INFORMATIONAL ITEM

April 19, 2010

To: Board of Education Members
From: Elizabeth Keefe
Subject: Special Services Report

Social-Emotional Impact of Transition

Summary of Findings:
<u>How well the school environment fits the needs of the students</u> *during this difficult stage in their development, is an influential factor in the shaping of their outcomes.* None of the dozen research articles I read showed strong negative effects of transition on adolescents per se. The changes adolescence itself brings coupled with less than appropriate school models/climate seems to have much more potential of producing negative outcomes for students.

Much of the research that has been done points to several factors that can lead to gradual declines in grades, personal development, motivation, and family interactions for adolescents. *Much of this same research, however, points to factors other than the actual transition into middle school or junior high as the most probable causes.*

Adolescents typically enter their middle school or junior high years at a time of heightened self-focus. They bring with them a rising desire for autonomy and self-determination, and an increased ability to use higher-level cognitive strategies. They view peer relations as being especially important. They also may be in need of close adult relationships outside the home.

If upon leaving elementary school, K-8 or otherwise, early adolescents encounter teachers exerting greater control, less personal student-teacher relationships, less small group attention, classwork that requires lower skills, and teachers using higher standards, they can be at-risk.

Attached is an article summarizing several studies dealing with the social-emotional impact of school transitions on early adolescents.

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL TRANSITION ON EARLY ADOLESCENTS

THE PROBLEM

Early adolescence is a time of rapid individual change and a shift to a new school setting. Most children pass through this tumultuous stage without great stress or serious problems. Others, unfortunately, begin a downward spiral that invites academic failure and, for too many, ends with them dropping out of school.

Between 15% and 30% of U.S. adolescents, depending on the ethnic group, drop out of school before completing high school. Adolescents also have the highest arrest rate of any age group and an increasing number of them report consuming alcohol or other drugs regularly.[1]

For many, the early adolescent years are a time when they experience gradual declines in several areas, including:

- **School grades.** A marked decline has been seen in some early adolescents' school grades as they move from elementary school to junior high school. For example, grades dropped for 54% of the students in New York State schools when they moved into junior high.[2] The magnitude of the decline in students' grades has also been found to predict subsequent school failure and dropout.[3]

- **Personal development.** Adolescents' interest in school, as well as self-concept, self-perception, and confidence in their intellectual abilities tend to decline, especially following school failure.

- **Motivation.** Early adolescents may also experience a decline in indicators of academic motivation, such as attention in class, school attendance, and self- perception. Also seen are age-related increases in negative motivational and behavioral characteristics, such as learned helplessness in response to failure, focus on self-evaluation rather than on mastering tasks, truancy, and school dropout.

- **Family interactions**. Although most children do not experience major disruptions in their family lives, there often is a temporary increase in family conflict during early adolescence. As they move into junior high, early adolescents find more opportunities for independence outside the home, unsupervised contact with peers, and exposure to different families. Such changes tend to heighten family conflict, especially over issues of autonomy and control.

To adjust and to explore new opportunities for growth, early adolescents need a safe, comfortable, intellectually challenging environment.

Unfortunately, when they enter junior high school they often find an environment that does not fulfill that need.

RISK FACTORS

School transition is a critical issue in early adolescence. How well the school environment fits the needs of early adolescents during this difficult stage is an influential factor in the shaping of their outcomes.

Adolescents typically enter their middle school or junior high years at a time of heightened self-focus. They bring with them a rising desire for autonomy and self-determination, and an increased ability to use higher level cognitive strategies. They view peer relations as being especially important. They may also be in need of close adult relationships outside the home.

Upon leaving elementary school, however, early adolescents are often confronted with a regressive change in their school environment. Several characteristics of a typical junior high school environment have been identified as factors that put early adolescents at risk for negative motivational and behavioral changes. They include:

- **Teachers exert greater control.** At a time when they seek autonomy and self-determination, early adolescents entering a junior high school often find that their new teachers place a greater emphasis on control and discipline, allowing them fewer opportunities for decision making, choice, and self management. Junior high teachers, for example, have consistently been found to spend more time keeping order and less time teaching than elementary teachers.
- **Less personal student-teacher relationships.** Early adolescents typically perceive their relationships with their junior high teachers as being less personal and less positive than the relationships they had with their elementary school teachers. Developing relationships is often more difficult for junior high teachers, who, unlike their elementary school colleagues, typically teach a different group of students each hour of the school day. However, how supportive students perceive their teachers to be influences student motivation and their interest in the subject being taught.

- **Less small-group attention.** Whole-class organization, between-classroom ability grouping, and public evaluation of their work are among the changes students find in junior high. Such changes, however, are likely to increase social comparison, concerns about evaluation, and competitiveness. One study, for example, found that small-group learning was rare in junior high seventh grade, while in sixth grade, whole-group and small-whole-group study was mixed across subjects.[4]

- **Classwork requires lower level skills.** At a time when their ability to use higher-level cognitive skills is increasing, first-year junior high students are often given work requiring skills of a lower level than those required of them in elementary school . In a study of 11 junior high science classes, only a small share of the work was found to require higher

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creative or expressive skills. Instead, the most common activity involved copying answers from black-boards or textbooks onto worksheets.[5]

• **Teachers use higher standards.** Junior high teachers tend to use higher standards to judge competence and to grade student performance than elementary school teachers. Such practices have been found to result in a drop in the grades for many adolescents.

Teacher Support

When students perceive their teachers as not being supportive, their motivation, interest, and the value they place on the subject being taught may decline.

In a study that examined those issues, students and observers rated junior high mathematics teachers less friendly and supportive than their elementary teachers. The junior high math teachers, for their part, expressed less trust in the students than did their sixth grade teachers a year earlier.[6] An important aspect of the study was the observation that students who entered the classrooms of junior high math teachers they perceived to be less supportive showed a decline in the value they attached to mathematics. Low-achieving students were found to be particularly at risk. However, students who moved into the classrooms of junior high math teachers they viewed as being more supportive tended to place a higher value on math.

Grading Practices

Junior high grading practices have been attributed, at least in part, to the lower grades many early adolescents bring home. While the grades of many adolescents drop upon entering junior high, their standardized achievement test scores generally do not show similar declines. Such observations suggest that the poorer grades students bring home more likely reflect the grading practices of their new junior high teachers, rather than a decline in their rate of learning.[7]

Self-Efficacy

Junior high teachers also tend to be less confident in the effectiveness of their teaching, especially with low-ability students. For example, in a study comparing junior high and sixth grade teachers in the same school district, junior high mathematics teachers expressed much less confidence in the effectiveness of their teaching than did the sixth grade teachers, even though the junior high teachers were more likely to be math specialists.[8]

Such characteristics emphasize the important role teachers play in junior high. It is important, however, to consider that teachers are only a part of a larger school system. In fact, several sources suggest that many of the problems in junior high result, at least in part, from the size and bureaucratic nature of the school as an institution.

In addition, several family and developmental factors might influence an early adolescent's educational, personal, and social outcomes.

Family Factors

Within the family, excessive parent control has been linked to lower school motivation, more negative changes in self-esteem following transition to junior high, a higher likelihood of school misconduct, and to adolescents investing more heavily in social attachments with their peers. Although excessive parent control is associated with negative outcomes, it is not clear whether it is a cause or a consequence of poor adolescent outcomes.

Developmental Maturity

The multiple life changes early adolescents are undergoing around the time they enter junior high school also influence their school experience.

Developmental maturity, such as pubertal development, has been found related in some ways to how adolescents perceive their school experiences. More physically mature female students, for example, express a greater desire to participate in classroom decision-making. They are also more likely to perceive that they have not been given greater decision-making opportunities in junior high school.[9]

Junior High

Finally, moving seventh-graders to a junior high school, as opposed to having them remain in a K-8 structure, has been found to be a factor in the difficulties some children encounter.

One study which took into account the pubertal development of students found that, regardless of their physical maturity, those who moved into junior high tended to experience greater negative change than those in a K-8, 9-12 school system, which postponed the upheaval of transition until the ninth grade.[10]

PREVENTION

In cases in which students find school environments that are ill-matched to their individual and developmental needs, school reform might be necessary to make school settings more compatible and to help students improve the skills they need to cope with change.

School Structure

Many of the characteristics of junior high and middle schools work against creating a well-suited environment for incoming students. For example, it is difficult for teachers to develop warm, positive relationship with students – as well as feel positive about their abilities to help everyone of them – when they teach 25-30 different students each hour of the school day.

The more successful middle and junior high schools have been found to have more positive and developmentally-appropriate learning environments, including classrooms and schools with higher teacher efficacy, greater opportunity for students to participate in school and classroom decisions, and better relationships between students and teachers.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, in its 1989 *Turning Points* report, suggests creating smaller communities for learning, empowering teachers and administrators to have more responsibility over their programs, and using team and cooperative learning.

Empowering teachers and using smaller learning communities, for example, has been found to result in teachers feeling more positive about the effectiveness of their teaching.

The use of cooperative learning practices has shown some success in improving student achievement. In this approach, students of mixed ability work on assignments that everyone is required to master. The practice has been found to enhance achievement by encouraging students to teach and learn from each other rather than compete.[11]

Coping Skills

Junior high presents different challenges to different students, suggesting that prevention programs that focus on teaching students to deal with a range of common stressors might help ease the difficulties of school transition. Stressors reported by junior high students include conflict with teachers, higher teacher expectations, missing grade school friends, peer pressure, dating, heavier homework loads, and difficulties related to going to a larger school.

Research suggests that early adolescents tend to cope better with the stresses of junior high when they use "approach" rather than "avoidance" strategies.[12] Approach strategies, such as seeking support to solve a problem, are associated with positive outcomes, such as higher self-concept. Those who rely on avoidance strategies, in which thoughts or behaviors serve to avoid a problem or its emotional impact, risk missing opportunities to develop coping resources such as building a social support network. Avoidance strategies are often related to poorer adjustment.

A high level of reliance on either strategy has been found to be a useful predictor of an early adolescent's later outcomes. Such findings suggest that prevention efforts might consider interventions that include teaching students to rely on approach coping skills, not avoidance.

Other Considerations

Early adolescents are just beginning to reflect on their own thinking. They are self-conscious and critical of themselves, detracting from their ability to make accurate and consistent appraisals of many issues they face in a new school setting.

Students who are most likely to adjust poorly are those whose appraisals of risky actions are positive, and who lack the social cognitive problem solving skills to think through the issues that confront them.[13]

Such findings suggest the need to help students refine their social problem-solving skills. Steps might include teacher training and curriculum adaptations focused on helping students develop social problem-solving skills and strategies to strengthen their self-concept.

Entering middle school or junior high marks a turning point for many students. Without intervention, many adolescents may become disaffected and alienated from learning and work – a troublesome path they may follow into adulthood.

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This report, written by Jeffery Fraser, is based in large part on the above-referenced publications. It is not intended to be an original work, but a summary produced for the convenience of our readers. References to specific studies mention in this report follow:

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