

Smooth Sailing to Middle School

Action, articulation, and activities provide a framework for the transition to middle school.

By: Joy Jameson Lea



Fear of the unknown—or fear based on a false belief—is one barrier fifth graders and their parents face as they make the transition to middle school. When this barrier is removed, students can embrace the new adventure and be successful.

Ask iPhone Siri what articulation is and she'll tell you it's "the shape or manner in which things come together and a connection is made." My articulation planning started about a decade ago

when I was principal at James Cashman Middle School in Las Vegas, Nevada. Mrs. Webb, the principal of one of the feeder elementary schools, and I arranged for me to visit with her fifth graders in the spring to prepare them for middle school.

Since then, my articulation plan for feeder elementary school students has evolved to address the expectations and fears of students and parents, to build support and cohesion across the vertical alignment schools, to promote articulation between school leaders and teachers, and to promote student academic achievement.

School Articulation Visits

As principal at Saville Middle School in Las Vegas, I invited the four elementary alignment feeder school principals to my school in early August for a principals' planning session where we discussed our schools' data (demographic, discipline/attendance, academic growth, and master calendars), identified strengths and weaknesses, set goals, and formulated a plan for the successful transition of their fifth graders into Saville Middle School.

We recognized time as an important commodity for all educators and scheduled school visits and mutual activities so they were not overly disruptive to the fifth grade instructional time. We established a timeline for mutual activities, site visits, and teacher trainings, and set our plan in motion.

In October, I paid my first visit to the feeder schools to begin bonding with the students and teachers. The elementary school principals introduced me to each fifth grade classroom. I was careful to limit each visit to nine minutes per classroom. I strengthened our connection by asking such questions as, "Who has a sibling or friend at my school?" I presented the simple rules that would help the fifth graders prepare for middle school: 1) Come to school every day. 2) Complete all your work. 3) Follow all the rules.

Of course the students had many questions, but in order to stay within my nine minutes per classroom, I asked the teacher to collect and email me the student questions ahead of time. I reviewed them, combined and categorized them, and addressed them in a PowerPoint presentation.

During my January visit to each elementary school, I reviewed my PowerPoint from October with the fifth grade as a whole. With the help of a sixth grade student leader, I was able to answer more students' questions within this 30-minute assembly and I reminded the students that I would be

back.

In early spring, a middle school counselor and student leaders from student council and National Junior Honor Society, and students from the performing/visual arts classes traveled to each elementary school to generate some excitement for student involvement in cocurricular activities. The counselor also distributed class registration packets and explained course selections.

I followed up this visit with a fifth grade parent night at my school so parents and fifth graders could turn in registration packets and meet me. I did a brief presentation about my philosophy, expectations, and the school, and answered questions. I was no stranger to the students and they were confident in introducing their parents to me.

During my final visit of the school year in June, I reviewed rules and expectations and promoted our self-funded summer academy for rising sixth graders, which is held in August. The academy brings together students from different schools to meet new friends, meet teachers, and engage in team-building and problem-solving activities.

Shared Activities

Our transition timeline included joint school activities such as the middle school Fall Festival to which the fifth graders and their families were invited to interact with teachers and explore the cafeteria, gym, and playground. In addition:

- Our middle school student leaders volunteered to help during the elementary school Halloween Carnivals.
- In December, we hosted a Junior Cheer Camp for the elementary students in grades 1–5. The minimal registration fee covered three hours of training, as cheerleaders led stretching exercises, taught a cheer, and prepared for the first home basketball game performance. The fee also included a special t-shirt, pom-poms, snacks, and a family pass to the first basketball game.
- Prior to the winter break holiday, I visited fifth grade holiday programs or stopped by to greet the students and remind them to keep working on the three rules.
- In April we hosted the fifth grade classes and their parents as they toured our school facilities, watched classes in session, learned the layout of the school, and ate lunch in the classroom (prior to the middle school lunches).

Teacher Collaboration

While at Cashman Middle School, I developed the 5 Alive and 3 To Be teacher dialogue tool. This vertical and horizontal strategy prompted discussions among educators as they worked to ensure the fifth grade “5 Alive” was congruent with the sixth grade “3 To Be.”

The collaboration process began with each teacher at each elementary school listing five priorities by subject (math, English Language Arts, and science) for student mastery prior to the end of the school year. The middle school teachers listed three priorities by subject that they wished the students knew prior to entering their class. The teachers at each grade level at each school were charged with reaching consensus about each grade level’s 5 Alive or 3 To Be.

At the principals’ planning meeting in August, the fifth grade and sixth grade teachers compared and discussed their schools’ 5 Alive and 3 To Be. The fifth grade teachers and the sixth grade teachers were required to ensure that the five promised priorities by the fifth grade teacher agreed with the three priorities of the sixth grade teachers. The discussions and revisions promoted a smoother transition between elementary and middle school curriculum and academic focus.

Open the Door

When activities, energy, and curriculum align horizontally and vertically, great things happen. Students' fears melt away, teachers collaborate, and parents transfer their involvement from the elementary school to the middle school.

I liken it to sailing. You can't change the wind, but you can adjust your sails to reach your destination. Change the way you prepare students for what lies ahead and watch them grow.

*Joy Jameson Lea is principal at Somerset Academy NLV in North Las Vegas, Nevada.
joyjlea@gmail.com*

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