

# Meeting the Needs of Students in Transition

By Al Summers and Larry Moehnke

**I**magine being a young adolescent waking up one morning in a strange new place. Except for your family, you don't know anyone at all. You have no friends and you know very little about the school you are about to enter.

This scenario arises more and more for young adolescents as our society becomes increasingly mobile. This increased mobility has made ensuring smooth transitions a challenge to students and their families. Although traditionally thought of as single events—moving from elementary to middle school and then from middle school to high school—transitions today are anytime propositions.

Successful schools for young adolescents must move beyond tradition and develop into ongoing comprehensive approaches built on a commitment to teamwork and collaboration. There must be a yearlong focus on transition that includes school leaders, teachers, counselors, parents, family members, and the students themselves.

Schools that serve military personnel have been dealing with transitions from day one. Utilizing their proven strategies can help all schools as they develop plans to make transitions a smooth and rewarding experience for each student.

## Student-Led Success

For a week last May, eight middle schools became pilot schools for the Junior Student to Student (JS2S) transition program, a research-based program developed through a partnership between U. S. Army Child and Youth Services and the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). This program is modeled after the highly successful Student to

Student (S2S) transition program for high schools, which was originally piloted in 6 schools in 2004 and is now operating in 113 schools.

Both S2S and JS2S are school-managed, student-led school transition programs grounded in research on the unique needs of young adolescents. The JS2S program is designed to ease student transitions, whether the student is transitioning from elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, or in or out of the middle school in the summer or during the school year. The program is based on the principle that transition does not have to be difficult, just different. When students do not feel threatened by the transition process, and when someone understands them and shares in this transition, the process is more acceptable and less stressful.

The JS2S goal is to provide immediate support for the transitioning student by offering, from a peer viewpoint, valued information, friendship, and assistance in three critical areas:

- What do I need to know about the academic requirements at this school?
- Whom will I meet? How will I make friends? What about my relationships?
- How do I find my way around?



A team of volunteer students, supervised by school counselors, teachers, or other professional school staff, works with inbound and outbound transitioning students on three key transition subject areas:

- Academics
- Relationships with other students, faculty, and staff
- The campus, community, and local culture.

The JS2S team provides a forum for all incoming students to feel welcomed, comfortable, included, and accepted into their new school community as quickly as possible. The team helps outgoing students prepare for the transition to another school.

seventh grade. (Since the training was held in May, eighth graders were not included as they would be leaving the school before the program could be implemented.) Schools also were asked to ensure diversity by grade level in terms of ethnicity, sex, and mobility. Schools also had the option of including a parent volunteer.

During the training, the teams learned about the three key transition subject areas (academics, relationships, the community/culture). While the curriculum content is standard for each school that attends S2S training, the training process is completely customizable and can be tailored to fit the needs of the local school and community. JS2S training is designed around best practices for young

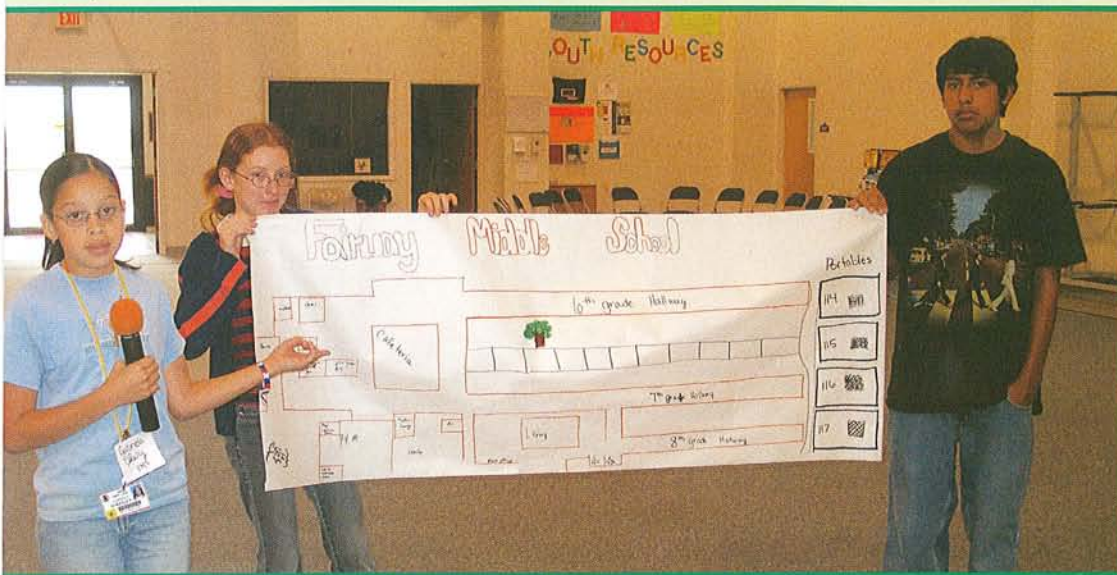
adolescent learning and takes advantage of the social nature of this age group and the need for activity and inquiry. Part of the training includes development of a school plan for each team.

The power of the JS2S program is that it is student-centered, student-led, and school managed. The JS2S program follows the “train the trainers” model, so each team is responsible for training more students on their respective campuses. When teams return to their schools, they initiate their

school plans in cooperation and under the guidance of the adults on the teams. Teams are responsible for

- Gaining commitment from staff, students, parents, and community members
- Planning and scheduling local training
- Conducting marketing at all levels, including seeking sponsors to help support the program
- Preparing local lesson plans
- Gathering supplies and equipment
- Delivering training
- Recruiting and training other trainers
- Evaluating the program.

As with all programs, JS2S needs to be well established to maintain success. If all responsibility remains with the initial team, the program is in danger of disappearing as the students move on or the adult members change jobs. Thus, the commitment the teams attain and the new members they train and bring onto the team will help the JS2S transition program become an integral and permanent part of the organizational structure of the school.



## Piloting the Program

The JS2S program was piloted in eight middle schools, selected based on their highly mobile student population and the schools' proximity to the training site near Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas. All eight middle schools feed into a high school that has a successful S2S program to provide for continuity of programs as trained students move from middle school to high school. The eight pilot schools are

- Audie Murphy Middle School (Killeen ISD)
- Fairway Middle School (Killeen ISD)
- Live Oak Ridge Middle School (Killeen ISD)
- Smith Middle School (Killeen ISD)
- Copperas Cove Junior High School (Copperas Cove ISD)
- S.C. Lee Junior High School (Copperas Cove ISD)
- Belton Middle School (Belton ISD)
- Lake Belton Middle School (Belton ISD)

Each school selected a training team consisting of two adult sponsors (counselor, teacher, or principal) and six students—three from the sixth grade and three from the



## Benefits of the Program

For the transitioning students, benefits include:

- Making immediate and positive peer contacts and connections
- Getting valuable and credible transition information from peers
- Building relationships and trust and fostering communication and mutual understanding with someone to whom they can relate
- Establishing an early comfort level with the new school and community
- Focusing on academics right away
- Feeling a part of the school
- Enjoying a better self concept.

For the school, benefits include:

- Investing in the students' well-being right from the start of the transition
- Meeting a very real need for students transitioning in and out of the school
- Helping create a welcoming, trusting, helpful school environment
- Preventing problems and reducing confusion caused by the transition process
- Improving the school's reputation and spirit
- Making students feel totally welcome and part of their school community
- Building a critical mass of active student leaders working as peer trainers and role models



For the student trainers, benefits include:

- Providing leadership opportunities and experience
- Developing personal and professional skills in project management, problem-solving, communications, and presentations
- Experiencing all aspects of training and being a trainer
- Being part of a team and learning to cooperate as a team member
- Learning lessons in citizenship, helping others, making a commitment, and developing new relationships with people they might not meet otherwise.

## The Beginning of the Journey

On the final day of the JS2S pilot school training, the students eagerly shared their initial plans for the local school programs and then received certificates for their participation. One could not help but think of a commencement—the end is the beginning. These students from eight middle schools will return and establish the first JS2S transition programs. As they develop their programs, their lessons learned will help plant and grow the seeds for programs in other middle schools.

With a program that is student-led, focused on the needs of the students, and supported by the school and community, transitions truly can be “not difficult, just different.”

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A session about the Junior Student 2 Student Transition program will be presented at NMSA's Annual Conference in Nashville on Friday, November 3, at 10:15 a.m. in Bayou A in the Opryland Hotel.

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