

**Fresh Starts and False Starts:
Young People in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School**
Executive Synopsis for Educational Policy and Practice

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Executive Synopsis

Introduction

The Ontario Ministry of Education has recently developed a broad set of initiatives to facilitate Student Success. The Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18) Strategy was designed to meet five inter-related goals focused on the secondary school system:

1. Increase graduation rates and decrease drop-out rates;
2. Support a good outcome for all students;
3. Provide students with new and relevant learning opportunities;
4. Build on students' strengths and interests; and
5. Provide students with an effective elementary to secondary school transition.

Fresh Starts and False Starts: Young People in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School is a three-year ethnographic study which addresses the final goal in detail. It has been designed to a) examine the perspectives of students, educators, parents and administrators about the transition process, b) examine risk and protective factors for student preparations in elementary school and adjustments to secondary school, and c) describe social, academic and procedural aspects and experiences of transition over time.

Cross-panel school cultures were examined from 37 families of schools in Ontario to determine educational practices and characteristics that acted as barriers and/or enablers to transition in grades 8, 9 and 10. The study was intended to emphasize necessary next steps for educational policy-makers, practitioners, young people, and parents. This summary paper has been written to outline the actions arising from key findings. The full report details the methodology, data, evidence and implications.¹

The study was conducted in three Phases spanning 2007, 2008 and 2009. The complete sample over the three years of study consisted of 795 people participating in 124 Focus Groups and an additional 130 Individual Interviews with young people. The Phase I samples were comprised of 265 youth in 34 Focus Groups and 52 of these youth also participated in Individual Interviews. We also spoke with 33 educators and 23 parents in Phase I. In Phase II, we conducted 44 Focus Groups with 305 participants and carried out 78 additional Individual Interviews. Of these, 35 were follow-up Interviews with young people with whom we also spoke in Phase I. Phase III included 174 participants who took part in 29 Focus Groups. These consisted of 17 Focus Groups with 125 young people, 8 Focus Groups with 25 parents and 4 Focus Groups with 24 educators. Focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to address the objectives of the study.

¹ The full report *Fresh Starts and False Starts: Young People in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School* (Tilleczek, Laflamme, Ferguson, Roth Edney et al, 2010) can be accessed through the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Review of Literature

Our literature review² included over one-hundred international reports, academic papers, and policy documents. The analysis of the literature demonstrated that we can enact more enduring practices to facilitate the transition from elementary to secondary school. We suggested the first step be a re-conceptualization of grade 8 to 9 transitions as longer term, temporal, and social developmental processes. In addition, we pointed out the presence in adolescent development of *nested transitions*. Students are in a lifespan transition from childhood to adulthood making social, emotional, cognitive and physical changes within their families and communities. At the same time, they are negotiating school transitions and learner identities when moving from elementary to secondary school.

The simultaneous occurrence of these *nested transitions* requires recognition that the school transition takes place at a critical juncture in the lives of young people. As students, they face both *fresh starts* and *false starts*. All transitions are both growth inducing and/or potential trouble spots. Students look forward to the *fresh start* of moving into secondary school and are adept at making new friends for positive social and academic experiences. As the initial adjustment phase passes, academic issues such as the demands of homework take precedence over social and procedural issues. Young people are in constant motion and tension between *being* and *becoming*.³ They are in process of *being* themselves in their everyday lives. This includes issues of forging identities through daily negotiations at school, home, community, work, and with friends. As such, they need to be valued for who they are today and to find places to belong. Students are also in the process of *becoming* young adults with markers such as moving into high school and taking part-time jobs. However, at each stage of these nested transitions, young people need to feel a sense of *belonging* and being valued for who they are today.

Exemplary programs reviewed in the literature were those which assisted schools to support students and build bridges between students, parents, educators and communities. These programs were geared to assessing and providing a good fit between student needs and school cultures. Procedural strategies and practices which promote more interaction between students, parents and teachers are helpful, as are transition programs that address similarities and differences in assessment, pedagogy and curriculum as the transition unfolds. Risk factors during transition exist both within and beyond the school and across individual, classroom, family, and cultural levels. The research literature suggests that the shift from elementary to secondary school is a

² See Tilleczek, K. (2008). Building bridges for young people: Transitions from elementary to secondary school. *Education Canada*, 68-71. and/or Tilleczek & Ferguson (2007). *Transitions and pathways from elementary to secondary school: A review of selected literature*. Report to the Ontario Ministry of Education.

³ See Tilleczek (in press) *Approaching youth studies: Being, becoming and belonging*. Oxford University Press for a detailed examination of being, becoming and belonging as fundamental social processes for youth.

journey from a relatively less academically and socially demanding context to a relatively more demanding one. All students find some difficulty in negotiating this journey. However, the students most “at-risk”⁴ are those with multiple risk factors working at multiple levels (eg. academic, behavioural, familial). Close attention to students who are “at-risk” for multiple challenges at school is required in all successful programs.

The largest gap in knowledge from the literature review remained in understanding the longer-term process of transition and the ways in which schools, friends, and families intersect. The levels of classroom and school practices require further scrutiny. This is where the intersections of culture and individual meet to create barriers or enablers for students. While researchers have addressed important sets of variables in quantitative studies, we needed to capture and describe the experiences and meanings of these interactions and how they play out in the transition for Ontario’s youth.

As a long-term ethnographic study, *Fresh Starts and False Starts: Young People in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School* has provided the opportunity to pose and answer these more difficult temporal and process questions. This project has made contributions to the literature on youth transition both empirically and theoretically. In addition, it has provided numerous practical contributions to the Ontario Ministry of Education for use in policy and program development.

Findings

The data for this study are rich and varied. Each year we spoke with many students, educators and parents in Focus Groups and had additional conversations with young people in Individual Interviews. We also collected a good deal of socio-demographic and Face Sheet data from all participants. The data were then analysed through multiple means. The research team worked closely in collaborative analysis processes to assure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the findings. Data from both group and individual sources allowed us to view the transition to secondary school as one of a number of simultaneous, demanding transitions that students are making as adolescents. The Focus Group data provides a clear sense of the ways in which young people, parents and educators perceive and experience the transition. It also provides specificity of the main risk and protective situations for each of grades 8, 9 and 10. Participants provided a good deal of information on the social, academic and procedural aspects of school and transition through the demographic and Focus Group data.

⁴ The use of the term “at-risk” in relation to young people requires historical and cultural consideration. Risk is seen in our work as distributed in the cultural system and daily lives of youth and thought to be more about understanding the fluid situations of risk in which young people live. Enhancing risk situations is grounded in actual practices and assessments. Rethinking “at-risk” as “in-risk” situations allows for a better understanding of the fluidity of risk and resiliency and for the active negotiations on the parts of educators, students and families.

In developing programs and strategies to support the transition from elementary to secondary school the focus must be on the social ensemble of people who have specific and collective roles to play in supporting young people and educators. Resources and strategies are needed to be placed at the right place and time as defined by the ages, grades and life histories of students, the readiness of the family of schools to facilitate transition, the engagement of parents/families and communities and the region of the province.

The transition process extends past grade 9. The needs and perspectives of students change as they progress. Many of the key supports necessary to students' success will result from increased cross-panel planning and implementation. Successful plans and programs will take into account the social nature of the transition and will create initiatives which bring families, friends and students themselves more actively into the process. Programming to support students perceived of as being "in risk situations" must take into account the transient nature of risk and the fact that any student may, at some time, be in a "risk situation." The feedback of students, parents and educators regarding the success of some current transition initiatives underlines the potential rewards of extending and improving our programs to support successful student transition into high school.

Youth, parents and educators differ as to what they see as important in the process of transition. Parent's ideas and concerns about transition were more stable over time. And, both youth and parents remained at the core of the process for parents. Educators were dissimilar from youth and parents and quite variable in their concerns around transition but were all eager to highlight their school success stories. Youth were focussed on friends, school and the troubles they encountered (or thought they would encounter) at high school as they first prepared for and made their transition. They then began to squarely place themselves and their friends at the centre of life and school. Self and friends were integral in elementary school and became more so across the years. The ongoing importance of friends for young people remains a critical aspect of transition although the character of these relationships changes over time and must be understood as such. Young people provided real insight into the emotional paradox they experience during transition. They provided a range of emotions in each grade demonstrating that transition is not a process that produces easily defined emotional experiences. For example, they were simultaneously excited and anxious; hopeful and fearful; confident and confused.

Therefore, not only do issues of timing, grade, region, gender, culture, and youth development matter in the conversations and programs about transition, perspective also matters since different stakeholders attend to different aspects. These lessons from the data are important to remember in programming and in assembling the community of people to support transition. The study shows that we need to make the stakeholders aware of the concerns and perspectives of each other. Students, parents and teachers need to be engaged around transition in elementary school and then re-engaged in secondary school as the focus and needs of students change. Educators need to detect what is not working for students during transition and fix it with the help of an engaged

community of helpers. The data shows the need for more attention to be paid to the role of friends, families and community agencies during transition.

Transition was seen to be negatively impacted by in-school and out-of-school situations including the following: students not making successful starts in social and/or academic realms; use of “scare tactics” with grade 8 students; large changes or discontinuities in workload, curriculum and pedagogy; not being placed in an appropriate high school program; and out-of-school factors such as family stress, poverty, emotional struggles and peer troubles which are not detected or alleviated.

The message from the study is to celebrate and continue transition initiatives and programs that are successful and noted by students, teachers and parents. Young people need to be recognized for their strengths, hard efforts, insights and hopes. Educators and parents need to be celebrated for the ways in which they are successfully preparing and facilitating young people in transition but also for the ways in which they create the school and home learning and living atmospheres that are so appreciated by young people.

Transition creates stresses that can be addressed. Time and support are essential ingredients in success. Indeed, transition was seen to be facilitated by in-school and out-of-school situations including the following: supports for *fresh starts* or changing attitudes towards school, supports for positive social development and making friends, giving time to get acquainted with new schools and new peers, support for meaningful and sustained cross-panel conversations and programming, cross-panel transition teams, assuring ongoing caring adults, positive school cultures and climates with good programs that best fit each young person, and the ongoing engagement of families.

The study has provided many kinds of data. The detailed narratives of young people arising from follow-up Individual Interviews show the complexity and intersections of daily life in families, schools and communities and how the process of transition into secondary school is nested in other developmental tasks and transitions. These stories allow us to break through into the daily lives of young people and recognize their *fresh starts* and *false starts* and how/when we could better intervene and support them when needed.

Recommendations

Policy and Implementation

The participants in the study consistently demonstrate how the transition is temporal, nested, complex and fundamentally social in character and requires policy and programs to build extended, cross-panel transition teams and plans.

The transition will be made more successful when the Ministry of Education and Boards of Education:

- Provide leadership and support to educators to understand the transition from elementary to secondary school as occurring at a dynamic time for students. They are in the midst of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and family changes and educators need to understand this complexity and to reflect on its meaning for teaching their students;
- Emphasize the core role of cross-panel transition teams in assessing impacts of the variable nature of families of schools and the successes and failures in supporting the transition of their students. Each family of schools will have established continuities and discontinuities in transition which should be examined, discussed and assessed in cross-panel transitions teams;
- Continue to build supports to extend the transition planning processes to include more elements and people in their transition teams and planning (eg, parents, young people, community agencies, educators across panels, etc);
- Review the various definitions of “at-risk” and the practices relating to transition (eg, at-risk or grade 8 students profiles). Ultimately the definitions and school practices should reflect the importance of the concept of “in-risk” situations and/or potential resiliencies and trajectories of transition. “In-risk situation” portfolios might be developed and discussed with cross-panel teams and on an ongoing basis from grades 8 to 10. All of the academic, social, familial, health/wellness and goals of youth should be considered;
- Review the extent of transition programming across boards and regions. Determine whether differences in context (rural/urban, north/south) require adaptation of transition programs to support optimal transition;
- Build on the successes of existing programs and strategies in each stage of transition. Transition resources need to be directed to the right place at the right time. This will be best accomplished with attention to the needs of individual families of schools within specific regions and across all phases/grades of transition.

Educational Practice

School Administrators

Educators, young people and parents provided perspectives on what is/is not working for transition at the school-based level. They agreed that people such as elementary teachers, high school teachers, guidance counsellors, principals and parents working together at the everyday level make a big difference. They spoke about the necessity of continually

working together to build on already helpful cross-panel work. Young people were looking to schools for a safer place and for better school spirit. They reported being impacted by negative rumours about high school in general and the reputations of specific schools. Many of these issues can be addressed by improved and/or extended cross-panel relationships and planning.

The transition will be made more successful when we:

- Support educators who recognize and value the place of cross-panel work in promoting transition. Cross-panel transition planning, programs and practices are a necessity;
- Inform cross-panel discussions by examining the specific discontinuities and continuities that exist in each family of schools. Continuities/discontinuities can be either positive or negative and both elementary and secondary educators will need to develop coordinated strategies to address these issues;
- Provide support and strong processes/programs for cross-panel transition planning in all its emerging elements (eg, flexible time tables, student “in-risk” situational profiles, caring adults, student success teams across panels, strategies/interventions, training for transition planning);
- Connect with communities and agencies that support students in their complex modern lives and assist in monitoring and supporting students “in risk situations”. Maintain and build on any positive integration that is currently happening in either elementary or secondary school. Ensure that it continues and is augmented;
- Broaden the range of school social activities for young people as they move into high school. The drop in participation in high school is set against the background of young people hoping for more teams and clubs as they enter high school and their appreciation for extra-curricular activities as necessary social events. Even if these are available, however, there is a group of students who are consistently not participating. Given the fundamentally social character of the transition, this is a situation to address.

Educators

In discussing transition, educators focused on the many barriers and enablers relating to school and family. Educators highlighted their own roles in supporting students in transition and shared with us their success stories. They also spoke about the importance of providing caring adults and the need to work closely with their partner schools across panels. Students shared with us both their deep appreciation for excellent teachers as well as a desire for more human connections with educators.

The transition will be made more successful when we:

- Remind educators that transition is a fundamentally temporal, nested and social process of *being, becoming* and *belonging*.⁵ Parents and friends play a critical role for students in this process;
- Continue to provide educators with processes to support parental/familial engagement in transition;
- Provide educators with support for cross-panel transition planning, programs and practices. Ensure opportunities for educators who value cross-panel work to put into practice their focus on promoting transition; providing support and processes for cross-panel transition planning and implementation (eg, flexible time tables, student "in-risk" situational profiles, caring adults, student success teams across panels, and strategies/interventions);
- Examine the specific discontinuities and continuities (such as pedagogy, assessment practices and curriculum) that exist in each family of schools to inform cross-panel discussions. For example, identify the positive or negative discontinuities and continuities for student academic and social success inherent in the transition process from grade 8 to grade 9 (or elementary to secondary school);
- Provide support and professional development to educators for the following: integrating friends into class work especially in Grade 9, making learning fun, demonstrating care to students in transition, supporting students' different learning needs, providing further information and help with high school decisions, and supporting and understanding the emotional paradoxes of transition;
- Understand that "risk" is not a characteristic of students but an interaction of young people and the situations they find themselves in at any time. We propose the concept of "student in-risk situations" suggest the use of "in risk profiles" as a way of being more sensitive to the broad range of student needs related to risk;
- Encourage and facilitate students' participation in extracurricular activities as a way of increasing their engagement with school and expanding their network of social supports.

Young People

Young people are at the heart of the transition. Their feelings and emotions about transition remain paradoxical but alter in character over time. They set academic goals for themselves at school and see social goals and processes as the way to become better educated. Transition takes place not just at school but also in a larger social context, as a part of the developmental paths of young people. Transition is nested and occurs with the assistance of friends and peers in schools and communities.

⁵ The complete report provides further specific suggestions as to ways to address each in educational programming and practice.

The data indicate that for young people, transition is more a social than only an individual process. The importance of close personal friends is a characteristic of young people and for this reason, friends can make transition easier. Friends are a primary and continuous element of the transition and only start to diminish slightly once the transition is realized.

The transition will be made more successful when we:

- Develop mechanisms that encourage students to move from elementary to secondary school with their friends;
- Support young people to make new friends and acquire a sense of belonging;
- Support the development of learner identities and good attitudes about themselves and their friends when making school transitions (“don’t be scared, be yourself, make good choices, do your work, join activities”);
- Support young people and their friends in juggling their school/work/life complexities;
- Make youth aware that missing classes may be a part of the grade 9 experience that can both paradoxically provide social status and disengagement. Alternatives to ‘skipping school’ as a way to gain social status should be addressed.

Parents

Parents and families are an essential part of transition. The focal point of transition for parents is their sons and daughters. Parents are aware of the importance of peers and classmates in the education of their children. Parents are generally aware of what is going on at school but are under-invited and under-engaged on transition teams/programming at present. There is a range of useful methods for keeping them engaged, but face-to-face communications are the most appreciated.

The transition will be made more successful when we:

- Invite parents to help set the foundations for transition in elementary school as many are still left out. They need to be continually re-engaged in the adjustment to high school at a time when their sons and daughters may want them to be differently engaged than they were in elementary school;
- Make parents aware of the importance of friends to the transition.