

# Students Offer Tips to Ease Leap Into High School

by Don Jackson and Gerry Kosanovic

**Help** me! I'm experiencing fear, anticipation, confusion, wonder, self-doubt, anxiety, and excitement. What am I facing? Marriage? A trip to the hospital? Relocation and a new job? Perhaps, because these are situations that everyone may confront in their lifetime.

However, these themes belong to a particular group of teenagers who face the move from middle school or junior high to the high school.

The eighth- or ninth-grader making this big transition imagines all sorts of things about life at the high school—some based on fact, some on folklore, most on pure horror—fears such as not fitting in, difficult and cold teachers, too much homework, being laughed at by those in the upper classes, hazing practices, or, one of our favorites, being forced to eat dissected frog entrails from biology class.

While these fears and the feelings that accompany them cannot be totally eliminated, those stakeholders able to assist the student—parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members who come in contact with the student—all have an opportunity to provide relief and soften the pain. So, too, does the individual student play an important role toward ensuring his or her own well-being.

What can be done and how can others help the middle school student in transition? To help answer this question, we surveyed the 458 members of the freshman class at South Eugene High School in 1992. We axed them (pun intended) to suggest ways in which the middle-to-high school transition could be improved, thus providing a better experience for those who follow in their footsteps.

The responses of the ninth-grade students were both candid and instructive, reflecting insight, sensitivity to the issue, and a genuine willingness to help. The many written comments and suggestions we received fall into four distinct areas, each identifying a particular perceived gap in the transition process.

The first area involves ease of scheduling classes and alleviating complications with the high school bureaucracy. A total of nine percent of the respondents indicated that the transition would be easier if the high school officials would simply take the bumps out of the road, thereby making the process more responsive and friendly. A typical response in this area stated: "There are a lot (sic) of people doing a lot of things, but I need just one person to help only me."

The second area of concern has to do with preparation for high school. Approximately twenty-one percent of the respondents stated that the middle school should do a better job of preparing students for the rigors of high school. A common response focused on homework: "Tell students to expect more tests and homework," and "Prepare students for the higher expectations." Another student suggested: "It's a shock to see so much work after having it so easy."

The third area focuses on the perceived need, by the student, for clear and precise information during the transition process. Twenty-four percent of the respondents stated that the schools

needed to do a better job in communicating with the students. Comments such as: “Tell them where everything is,” and “Explain what is going on and when it’s going to happen” were common responses.

The fourth and final area is one that also elicited the most written comments. Almost half, or forty-six percent of the respondents, stated that the transition could be made better by simply having the student visit the school before the beginning of the new school year. Moreover, the majority of ninth-graders with an opinion in this area stated that a high school visit could occur at any time during their middle school years. One student summed up the feelings of others by stating: “It’s not so scary if I get to see it and spend time experiencing it first.”

As we examine the comments of the students, we are reminded that you don’t fool old dogs or kids, so listen to what they say.

Teachers and administrators have a primary responsibility to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. All staff at the senior institution must be willing to share everything they know, repeatedly.

Staff at the sending institution must be willing to listen to the students and provide reassurance without adding personal bias or concern. Plant positive seeds of encouragement and forget the negative war stories.

Parents, take your middle school student to the high school for a visit. Keep in mind that the public schools belong to you, and the most important thing you’ll ever own is going to be using them. They’ll either be served and build upon their successes at home, or they will be disillusioned, frightened, and you’ll be the last one they turn to for help.

We recommend that you attend school while it is in session. Or, if your high school has a “Swap Day” or similar arrangement, where the normal school day is replicated in its entirety for the benefit of the parents, attend and bring your child.

Finally, to the eighth-grade student: continue to ask questions. Seek assistance and help from your teachers, your counselors, your principal—and friends who are already in high school.

Each student making a transition is different, possessing unique needs while still reflecting the common concerns of the group. The stress of the transition from middle or junior high school to the high school cannot be eliminated, and rumors of hazing will most likely continue, but with everyone involved helping to communicate, illuminate, and educate, the results will be a positive experience for all.

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