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Surviving Middle School Transition: A Parent's Perspective

The first time my son Sam saw what is now his middle school it was traumatic. We were there for a morning ceremony for his older brother and I was supposed to take him onto his elementary school afterward. Sam was so upset I could not get him to go into his elementary school. He is not the type of kid that has done this—ever. Sam wasn't able to express what upset him so much, but I had to guess seeing that giant school (it happens to be the largest middle school in the state) and knowing his brother went there that he made the connection that he might have to go there too. I knew if Sam followed his brother, I would have to get busy helping him with a difficult transition.

A little more background about this presentation. This is definitely not about “procedure”—although I'll try to answer those types of questions if you have them. It is based on the experience I have had with my moderate functioning son in FCPS with some insights I've gained from other parents. Just FYI, for all of elementary school, Sam was in an enhanced autism classroom, but included with general ed for morning meeting, specials and various academic subjects over time. He takes SOLs. We were lucky Sam doesn't have many behaviors, even though he does not “blend in” with the typical middle school kids. This leaves a lot more options open to us.

Even though not everything from our experience will apply to yours, but there are lessons for everybody with a kid going through this transition. I start with actions you can take in elementary school and end with entering middle school.

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1. Elementary School (Before Transition IEP)
 - a. If you have trusting relationship with your child's elementary school, share your thoughts about placements early on—I told our teacher I'd heard from parents that one of the schools we were considering worked really well for moderate to higher functioning kids; most of the schools would rather work with you than against you, in determining appropriate placements.

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- b. There are a range of options that might be appropriately considered for our kids.

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- c. Push for inclusion if you believe it's appropriate for your child –this is a fluid process that will evolve over time according to your child's needs (in my experience not always through IEP process, but should be with parents' knowledge). Successful inclusion in elementary school will give you more choices over time.
 - i. One parent told me when she was asking for new option she always suggested “short-term trials” for her child.

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- d. Visit all of the sites that are being considered for your child—really listen and keep an open mind about what’s best for your child!
- e. Have a list of questions for each site you visit
 - i. Opportunities for Inclusion
 - ii. Executive Function curriculum
 - iii. Evidence-Based Curriculum—I asked about the programs Sam was using (ie, Reading Mastery and Math Connections)
 - iv. Typical Day
 - v. Lockers, lunch and how changing classes is addressed
 - vi. Buddy or afterschool programs
 - vii. Ask about related services (speech, adapted PE, OT, assistive technology)
- f. Talk to parents of older kids in the schools you’re considering or that you believe may be considered by the IEP team.
- g. Don’t accept the limitations local teachers and administrators put on their programs if you believe the program is the best fit overall for your child

(Our MS ABA site—Poe-- told us that its students didn’t have the option of including and didn’t take SOLs; we have a child that does those things so we dismissed the program. We don’t regret the decision we made for my son, but I should have asked her to show me the policy backing up this school’s rules; FCPS administrators later told there wasn’t any)

- i. Programs are supposed to accommodate IEP team decisions
- ii. Fit the program to the child, rather than fitting the child into the program
- iii. If in doubt, ask for the written policy

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- h. Get your child ready. Find opportunities for your child to visit the school for fun activities if possible
 - i. iCan Shine--iCan Bike at almost every MS; iCan Dance at some schools, others
 - ii. School Plays and Performances
 - iii. PTA sponsored events (Basketball games)

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2. During IEP
 - a. Ensure any verbal agreements made during school visits are documented regarding inclusion, curriculum, etc

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3. After You’ve Come to Agreement on Transition IEP
 - a. This above all---Don’t let your anxiety rub off on your kid

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- b. Our kids are visual. Use social stories with pictures—you can easily make them using smart phones (some schools have available) to familiarize kids with new school, people (special ed chair, principal, case manager if known, teachers, or administrators or other staff they are likely to encounter during the day)
- c. Make it fun to continue visiting new school—my friend had her daughter bike in the school's parking lot over the summer; do drive-bys then go get a treat; anything to create a positive association for your kid
- d. Use positive language to explain how things work and “walk through” the day with your child
 - i. Wow I bet they have a lot of good choices for lunch in the cafeteria.
 - ii. Gym will be fun. Maybe you'll see friends from your elementary school.
 - iii. Look at the Media Center—I bet they have books about (insert your kids interest) in there!
 - iv. Boy, I'd like to hang out in your Personal Development classroom!
 - v. It will be fun to choose an elective (music, art, etc)—if that's appropriate
- e. Walk through child's schedule at least once (we did it 3 times, and were in the school on many other occasions including 6th grade orientation, events for his older brother)
- f. Ask the Special Ed Dept. Chair for assistance in scheduling tours for your child at quiet times, but when teachers may be there (teacher workdays)

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- g. Prepare a one-page CV or “letter of introduction” for your child and distribute to teachers (may not be as important for self contained)—also a good way to show that you're an involved parent

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- h. Try to “lighten the load” while your child is adjusting to new demands
 - i. SACC was too much for my son; we were ultimately able to pull him out.
 - ii. Are there afterschool activities you can postpone for awhile?
- i. Try to identify a typical peer (a sibling, a neighbor or someone from their elementary school) that will look out for your kid (especially on bus if they're not on special ed bus)
- j. Homework routine—heavier demands in middle school; help your child manage his/her time
- k. Keep in touch with teachers and school!

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QUESTIONS?