

Making the Move from Elementary to Middle or Junior High School: Transition Tips for Parents of Students with Disabilities

While attending elementary school, your son or daughter may have learned many of the skills he or she will need in middle school. For example, your child may already know how to make new friends, change classrooms multiple times a day, navigate crowded hallways, and work with different teachers for different subjects.

You may be concerned about your child's move from elementary to middle school, but you can help to lay the groundwork for your child's success by following these tips.

In middle school, your child may encounter some new situations that come with growing independence, such as:

- using self-advocacy skills
- choosing some classes
- attending social, cultural, and sports events
- increasing organizational skills and homework expectations
- developing goals and planning for the future

It is important to be prepared with a plan to transition your child to a new school. Your child will interact with new teachers, staff, and administrators, and a new building.

1. Develop a transition planning timeline

As with other major changes in your child's life, the move to middle school will go more smoothly if you gather information in advance and prepare for the change. In general, a good time to begin planning for the transition is six months prior to your child's last Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting in elementary school. You may want to start earlier if your child has complex needs.

Ask if your district has a formal plan for transitioning students to middle school. In order to make the orientation a meaningful process, **you may want to consider other questions:**

- Will one orientation visit be enough for your son or daughter?
- Will your child benefit from taking photos of the school or other visual supports (a map, resource list, location of the office, etc.) to familiarize them with the middle school layout during the summer break?
- Will an interpreter be needed (Spanish, Somali, Hmong or other language, or sign language)?
- Does the school district offer an orientation, tour of the middle school, and an opportunity to meet new teachers for incoming students and parents at the end of summer break or early in the fall? If so, be certain to make a note of the dates and sign up your son or daughter for the experience.

2. Gather information about the middle school or junior high school

Make an appointment to observe and tour the middle school in spring when classes are in session. An early visit is especially important if you have concerns about accessibility and safety. Ask your elementary school case manager for a contact person at the middle school to help you arrange a visit.

When you visit the school:

- Ask for a copy of the student handbook, class schedule, course offerings, and a list of during and after school activities.
- Schedule a short appointment with the principal or vice principal to introduce yourself and briefly explain your child's needs. Indicate your desire to work in partnership with the school to help your child succeed.
- Talk with other parents whose children attend the school. Their information might be helpful.
- Identify the names and contact information of resource people, such as the school social worker, nurse, vice principal, and the school's Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC).
- Schedule a short meeting with your child's new IEP manager.
- Ask if there is a family support group for parents of children with disabilities.
- Check out accessibility issues. Is there an elevator to the second floor? Are the science labs accessible to children who use wheelchairs?

3. Develop an IEP plan

As you, your child, and the elementary school IEP team develop a plan for the move to middle school, you may want to request that a representative from the middle school be invited to your child's last elementary school IEP meeting. Make sure your child's IEP team identifies and addresses any issues in scheduling or the school's behavioral policy.

You may also want to consider asking the following questions:

- What are the attendance and discipline policies in middle school?
- Are there any expectations for a student's ability to use technology or consideration for assistive technology?
- Will my child's interests, strengths, and future plans be considered in the selection of classes and activities?
- Does my child need accommodations in the cafeteria, library, restroom, or locker room?
- Have my child's transportation needs been addressed?
- What is the school's emergency and evacuation plan? Have my child's unique disability-related emergency or evacuation needs been addressed?
- With whom will my child eat lunch?
- Will new or different accommodations and goals need to be written into the IEP?
- Is there a parent communication website? Will staff communicate with me through it?
- What plans are in place to support my child's social interaction and growth in areas of recreation and leisure?
- What accommodations are available so my son or daughter can participate in available extracurricular activities?
- Is there a specific staff member identified to assist my child if he or she feels confused, anxious, or overwhelmed? A school counselor, social worker, or special education teacher would usually fill this role.

Note: If your child has a 504 plan instead of an IEP, you will need to schedule a 504 meeting. At this meeting, you should share last year's 504 plan and discuss the need to develop a new one for the middle school setting. You may find that some of the accommodations that were helpful in elementary school are applicable to the middle school, but different accommodations may be necessary as well.

4. Encourage self-advocacy

The end of elementary school is a good time to help your child begin to practice the self-advocacy skills needed in middle school. Self-advocacy skills include the ability to make decisions, communicate one's needs, and ask for help if necessary. Your child can develop these skills by participating on the IEP team as much as is appropriate.

At an IEP meeting, you may want to ask:

- Are my child's ideas and requests taken into consideration as educational decisions are being made?
- Is the team encouraging my child to assume responsibility for explaining how he or she learns best, and to ask for the necessary support?
- Is my child able to present information about his or her disability, skills and interests, and dreams for the future? Include your child as much as possible in the planning and goal setting of the IEP process.

5. Prepare your child for the move

In the spring of your child's last year in elementary school, begin to casually introduce positive elements of the new setting.

Here are some ideas:

- Give your son or daughter a middle school T-shirt, or attend a school sporting event or concert as a family so your son or daughter feels they are a part of the middle school community.
- Talk with your child about middle school and identify any concerns he or she may have. Talking about issues may reduce your child's anxiety about the move.
- During the summer, make it a point to drive by the school a few times and look at the school and its grounds.
- If the school has orientation sessions in the summer, plan for your child to attend.
- Arrange to visit the middle school a week before school begins in the fall so your son or daughter can meet teachers and staff, practice self-advocacy skills, and become familiar with the building before it is crowded with other students.
- Talk to other parents. They may be a good source of information.

It may also be helpful to:

- Locate restrooms and water fountains, the nurse's and counselor's offices, the cafeteria, and the special education resource room.
- Ask if it is possible for your son or daughter to shadow a current student for part of the day while school is in session.
- Determine the best routes between classrooms. Your son or daughter may need to leave class a minute or two early in order to navigate the halls.
- Practice using the hall and gym lockers with your son or daughter and note if the lockers, locks, or location need to be changed to accommodate your child's needs. Be sure to discuss this with administrators ahead of time.
- Determine if your child needs a special access card or key to use the elevators.
- Plan necessary routines for getting on the school bus; it's helpful to have them ahead of time.
- Consider if your son or daughter will need help from an aide or a peer during passing time, lunch, or the changing of classes or schedule.

The move from elementary school to middle school can be an exciting milestone and a time of growth. With advance planning and teamwork, this transition to middle school can be a positive experience for you and your child.

Making the Move to Middle or Junior High School: Questions for Parents of Students with Disabilities to Consider

Parent Worksheet

- Have I reviewed the student handbook and discussed the school rules with my child?
- Will the number of class periods increase? How will the increase impact my son or daughter?
- Is there anything specific that my child will need to know about grading policies, behavior, or homework expectations?
- Are there any new accommodations my child will need to orient to the middle school building?
- Do I know the name and room number of a person to whom my child can go for help?
- Are there any anticipated changes in the nature or type of supports that need to be written in the IEP?
- How will teachers be notified that they need to provide accommodations for my son or daughter?
- Will my child have the same lunch period as his or her general education peers?
- How are middle school students introduced to possible extracurricular activities? Can I obtain a list?
- Is there a program for my child to shadow a student in the middle school?
- Does my child need to add or change his or her assistive technology as an accommodation? If so, is it available in all of his or her classrooms?
- Would a study skills class in summer school or community education be helpful for my child?
- Are there opportunities for my child to socialize with general education peers in school or extracurricular activities?
- Is there an emergency plan?