

**Indicator:** The school develops and implements consistent, intentional, and ongoing plans to support student transitions for grade-to-grade and level-to-level. (5134)

**Explanation:** Schools must develop, implement, and evaluate explicit and ongoing plans to support student transitions across grades and levels of schooling. Elementary schools should access data on incoming children's early learning experiences, and aligning standards, curriculum, and instruction can facilitate young children's transition to elementary school settings. Students transitioning to middle school have a variety of developmental needs, and must deal with procedural, social and academic changes; effective transition programs must foster communication and be responsive to stakeholder needs. High schools should monitor incoming students for early warning indicators and provide appropriate supports; ninth grade academies, personalizing learning, and ensuring students have access to highly effective faculty are supportive structures for this transition. Closing the social capital gap between low-income students and their peers through early college programs, college/career advising, and predictive analytics system have proven effective for students transitioning out of high school into college/career.

**Questions:** *Does your school have an explicitly stated transition plan for entering students? If so, is the plan consistently implemented and provide for ongoing student supports? How is the effectiveness of the plan evaluated, and how is the data used to improve the transition program? Do teachers at your school engage in cross-grade planning and collaboration? Are standards and instruction aligned across grades?*

**Research Brief:**

*What are effective practices to support students' transition between grades and levels of schooling?*

Schools at all levels must develop, implement, and evaluate explicit and intentional plans that describe their approach to fostering students' grade-to-grade, as well as level-to-level transitions. Research supporting effective transition practices at each level is described below.

**Transitions to Elementary School.** Researchers have noted that many children experience discontinuities as they progress from preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, particularly when transitioning from preschool to kindergarten, when they must adjust to a reduction in free choice time, and more whole-class instruction (New, Palsha, & Ritchie, 2009). It is important for principals and teachers to know about students' early learning experiences prior to school entry, including whether students attended a pre-K program, and the extent of the student's experiences in pre-K and other formal early learning settings in order to foster their transitions (Bornfreund & Severns, 2010). Linked data systems can provide two-way communication between early childhood education programs and K-12 programs so that early childhood education programs can determine how children progress once they exit these programs, and K-12 programs can tailor instruction to meet individual children's needs when they arrive at school (Early Childhood Data Collaborative, 2011).

Across states and in many districts, separate standards govern early childhood programs serving children under age five and children attending early elementary school. Almost all studies and policy articles, however, advocate for the alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, and environments across pre-K to grades K-3 as a successful approach for providing effective transitions for students in the early years (US Department of Education, 2016). Most policy experts call for both vertical (across grade levels) and horizontal (within grade levels) alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment. For example, many states that have adopted Common Core State Standards have chosen

to also align their early learning standards with these standards (Guernsey, Bornfreund, McCann, & Williams, 2014). Examples of alignment across grades include Montgomery County Maryland, which created a P-12 curriculum framework, and supported alignment by developing instructional guides for all grade levels which included sample lesson plans that aligned with the curriculum framework and state standards (Marietta, 2010). *FirstSchool*, an initiative to promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger and more diverse population, provides an example of a P-3 model that utilizes a curriculum framework to stress the continuity of student learning goals, and professional learning communities that emphasize cross-grade instructional planning (New, et al., 2009). In fact, the policy literature “suggests that prekindergarten and K-3 teachers should receive joint teacher preparation and engage collaboratively in planning” (US Department of Education, 2016, p. 11).

**Transitions from Elementary to Middle School.** Many students are undergoing substantial physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes as they transition from elementary to middle school, and an effective transition program must address the needs of students developing in these areas at a wide variety of rates (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Middle schools also require that students adapt to a variety of procedural, social, and academic changes (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016). Procedural changes involve the shift from the highly structured elementary school environment to a less structured environment in which students must independently manage their time wisely, get to and from classes on their own, and use a locker (Niesen & Wise, 2004). Students must also make social transitions as they try to build new friendships with peers, encounter older students whose needs and interests may be very different, and develop new relationships with teachers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). These procedural and social transitions impact students’ academic performance, and incoming middle school students must often multitask and meet the demands of multiple teachers when adjusting academically (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016). Students entering middle school are also concerned with the thought of having a tough teacher, harder schoolwork, too much homework, and knowing how to get extra help from teachers (Cauley & Jovanovic, 2006). Effective transition programs can alleviate many student concerns and provide supports for academic success.

Gilewski and Nunn (2016) suggest that to have an effective transition program, “schools must address the expectations that middle school students need to meet, bridge the gap between what will be expected of young adolescents in middle school and what was expected of them in elementary school, and consider the procedural, social, and academic changes that young adolescents face when transitioning” (p. 3). Transition programs should include students, parents, and teachers, and should provide comprehensive and targeted transition activities for these stakeholders (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Examples of transition activities include tours of the middle school, fifth-graders “shadowing” a sixth-grader for a day, parent-to-parent meetings to discuss middle school concerns, and holding orientations where incoming students get information, practice routines, and meet teachers and peers (Wormeli, 2011). Transition programs should be ongoing and sustained, by continuing to assess and address student concerns, and continuing activities to enhance parent-school communication and build rapport between all stakeholders (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016). Research shows that in order for transition programs to be successful they must 1) foster communication; 2) respond to all stakeholder needs; 3) develop a sense of community; and, 4) include an evaluation of the transition program and evolve and adapt it as needed (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016).

**Transitions from Middle to High School.** Student success in the first year of high school often determines later success, and more students fail ninth grade than any other grade (Williams & Richman, 2007). Many students are held back in ninth grade (the ninth grade “bulge”) and drop out by the tenth

grade (Wheelock & Miao, 2005; Nield, 2009). Research-supported strategies for helping students transition to high school include summer “bridge” programs, which provide students with remedial or preparatory coursework, experience navigating the school, and a chance to make friends with new peers (Nield, 2009). Ninth grade academies, which physically separate ninth graders from the rest of the student body and provide intensive, engaging transition supports, have been shown to be effective through school models such as those used for *Talent Development High Schools* (Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005). One recently implemented model is a data-driven, tiered intervention that is intended to transform middle and high school students’ academic experience and provide more targeted intervention of students with “early warning indicators” that place them at risk for dropping out (Corrin, Sepanik, Rosen & Shane, 2016). This model includes the supports described within Talent Development High Schools, along with instructional/curricular innovations and teacher and administrator coaching and support. Preliminary results suggest positive impacts in terms of reducing the percentages of students with early warning indicators, with stronger impacts seen for middle school students (Corrin, et al., 2016).

Schools should also seek to build the capacity of faculty, particularly in low-performing schools, to address diverse student needs. Ninth-grade students, particularly in low-performing high schools, are more likely to have less experienced and less qualified teachers in their core academic courses than students in upper grades (Neild, 2009). Mentoring systems and establishing strong professional development programs for teachers with large numbers of ninth graders can help alleviate this disparity (see Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2011). Interventions designed to personalize instruction and the school environment for incoming high school students have also been shown to be effective (Herlihy, 2007).

**Transitions from High School to College/Career.** Students need supportive and informative networks as they plan their transition out of high school. There is a significant “social capital gap” between students who have access to critical information and support on how to prepare and effectively participate in college/career decision-making, and those who do not (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Successful initiatives include *early college programs*, which typically serve high-needs populations, and allow students to pursue college credit during high school, usually at no cost to their families. Some research has shown that early college students outperform their peers in high school graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment rates (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014). Other research-supported practices include college advising and mentoring (Bettinger, et al., 2010), and predictive analytics systems that determine college readiness using student academic rigor and performance data to help teachers develop early interventions that target specific student needs (Education Commission of the States, 2014).

## References and Resources

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[NSC Update 01-14-14.pdf](#)

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