

## Programs to Engage Parents and Other Family Members

### SNAPSHOT

**Program:**

Successful Transitions

**School:**

Upper Merion Area Middle School

**District:**

Upper Merion Area School District

**Location:**

King of Prussia, Pa.

**Grades:** 5-8 (program begins in grade 4)

**Enrollment:** 1,135

**Free/reduced-price lunch:** 25%

## Easing the transition to middle school

### Successful Transitions

Upper Merion Area Middle School

*King of Prussia, Pennsylvania*

Founded in 2000, the Successful Transitions program at Upper Merion Area Middle School is designed to smooth the transition from elementary to middle school by helping students and their families adapt to their new, larger school and its culture. In a year-long program of meetings, visits, tours, correspondence between pen pals, and peer mentoring, students and parents become familiar with the middle school campus; school day routines and schedules; and the school's teachers, administrators, staff, and older students.

"The students get so excited," says Dr. Karen Geller, the school's principal for grades five and six. "The parents are more anxious than the kids," she adds. "That's one reason why we need to have a lot of face-to-face time with parents. We assure them that safety is the No. 1 priority."

Successful Transitions was developed by parents, staff, students, and community partners serving on the school's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP). In recent years, the school has seen improved test scores and steady decreases in suspension rates and bullying incidents.

### How the program works

Each year, about 300 fourth graders from four different elementary schools move to Upper Merion Area Middle School for fifth grade. Each fourth grader gets a fifth-grade pen pal. Throughout the school year, the pen pals send each other handwritten letters and drawings.



In February, the fourth-grade classes attend a drama production at the middle school and get a chance to meet the cast, ask questions, and learn about ways to become involved in school activities. All middle school students are welcome to take part in drama productions, and the visitation program encourages student and parent participation in a variety of middle school activities.

In the spring, fourth-grade classes at each elementary school are visited by one of Upper Merion Area Middle School's three

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principals. The principal answers questions and talks about the middle school schedule, expectations, safety, clubs, and other aspects of middle school life.

In May, each elementary school's fourth-grade class spends a day at the middle school. The middle school teachers give school tours. The students meet their pen pals, have lunch in the cafeteria, and learn how to use a locker. They also attend 15-minute classes in art, physical education, consumer science (cooking and sewing), and tech ed (engineering, robotics, computer, and industrial arts). Later in the month, fourth graders and their parents are invited to an evening at Upper Merion, where they tour the school and meet the school's three principals, who are available to answer questions.

In August, shortly before the school year begins, the incoming fifth graders and their parents are invited to another meeting at the middle school, where they meet the teachers. Students receive their schedules and become familiar with the building as they walk around and find their classrooms. Parents can purchase gym uniforms and school supplies at the school store.

After each event, parents, students, and teachers complete evaluation forms. The school's Action Team for Partnerships meets regularly to assess Successful Transitions, and the program is adjusted each year. Action Team members include parents, staff, teachers, counselors, and community partners.

### Evidence of effectiveness

- ▶ Successful Transitions was recognized by the 2010 National Network of Partnership Schools in the category, "Collaboration with Partners, Promising Practice."
- ▶ The school has received numerous awards, including National Blue Ribbon School of

Excellence, Department of Education Secondary School of Distinction Award, National Community of Caring School of Excellence, 2010 National School of Character (Character Education Partnership), 2011 National Network of Partnership Schools Award, and others.

- ▶ The school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the past five years. Standardized test scores show clear progress from fifth to eighth grade: In the spring of 2006, fifth graders averaged 71.37 in math and 68.35 in language arts. As eighth graders, the same class in the spring of 2009 averaged 81.25 in math and 86.72 in language arts.
- ▶ Suspensions have continued to decrease yearly, from a high of 315 in 2001-2002 to a low of 49 in 2010-2011.
- ▶ Incidents of bullying decreased by 20 percent in 2007-2008, then by an additional 5 percent each year between 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011.

### Exemplary practices

**Building a supportive school community:** The school's meaningful, challenging academic curriculum aims to respect all learners, develop their character, and help each student succeed. "We work for the success of the whole child, and particularly...for the success of students transitioning to the middle school," says physical education teacher Joy Power. The school strives to provide a comfortable, stress-free, and nurturing environment and to foster students' self-motivation.

**Welcoming the whole family:** Families of rising fifth graders visit the school during the spring of fourth grade and again in August, just before the new school year begins. Upper Merion treats families as partners not only for academic pursuits but also in the school's character-building efforts.

# Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0

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**Agreeing on core values:** As a Community of Caring school, Upper Merion integrates that program's core values—caring, respect, responsibility, trust, and family—throughout the school's curriculum and activities.

**Forming community partnerships:** The school has partnerships with more than 30 community organizations. The local Rotary Club, for example, has donated \$2,000 per year for books for the school library on topics such as "heroes and respect" and "families, diversity and good citizenship." All staff and students perform service-learning or community service activities. Parents and community members also engage in volunteer activities.

### Outlook

The Successful Transitions program began in 2000, when the school also launched its Community of Caring initiative. The Successful Transitions program is highly popular among parents and students. The Action Team for Partnerships will continue to evaluate each aspect of the program and make improvements based on parent, student, and teacher feedback. Program costs are minimal and are covered by the regular school budget.

### Association perspective

As Jerry Oleksiak, vice president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association, puts it: "Having worked for many years at Upper Merion Area Middle School myself, I can attest to the effectiveness of the Successful Transitions and Community of Caring programs. It's easy to forget how daunting moving from elementary to middle school can be for families and students. I'm proud to see that these programs continue to grow and thrive."

KING OF PRUSSIA, PENNSYLVANIA

### Local contact

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### Related information

**AYP report on school:** <http://paayp.emetric.net/School/Overview/c46/123468402/3394>

**Student performance data for the district:**  
<http://bit.ly/pd8DeK>

**School website:** <http://umasd.schoolwires.com/umams/site/default.asp>



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