



# Navigating the Transition to Middle School for Students with Disabilities



The transition from elementary to middle school is a big change for any student—but for students with disabilities, it can be especially significant. It is also a major transition for parents and caregivers who have spent years building relationships with teachers and staff who know and understand their child. Many families are leaving a familiar environment where routines, supports, and communication are well established. Moving to middle school often means a new building, new expectations, multiple teachers, changing classes, lockers, and increased independence. At the same time, students may be navigating social, emotional, and developmental changes that come with adolescence. Without thoughtful planning and support, this transition can feel overwhelming for both students and their families.

Because of these changes, it's important for the IEP team—including parents and caregivers—to work together to plan for and support a smooth transition to middle school.

## ▶ Planning Ahead: Transition IEP Meeting

A transition-focused IEP meeting should be scheduled in the late spring of a student's 5th grade year to prepare for the move to middle school.

Including a representative from the middle school—preferably a teacher—can be especially helpful. This team member can share what the student can expect in terms of schedules, routines, and classroom expectations, helping the team plan appropriate supports.

During the meeting, the IEP team should:

- Review IEP goals and determine appropriate supports and services
- Identify any needed Specially Designed Instruction
- Consider accommodations that will support the student in the new environment

Accommodations may include adjustments to the learning environment, instructional methods, organization systems, and how the student demonstrates learning.

## ▶ Visiting and Exploring the New School

If possible, visit the middle school and take a tour. This can help both you and your student become more familiar with the environment and identify potential areas of need.

As you reflect, consider:

- Will the student need support navigating hallways and buildings?
- Can the student independently manage a locker?
- Does the student need a planner or schedule to manage multiple classes and assignments?
- Can the student effectively self-advocate?
- Does the student have the social skills needed to engage with peers and staff?
- Can the student manage personal care routines independently, such as changing for PE, tying shoes, or handling clothing fasteners

Discuss these considerations with the IEP team to determine what supports may be necessary for success.

## Preparing Your Student

Change can feel overwhelming, but preparation can make a big difference. Over the summer, consider the following strategies:

- Talk about what the new school may be like and how it will differ from elementary school
- Encourage your student to ask questions and share concerns. Reach out to the school to get answers when necessary
- Practice new routines, such as morning schedules or bus times
- Build IEP-related skills such as organization, following directions, and self-advocacy
- Practice using a combination lock
- Practice independence with daily routines, such as changing clothes for PE, tying shoes, and managing personal belongings
- Practice using a planner or other organizational tools
- Attend any available summer events or orientations at the new school

Reading books about middle school transitions can also help students feel more prepared and less alone in their experiences.

## Building Connections with the New School

Strong relationships between families and school staff are key to a successful transition. Start by exploring the middle school's website to learn about school policies, schedules, staff, and available supports. This can help you and your student become more familiar with the new environment and prepare questions ahead of time.

- When schedules are available, reach out to your student's teachers to introduce yourself and your child
- Share helpful insights about your student, including key supports from the IEP
- Use tools such as ECAC's "[Painting the Big Picture](#)" to communicate important information about your child
- Ask teachers about their preferred communication methods and how often you can expect updates
- Attend orientation events to help your student become familiar with the building, staff, and peers
- Introduce your student to key staff such as counselors, administrators, and support personnel

## Ongoing Support and Flexibility

Ensure that the middle school team is aware of your student's needs and that the IEP reflects appropriate supports for the start of the school year. It is also appropriate to reconvene after the school year begins if adjustments are needed. As students settle in, new needs may emerge or existing supports may need to be refined.

## Final Thoughts

Middle school is an exciting time filled with opportunities for growth, independence, and self-discovery. While the transition can feel challenging, thoughtful planning, open communication, and a collaborative team approach can make this a positive and successful experience for both students and families.

**You don't have to navigate the middle school transition alone.  
Contact an ECAC Parent Educator today for support.**

**1-800-962-6817**

**[www.ecac-parentcenter.org](http://www.ecac-parentcenter.org)**

