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# Navigating the Transition: Strategies for Supporting the Success of At-Risk Youth from Middle School to High School and Beyond

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**Navigating the Transition:  
Strategies for Supporting the Success of At-Risk Youth from Middle School to High School  
and Beyond.**

By

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

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Thesis Advisor:

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## **Background Information**

This literature review is dedicated to the teachers who helped at-risk students in the Swing Shift Options alternative program. Between 2002 and 2004, I was enrolled in this alternative program at Five Oaks Middle School. Swing Shift Options assisted me in improving both my failing grades and my low attendance at the time. I look back nostalgically and find peace with my disadvantaged origins, which inspired me to pursue higher education and the scholarships that came with it, such as McNair and NIH Build Exito. When I finished high school, I had a 2.8 grade point average. It did not occur to me to return to school until I was well into my 30s. Despite the fact that I was a non-traditional student at Clackamas Community College, I loved education more than I had in my prior chaotic adolescence. These early educational experiences helped me understand the value of education, inspired my growth as a lifelong learner, and stimulated my interest in pursuing an honors curriculum at Portland State University. As a first-generation student with a disability who is about to graduate in June 2023 with a bachelor's degree in psychology, I am now able to share my early educational experiences with others who share similar backgrounds or interests.

For my honors thesis, I am particularly interested in the recurring themes and interventions students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience when they transition from middle school to high school. I will focus on the benefits of later start times for classes, mentorship programs, and classrooms with fewer students as my three recommendations for improving the lives of young people at risk of dropping out. During the time I was in the Swing Shift Options alternative education program, a Ph.D. student who had been the principal of my middle school from 2002 to 2004 interviewed me. I came across her dissertation on the PDXScholar website not too long ago and was taken aback by how strange it seemed to me at

this moment in my life. The dissertation was written from the standpoint of an outsider, and I knew I could add from the perspective of an insider. My transition from middle school to high school was facilitated in large part by the three recurring themes that I will focus on throughout this literature review. As a young person who was thought to be at risk of dropping out of school, I will also discuss the significance of preventative science and early interventions.

### **Addressing the Problem**

It is a well-known phenomenon in the realm of education that children have a tough time transitioning from middle school to high school. Students confront a variety of challenges during this time. In fact, Ellerbrock (2014) stated that "The passage of students from the middle grades to high school is the most difficult transition point in education" (p. 3). According to Rice, et al. (2001), students who have lived in households with a high mobility rate have outcomes that are comparable to those of students who transitioned from middle school to high school: "The schools' transition from the middle to high school level of education has a negative impact on student performance, regardless of when the transition occurs or whether it is associated with a change in schools" (p. 373).

We know all students will make this transition, and, as a result, research aimed at easing this transition has received a lot of attention in the field of education. Rice, et al. (2001) argue that

Research has long documented the negative effect of frequent school transfers on the performance of students from high-mobility families. Although idiosyncratic transitions are typically the result of individual family decisions and circumstances, systemic transitions are predictable events that are imposed on school communities by education policymakers (p. 373).

Those who are regarded as being at risk throughout the process of changing schools are categorized as either exhibiting antisocial behaviors or having low academic accomplishment, or potentially a combination of the two. There are certain students who, for example, who struggle to make friends because they do not participate in any extracurricular activities that provide them the opportunity to do so. These students may have learning problems such as ADHD or dyslexia. This is in contrast to their contemporaries, who do not have difficulties with learning. Leterello, et al. (2003), affirm that “Even though students with learning disabilities engaged in fewer activities, participation was important for students in both groups during the transition” (p. 213). It is unfortunate, as also noted by Leterello, et al. (2003), that students with learning disabilities drop out of school at a substantially higher rate than the rate for their peers. In fact, Leterello, et al. (2003) found that “Students with learning disabilities had a dropout rate of 30 percent, one of the highest for students with disabilities” (p. 212). According to McIntosh, et al. (2008), students who exhibit antisocial tendencies, such as emotional or behavioral problems, are more than twice as likely to drop out of school: “Students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders have been found to be twice as likely to drop out of school than students without such eligibility” (p. 244).

One approach that shows a lot of promise is for parents of children with disruptive behavior to change their parenting techniques. Ryzin, et al, (2012), discovered that high-conflict households may lead parents to pull away, which allows children the opportunity to continue engaging in risky behavior without the benefit of adequate supervision. The encouraging news is that high-conflict families who took part in programs to address high-risk behaviors showed evidence of improvement as a result of the interventions (p. 2).

Recent research has put a lot of focus on meeting the academic needs of at-risk kids in middle school, high school, and beyond. Small learning communities and the benefits they offer students have been a big part of this research. As Ellerbrock et al. (2014) put it:

High schools have begun implementing developmentally responsive school structures and programs (e.g., small learning communities) for ninth-grade students to help foster a personalized environment that meets the unique needs of adolescents, promotes a sense of community and care, and bolsters academic success (p. 4).

The smaller learning community is a great fit for learning-disabled students. Almost all of the students who were interviewed for this study said that getting around in a bigger school was their greatest obstacle. According to Leterello et al. (2003), “Both groups expressed that as eighth graders they were fearful of high school, especially of the size of the school” (p. 213). If these students do not have their fundamental needs satisfied during the process of transferring to a new school, an alarming percentage of them will drop out of high school during their freshman year. “Ninth-grade failure rates are as high as 40% in many lower-performing, high-poverty urban schools throughout the United States” (Ellerbrock et al., 2014, p. 3). There is evidence to suggest that the future does not look particularly promising for individuals who do not graduate from high school. It would be unsustainable for society to continue to bear the costs associated with ignoring the problem, as described by McIntosh et al., who state, “Students who drop out of school are more likely to have lower incomes and to experience unemployment; in Canada, 62% of high school dropouts are unemployed. As a result, students who do not complete high school cost taxpayers billions of dollars in lost revenues, welfare, unemployment, crime prevention, and prosecution” (2008, p. 243). Thus, a preventative stance that will have a long-term impact

includes smaller classroom sizes, mentorship opportunities, and late school start times for the at-risk students.

### **Classroom Sizes and Student Achievement**

One helpful resource for exploring the controversy about classroom size is the Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) research project, a project that has been well-cited among scholars who are concerned with classroom environments. The STAR project was a four-year longitudinal class size study funded by the Tennessee General Assembly and managed by the State Department of Education. This research examined the academic performance of students in 79 schools from kindergarten through third grade. Approximately 7,000 children were randomized to one of three interventions: a small class with 13 to 17 students per teacher, a standard classroom size with 22 to 25 students per teacher, or a regular class with a full-time teacher's aide (Achilles, 2003). The results showed that students who attended elementary school in settings with smaller class sizes had a greater chance of succeeding on the Tennessee Competency Examination (TCE) in a variety of subjects, including language and mathematics, compared to those who did not attend schools with such settings during their elementary school years. Other long-term impacts included students staying on track with the rest of their cohorts at the appropriate grade level (Achilles, 2003).

Another factor that is considered to be a consequence of a smaller classroom is the possibility of teachers changing their pedagogy techniques. Surprisingly, improved pedagogy is not well supported in observational research in smaller classrooms. According to Finn et al. (2003), "Although teachers often report that small classes help them to individualize instruction, classroom observations do not support that perception" (p. 322). It was discovered via classroom observations that there was less emphasis placed on improving pedagogy and more emphasis

placed on spending less time disciplining students for problematic behaviors. And consequently, more time was available for addressing the needs of students (Finn, 2003). Absenteeism, low academic performance, and a lack of interest in social activities can all be linked to problematic behaviors. Students who come from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES) as well as students whose families are members of a minority group are more likely to be at risk than students whose families are members of the majority group. Nye et al. (2004), demonstrate that the small classroom sizes have a lasting impact on these marginalized youth when they state:

Although certain students do tend to benefit from the reduction in class sizes modestly, students of color and low socioeconomic status students do benefit the most; in fact, the longitudinal five-year research suggests that small class sizes have a lasting impact on both marginalized boys and girls in mathematics and reading (p. 99).

In fact, Nye et al. (2004), mention that it is plausible that high-risk adolescents are more likely to be placed in classrooms with fewer students so that they can benefit from this environment. Nye et al. (2004), state:

For example, a plausible hypothesis is that achievement (or expected achievement) causes students to be assigned to classes of different sizes, not the other way around. That is, students may be assigned to smaller classes precisely because their achievement is low (for example in compensatory or remedial programs (p. 95).

Since research shows that pedagogy does not change, contrary to what the teachers have reported, the question arises as to whether or not smaller class sizes are truly beneficial to improving academic performance, regardless of the reduction of problematic behaviors in these settings. If teachers are spending less time disciplining and more time teaching in smaller class



sizes, does this actually translate to improved academic performance? Additionally, as was mentioned earlier, the children who were interviewed expected that the transfer from a more intimate school to a more expansive school would be difficult. Although it may appear that a smaller classroom would be beneficial to those who are academically at risk, the results show that it is not statistically significant compared to the students who are higher achievers. This does not mean that a smaller classroom wouldn't be beneficial to at-risk students, but it does mean that the higher achievers benefit the most from the classroom reduction. According to Nye et al. (2002), "The net effect of small classes for very low-achieving students in mathematics is positive. It is just not any larger than that of their higher-achieving counterparts" (Nye, 2002, pp. 215-216). Also, the academic achievements of minority students, as described by Nye et al. (2002), weren't statistically significant for subjects like mathematics, but it was statistically significant for reading. These findings contradict the findings of the STAR experiment in Tennessee, which showed that children in smaller classrooms performed better in all academic disciplines, not just language. Perhaps the research that best supports smaller classroom sizes for at-risk youth is not supported by test scores and academic achievements but by the overall welcoming and inclusive environment that a smaller classroom has to offer these students.

Alivernini et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of emotional well-being and smaller classrooms. They suggest, "As regards educational policies, it should be noted that small classrooms appear to benefit not only cognitive and behavioral outcomes, as was shown by previous research, but also students' emotional experiences at school" (Alivernini et al., 2019, p. 185). Alivernini et al. (2019) further conclude that the beneficial influence that a smaller classroom has is due to the closeness that may be achieved via collaborative efforts with both other students and teachers. It would appear that kids benefit from having a feeling of belonging;

however, it is unclear if students who are at risk could benefit more from a mentorship-based program that enables healthy interactions with students who are near their own age or a reduction in class size. Also unclear is the ability of a teacher to develop a mentoring relationship and the size of the class. What exactly does it look like when a mentoring relationship is carried out in an effective manner? Does the size of the class matter? According to Finn et al. (2003), there is a need to better understand the sense of belonging principle because it has received less attention than "the visibility of the person" in a classroom (p. 346). What better way to have a sense of belonging than from a near-peer mentorship or from an instructor that is a mentor?

### **Mentorship Programs and Relationships**

Mentorship programs developed inside academic environments may be able to keep at-risk teenagers from falling through the cracks and dropping out. Although providing a mentor to at-risk adolescents may seem beneficial, difficulties may arise over the course of the match. According to Raposa et al. (2016), youth with the greatest behavioral and academic risk seemed to gain the least compared to their peers:

Findings suggested that the effects of mentoring were weaker for youth who had high levels of both types of risk: individual risk (e.g., behavioral, academic, or social difficulties, and environmental risk (e.g., family conflict, and poverty) relative to youth who had only high levels of environmental risk or high levels of individual risk (p. 320).

Hickman et al. (2014), found this is particularly true if they are identified as "at-risk" at a younger age than their peers:

For both males and females, the age they started the program was significant in predicting high school graduation. Namely, the younger the age of entry into the

mentoring program, the less likely male and female adolescents were to complete the program and graduate from high school. Such findings support a litany of research that suggests the younger a child is labeled as at risk, the more likely they will experience a life persistence course of problematic behaviors (p. 31).

Since the major obstacles that might prohibit success for the mentorship match may be due to the toxic and unstable households that these adolescents live in, the particular problems that they experience can lead to the weakening of a mentorship connection that is strained by numerous factors that are often unanticipated, such as frequent cancellations, crisis interventions, and generally just being combative towards staff. This phenomenon is described by Raposa et al. (2016),

Mentors of youth with high levels of environmental and/or individual risk reported more challenges within the match, such as more frequent cancellations by the youth, difficulty managing youth behavioral problems, and a greater need for program staff support in interacting with the youth's family, navigating social services, and addressing youth social and emotional needs (p. 321).

One strategy to avoid a rift with a mentor is to do a thorough screening for desirable qualities in a mentor. Possible qualities in a mentor include confidence in one's own abilities, an upbeat outlook towards younger generations, experience working with adolescents, and a history of community service. However, the formal mentoring of at-risk kids and the mentor's aspirations for the child may not be sufficient to counteract the problems, even though these ideal qualifications seem fantastic for a match with the most challenging behavioral and academic challenges a mentee may have issues with (Raposa, 2016). Regardless of these challenges, the best chance of success for the duration of a match with a mentor is to possibly come up with an

emergency plan for these students when they face environmental stressors because these issues are more likely to prevent a positive relationship with the mentor compared to behavioral problems, as Raposa et al. (2016), describe: “Environmental stressors were most likely to affect match duration (without necessarily causing decreases in relationship satisfaction), while behavioral risk factors were more likely to influence youth and mentor perceptions of relationship quality (without necessarily leading to early termination” (p. 327). Although prematurely discontinuing a mentorship match may be an unanticipated situation, the damage caused by doing so is comparable to having no mentorship to begin with and therefore should be a consideration when matched with the most at-risk participants, according to Zilberstein et al. (2017): “In studies of programmes promising a mentor for a minimum of either a school or calendar year, youth whose mentoring relationships stopped prematurely reported no gains and even decrements in functioning compared with controls who received no mentoring at all” (p. 2). If a student is at risk of having a mentoring relationship terminated early, it can be especially detrimental for adolescents with trust and attachment style challenges.

There are a few positive indicators that make a difference in the lives of at-risk adolescents, but being in a mentoring role that is likely to be influenced by these so-called environmental stresses that are beyond the control of the mentor and staff may seem like a futile undertaking to some people. According to the findings of Sulimani-Aidan et al. (2019), students who reported a sense of belonging and a sense of hope had the support of a variety of sources; nevertheless, the support of educational staff was considerably more related to a sense of hope for these students:

Both mentor support and staff support were found to be significantly and positively related to hope. Educational staff support received the highest score, whereas mentor

support received the lowest score. Levels of hope were high, as were levels of belonging, though the latter were slightly lower” (p. 705).

Haft et al. (2019), who believe that students who have learning disabilities or ADHD, which can make it difficult for them to build relationships with their classmates due to symptoms of depression and anxiety, may be at an increased probability of not having a sense of belonging, which may be a special risk factor for these students, “Overall the near-peer mentoring had a positive impact in reducing depressive symptoms and boosting self-esteem for youth with LD/ADHD. The increase in self-esteem has been observed in other studies as a consequence of mentoring for youth with LD/ADHD” (p. 325).

Children who come from disadvantaged communities often have problems with their attachment styles and their feeling of belonging in the world. According to the findings of Hurd et al. (2012), it is possible to show and motivate students who have given up on their academic pursuits by establishing mentoring relationships with African American youth. These relationships should demonstrate that upward mobility is possible despite the messages of society and racist institutionalized practices. “When African American adolescents perceive low public regard, they may engage with school less because they are less likely to see education as an opportunity for upward mobility” (p. 1197). Children who are the most resilient are given the opportunity to become so when they have been racialized by their mentor and feel a sense of pride in their racial identity and history. Hurd et al. (2012), proclaim that a chance for a mentor to speak with children about their identity benefits them tremendously “Researchers have found that stronger racial group affiliation and connectedness may promote more academic motivation among African American middle and high school students” (p.1196).

Beyond the Big Brothers and Big Sisters organizations that provide after-school activities and mentorship, a sense of belonging and healthy attachment styles should become a policy that Sulimani-Aidan et al. (2022), strongly support for all students that are deemed to be at-risk.

A possible implication for policy is to integrate mentors as part of the staff (teachers, therapists) in these educational settings. The mediating role of school belonging in the link between staff support and youths' hopefulness highlights the importance of strengthening youths' sense of belonging to school, especially among youth who struggle academically and experience adjustment difficulties or instability in school settings. (pp.707-708)

There is still one issue that has gained a lot of attention as neuroscience research continues to advance: the teenage brain and sleep. Even though the needs of children may be met with smaller class sizes and stronger mentorship programs, it remains a current and trivial question on which the public has yet to agree. So, what should the general public do in response to the ongoing controversy around whether or not it is appropriate for children to start school when they are more likely to struggle to wake up?

### **Late Start Classroom Times and Adolescent Sleep Quality**

Although it may appear that young adults spend all of their leisure time on social media, cell phones, and video games, this does not necessarily mean that these activities keep teenagers up late. In fact, the true cause of restless late nights is the sleep chronotypes, alpha wave activity, and melatonin release of these teens. Due to the hardwiring of our biological clocks, it is impractical to urge a teenager to switch off their computer or phone in order to promote sleep. However, it is conceivable to consider altering class start times in order to promote better sleep.

In rural areas of America and in highly religious households, there are some noticeable differences in navigating a homeschooled teen's sleep schedule compared to a student at a private or public school where the class times are rigid. In fact, Meltzer et al. (2016), found that homeschooled youth are more likely to be monitored by their parents "These children are more likely to be monitored for the foods they consume that may contribute to insomnia, such as caffeine products from soda, and electronics in their bedrooms" (p. 141). And not only that, but Meltzer et al. (2016), mention the discrepancies between homeschool and private/public sleep patterns being very noticeable "Public/private school students going to bed 39 minutes earlier but waking 85 minutes earlier than homeschool students. This resulted in public/private school students obtaining 49 minutes less total sleep time than homeschool students on weekdays" (p. 144). As kids who went to private/public school started their day at 7:56 AM the students who were homeschooled were just getting up. This means that the home schooled students would start their curriculum at 9 AM on average. (Meltzer, 2016)

Perhaps the biggest difference isn't the start times but the health outcomes for students who sleep in later. There is an increase of risky behaviors linked to poor sleep. According to Alfonsi et al. (2020), "Insufficient sleep was linked to greater tobacco smoking and marijuana use, alcohol consumption, and abuse of other illegal drugs. Sleep loss was further associated with unhealthy behavioral strategies, bullying, physical violence, and unsafe sexual activity" (p. 5). And physical health also is impaired by poor sleep, as noted by Alfonsi et al. (2020), there is "An increase in body weight, a higher risk of obesity, and a reduced physical activity in association with low sleep were observed in the teen population. Furthermore, sleep loss in adolescents is likely to lead to increases in blood pressure and high cardiometabolic risk" (p. 4). Furthermore, there is also an increase in suicidal ideation in sleep-deprived teens. (Alfonsi, 2020). And lastly,

one of the less obvious indicators that sleep deprivation is a real issue is the record of car crashes among teen drivers. According to Wheaton et al. (2016), “In a Kentucky county, Danner and Phillips saw a 16.5% decrease in motor vehicle crash rates for 17- and 18-year-old students in the 2 years following a 1-hour delay in school start time by county high schools. During the same time period, crash rates for this age group increased by 7.8% in the rest of the state” (p. 377). All of these issues are legitimate concerns for public policymakers and educational leaders about the implementation of later start times for students, but neuroscience research is the true reason why the public is discussing this topic now.

Research makes it clear that the teenage brain differs in many ways with regard to sleep. There is an increase in the amount of time needed to properly get a good night’s sleep, sensitivity to melatonin that differs from adults, and even the Alpha waves differ in adolescence. Wheaton et al. (2016), have found that “Most adolescents may need at least 9 hours sleep per night; however, less than 8% of high school students report getting this amount” (p. 363). Furthermore, Alfonsi et al. (2020), mention that “Recent data have also indicated that melatonin seems to exhibit greater sensitivity to evening light and less sensitivity to morning light in young people than adults” (p. 316). The decrease in sensitivity to melatonin explains why alpha waves are more pronounced in adolescents in the morning compared to the night; according to Dikker et al. (2020), “Students’ resting state alpha brain activity decreased as the day progressed, consistent with adolescents being least attentive early in the morning” (p. 1193). Alpha brain waves are the predominant brain wave pattern that emerges during drowsiness and the shift from waking to sleeping. Alpha waves persist until the onset of sleep and until they are replaced by theta waves (“Sleep Foundation”, n.d.). The findings of these researchers suggest that not only do adolescents have a reduced sensitivity to light in the morning, but also that alpha waves continue to be



present during the morning routine at school. But does that mean that students who get to sleep in later also tend to go to bed later? This is not so much the case according to Meltzer et al. (2016), who share that “Concerns that later school start times would cause later bedtimes have not been supported” (p. 141). In order to create a policy for school start times, it may be necessary to evaluate not only the scientific evidence gained from neuroscience but also the benefits for marginalized students who are affected by unstable home environments.

Philbrook et al. (2020), state that “Chaotic family environments characterized by noise, crowdedness, and unpredictability in routines have been associated with lower cognitive outcomes” (p. 578). Students from historically marginalized backgrounds may be impacted by this description of a chaotic household. Privileged students are more likely to have an advantage compared to their counterparts. As Neuroth et al. (2021) illustrate, “Schools with earlier start times had a higher proportion of racial/ethnic minority students relative to schools with late starts” (p. 7). There seems to be a protective factor for marginalized students if they have mothers who have higher educational attainment. As described by Neuroth et al. (2021), “Students attending schools with late start times were more likely to have mothers with at least some college education and to attend schools in urban locations” (p. 7). Indeed, the protective factor for all students is connected with the socioeconomic level (SES) of their families; hence, a mother's ability to provide better opportunities is contingent on her ability to provide sufficient resources. Although it may appear that educators have no control over the effects of disorderly and low-income households, it is nevertheless possible to take these aspects into account when problems develop. Due to the fact that not all children are able to advocate for themselves when presented with these hurdles, it is vital that educators investigate methods for identifying kids who may be at a higher risk for sleep disorders. Whenever academic or behavioral issues arise,

educators should also involve the student's parents in order to prevent more long-term harm. When it is not possible to involve the parents, children whose unstable home life provides the greatest risk of sleep disturbances should participate in a mentorship program.

### **Implications and Future Directions for Educators and Families**

As previously mentioned, the cost to society is significantly influenced by the developmental milestones that young people reach with the help of community and family assistance. Unfortunately, many children struggle to make a healthy transition from middle school to high school, which increases their likelihood of becoming dysfunctional members of society. It is necessary to identify the mediators that can enhance the lives of at-risk adolescents. Strategies such as reducing classroom size for better student achievement, supporting mentorship programs to foster healthy mentorship relationships, and facilitating later school start times for the developing brains of adolescents may need to be implemented. Educators may need screening instruments to identify students who require these interventions, and workshops may be needed to facilitate the successful transfer of all students from middle to high school, irrespective of perceived obstacles.

This literature review aims to promote a dialogue regarding the future of education and how students may benefit from additional support. Although it is distressing that it may be impossible to improve a young adult's home situation, evidence suggests that these students can still be supported and receive long-term advantages from smaller class sizes, mentorship programs, and later class start times. Educators and policymakers who would like to begin applying these interventions as permitted by their government and community should anticipate a promising future, despite the need for additional research on how to navigate chaotic households that affect the quality of education a student receives.

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