

Pivot point: Elementary to middle school is giant leap for students

By AMY RITCHART

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Millions of children each year make the transition from elementary school to a fantastic new environment - middle school.

"There's a level of energy at middle schools that, to the casual observer, might seem frenetic and out-of-control," says psychologist Ted Feinberg, assistant executive director for the National Association of School Psychologists. "They're in search of who they are. The net result is that you have some wild-and-crazy days in middle schools."

Both students and parents, however, have concerns about those future wild-and-crazy days.

Anxiety about the unknown

Kim Vollmer's daughter Dakota, 11, will attend sixth grade at Kenwood Middle School in Clarksville, Tenn., this year and Mom has concerns about the upcoming transition.

Although Dakota likes school and wants to study to be a veterinarian, she is anxious about changing classes.

"I'm nervous because I'm scared I'll be late for class and I'll get in trouble," she says. "When you open your locker, it's sort of hard because you have to get it on the exact number."



Dakota Vollmer, 10, and her mother Kim Vollmer pick out school supplies at Target in Clarksville, Tenn. Dakota will start the sixth grade this fall. (Greg Williamson | The Clarksville, Tenn., Leaf-Chronicle)

Begin early to prepare child for middle school

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- Help your children develop an organization system. Try helping them organize a different color folder for each subject and an assignment book.

- Emphasize personal responsibility. Most middle school students are responsible for their lunch accounts and money and for remembering to carry the proper supplies to each class and for physical education and band. In many schools, use of phones is not allowed so if the student has left his or her gym clothes at home, they must sit out the class.

- Have a calendar at home where your student can mark down their activities. Middle school students will have

She also worries about being on the bottom rung of the age ladder.

"Now I'm the older kid of my school," she says. "But now, I'm going to be the little small kid."

Vollmer says her older daughter, Amy, already a student at Kenwood Middle, felt more comfortable with the middle school format because she changed classes during her fifth-grade year at an elementary school serving only fourth and fifth grades. The school allowed fifth-graders to change classes in order to prepare for middle school.

Despite her apprehensions, Dakota is also excited - especially about increasing her social circle.

"I'm looking forward to changing classes instead of staying in one classroom and to meeting new people," she says.

The very thing that excites Dakota causes her mother concern. Vollmer says she's worried about how her daughter will handle potential peer pressure from older children.

She also worries about her daughter's exposure to drugs and teen pregnancy.

"I just hope talking to them about this discourages them," she says. "They're getting their independence. You can't restrict them to be in your house and you can't be with them all the time. You have to know when it's time to be with them and when it's time to walk away a little."

Rosalyn Evans, director of secondary education for the Clarksville-Montgomery (Tenn.) County Schools, says during the first week of classes, students can practice getting their schedule down.

The students' worries about unlikely events is just as serious as the worry about likely events, Feinberg says.

"There's an adjustment that takes place relative to the routines and the size of the physical plant. They're encountering kids that are strangers to them," he says. "Kids hear there are going to be gangs, bullies - all

a variety of club meetings, after-school program opportunities and social engagements like dances.

- Encourage an appropriate homework schedule and set aside time each night to read and write.

- For those students who miss a spring or summer middle school transitional program, register as soon as possible at the school, request a tour, and check both the school system and middle school Web sites. Some school systems have a video or DVD addressing the transition.

Source: Janet Rice, middle school teacher of 26 years and assistant principal at Northeast Middle School, Clarksville, Tenn.



Between Aug. 2 and Aug. 13, current and former members of USA TODAY's All-USA Teacher Team answered back-to-school questions for parents. You can read the experts' answers by clicking the link below.

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kinds of terrible things to encounter. For some kids that kind of folklore is very difficult and intimidating."

Innovative program eases way

Brenda Hunter, principal at Lucas Elementary School at Fort Campbell, Ky., says fifth-grade teachers are preparing children throughout the year for middle school in an attempt to alleviate any unfounded fear of the larger school.

A middle school teacher for 14 years, her fifth-grade students rotate classes. This helps them become comfortable with the middle school format, Hunter says.

"The kids love it," she says. "They don't have lockers, but they do move around during the day."

Teachers also spend a good amount of time discussing the transition with parents, she says.

"Some schools have parents sit in the (middle school) classes," she says. "They come and follow a schedule and spend 15 to 20 minutes in the class just to get a feel - which is fun."

She says the biggest challenges for new middle-schoolers involve changing classes, having lockers, making new friends and following a stricter dress code.

"There's the peer pressure of how you're dressing," Hunter says. And, "Can I get to class on time?"

Janet Rice, middle school assistant principal at Northeast Middle School and a 26-year veteran middle school teacher, is one of the founding teachers of Clarksville-Montgomery County's Jumpstart program - an orientation program designed to make the transition between elementary and middle schools easier for students and parents.

Students attend the program in between fifth and sixth grades. Parents also attend orientation sessions.

Each student receives their schedule, a supply list, the homework policy and the dress code; tours the school;

fills out registration paperwork; and learns how to open a locker.

"That's a big thing - to get that locker open," Rice says.

The whole idea, Rice says, is to show students the difference between elementary and middle school and to allow the students to see those at the middle school as real people.

"We do a scavenger hunt where they have to go find all these places," she says. "We group them together so they learn to meet new people on their team."

Rice says the biggest change for students is the increased demand for organization skills.

Hunter says fifth-graders attending Fort Campbell schools visit the middle schools and follow a schedule.

"They love to go to the middle school," she says. "They feel big."

Rice says even students who miss the springtime transitional programs can use summertime to get ready for the new year by registering at the school as early as possible, requesting a tour, and practicing with a combination lock to assuage fears about having a locker.

Mom Brenda Tripp says the parent's key to making middle school successful for a child is staying involved.

"One of the unfortunate things is, parents kind of view the middle school time as letting go," says Tripp, who is president of the Northeast Middle School Parent-Student-Teacher Organization. "You don't check their backpack every day. Communication can be a problem."

Tripp suggests monitoring what children bring home from school and checking the school's Web site and marquees for upcoming events.

"The main thing is extra responsibility - more on the student," she says. "Parents, they have to be aware of

that. A lot of times children don't talk about what's going on at school.

"Ask them questions that are more than yes-or-no questions."

Feinberg adds that for all of the preparation and worry - about both realistic and forecasted middle school encounters - students tend to move swiftly into their new lifestyle.

"By and large, they get through the transition fairly quickly," he says.