how the six types of involvement may be used to enable parents to take different roles in transitions across the grades. The activities include readiness for kindergarten, a get-together picnic before school starts, orientations to middle and high schools, strengthening academic skills for high school, choosing high school courses, and other activities to welcome students and parents.

Improve Classroom Teaching

The sample activities were conducted by schools' Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) and engaged many teachers, students, parents, and administrators working together to improve students' transitions at all school levels. Individual teachers and grade-level teams (particularly at key transition points) may adopt, adapt, and improve the activities to meet the needs of their students and families. For example, sixth grade teachers could plan a pre-session for new students and families prior to a general Back to School Night. At any transition point, teachers could adapt the Parent-to-Parent Night where a panel of parents whose children made the transition last year talk with the parents of children who are about to transition to the next school level.

The ten examples in this *Sampler*, arranged alphabetically, are a few of many excellent activities in NNPS collections of *Promising Partnership Practices*. Visit www.partnershipschools.org and click on Success Stories for more ideas.

Marsha D. Greenfeld, Joyce L. Epstein, and Steven B. Sheldon. © Baltimore: National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 2013. **Amended for middle and high schools, Seattle Public Schools, 2016.**

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Review of Research: Family and Community Involvement to Improve Student Transitions

Joyce L. Epstein and Frances L. Van Voorhis

When students move to the next school level, families make the transition with them. Parents need to know that their child's new school welcomes them as partners in their children's education—starting with the transition process. Then, parents and school personnel can work together to support students' successful adjustment to and achievement in a new school. Educators' activities to prepare students and parents for any transition include *individual* and *group* communications, school visits by parents and students, home visits by teachers, and exchanges of information among partners conducted *prior to the transition, at the time of transition; and throughout the transition year.*

Effects of Transition Activities Across the Grades

Early Grades. Studies confirm that transition activities are important when children enter preschool and when they move to kindergarten. Studies show that, with background variables accounted for, kindergarteners had higher achievement if their schools implemented family involvement activities, compared to similar students in other schools (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Schulting, Malone, and Dodge, 2005). At the preschool level, parents had concerns about how to help their children follow directions, get along with peers, relate to teachers, and how they—as parents—could remain involved in the new school (McIntyre, et al, 2007).

A major study of over 16,000 children in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten (ECLS-K) sample revealed that the number of school-based transition practices conducted in the fall of kindergarten was associated with children's more positive academic achievement scores at the end of the year, after controlling for background and demographic variables. Effects were stronger for children from families with low and middle incomes (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005) and for children who visited the kindergarten classroom with a parent *before* they officially entered the school.

A study of over 3500 kindergarten teachers found that those who had some professional development about the transition process conducted more and different transition activities with parents compared to teachers who had no preparation on the transition process (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001).


Older Grades. Students made more successful transitions into middle and high school if their parents talked with them about schoolwork and helped them navigate the growing expectations and new experiences at each school level. A study of over 17,000 eighth graders in the NELS:88 data set revealed that, with background variables controlled, teens transitioned to high school at higher math levels when parents and middle and high school educators communicated with each other in two-way and three-way exchanges of information about high school (Crosnoe, 2009). In "triangulated" communications, parents and students learned about course options from high school personnel, and high school personnel learned about the strengths and needs of incoming students from parents and middle school educators. These connections helped teachers place students in math and science courses that matched their skill levels and resulted in less "slippage" in learning due to incorrect course placements. This was important for all students, but particularly important for ELL students and those from families with low incomes.

Another study using the (NELS:88) data reported that, in general, middle and high schools' emphases on parental involvement significantly increased students' math skills across the transition point and through high school (Holt & Campbell, 2004). Other studies, too, confirmed that middle grades students made smoother transitions and adjustments to high school and achievement in high school if their parents were positively engaged with the school and with the students (see a full review and references in Smith, 2006).

All Transitions. Based on research to date, educators may conclude:

- At all major transition points, communications of parents and educators in feeder and receiver schools help more students adjust to and achieve in their new school.
- Teachers need in-service education and on-going technical assistance to improve the design and implementation of practices that effectively engage parents and students in the transition process.

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BACK TO SCHOOL BASH

GREENBRIER WEST HIGH SCHOOL CHARMCO, WEST VIRGINIA

At Greenbrier West High School, the students came up with the idea to welcome incoming freshman with a Back to School Bash. Having made the difficult transition into high school themselves, Greenbrier West's students knew how important it was for incoming students to start the year on the right foot.

The night before school started, 189 parents, 154 students, 16 teachers, and 22 community members gathered together to pave a smooth path to high school. Staff members served parents and the new freshman hot dogs, chips, and drinks. Administrators welcomed all participants in the school gym and presented information on pertinent school policies. After this formal gathering, cheerleaders enthusiastically took groups of families on a tour of the building so that the students would feel comfortable finding their classes the next day.

The Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) created packets for participants, including students' schedules, county and school policies, and other important information that would help the adolescents and their parents join school functions and become active in decision making.

In the past, Greenbrier West's ATP struggled to get parents involved in school activities. Abundant publicity helped to encourage families and freshmen to attend. Local newspapers and radio stations announced the bash; parents received voice messages from the school's automated phone system; and County School Board members received personalized invitations in the mail.

The ATP reached out to school staff, parents, and community partners to help make Back to School Bash a success. Volunteer parents and staff made and served dinner, which was donated by a school partner—Rainelle Medical Center. One teacher made coleslaw and another cooked chili. Area businesses contributed ice and cups,

and the cafeteria staff helped set up for dinner and made tea. Communities in Schools (CIS) staff provided nutritional information to include in packets.

Students played an important role in developing this event. A group of high school students was chosen at random for an advisory discussion about ways to improve the school and student achievement. They compiled a list of activities that might help. The newly formed Academic Achievement Association used the students' suggestions to plan several events—including the Back to School Bash—for the new school year.

The ATP's goal of involving community members paid off. The Back to School Bash served as a jumping off point to recruit new Partners in Education. As a result, nine new partners joined the Local School Improvement Council (LSIC).

Several parents, students, and community members reported how nice it was to have an activity right before school started so that everyone began on the right foot. The principal praised all planners and participants for helping freshmen make a smooth transition to the school.

The ATP and its many partners plan to continue this practice, but will add more fun activities for the students. They also intend to highlight more Partners in Education and encourage even stronger school-community ties.



Crossing the Bridge

*Hamilton County Family and Children First Council
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Ninth grade is pivotal. Much of what happens throughout high school is influenced by the start students get academically, socially, and emotionally. To put students at Aiken High School in Cincinnati on a sound footing, the Hamilton County Family and Children First Council sponsors Crossing the Bridge, a two-week transition program.

In half-day sessions during the two weeks before school officially begins, the incoming ninth graders spend time on academics, learn study skills, get acquainted with school procedures, find their way around the building, and tackle social skills, such as conflict management, healthy relationships, and decision making.

“Our Crossing the Bridge program is a comprehensive program designed to provide students and parents with opportunities to assist with the improvement of student outcomes,” said the council coordinator who works with Aiken High.

Parents are included, too. During the second week of the Summer Bridge, parents and guardians are invited to a family dinner and orientation. Parents tour the building, meet teachers, and learn about extracurricular activities and facts of high school life, such as grade point averages and what it takes to get credit for courses.

The Bridge program does not end when school starts, either. Ninth graders who would like to have a “big brother” or “big sister” are paired with older students, and all ninth graders continue to meet throughout the school year for team-building classes. Social service providers teach these sessions, focusing on social skills, conflict management, goal setting, and violence prevention.

The goals of the Bridge program are lofty:

- Increase student achievement and decrease the drop-out rate
- Increase parental involvement in high school
- Increase social skills and enhance positive behavior of students

To meet these goals, Crossing the Bridge enlists the whole community, drawing on resources from colleges, private industry, and social service agencies. The Council serves as a catalyst and coordinator of services in this and other projects in Cincinnati area schools.

At Aiken High School, a Council coordinator and the principal planned the Bridge program to reduce the large number of students who regularly repeat ninth grade, and to reduce the dropout rate. Aiken teachers and area social services providers planned the curricula; engineers from General Electric and engineering students from Ohio State University developed hands-on science projects and worked with students; the vice provost of The University of Cincinnati lectured and demonstrated the study of bones in solving crimes, and local students worked as junior staff members and served as big brothers and sisters. Several of these partners helped the school pick up the \$14,000 cost of the program. About 180 students and 260 parents and guardians took part, along with more than 30 community members and 15 school staff members.

The biggest challenge is convincing students and their parents of the importance of beginning school two weeks early — even for half days. The school met this challenge by enlisting students from the upper grades to call incoming ninth graders to talk about the program. This direct phone contact was a big success.

Some parents did not have to be convinced: “This program is the main reason we selected this school for our son.” Even students who may have been reluctant to attend saw the value of the program. “I’m glad I came in the summer because, then, I already knew a lot of stuff when the school year began,” said one student. “I like this anger management stuff. I used it at home ... and I get along better now with my mom,” commented another.



Navigating the Course Selection Process

*Naperville Central High School
Naperville, Illinois*

Selecting courses, resolving schedule conflicts, handling the stress of academics, and making time for extracurricular activities were all topics addressed in “Navigating the Course Selection Process,” a presentation for students and parents at Naperville Central High School. The School Family Community Partnership (SFCP) team established the program in response to surveyed parents’ requests for a better understanding of what courses students choose and how they make those selections.

“We are a comprehensive, high academic high school with 97 percent of our graduates going on to secondary education. It is important for students to select the courses that fit their ability and extracurricular plans,” said one of the SFCP team members. The SFCP also hoped to spark discussions between parents and students and between parents and the panel members.

Among the questions addressed were:

- What is a regular college preparatory curriculum?
- What are Advanced Placement (AP) courses?
- What electives should students take?
- What courses are best for students considering the military?
- How can students handle the stress of high school?

The presentation took place at two Parent Huddles, small-group events the school uses to get parents together with an expert or experts on a particular topic. There was a morning

get-together in the school district office and an evening gathering at the school. The panels consisted of students, teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and community members.

At first, both eighth-grade and high school students and parents were invited to the huddles. Later, eighth-grade families had their own session, and nearly 350 parents and students attended.

In addition to fostering better communication, the program prompted students to think about the courses they would need and want over all four years, not just freshman year.

Parents reacted positively to the program, seeming to gain a better understanding of the scheduling and course selection processes. “I always learn something new at every event I attend. Thanks,” commented one parent.