PROMISING PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING THE MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS

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Promising Practices for Improving the Middle to High School Transition for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Introduction

In this practice brief, we describe several current examples of approaches that are aimed at improving outcomes for students entering high school. Additionally, we present strategies to disrupt the negative trajectory for students with EBD, who seldom receive coordinated, individualized supports during the critical transition from middle to high school.

Key Takeaways

- Promising practices in the transition from middle to high school at the school-wide and individual student level offer educators a starting place for improving transition supports.

- Strategies to consider in supporting students with EBD during this transition include behavioral skills coaching, coaching for caregivers, team planning & case management, student-led goal setting, peer transition mentorship, and behavioral progress monitoring.

As many educators know, transitions can be challenging. Whether it is moving from one activity to the next in an elementary classroom or graduating high school, all transitions benefit from planning and coordinating efforts among stakeholders. The transition from middle to high school, however, is one of the most difficult for students. Navigating a larger campus, more rigorous academic coursework, and increased autonomy combined with a lack of relationships and community found in middle school contribute to the challenges many students experience during this transition period (McFarland et al., 2018). Furthermore, students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) are at increased risk for a host of negative academic and social outcomes, including decreased school engagement, substance abuse, academic failure, and school dropout (Hussar et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Promising Practices

Coordinated supports targeting emotional and behavioral skills, family involvement, student-led goal setting, peer mentorship, and high school transition planning during the middle school years have the potential to increase high school graduation rates while also improving the overall educational experience for students with EBD; however, these supports are seldom implemented systematically (McGrath Kato et al., 2018). Nonetheless, a few specific interventions and practices tackle some of these concerns.

Freshmen Success (Flannery et al., 2020) is a preventive, universal intervention designed to increase the engagement and performance of all ninth graders in high school, regardless of skill level (Flannery et al., 2020). The core components of Freshmen Success are (a) explicit instruction of a prevention-oriented engagement curriculum for all ninth-grade students, (b) use of engagement-focused peer support from upperclassmen who share experiences and knowledge with ninth graders, and (c) use of data-based decision making by a freshmen-wide leadership team. Freshmen Success is easily implemented in coordination with multi-tiered systems of support a school may have

in place or it may be a first step in moving towards a tiered model for a high school. Research on Freshmen Success has documented statistically significant and educationally meaningful effects on student motivation, engagement, attendance, and credits earned for ninth-grade students (Flannery et al., 2020).

Students with Involved Families and Teachers (SWIFT, Buchanan, Nese, et al., 2016) is a multi-component, individualized intervention designed to address the social and behavioral needs of students with EBD during their middle school years. SWIFT includes the following four components: (a) behavioral data collection for weekly progress monitoring of student's behavior at home and in school, (b) case management for coordination of services and communication among the team, school personnel, and families, (c) weekly parent coaching for improved home-school communication and positive parenting practices, and (d) weekly behavioral skills coaching to support the students in developing prosocial skills. Research on SWIFT has documented its feasibility in middle school settings as well as promise for improving student school adjustment, school stability, home-school communication, and the use of positive parenting practices (Buchanan & Clark, 2017; Buchanan, Nese, et al., 2016; Buchanan, Ruppert, et al., 2016).

IEP Transition Planning (Ruble et al., 2019) is a critical step in supporting students in the move from middle to high school. Teaching students with, and at risk for, EBD the skills they need to set and attain meaningful educational goals is an important objective of educators. Since 1997, special education law (i.e., IDEA) specifies that students ages 14 and older are to be invited to attend and allowed to actively participate in meetings with their IEP team members. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA strengthened the role of students in transition planning by requiring that (a) transition plans state postsecondary goals that reflect students' strengths, interests, and post-high school aspiration in addition to assessments related to employment, education, training, and, when appropriate, independent living; and (b) transition services include an appropriate course of study needed to help students achieve their goals (Grigal et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2012). Student inclusion in the IEP process helps to ensure that their interests, preferences, and post-high school aspirations inform IEP team decisions and guide the student's course of study and transition services (Johnson et al., 2020; Ruble et al., 2019).

Ninth Grade Academies (Somers & Garcia, 2016) are small learning communities led by school administrators and teachers who focus exclusively on establishing and maintaining a school within a school for ninth graders. Ninth grade academies are designed to be responsive to the academic and social needs of incoming students and typically have four core structural components: (a) a designated separate space in the high school, (b) a ninth-grade administrator who oversees the academy, (c) a faculty member assigned to teach only ninth-grade students, and (d) teachers organized into interdisciplinary teams that have both students and planning periods in common. In addition to these components, ninth grade academies integrate supportive practices for students that can include a "summer bridge" program to support incoming ninth graders, a curriculum to help students catch up,

additional academic help beyond the school day, and a curriculum focused on career and college awareness (Somers & Garcia, 2016).

Six Intervention Supports for Students with EBD Transitioning to High School

The following six strategies intend to address the support gap students with EBD experience when moving from middle to high school. These follow the logic that behaviors are learned through modeling and teaching and that environmental factors influence when and how behavior is likely to occur (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

1. Behavioral Skills Coaching

Students are partnered with a skills coach who models appropriate behaviors across the community and school settings, supports the development of prosocial skills, and reinforces the use of positive adaptive skills and peer relations. Skills coaches may be existing school personnel, such as educational or behavioral assistants, or community-based counselors or mentors. The main goal for skills coaching sessions is to problem-solve and practice the skills needed for high school. Examples of high school transition skills practiced in coaching sessions include tracking credit accrual, asking for help, setting up regular meetings with guidance counselors, making and keeping friends, appropriate self-advocacy, and organization of academic materials. Skills coaches begin meeting with students during the second half of eighth grade and continue supports through the first half of ninth grade. Supports are faded as the student becomes more confident in navigating high school.

2. Coaching For Caregivers

Caregiver coaches can help caregivers practice communication with the school team, collaborate on the school team with both eighth and ninth grade personnel, and develop home routines and encouragement systems that target the same skills as the student's skills coaching sessions. Similar to the skills coach, caregiver coaches meet with families regularly at home, school, or a location requested by the caregiver; coaches can also provide support to caregivers between meetings in person or by phone, email, and text as needed.

3. Team Planning and Case Management

Transition teams for each student meet during the student's eighth and ninth grade years to review the student's progress towards set goals and discuss additional supports needed. The team includes the student, caregiver, and key school personnel (e.g., the student's teachers, school psychologist, counselors, administrators). The transition team may be the IEP team or another school-level team, as long as members include the student, family, and critical stakeholders. A school-level case manager is the primary contact between families, coaches, and the transition team. The case manager gathers information about student functioning in the current educational environment, provides updates to key school staff about relevant family information, and helps translate the supports identified in the student's IEP or behavior support plan to the new educational setting. The case manager also checks in with the skills coaches via weekly clinical meetings and provides on-call support as needed.
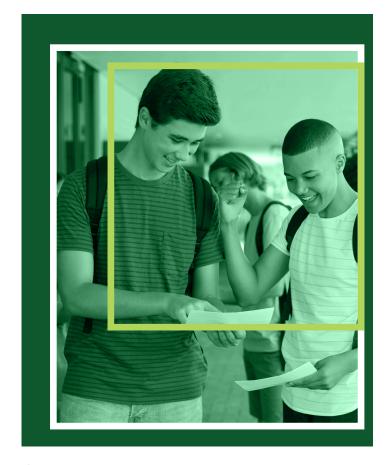
4. Student-led Goal Setting

Skills coaches support students in setting goals and tracking progress toward their goals that directly align with the transition to high school. Students who are supported through the process of setting their own goals are more committed to achieving their goals, find and use better task strategies to attain the goals they have set, and respond more positively to constructive feedback (Locke & Latham, 2002; Seijts & Latham, 2001). Caregivers, with the help of their coach, can reinforce the goals set by creating systems and routines in the home to encourage progress towards set goals. Additionally, students are encouraged to share and discuss their goals with their transition team at the eighth- and ninth-grade meetings.

5. Peer Transition Mentorship

With first-hand experience in the school setting, peer transition mentors serve as guides to the school environment and prosocial peer models who share various aspects of school engagement. Both mentees and mentors benefit from this relationship; these shared positive outcomes include improvements in interpersonal skills and abilities, including better communication, increased self-esteem, better conflict resolution skills, personal abilities (e.g., being responsible, reliable, and organized), knowledge of adolescent development, leadership abilities, and more connectedness to school (Herrera et al., 2008; Karcher et al., 2006; Noll, 1997). Peer transition mentors can provide scaffolded supports in structured one-on-one sessions to help reduce the complexity of the school setting, decrease isolation, increase the understanding of expectations and routines, and facilitate peer support from positive role models.

6. Behavioral Progress Monitoring

Weekly behavioral progress monitoring is crucial for tracking the development of prosocial skills and the progress students are making towards their specified goals. Each week, the caregiver and one teacher can provide a rating of whether a set of unwanted and prosocial behaviors occurred in the past 24 hours in the home or school. This may be done via a brief telephone call, text message, or online form. Behavioral data are collected one time per week from caregivers and teachers, used each week by the transition team to identify unwanted behaviors to target in weekly sessions, identify the prosocial behaviors students exhibit, and monitor progress throughout the transition period.

Where Do We Start?

To develop interventions support for this transition, practitioners can take multiple steps to inform their efforts and prepare staff to focus on pivotal student skills. When working with groups with individualized needs, gathering stakeholder feedback is particularly important. A second practice brief covers in more depth the process of gathering this feedback, outlining a process of data collection, making sense of results, and then comparing results with the intervention supports from this brief.

1. Revisit District-wide Coordination Efforts

The alignment of efforts across middle and high schools within a school district enhances access to adequate high school transition supports. Within a review of a district's efforts, practitioners can consider the following actions: (a) take inventory of transition supports provided, (b) organize services by tiers or levels of support, (c) develop agreement on coordinated intentional communication and information sharing efforts across stakeholder teams, (d) clarify decision rules for intensifying high school transition supports, and (e) identify possible gaps across the continuum of supports.

2. Gather Information From Stakeholders

To understand the strengths and weaknesses of high school transition supports from the perspectives of students, families, and educators, consider the use of various data collection methods. Accessible surveys in multiple formats (e.g., paper, online) may make more sense when gathering information from all members of the community, or when asking questions about

particular implementation efforts. Focus groups may be more appropriate when interested in the perspective of particular subgroups within groups of stakeholders. Evaluate feedback to inform improvements to district or school-wide high school transition supports.

3. Integrate Social-emotional Learning and Teaching of Interpersonal Skills Across the Ninth-Grade Curriculum

Gather a representative group of expert educators or curriculum coaches that can help staff integrate prosocial skills instruction into academic instruction. Aligning the academic curriculum with identified prosocial skills can support students to use these strategies outside of freshman learning communities.

Summary

The increasing documentation of numerous poor outcomes for students with EBD during the transition from middle to high school demonstrates a clear need to disrupt the trajectory towards high school dropout. Promising practices along with coordinated supports as students transition into ninth grade are needed to ensure students with EBD are set up for success as they enter high school. For a more in-depth walkthrough on gathering stakeholder input on the eighth to ninth grade transition, please read the practice brief titled *Obtaining Stakeholder Feedback to Improve the Middle to High School Transition*[1] (Nese, Santiago-Rosario, Triplett, & Austin, 2021).

Additional Resources

High School PBIS Implementation: Student Voice[2]

Using Outcome Data to Implement Multi-tiered Behavior Support (PBIS) in High Schools[3]

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Embedded Hyperlinks

1. https://www.pbis.org/resource/obtaining-stakeholder-feedback-to-improve-the-middle-to-high-school-transition

2. https://www.pbis.org/resource/high-school-pbis-implementation-student-voice

3. https://www.pbis.org/resource/using-outcome-data-in-high-schools