OBTAINING STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE THE MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION

RHONDA N. T. NESE, MARIA REINA SANTIAGO-ROSARIO, DANIELLE TRIPLETT, & SEAN C. AUSTIN

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Introduction

In this practice brief, we explore feedback from a group of eighth- and ninth-grade students, families, and educators on what has been challenging, what has been missing, and what is needed during the transition from middle to high school for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. We also discuss the process for gathering stakeholder feedback and some feasible next steps for schools and districts who are interested in utilizing such valuable input for improving their systems of support. This document accompanies the practice brief titled *Promising Practices for Improving the Middle to High School Transition for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders.*

Authors

Rhonda N. T. Nese
Maria Reina Santiago-Rosario
Danielle Triplett
Sean C. Austin
Key Takeaways

- Using stakeholder input can enhance community relations and make school practices more effectual.

- Preparation for gaining input is key: a) design the survey to elicit answers that can directly inform team decisions and b) plan for how to ensure all voices are included.

- Make stakeholder feedback known by expressing gratitude and communicate back findings and what changes resulted from their input.

Within our school communities, the most crucial stakeholders we serve are students, families, and educators. Thus, when we set out to create and implement socially relevant interventions, their voices, experiences, and opinions are what matters most. Community-based participatory research is one approach that emphasizes engagement and partnership with community stakeholders during the development of behavioral and social interventions (Ayala & Elder, 2011), and practices such as interviews and focus groups to help build trust between researchers and the individuals they set out to serve (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Over time the process of engaging in action research can be described as a spiral of self-reflective cycle in which stakeholders plan for a change, act, and observe the process planned and the consequence of the change, reflect upon that process and consequences before re-planning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on (Kemmis et al., 2014). These strategies can help close the research to practice gap and ensure that interventions are contextually appropriate, implemented with high fidelity, and more likely to produce equitable outcomes. In our efforts to gain stakeholder feedback on the middle to high school transition for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), a number of individuals provided overwhelming support for the opportunity to partner with us and share their experiences, with one ninth grade educator stating, “I really appreciate you guys trying to help these eighth/ninth graders in their transition to high school,” and an eighth-grade educator commenting, “Thank you for asking! I think this is an important thing to talk about - and I believe that the gaps between middle and high school are widening, just as they are between high school and college.”

The purpose of this brief is to describe steps to a planning process taken by a school district and sharing the experiences of eighth- and ninth-grade students, families, and educators about what has been challenging, what has been missing, and what is needed during the transition from middle to high school. Their feedback laid the foundation for
the six intervention components identified in the supplemental practice brief titled *Promising Practices for Improving the Middle to High School Transition for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders* and informed a school district proposal to take actions to support their community responsively (Nese, Triplett, Santiago-Rosario, & Austin, 2021). Although the focus of these briefs is on supporting students with more individualized needs during this critical transition period, the feedback provided by stakeholders lends themselves to a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework and identify the need for layering supports for all students, starting with whole-school prevention.

To gather stakeholder feedback on one district’s efforts to support the eighth- to ninth-grade transition, we began exploring what was in place and what was missing regarding transition supports for students with EBD. Initially, the team planned to conduct in person focus groups with students, families, and educators. Due to COVID-19 school closures, we adapted and collected input via online surveys and considerations were made to ensure accessibility. Our team provided verbal prompts for each survey question so participants could choose to read the survey items or listen to them and respond. The following steps are recommended for schools and districts to follow in gathering stakeholder input.

**Considerations for Getting Stakeholder Input through Surveys**

Although there are multiple ways of gathering stakeholder input (e.g., group interviews, town halls), providing surveys online is an incredibly efficient way to reach a large audience and allows people to participate over a period of time on their own schedule. Below are some best practices to keep in mind regarding administering surveys. These guidelines can also apply to other formats that may be used to obtain stakeholder feedback, such as town halls, focus groups, or interviews. The following recommendations for preparation, data collection and communication can be considered and modified to apply to all forms of feedback gathering.

**Preparation**

- **Start with the end in mind.** Design the survey to elicit answers that can directly inform team decisions. Often surveys become lengthy and attempt to cover too much; to gain input on a particular topic, keep the survey laser focused. See the figure for some example questions we asked stakeholders to better understand the supports needed in the transition to high school.

- **Maintain participants’ confidentiality and emphasize that participation is voluntary.** Ensuring that people can participate confidentially can increase participation from stakeholders and increase the likelihood they open up and provide honest answers. Voluntary participation applies to the whole survey, but also allows participants to skip questions if preferred.
• Make the survey accessible to as many people as possible. Use multiple means to present survey questions. Consider recording survey questions read aloud in addition to having them in text. Give an estimated time for completion and include a progress bar.

• Be intentional about reaching underserved communities. Consider ways to include and encourage feedback from under-represented or underserved populations (e.g., incentivize participation, phone interviews instead of in-person). In addition, consider who may be best for delivering invitations for feedback, as relationships can be important in gaining earnest feedback (or sometimes, any feedback at all). Translate the survey into the most common home languages spoken by stakeholders in the community.

Data Collection

• Disseminate the survey, and then send reminders. Many stakeholders are going to have multiple competing obligations, and even those who intended to complete the survey promptly may lose track of it. Sending gentle reminders can support both survey completion and send a message that their feedback is still wanted.

• Follow up using a different communication method. Not everyone keeps the same communication lines open. Reach out in multiple ways to ensure all voices are captured.

Communication and Feedback Loop

• Communicate to participants how their input will be used. Make sure that stakeholders know that time was not wasted in providing feedback. Follow up about the value of the information shared, and a summary of what was learned.

• Extend an invitation to collaborate on an action plan. Reach out to a smaller number of stakeholders who are representative of the community and may be interested in teaming with staff to formalize an action plan.

• Communicate back to the larger community how the information has been and will be used. Being explicit about new commitments and actions taken based on the feedback received through this outreach, as well as any additional planning to take place and the responsibilities the committed team will be taking in preparation of enacting the plan.

What We Heard from Students and Families

When asked to identify helpful supports currently provided, respondents spoke to information sharing focused on the physical layout of the high school setting and logistical aspects underlying high school procedures (e.g., first day orientation, welcome video), as well as individualized supports received as part of their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Many students emphasized the explicit teaching and learning opportunities provided by their teachers. One said, “Some of the teacher[s] showed us what it would be like in the high school. They also show[ed] some of the ways they [high school teachers] taught lessons [...] and they also taught us what to expect with homework.” Ninth graders commonly identified handling the amount and rigor of academic work, making friends, and navigating the high school building as the most common challenges. One ninth grader wrote, “I wish that there was one person that checked in with me so that I had one person to go to with questions.” Parents mentioned similar efforts but emphasized communication with teachers.
What We Heard from Educators

One of the most common elements educators expressed as valuable for fostering a smooth transition from eighth to ninth grade were visits and tours of the high school in eighth grade. One said, “There’s an accompanying parent night where they choose their classes with their parents for their ninth-grade year.” These events are typically held in spring to allow students and parents time to prepare for this transition over a few months. The educators also expressed the value of the first day of school, where ninth graders attend without other grades for one day. This day includes structured activities to help students get to know their schedules, the physical layout, and other logistics. Some upperclassmen also attend to offer help and guidance to ninth graders that day. While responses were largely positive and expressed several school-wide supports for students in this transition, the surveys also confirmed the need for specialized supports offered to students with intense needs transitioning to ninth grade. For instance, an educator shared, “Transition to HS for students with significant behavioral issues are a big concern for MS sped [middle school special education] teachers and historically have not fared well in terms of graduation.”

Educators highlighted the need to explicitly teach students executive functioning skills (e.g., organizational, breaking down work), self-advocacy, and communication skills. “We [educators] need to figure out how to get them [students] self-reliant.” Additionally, educators suggested pairing this group of students with one person (e.g., upperclassman, teacher, case manager) that “takes them under their wing” throughout the year possibly through weekly check-ins. “We [educators] must show these students that we want them to succeed and will spend the time with them to make it happen.”
**Summary**

What we know from research and stakeholder feedback is that supports are needed to disrupt the negative trajectory for students with EBD who seldom receive coordinated, individualized supports during the critical transition from middle school to high school. Specifically, stakeholders highlighted the need for components related to high school transition planning, mental health and mentorship support, and student-led goal setting. They also emphasized that transition planning for students with EBD should include coordination between the middle and high school staff as well as the students and their caregivers to ensure that individualized needs are targeted and that comprehensive supports are provided before, during, and after the transition to ninth grade. What stakeholders also made clear is that supports delivered within an MTSS framework, whereby all students receive preventative guidance during this critical transition and then students in need of more support receive further individualized interventions, is what will lead to a more successful and equitable system of supports for all learners.
Student Questions

Think back to the months before school went online. What supports were in place that you hope will continue when you get to high school? For example, did you have a counselor or teacher or student group that helped you feel connected to school or helped you plan for the move to ninth grade?

1. What are your biggest concerns related to moving up to high school?
2. When you got to middle/high school, what help do you wish you would have received?
3. What did school staff or teachers do that made settling into high school easier for you?

Family Questions

What supports were in place for your child that you hope will continue when they get to high school? For instance, communication efforts from the middle school or high school teams related to your child’s eighth- to ninth-grade transition, counselor or teacher or student groups that helped them feel connected to school or plan ahead for the move to ninth grade.

1. What are some anticipated barriers that as a parent or guardian concerns you when thinking about your child moving up to high school?
2. When you think back to your child moving up to high school, what supports do you wish they had received to make the transition easier?
3. Tell us about anything the high school did to support your child and make the transition to ninth grade easier.

Educator Questions

We want to know from you what supports have helped them be successful transitioning into high school, or what supports you wish they would receive, and any suggestions for how schools might do a better job in getting students ready for the move to ninth grade.

1. Please describe the supports ALL ninth graders receive to help them be successful in high school. What skills are being taught OR NOT being taught to ninth graders that would help them be successful in high school?
2. For students who have academic, attendance, and/or behavior concerns or are receiving special education services, what (if any) specific ninth grade transition supports do you or other staff provide? What is missing that you wish the students would receive?
3. What does communication look like between the staff at the feeder middle and high schools? What is missing regarding communication between the feeder middle and high schools that would better support students with more intensive needs?
References


Embedded Hyperlinks


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