

Building Alliances, Building Families

Making the Transition a Community Concern

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The transition from elementary to middle school is a journey few adolescents—or their parents—remember fondly. This benchmark migration is often filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion—especially since the students typically move from a small, personalized elementary school to a larger, more complex middle school.

Peter Gurche remembers his transition from Roosevelt Elementary School in Spokane, Washington, with a sixth-grade enrollment of 60 students, to the 900-student Sacajawea Middle School: “I was really nervous about coming from a small school to such a big school. I was scared about having six different teachers a day and not knowing if I could get to all my classes on time. I didn’t know if I’d have any friends in my classes or if I could ever learn to open my locker,” he shares.

Peter’s mother had other concerns: “I was so afraid that Peter would be unknown—just another number. I wanted desperately to be assured that a significant adult would know and take care of him and let Peter know that he mattered to someone.”

These concerns and fears are illustrative of the transition issues students and their parents face every year as they move from elementary school to middle school. Most elementary and middle schools recognize and address these concerns, but often in ways that are isolated and centered on what they, the educators, think is appropriate.

But, as we tell our students, everyone is different, and that applies to our feeder elementary schools and their communities. Students come to Sacajawea Middle School (grades 7-8) from six elementary schools—each representing uniquely different communities and demographics.

Within the Spokane Public Schools system, as with many school districts around the nation, each elementary school is like an island, isolated from the others and quite autonomous. There is little, if any, interaction or communication among staff, students, and parents of the different elementary schools.

Because of this isolation, students generally don’t have an opportunity to get acquainted with students from other schools, and parents don’t get a chance to build relationships with parents from outside the neighborhood. They arrive at our large middle school with no sense of community or camaraderie. It’s like having a nuclear family that doesn’t know its extended family or relatives.

How can we build a sense of community among our students and their parents in the short time we have them if they know nothing about each other? About the time they start feeling connected, it is time for them to head to the high school.



COMMON CONCERNS, COMMON HOPES

In the spring of 1998, 35 parents (five from each of the six elementary schools and five from Sacajawea Middle School) met to examine this troubling state of isolation and unfamiliarity and begin a dialogue about how we might effectively address these issues. Clearly, we needed more opportunities for parents, teachers, and students to connect and build relationships between and among school communities before they arrived at the middle school door.

“What impressed me, from the earliest discussions, was that in spite of the fact that our children were in different elementary school communities, we as parents, found ourselves sharing common concerns, fears, and hopes for our children’s middle school experience,” Wilson Elementary parent Mardi Salisbury-Currin remembers.

“Those commonalities, while a surprise, were also very exciting and empowering. We could talk about issues that concerned us and brainstorm a multitude of potential solutions.”

A vision began to emerge of a regional education community that would support the academic, social, and emotional needs of all children, grades K-8. When a leadership team’s search for a model that might provide a template proved unsuccessful, we decided to try our hand at building such a community on our own. Using *Boundary Crossers: Community Leadership for a Global Age*, by Neil Pierce and Curtis Johnson, as our primer, we learned all we could about the principles of community building and set about the process.

Alliance of Schools Beliefs

- Creating communication links between schools will assist in enhancing the educational partnerships between schools and the community at large.
- Facilitating inter-school communication and activities will result in the sharing of ideas, collective resource development, planning, and collaborative problem solving between member schools.
- The Alliance recognizes individual schools, each with its own mission, goals, and community. While founded on interests and goals common to all member schools, it is intended to honor the autonomy of each member school while providing a collaborative forum for the pursuit of shared goals.
- This Alliance seeks to build on the existing social, academic, and emotional support structures within each member school and create a framework for collective partnerships between these structures.

THE ALLIANCE OF SCHOOLS

Working together, parents and school administrators began designing a framework to support the concept of a regional educational community—one that encompassed Sacajawea Middle School and its six feeder elementary schools: Grant, Hutton, Jefferson, Mullan Road, Roosevelt, and Wilson. A statement of purpose and core set of beliefs (see above) were developed and adopted by each school. Thus, the Alliance of Schools was born.



The Alliance is guided by one principal, one teacher, one parent, and two students from each school. Although each school is an Alliance member and working toward a common goal, each school also retains its individual identity. Rather than try to promote collaboration by creating a sense of sameness, the Alliance seeks to enhance each school's mission by fostering a "collective commitment to student academic excellence, social development, and safety."

One of the first commitments the Alliance members made was to address the transition from elementary to middle school. Specifically, the Alliance focused on the following issues:

1. **Fear of the Unknown:** Easing the anxiety and enabling new students and their parents to feel welcome and connected to the middle school.
2. **Student Advocacy:** Building a program that ensures there is no anonymity by establishing small "family" groups of students who meet daily with an adult advocate.
3. **Academic Skills Alignment:** Establishing a better-coordinated and articulated vertical alignment in developing literacy skills for all students in grades 5-7.

Three subcommittees consisting of teachers, principals, parents, and students were formed to address each issue. For the first time, members from separate and dissimilar communities had a framework to build relationships, communicate, and take collective action. The Alliance meets four times during the school year, and the value of sharing resources and the potential social benefits of connecting schools in a formal union are being realized.

As a result of the collaboration among students, parents, and administrators:

- An activity night is held for all incoming seventh grade students each June. The evening includes ice-breaker activities, team-building exercises, games, and group problem-solving exercises.
- An adult-to-student advocacy program was established at Sacajawea Middle School to create a smaller, more intimate environment for students to bond with each other and with their teacher.
- Fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade Alliance member teachers meet to develop strategies to better coordinate the academic experiences of students in grades 5-7.

Students have emerged as an incredibly valued and respected voice, have connected with students from other schools, and have helped shape the decision making.

Julian Knutsen, a seventh-grade delegate to the Alliance and former Roosevelt Elementary student, feels he can help his sixth-grade colleagues: "Having gone through the move from elementary to middle school last year, I like being given the chance to work with the sixth-grade student delegates. I want to make it easier for them. I know what worked last year and what didn't."



Margaux Fox from Jefferson Elementary agrees: "I'm glad I'm a student delegate on the Alliance because I feel I can make a difference in helping sixth-grade students. The adults listen to us and want to help us make it happen."

Parents have developed a common bond by crossing the traditional boundaries of separate and diverse neighborhoods. "We've looked at ways to build connections that would ease transition anxiety, nurture academic achievement for all students, and help kids feel a bond with their growing school family. A residual affect of focusing on kids has been the positive relationship parents have established with each other," says parent Mary Joan Hahn.

Teachers across grade levels have begun to discuss curriculum coordination, vertical alignment, and best instructional practices.

Jefferson Elementary sixth-grade teacher Dave Hogberg sees immediate benefits: "The Alliance has created an opportunity for fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade teachers from all seven schools to communicate in a meaningful way about student outcomes. It has allowed us to collectively identify what we're doing right and what we need to improve on."

Kris Gladeau, a fifth-grade teacher from Grant Elementary, agrees: "I feel it is critical to have a seamless transition from elementary to middle school in order to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of kids. These staffs must work together laterally and across grade levels to ensure continuity. The Alliance has provided a structure for teachers to make it happen. We need to honestly share and examine data, school by school, and identify strategies that will improve our effectiveness."

Principals are beginning to shift their paradigm from administering a separate, isolated school to leading a school that, while autonomous, is part of an interconnected educational community.

In past years, seventh and eighth graders had few opportunities to talk, positively interact, and relate with each other during the school day.

The implementation of the Home Base Advocacy Program has changed all that. With membership balanced between seventh and eighth graders, students across grade levels have become more engaged and better acquainted with one another.

Making connections and belonging to a small "family" group has eased transition fears and helped forge a sense of community. The social instability that previously divided the seventh and eighth graders has disappeared.

Alliance members have celebrated the success of many transition activities and have examined, revised, and adjusted those areas of transition that need additional work. While continuing to attend to the social/emotional issues of transition, the Alliance has identified the academic skills alignment as a current priority. This shift in emphasis indicates the dynamic nature of the Alliance and its responsiveness to the changing needs of the educational community.



Activities That Create Community

The Alliance of Schools members suggest the following transition activities for middle schools and their feeder elementary schools. They can also be expanded to include the high schools:

- Share science fairs, talent shows, art exhibits, concerts
- Provide reading mentorships, partnering middle school students with elementary school students
- Develop community service opportunities for students outside their own communities
- Share PTA newsletters, fundraising information, and educational opportunities
- Connect schools with a common Web site that includes directories and calendars of events
- Expand social program opportunities across levels
- Develop sister classes and pen pal programs between middle schools and elementary schools
- Conduct inter-school visits
- Offer common in-service programs for teachers and promote sharing of best practice instructional methods
- Collaborate on K-8 curriculum alignment
- Adopt a common peer mediation program
- Launch multi-school leadership programs

There is great potential in the Alliance of Schools and much is yet to be actualized. Communicating and coordinating connecting activities among elementary schools is still a work in progress. However, building community is about developing relationships, and in recognition of this fundamental principle the Alliance's success can be attributed to bringing people together.

The strength and sustainability of this venture will largely be determined by the relationships that are forged between and among people from our different schools. Legitimately addressing the issues of transition from elementary to middle school is predicated on building a sense of community spirit.

There is a vitality that has emerged with the Alliance of Schools. As with any community, its continued viability will depend on our collective family of schools to exhibit a measure of shared values, sense of mutual obligation, and trust.

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