

Leading Through a School Restructure



Growing schools often face a restructuring process because of construction or other factors. At Southside Middle School in Batesville, Arkansas, nearly one-third of our student body comes to us via school choice. Because of this and natural growth, we transitioned from a configuration of serving nearly 500 students in grades 5-8 to a new structure serving 405 students in grades 4-6. There are many considerations that must be thought through when such a transition occurs, including outgoing and incoming faculty, curriculum, and student make-up. As school administrators, we always want to think that we configure grades based on what is best academically and socially, but we also understand that physical space sometimes must be the determining factor, as it was in our case.

Address Students' Needs

No matter when students transition from a primary school setting to a middle or intermediate setting, students and their families are anxious. In this case families feared the “earlier” transition from elementary to middle school. This anxiety was not new; over the years I have heard many parents express their worry about their child entering middle school.

To ease parental concerns, we hosted an open house where I addressed parents in an assembly. Then, students and families visited classrooms and met the fourth-grade teachers. As a grades 5-8 school, we were departmentalized and each student would see four core teachers a day. To help incoming fourth graders, we limited their number of core

teachers to two, which greatly reduced the transition between classes.

Physically speaking, our building has two distinct ends. We decided to place the entire fourth grade on an end onto themselves. This strategy helped ease another concern that parents had, ensuring that the fourth graders would not be placed directly with older sixth graders.

Prepare Teachers for the Transition

The year before the restructuring occurred, I transitioned teachers serving on districtwide leadership teams. The seventh- and eighth-grade teachers met with junior high teachers, and fourth-grade leads transitioned to the middle school team. I believe this helped shape the new teams that would quickly form and also gave the fourth grade

a stake in the building even before they had an official and physical presence.

As many know, a faculty can feel like a family. We had teachers who wanted to stay and fill vacant positions at the middle school and some who were eager to begin a new junior high school. Emotionally, it was hard to turn loose so many great teachers and welcome a new fourth-grade team. At the same time, a fourth-grade teacher retired, another resigned, and a new position was added during the summer of the transition. So not only did the fourth-grade team have to come to a new building, but they also had to adjust to half of their team being replaced.

To overcome this challenge, I assembled a transition team made up of volunteers who wanted to meet and work on the perceived issues the school’s transition would bring. Our team included at least two representatives from each grade level, the counselor, and the instructional facilitator. We met three times over the summer to discuss and resolve a wide variety of concerns. These included PLC team make-up, curricular issues, and defining our central vision and mission.

Scheduling was another area that needed attention because being in the middle sometimes means that we have to share faculty from grade levels above and below. One challenge that I faced was borrowing faculty to meet requirements for courses such as art, music, and physical education. These classes are offered in a rotation, so I did not need full-time positions to meet requirements. However, I did need the teachers at select times, and that was a grueling process of compromises on all parts. Our district administrative leadership team met regularly for the eight months prior to the transition to ensure needs were met on all campuses.

Major Differences

Leading a building of 10- to 14-year-old students in a 5-8 grade span is much different than leading a building with 9- to 12-year-olds. On the first day of school, a fourth-grade girl came right up to me, looked up, and said, “Hug?” At that point I knew I was in for a different—yet great—experience. Younger students are more adult dependent, more active, and can in many cases be easier to motivate.

I have found students to be more intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. We used this fact to implement positive behavioral intervention and supports into our school and focus on positive behavior instead of a focus on consequences.


Teachers in this grade span can also be different. I had to shift my professional development practices to gear more toward elementary-minded teachers. Yes, that meant I

had to have more “fluff and stuff” in our meetings and professional development time. This time needed more focus on feel-good moments, team building, and of course door prizes.

Lessons Learned

Despite the changes we had to endure, the one aspect we continued was high expectations for ourselves, our students, our community, and our school. This is some advice I can offer to other principals facing a similar transition:

- Involve parents, the community, and faculty as early as possible.
- Create a transition team. This is a great time to examine all practices and make a “keep doing” and a “stop doing” list. You have the opportunity to create a new school with a new culture and new traditions.

- Invest in rules-and-procedures training with students. Two-thirds of my students were new to the building, so in the first three weeks of school we focused on implementing positive behavioral intervention and supports and training students on the new rules.
- Integrate new staff with current staff. In my attempt to ease student and parental fears, I placed all fourth-grade faculty on one end of the building, but these were the very people who did not know our daily procedures and didn’t have anyone to turn to for quick questions.
- Pair new teachers with a current teacher in a mentoring role. This will give the incoming teacher a safe person to ask various questions. 

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