

Stumbling Blocks Your Child May Face During the Transition to High School, and How To Overcome Them

(Words of wisdom from high school counselors, experienced parents and adapted with written permission from the Boston School District's Countdown to High School.)

Stumbling Block #1: Change in Academic Expectations

Depending on what kind of high school your child attends, he/she may experience a significant shift in academic expectations compared to middle school. The expectations may be higher, or they may be lower, but either way, it can cause your child to struggle. If they feel expectations are lower, they may start to reduce the quality of their own work in order to fit in with their peers. If they feel expectations are higher, they may start to feel overwhelmed by the amount of work being asked of them. Bottom line-do not expect they will get the same grades as they did in middle school. It's important to factor in all of the other social-emotional changes that are taking place that may distract them from their best academic brain.

Strategies:

- **Be in communication with your child's teachers early and often about their academic performance. Make sure to attend the first Open House, and encourage your child's teachers to contact you about any academic concerns. Do not hesitate to call or visit the school if you are not hearing back from the teacher. High school teachers teach over 100 students, and your child may get lost in the shuffle if you don't initiate communication.**
- **Make sure that your child is completing all homework in all classes. At some high schools, homework counts for such a significant percentage of the class grade that students sometimes fail because they are not turning in homework.**
- **Encourage your child to utilize free tutoring resources available to them—Seattle and King County Public Libraries have free tutoring and study/homework help available on certain nights of the week. Some community centers do as well.**
- **Teachers at the high school sometimes have drop-in times as well. Help your child to develop a sense of agency and advocacy and have them reach out to teachers for help. They want to help!**

Stumbling Block #2: Dip in Confidence

The first semester of high school is the hardest and may take a toll on your teen's confidence. Between missing 8th grade friends, wondering about who they are now as compared to their 8th grade self, and being nervous about approaching new teachers-this can wreak havoc on one's self-confidence. They are wondering who they can trust, which group of friends to join, and how to explain the fact that they are trying their very best-but not achieving the same level of performance and grades.

Strategies:

- **Be patient and affirm that your teen is doing his or her best given all the changes they are going through right now.**

- **Allow them to grieve their middle school self. They may go through some loss of who they were in 8th grade.**
- **Acknowledge the roller coaster ride and let them know you are right beside them for the ups and downs.**
- **Don't compare them to who they were, they are becoming a new person and their brains are pruning accordingly!**
- **Understand that this is the most significant change they have ever dealt with. Their brains are undergoing the last major renovation.**

Stumbling Block #3: Lack of structure around after-school time

There are far less after-school resources available to high school students than there are to elementary and middle school students. The school day, in many cases, ends by 3:00 pm, and that leaves students with a lot of unstructured time on their hands. If they make poor choices when deciding who to be friends with, or start to spend a lot of time in places where there is no adult supervision, this can really put young people in harm's way.

Strategies:

- **Set a clear expectation around when your child has to be home from school every day, and how they need to communicate with you if they are going to be delayed.**
- **Encourage your child to get involved in extra-curricular activities at school, like sports.**
- **Get to know your child's new friends. Make sure they are young people who are making smart choices.**
- **When they are of age, seek out jobs for your teen that allow them to do positive work in the community (working at the Boys and Girls Club, community centers, pools, etc.), but make sure that the jobs have reasonable hours, and do not prevent them from being academically successful. (As an aside, Seattle Parks and Recreation offer many free training programs and work/volunteer opportunities for kids ages 13 and up. This is a great way to earn volunteer hours or earn money or a stipend. Here is the website: <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/teens/programs/teenjobs.htm#YES> Typically, applications are due in May.)**

Stumbling Block #4: Reduced Communication with Families as Kids Get Older

As young people enter high school, they start to view themselves as 'adults', even though they are still 14/15 years old. Many high school teachers and administrators begin to view them as adults, as well, and therefore choose to communicate directly with students about their performance, rather than involving families. Relatedly, when students stop coming to school, some high schools do not communicate well with families about this issue, assuming that students are old enough to make decisions for themselves. As a result, your child could be in major academic danger for a long time before you ever hear about it.

Strategies:

- **Scaffold your involvement with your teen as he/she enters high school. Definitely go to the Open House and Curriculum Nights. You know your teen best in terms of his/her abilities and needs. You may need to be more involved at first, then less over time. If you are concerned, email your teen's teacher to check in on their academic progress. Request frequent progress reports. Visit the school and meet the teachers. Make sure that the school knows that you are invested in your teen's education, and that you expect to be informed about your teen's performance in school. Check the grade system regularly for your teen's school.**

Stumbling Block #5: Appropriate Student-School Match

Sometimes students choose a high school based on what they think they want, or because their friends are going there only to get there and realize that it's not the right fit for them. In other cases, a student might be on an IEP or learning plan and find that the school does not have supports adequate to meet his/her needs. In still others, issues like transportation and school start and end time prove too difficult to overcome. In these situations, it may become apparent that the match between your child and his or her school of choice is not appropriate.

Strategies:

- **Encourage your child to ask for help when you can see that he/she is struggling. Help your child identify teachers who they like, and push him/her to build a strong relationship with at least one teacher, who can then identify appropriate supports.**
- **Communicate with the school early on to express the issues that your child is struggling with. Try to find allies--both inside the school, and through outside organizations--who can advocate for your child, and make sure the school is meeting your child's needs.**
- **Consider having your child switch schools, but only do this after conducting significant research to ensure that the new school will be an appropriate match for your child.**

Stumbling Block #6: Different Behavior Expectations and Consequences

Adolescents thrive on novelty. During adolescence, the pleasure centers of the brain are lit up and felt more powerfully than any other time in development. With this drive for pleasure seeking and novelty, there may be temptations and risky situations. More serious behavioral situations come with more serious school consequences.

Strategies:

- **This summer, go over the student handbook with your teen. The handbook is found on the high school's website. Make it a game and ask them to find out answers to certain questions. For example, what might happen if the school officials found alcohol or pot in their locker or car? Does the school have a right to search their locker and car? What happens if they are found drinking at a friend's house-will they get in trouble if caught? What is their bullying policy? What happens if they plagiarize?**

- **If there was a “teachable moment” on your behalf in high school and you don’t mind sharing about it, your teen could benefit from your past mistakes and lessons learned. Use discretion, but your teen will be really dialed into your experience and hopefully apply the lesson to his or her own high school life.**
- **Take the approach with your teen that they are going to make their own choices but it is good to be aware of all the facts about the school so they can feel empowered to make informed decisions.**