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It Takes A Village: Engaging Families to Support Student Transitioning Into A New School

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

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Abstract

Students face many barriers throughout their education and school transitions have always been a significant challenge for many. Moving to a new school always comes with a host of challenges whether you are moving into kindergarten as a 5-year old or moving to a four-year university as an 18-year old. Schools attempt many different interventions at each of these levels but one common theme, which transcends through a student's entire journey and increases the chances of a success, is engaging families throughout its entirety. Parents are typically much more involved in a student's earlier years of school, mainly elementary school, but this engagement seems to decrease as a student gets older and moves into different schools. Having parents involved early in their child's education is vitally important for adolescent development. It is just as important to keep them engaged throughout all of it as every transition is just as important as the previous. Using families as a tool and a resource to help a student through these difficult times in school will help all students become more successful academically, socially, and behaviorally. There are many barriers to increasing family involvement. Some of these barriers are due to family circumstances such as busy schedules and childcare needs. However some of these barriers (often unknowingly) are from the school and district itself such as inherent biases from staff and teachers or a (perceived or actual) lack of communication between school and home. Overcoming these barriers and making a stronger connection between school and home remains a critical intervention to aid students in making transitions between schools.

Keywords: school transitions, family engagement, family involvement, education.

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Transitioning into A New School

It truly does take a village to raise a child. Throughout a child's life they are influenced by, taught by, trained by, nurtured by, and generally cared for by hundreds of teachers, administrators, counselors, nurses, doctors, bosses, coaches, and any number of other adults outside of their immediate family. Oftentimes these adults work together very cohesively in the care of the child while other times there is an obvious divide. It is widely researched that increased family involvement and a collaborative relationship in a child's education between school and home will lead to students being more successful in all areas (Caplan, 2001) and that "disadvantaged" students (whose family, social, or economic circumstances hinder their ability to learn at school) are able to reach the same milestones as other students (Pape, 1999). Building up the levels of communication for schools will not only help all students to learn to be successful but will have a greater impact on those students that need it the most. The first portion of this literature review will dive deeper into these, and other such studies showing the positive results of family involvement and engagement.

There are four major transitions that students face while navigating most school districts in our current structure: (1) The transition into public education in kindergarten, (2) the transition from elementary school to middle school or junior high school, (3) the transition from middle school/junior high to high school and, (4) the transition out of education into colleges or careers. Each of these different transitions comes with a host of difficulties and changes that not only impact the student but the families as well. These transitions take a major toll on students and these are often times where students begin to struggle academically, socially, behaviorally, or any combination of these. Schools work through many strategies to guide students through these transitions with a wide range of results. One overarching theme while looking through successful school transition programs is that family engagement helps at all levels. "Over 40

years of steadily accumulating evidence show that family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children's school success, and that families play pivotal roles in their children's cognitive, social, and emotional development from birth through adolescence" (Weiss et. al., 2009, p. 4). For this reason, sections two and three will primarily focus on the needs of students in each of these transitions and the importance of involving family at ever level.

The literature review will conclude with a review of common barriers associated with family engagement in schools to begin to look at common communication gaps between schools and families. It can appear very simple to review and discuss the importance of programs to help students within school transitions but this should not be done without also determining why families are sometimes not more involved. There are many reasons that families may not engage in a child's education and to really consider interventions for students we need to first find the root causes.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

Family Engagement and Student Success

The definition of family engagement is "parents and teachers sharing a responsibility to help their children learn and meet educational goals" (Waterford, 2018, What is Parent Engagement section). This idea began to grow steadily over time, beginning with the "Strong Families, Strong Schools" campaign and research completed in 1994 (Department of Education, 1994). For years there had always been thoughts of a strong connection between how education is treated at home and how successful the students are. This research was instrumental in creating changes to the education system and the focus of schools with a bigger emphasis on involving families in education by showing specific reasons and research to support these beliefs. Additionally, this research showed that "controllable" behaviors by a family, such as reading at home (even just having access to reading materials at home), limiting student absenteeism and reducing excessive television watching correlated greatly to positive

test scores in eighth grade mathematics in 37 states. This landmark research also indicated that family income and education levels were not as strong of a predictor of student achievement as were the activities that families do together (Department of Education, 1994). This research helped to strengthen the movement for schools to work harder to involve families more in the learning process. The American Psychological Association (APA) remarks that parental involvement is important for a student "…because if parents show that they care about schooling, children are more likely to value it themselves" (Allen et. al., n.d., School/Family Partnerships section). Often, parents are reluctant to get involved in a student's academics as they do not think they have the knowledge to help them. This research proves that simply by trying to help them and actively participating in a student's education they are showing the importance of education and this participation can pay huge dividends in the future.

Families who help their children in their educational journey and involve themselves in the process will see very large gains in many areas for the student. Students will be much more successful academically as students whose families engage in their education typically have higher homework completion rates and better attendance which lead to higher test scores and better overall grades in their classes (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Students who have families that are more involved also see higher graduation rates and have a higher likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education (Norton, 2003). Henderson (1987) and Caplan (2001) explain that at-risk students (typically seen as students of color or with a low socio-economic status) also show greater improvements with the addition of family engagement strategies and it is one of the strongest indicators of success for these students. There are many factors that affect the success of students but including families in planning often comes up very early in the list of successful interventions, "although family engagement is not the only driver of high school student success, it is an important influence that must not be ignored" (Iver et. al., 2015, p. 28).

Family involvement correlates greatly to increases in academics but this is not the only area we see it helping students in their growth and development. In addition to academic success there are also studies that show students can be more successful with classroom behavior (Carlson et. al., 2020) and social-emotional skills (Sheridan, 2010). When parents become more confident in their ability to help their children the confidence of the student grows. A study by Wang & Sheikh-Khalil (2014) of over 1,000 students studied the impact of increased parental involvement on both academic success and feelings of depression and found that this engagement increased academic success and emotional functioning in adolescents. This study also showed that even if there is less involvement in one of the facets studied (home-based, school-based, or academic socialization) there was still an increase in social functioning and academic success, which means that even a minimum level of family involvement can still have a positive impact on students. This is also important to note as families in lower socio-economic status tend to have less time for such involvement, due to varying work schedules and other such barriers. These findings show that, some involvement in one facet is just as important as high levels of involvement in all facets. Roeser et. al. (2000) state that this is most likely the case as this helps to fulfill an adolescents' basic psychological need for "trusting and accepting relationships with adult" (p. 445) and helps them to see the value in their education as well.

In 2017 an estimated 3.2 million children between the ages of 12 and 17 in the United States (roughly 13.3% of children in that age range) have had at least one episode of depression in the past 12 months, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2019), and these numbers are a steep incline from a similar study in 2007. Research is also seeing similar rising numbers in anxiety (McCarthy, 2019; National Institute of Mental Health, 2017) and suicidal ideation (Santhanam, 2019) in adolescents. Parental behaviors are a major indication of future depression in children and increasing family engagement for these students tends to give a more positive outlook on school, through increased confidence, and decrease some of

these levels of anxiety and depression, through a more constant support system. (Duchesne et. al., 2009)

Copious amounts of research has been done on the positive impact that family involvement has on the potential success a student can have in school and this is something that must not be ignored by the school system. Families can have a positive or a negative impact on a student's success at school by no fault of the school itself. By finding creative ways to encourage, support and empower families to become involved and stay involved, schools will see many positive outcomes by way of their students feeling confident and mentally prepared enough to be successful learners and focus on education.

Struggles in School Transitions

Transition to Kindergarten

The first educational transition for students is the transition into the school system in kindergarten and it is a very important transition as students who repeat their first grade in elementary school are more likely to eventually drop out than their peers (Allen, et. al., n.d). This is a very unique transition as students, and families, come from all walks of life and previous experience with the education system. Some students have had older siblings who have already entered the school system while this may be the first child to make this transition for many families. Some students have been at a preschool type of system that prepares them for the classroom while many are cared for in other ways that are much less structured. These, and a host of other experiences and barriers, are going to have a major impact on this transition for the student and the families involved. The beginning phase for many kindergarten classrooms is assessing students in areas such as math and reading and using this data to guide future classroom lessons (Zill & West, 2001) and get a feel for this new group of students. Zill & West (2001) also state that one of the major difficulties with these assessments is that it can be a time-consuming process for teachers and may not give accurate results as they can be

impacted in a major way by some unforeseen carriers such as overall shyness and language skills of the student.

Once elementary school classrooms are up and running they may try many different transition strategies to support students but it really depends on the individual school. A review by Little (2017) researched the most effective transition strategies and found that there is little correlation between the number of transition practices and student success but that there were specific techniques used that appeared to work such as staggering the students beginning the year into smaller groups. Each school, and class, is so unique that it is very difficult to create a universal transition program that is going to have equal impact for all students.

Much of the difficulty, from a school standpoint, that comes from helping a student transition to kindergarten is that much of the work is out of the school's hands. So much of this transition is all about the preparedness of the family before the student even sets foot into an elementary building. Some skills, most non-academic, should be taught at home prior to a student enrolling in kindergarten such as independence, the ability to ask for help, responsibility, routines, acknowledgement of feelings, and basic literacy skills (Galusky, n.d.). These foundational skills are very important for students and must be assessed, and addressed, by the school and the classroom teacher before they are even able to consider working on the kindergarten academic curriculum.

Transition to Middle School

The next transition that students make while in the traditional education system is the move to middle school or junior high school. With each school transition we see a gradual increase of independence and this is often where we see the most obvious changes. "The concerns that preteens have about entering middle school can be grouped into three categories: academic, procedural, and social" (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 16). Elementary students are typically staying in one or two classrooms the majority of the day while seeing and working with

a few main teachers during this time. When students enter middle school, they begin navigating more classrooms, teachers, and free time which they are not always ready for. The age of students entering middle school is crucial for development and one that can not be understated as described by Roeser et. al. (2000, p. 446), "For researchers and practitioners interested in middle grades education, the challenge of cultivating positive youth development is the dual challenge of understanding, designing, and implementing schoolwide reform efforts that benefit all adolescents during this critical developmental period." In short, middle school is a critical time for adolescent development and needs to be treated as such.

In regards to helping with this transition many sixth-grade classrooms are set up to help students be more successful and to ease the burden of this transition. Most middle schools purposefully keep students in a similar pattern that they saw in elementary school as to make it not seem so different. Most middle schools also treat sixth grade students much differently than their older counterparts as they often see less teachers in a given day, are more likely to have a homeroom type of teacher who is seen as their advisory teacher and they are often grouped or teamed with smaller groups of students (Jackson & Davis, 2000). These are proven transition practices that many schools are currently implementing to help students successfully make the necessary adjustments to middle school.

Adolescents entering middle school have much different needs than those who entered kindergarten. Incoming sixth graders are beginning to feel a lack of motivation to learn (Anderson et. al., 1999) and higher levels of self-reported anxiety (Nelemens et. al., 2018) which is very different than many students entering lower grade levels. Often the move from smaller elementary schools, where students are often with the same group of students all day, to bigger middle schools, where they are now moving around to new classes with new people, makes them feel less connected to their classmates and their school (Fite et. al., 2018). In addition to these developmental changes research shows that middle school teachers set higher

expectations for student workloads and ability to work independently which many students are also not ready for (Elias, 2001). All of this can further decrease motivation and make students feel like they do not have the ability to be successful (Cauley & Jovanovic, 2006) which can cause undue stress and drastically hurt these students academically, emotionally and socially.

At the middle school level students begin to have a greater sense of self and no longer just need to learn about being responsible and independent. Students have to learn more difficult skills such as perseverance and prioritization. Many skills like this require additional time and opportunity to develop than they can be given. Embracing these developmental changes can be very important for helping students make this transition.

Transition to High School

One of the most researched areas of student transition is the transition to high school. In our current education system most schools move from middle school to high school between the eighth and ninth grade year when students are between the ages of 13 and 14. At this stage of development adolescents are going through many additional changes in terms of relationships, self-identity, and natural bodily adjustments. With all of these happening at once it is not a surprise to see how many ninth-grade students struggle in this first year of high school and it is staggering to see the negative implications of falling behind as a ninth grader on future high school years and beyond. A 2005 research study by Allensworth and Easton (2005) stated that students who were on track to graduate (which is defined as accumulating five full course credits and no more than one semester F in English, math, science or social studies) by the end of ninth grade were "more than three and one-half times more likely to graduate in four years than off-track students" (p. 7). Falling behind in ninth grade can be a major pitfall for many students that can feel almost impossible to recover from as you progress in your later high school years. Academic, time-management and problem-solving skills become incredibly important in supporting students at this age of development,

One of the most important jobs a middle school teacher has is aiding the transition for their students into high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Just as in the transition to middle school, students entering high school have more challenges they must learn to navigate. In high school, students now begin to desire even more independence from their parents (Letrello & Miles, 2003) and social needs begin to take much more of a front seat to academic needs (Oakes & Waite, 2009). Students have much greater autonomy in their choice of classes, are required to do much more work academically per class, and are given much more independent time to complete assignments. Students are also expected to begin advocating for themselves more and to ask for help as needed while working to balance additional options outside of school such as sports teams, clubs, extracurriculars, and job opportunities (Klein, 2019). All of these new challenges can be overwhelming for students, especially those that already had academic, mental health and/or social issues while in middle school. Outside of school, friendships and a student's social life also have a major impact on student success in school, both good and bad, as adolescents often begin to find a sense of self through the friendships they acquire at this point in their lives (Roybal et. al., 2014). It is also important to note that minority students tend to struggle more in high school transitions (Benner & Graham, 2009) due to potential factors such as changing peer groups and a higher likelihood of feeling disconnected from the school and other peers. As such, identifying and supporting these at-risk students early is even more critical than your typical struggling ninth grader.

Two other factors that contribute greatly to successful student transitions at both secondary (middle school and high school) levels are school connectedness and bullying. One such longitudinal study of over 105,000 students in 188 different schools found that school climate, student perception of school climate, and student perception of their connectedness to the school all had high correlations to positive adjustments to high school and that grades were positively correlated to a feeling of belongingness to the school and students (Brand et. al.,

2003). This research also showed that students with lower socio-economic status (SES), and minority students benefited at higher rates from increased perceptions of school connectedness. Students, and human beings in general, desire strong connections to the people and places where they spend their time. Establishing this connection early is very important to support successful students. Bullying is a major issue that disengages students and makes them feel like they are not connected. Research has intensified on this topic over the past few years. According to StopBullying.gov (2020, What is Bullying section) bullying is defined as having three core characteristics of "unwanted aggressive behavior, an observed or perceived power imbalance, and a repetition or a high likelihood of bullying behaviors." Bullying is a much larger schoolwide issue than just for students transitioning to a new school, but according to the Center for Disease Control & Prevention (2014), people involved in bullying behavior (both victims and aggressors) show numerous negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, poor social functioning, poor school performance, and substance abuse. Though bullying is a much bigger issue in a school setting it must not go unnoticed as students transition into a new building, as it can also contribute to school struggles, behavioral problems and mental health issues. These concerns must be addressed early and maintained often.

Schools attempt many interventions to help assist middle school students transition to high school. This process begins with some coordination between the middle school and the high school, which is very important. Oftentimes these transition programs include: visits and tours to the new high school while still in middle school, use of peer mentors or positive student leaders, high school counselors meeting with eighth graders for advising and schedule planning, summer bridge programs, and freshmen specific orientations or classes (Roybal et. al., 2014; Erickson et. al., 2013). Programs such as these, emphasize great communication between the middle school and high school which leads to success for the majority of students. Students transitioning to this level need layers of support programs that not only will focus on academic

needs (as many often do) but also must have a focus on the social and connectedness needs that adolescents at this stage of development strive for.

Transition to College and Careers

This transition for students is, in some ways, very similar to the transition to kindergarten whereas much of the work occurs outside of the walls of the school. The end goal of any school system is to create students who are ready to be successful in life after high school, whether it be in continuing education or entering the workforce. Helping students to plan for their life after high school has been a major push in schools all across the country which has led to legislation such as the "Planning for Students' Successful Transition to Postsecondary and Employment" legislation in the state of Minnesota. With this legislation all ninth-grade students must enter high school with a personal learning plan that "includes academic scheduling, career exploration, career and employment-related skills, community partnerships, college access, all forms of postsecondary training, and experiential learning opportunities" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). The idea behind this, and similar legislation, is to ensure that students are taught the skills required for life after high school no matter what they decide to do.

The complications arise for helping students with this transition because students begin to take so many paths after high school and preparing for each unique situation is nearly impossible. We will first begin with using high school as a way to prepare students for continuing their education at a college or university. A study by Winters and Green (2005) shows that, though graduation rates remained unchanged from 1991 – 2002, the percentage of students who left high school with the necessary qualifications to enter college rose from 25% to 34% which shows the increases in college preparedness focus for school districts. During this same time the percentage of high school sophomores who expected to go to college following high school rose from 59% to 72% (Ingles et. al., 2005). College preparation has been a major focus of school districts. This makes sense as according the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics

(2020) a student who earn at least an Associate's Degree in college earns nearly 20% more

annually than someone with only a high school diploma. Furthermore, these numbers

dramatically rise as a student obtains additional college education.

The Institute for Education Sciences (2009) recommends that schools provide the

following opportunities to students to help ensure they are prepared to enter college

- Provide students with college level coursework as ninth graders
- Use assessments and other data to track if students are on the right track with built in indicators of students who are beginning to get off track
- Partnering up students with mentors in the community
- Educate and provide help for students in "critical steps" for college entry such as ACT/SAT testing, college applications and entrance exams
- Help families and students understand college financing and financial aid options

Some of these steps require large scale changes in the school system and are not something

that can be done in the short term which can make it difficult. Most schools rely heavily on their

school counselors in helping with this transition by providing some level of college counseling

and senior meetings with students to help them know what to expect (Greatschools, 2019) and

how to begin navigating life after high school. It is, once again, critically important to target and

reach out to at-risk students as early as possible (preferably ninth grade or earlier) to begin

exploring options, providing information, and giving them incentives. Finally, according to

Greatschools (2019), it is important to build a culture in the school of high expectations and

encouraging students that they can be successful in college, if this is something they really want

to do. It is equally as important to show students that college (especially a 4-year program) is

not the only option for students to be successful. It is crucial to understand the student and their

goals, values, skills, and ambitions to be able to show them all options that are available to

them.

This leads us to the discussion of other opportunities for schools beyond college

preparation. It is true that college graduates earn more money than students with a high school

diploma but we often forget to mention that not every student who goes to college after high

school ends up graduating from that, or any, college (Snyder et. al., 2004). Students who go to college unprepared or unmotivated may drop out which puts them in undue debt even though they will still only be earning the same, or close to the same, as someone with a high school diploma. It is important to provide students with all options or opportunities while in high school so they do not fall trap to these circumstances which negatively impact them in the long run, both financially and emotionally. Some schools are beginning to create classes in high school that will certify students for careers they can enter immediately after high school (Springs, 2020), such as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program or ServSafe certifications. These types of programs will give some students a glimpse of this career area, and college credit without having to pay college fees, and allow them to earn these certifications free of charge before graduation. At the very least giving the opportunity in high school to see all options outside of traditional post-secondary education is important.

In terms of preparation for life after high school, although looking at careers and hard skills for these careers is important it is also pertinent that schools provide training and education in soft skills that are desired in all aspects of life. There is much crossover in the areas of soft and hard skills that are needed for student success in college or the workforce. A study by ACT (2006) compared trainings and preparation for colleges (using ACT tests) and the workforce (using WorkKeys readiness levels) and found comparable skills needed in reading and math skills for students going into either area following high school. As for soft skills, both college professors (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., 2005) and employers (National Association of Manufacturers, Manufacturing Institute's Center for Workforce Success, & Deloitte Consulting, 2005) alike show that students and employees coming straight from high school have major gaps in areas such as:

- Quality writing skills
- Presentation and general communication skills

- Teamwork skills

- Computer and research skills

- Reading and translating graphs and charts

- Basic math skills

All students leaving high school must be prepared with employability skills upon exiting high school to successfully transition to any professional setting. What students do upon leaving high school is out of the control of the school itself but what they are taught to make them successful is within their control. This is a difficult transition because almost half of these students (49%) felt that high school left them unprepared for the work world (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., 2005). Since this research was completed much work has been done and areas of study have been changed to hopefully help students feel more prepared for work, but there are still deficiencies that must be addressed.

Family Engagement in School Transitions

Parent involvement is typically at it's highest early in a student's educational journey and tends to decrease as a student ages and progresses through the school system (Crosnoe, 2001; Choi et. al., 2015) Low-income families tend to have much less engagement, for a variety of reasons, than families with higher socio-economic status (Drummond & Stipek, 2014). School transitions are some of the most difficult areas for students to navigate and we know that middle school transition is a pivotal time for many adolescents as they are beginning to shift interests from family and school focused to their peers, relationships and things outside of the family (Davis & Lambie, 2015; Downs, 2001). There are many areas that can positively impact a student's transition into new building such as school connectedness (Brand et. al., 2003), academic and social-emotional support programs (Roybal, et. al., 2014), and celebrating student successes rather than focusing on failures (Chitoyo & May, 2018). However much of the research comes back to the importance of family involvement.

Engagement opportunities from schools are crucial early to get parents involved as much as possible.

Perhaps more importantly, they (schools) need to work to keep parents involved in their child's education and school activities during the middle school years so that they are comfortable 'coming to school' and confident that their involvement makes a difference in their child's academic success (Mizelle & Irvin., 2000, p. 59).

If we can begin engaging families early they will find it easier to come and work with the school if they notice their child struggling or needed assistance in an area. Families typically want to be connected but often may feel like they are not able to be as connected as they want to be, therefore providing plenty of opportunities in the kindergarten transition could be very beneficial. For some families feeling connected may mean coming into the classroom and volunteering, or attending in-person events, but not all families are comfortable doing this. Simple activities that the school can do such as announcing and introducing new staff or sending pictures of what was done in class can also make the family feel like they are more involved in the process (Nixon, 2017) and help them to stay a part of the community. In our new digital world there are many simple ways and platforms available, to open up the door to connection. This will pay off in large quantities, as much research suggests that engaging families early is crucial to childhood transitions and finding creative ways to get them involved as early as possible, with the most useful being in kindergarten (Walsh et. al., 2018).

One of the main difficulties with keeping families engaged in the transition to middle school is that, rather than teaching one classroom full of students, teachers have up to five different sections that they are trying to teach, so there is less time to build a relationship with families (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Hill and Tyson (2009) also state that middle schools are typically much bigger and less personal than elementary schools which makes this transition much more daunting. These, along with many other factors, make it very important for the school and teachers to actively work to keep families engaged and provide opportunities to aid in this transition (Davis & Lambie, 2005). Parental involvement tends to be much more indirect at this

stage as children tend to crave independence and this makes it much easier for parents to distance themselves from education but schools must work to keep families from becoming disconnected. If families are not kept engaged in middle school you will rarely see them come back to being more connected in later years.

The transition to high school is also difficult as it does not really end in ninth grade and "it is necessary to address students and their troubles during various stages of the transition, not just once they reach the ninth grade" (Cohen & Smerdom, 2009, p. 180). Many changes occur throughout high school and constant communication is important. Though communication between parents, teachers, and students shows to increase high school achievement, most notably in math and science, 17% of parents report that they received no communication about their students' transition to high school (Iver et. al., 2015). Parents and families play a significant role in helping their children become successful members of society. They are also integral in guiding their children through this time of transition. Studies have found that students whose parents monitored and positively intervened in their child's activities (e.g., schoolwork, peers, participation) were more likely to transition easily into high school (Smith, 1997). Smith (1997) also stated that school contact with parents resulted in improved overall communication between families and schools. When schools and teachers encourage parental participation, they have higher levels of involvement. Students whose parents are involved are usually more adjusted, have lower dropout rates, and higher achievement. Parents should be informed about all aspects of the transition, course decisions, and planning of activities. Transition programs that involve students, parents, and teachers have the strongest effect (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). One very successful strategy to increasing parent involvement early in the process is by setting up home visits with freshmen students and families the summer before arriving to high school (Ferlazzo, 2011), to begin to bridge the gap of home and school before the child even sets foot on campus.

Many parents, especially those that did not attend college, worry about helping their student transition to careers or college after high school. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) stated that a family, and their knowledge and experiences, has the biggest impact on expectations students have about college and their preparedness or ability to go to college. This is why we often see children of people who did not attend college also follow the same path. Allowing students to explore college and career options while also involving families in this process (as a teacher, counselor or administrator) is very important in high school to give students and families the information they need. The more comfortable a family feels about initiating and engaging in conversations about college and other such options the more opportunities the student may have (Bergersen, 2009). Another area where families typically have concerns is paying for, or obtaining financial aid for, college. Exploring the costs of college can be very intimidating, especially for families with limited experience dealing with such costs. According to the Institute for Educational Sciences (2009) one of the most important steps that students (and families) need in successfully creating a pathway to college is increasing awareness of paying for college and types of financial aid available. By simply holding workshops for families about financial aid and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) students and families may feel more comfortable with this daunting process.

Overall, engaging families at every level is pertinent to helping students feel and become successful. When parents are happy and informed, they can more easily help their students be happy and informed. Just like the need to empower students in their own learning it is important for all schools to empower families with the skills that they need to help students. When we are able to encourage families to be a part of these important transitions it will not only help the school or the student but the relationship between all three.

Barriers to Increasing Family Engagement

The discussion of increasing family engagement is much easier said than done. There are many factors that may discourage or hinder family engagement such as personal matters with the families, teacher assumptions or biases, and schoolwide or district issues (Breese, 2017). Garbacz et. al. (2017) put parental barriers into two main categories: structural/logistical and psychological/attitudinal. No matter how they are categorized it is important to realize just how many barriers could be in place that will hinder student success. In a perfect world every school would work hand in hand with the families of their students and the families would be ready, willing and able help their students at any time. We know that we do not live in a perfect world and there are many reasons that families are not able to, do not know how to, or are just afraid to get more involved in their students' education.

In terms of personal matters that may hinder and discourage family involvement Panorama (n.d.) survey data the top barriers parents have to engaging in their child's learning are:

- How busy your schedule is (54%)

- Childcare needs (25%)

- School staff seems to busy (23%)

- Worry that other adults will treat your child differently (21%)

- Transportation-related challenges (19%)

- The school provides little information about opportunities (18%)

Barriers to helping a child's needs come in many different forms as, by looking at the results above, much of the challenge comes from perspective and/or circumstance. Schools may be able to establish regular communication to families or provide childcare and/or transportation, but if a parent does not feel comfortable becoming involved it could all be for nothing. When the problem has to do with perspective (such as school staff treating my child differently or the staff

seems too busy) it is something that the school may be able to overcome and communicate regularly with all families. Schools can send out information in a variety of ways to provide necessary information and allow teachers and counselors either more time or flexible time to meet with or work with parents outside of regular hours. In terms of personal barriers such as busy schedules and childcare needs it can be more difficult for schools to either know the problem exists or establish ways to solve this problem.

School staff can also contribute to limiting family involvement, often without even realizing they are doing it. According to Caplan (2001) there can also be many assumptions held by teachers that may hinder communication such as

- Parents who do not attend school events don't care about their children's success in school

- Parents who are illiterate, non-English speaking, or unemployed can't help their children in school

- Parents from different ethnic and racial groups don't understand how to help their children with school

- It's up to parents to find out what is going on at school

- Parent involvement is not worth the effort

If teachers hold assumptions similar to those above, they alone, can become a barrier to family involvement and be a major reason that families do not want to be involved. If parents do not see their given role, or feel their role is undervalued, they will often become disengaged. This can lead to parents feeling like they do not have the skills necessary to help their children become successful which leads to them being even more disengaged. It is important for administrators and teachers to understand that parental involvement is not always the one-dimensional way that is typically perceived (attending events and helping with homework) but

that there are a multitude of ways that parents can, and are, involved in their children's life and education (Garbacz et. al., 2017).

In addition to these barriers that may impact all family engagement we need to look at some of the systemic barriers that hinder this relationship for minorities and other underserved populations. One's own educational experiences can, and will, create a major barrier to the education of their children and African Americans tend to have a much higher rate of negative experiences in school (Koonce & Harper, 2005). Barriers like these are much more difficult to overcome as they are based in history that cannot be erased by some of the measures discussed in this paper. Other barriers to underserved populations that can create barriers tend to be limited financial resources, limited educational resources, and less flexible work schedules (Williams-Powell & Sanchez, 2011). Once again, these barriers may be much more difficult to overcome and will often need some sort of community involvement and supports that are outside of the school system itself.

Overcoming barriers is something that schools need to determine on an individual level as every school and community has such different needs. There is no universal solution that is going to help all families and keep them all involved and engaged throughout. One of the crucial areas that each school needs to determine is where these barriers are before they can begin to find viable solutions that will cater to the needs of their specific population. Parents and families want to be involved, want to be empowered, and want to help, but sometimes there is something beyond their control that does not allow them to actually do it.

Future Research Needs

This research was mostly completed by separating the two areas discussed above (the importance of family engagement together and the difficulties students have with transitions in school) and tying them together to show their correlations. Though there are a few large scale studies regarding this topic, not enough overall research has been completed in the areas of

combining family engagement supports with transition supports. Much of the research done

shows family engagement strategies at different levels but does not specifically identify

strategies that would be best for parents who are new to a school (or to the school district).

There are very specific needs for students, at any level, that should be addressed to ensure an

effective transition. According to National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments

(2020) some of these specific needs, for both parents and students, include

- Meeting the teachers, counselors, administration and other support staff

- Touring and getting an understanding of the building

- Providing peer contacts or mentors to support social and emotional health

- Communicating with the previous school

- Create a warm and inviting atmosphere

This does not come as a surprise, however, because the idea of family engagement is

something that can help students at any point in education, not just those who are transitioning

to a new school. Another difficulty with this is that the transition period may be longer in certain

schools than it would be in others. An example of this is the transition to ninth grade as it is

rather arbitrary to say that only ninth grade students need additional supports to help navigate

high school as there are probably many sophomores who are still struggling in school. Although

the research shows many strong connections between family engagement and each level of

student transition in school it would benefit to look at these unique needs of students in these

areas to try and find some more universal supports that schools could put in place.

Implications in School Counseling Programming

Engaging families is very important for schools to help make students successful. It is

also important to engage these families very early in the process because families who are

engaged early are more likely stay engaged throughout the child's education. The work and

support put in by families in elementary school, leads to successful students in middle school

and high school (Henderson,1987). In a typical school setting the school counselor is the first

line of defense for all new students. For this reason, school counselors are often also charged

with helping to create programs and orientation. Parents and families may not know the

implications and importance of their involvement in every student's success in high school. This

research and knowledge will help school counselors be able to not only implement such

programs, but also to show the evidence of their importance. Simply stated, involving parents,

or at least giving them the opportunity to be involved, will help shape their child's journey

through school and beyond, as well as help them to be more open if they need help in the

future.

In a school setting a school counselor is asked to be a leader and a change agent.

Davis and Lambie (2005, p. 147) remind us that school counselors are to:

> Take a leadership role in designing and delivering a comprehensive school counseling
> program that proactively engages all stakeholders (families, teachers, school personnel
> and staff, and the community) through collaborative and coordinated programs in an
> effort to promote the academic, career, and personal/social development of middle
> school students.

In addition to this, The American School Counselor Association (2019, p. 81) states that

in a school counselor's consultation role: "as experts in academic achievement, college/career

access and social/emotional development, share strategies that support student success with

families, teachers, other educators and community organizations." The keys to these statements

are that counselors must not only react to issues that may come up for students in terms of

transitions but to be proactive in helping to develop supports prior to a student ever setting foot

on the school campus. The role of the school counselor is very important to help in these

transitions and working to involve families in the process is shown to be a powerful and

worthwhile strategy.

Conclusions and Discussion

Change is hard for everybody, not just children, as many people struggle with moving to a new city, or to a new house, or to a new job. The main differences between transitions as an adult and transitions as an adolescent is that you have already, hopefully, had some good experiences transitioning in the past, have a better understanding of how these transitions impact you and, most importantly, are most likely doing it as a choice. Students are asked to move to a different school along with their peers regardless of how ready they are or if they are not ready academically or emotionally as it is mostly about age rather than maturity. This being said, it is important to have a support system in place for any transition, especially for adolescents who do not have the skills required to cope with all of the changes that occur.

A family being involved in education is important for every student at every level and sometimes we, as adults, seem to forget this as students get older. As adolescents become more independent and as lives continue to stay busy it can be very easy to think that these children can navigate all of this on their own, but we all must work together to continue nurturing and assisting children through their formative years. Research overwhelmingly shows that not only does engaging families early help students through their education but keeping them involved pays huge dividends to that child's confidence to keep growing and learning. It is not always easy, as something will always get in the way, but at the end of the day the student's needs come first and we must work to create the village it takes to raise the child to become ready for these future changes in life as they occur.

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