

Easing Transitions

Content provided by Rashad Norris

Imagine you're a student who hasn't been to school for some time. Maybe you're rejoining students you knew years ago or are meeting them for the first time. You're not familiar with the idiosyncrasies of how each teacher wants you to turn in your work, or if late work is accepted, their cell phone expectations, or when you can get out of your chair. The anxiety of sitting in the lunchroom and finding the people who will understand you best is high.

Everyone struggles with transitions, but they are especially stressful when they impact your identity. Schools play a crucial role in helping youth experience a sense of belonging from day one. They need to know they belong at school and that they can trust the school to support their needs.



Rashad Norris mentors justice involved youth. He's seen youth that experienced positive welcoming returns to school and some that have missed the mark. Here are some of his suggestions for what schools can do to ease transitions.

Connection Opportunities

According to Norris, one of the most important things you can do to help a student who is in the middle of a transition is to be regularly checking in with them. They need to know a trusted adult is supporting them when they have questions and when they need help. That adult has the power to set the tone.

Ideally, a youth could experience a cohort model where they could connect with someone who has already been through the transition to help them.

Youth often don't have advocates helping them and haven't been identified for supports through Individual Education Plans or 504 plans. A school can help students by screening for common learning disabilities from the outset and providing those supports. If a student hasn't attended school in a long time, their reading may be slower, they may need more time on assignments, or breaks throughout their day.

Norris recommends connecting with youth through technology. Send those texts! Encouraging messages like, "keep going!" motivate mentees to stay on track. He also likes to remind youth, "You're the light for the next generation." There are other kids who look up to them. They have the choice for how they're going to live their lives.

What a Teacher Can Do

Justice involved youth often have their stories told for them. It is helpful for teachers to know when a new student is expected and their circumstances so that they can be proactive in offering supports. Teachers have an opportunity to build trust by inviting students to introduce themselves in their first assignment. Learn about who they are, what they're good at and what motivates them. Ask the student to tell you their story and let them know that you want to help. And once a teacher knows that story, it's important to maintain professional boundaries and respect their privacy by not sharing that story, but encouraging other teachers to connect with the student also.

As a teacher you also can encourage social connections. Finding a student leader in the class and pulling them aside to ask that they pay attention to the new student and help them if they look stuck can go a long way to helping a new student build social connection and to give them an alternate support in the classroom. It also helps to establish the student leader and new student as equals.

A teacher can also encourage new students by making sure the student experiences success in their first 5-6 assignments. They can use a gradual release once the student has the hang of it.

It's easy to forget that a new student is still just a kid. They might be nervous and not want to raise their hand. The classroom environment can scaffold supports for a student by providing examples of how to do the work well, checking in on progress, and encouraging more classroom discussion. The last thing you want a kid to feel is that going to school is a lot like being in jail.



Encouragement

And although we know it's above and beyond, it's always a great idea to have food, drinks, healthy snacks available. Nutrition can make a huge difference in motivation, energy, and attitude. Not all students have access to healthy foods, so it's great to be able to offer fruits and vegetables.

You might also think about establish some incentives for the new student. Some schools offer school logo gear, gift cards, food, to encourage assignment completion or other positive behaviors.

Measures of Success

What does success look like? For a new student an easy win is celebrating good attendance. Knowing that they are seen is an important part of feeling a sense of belonging. Encouraging a new student to join sports, clubs, and help them onboard with the right gear, be a TA, or participate in assemblies and field trips goes a long way,

Learn more from Rashad Norris on his website [Relevant Engagement Consulting](#).

Contact

Rashad Norris | relevantengagementllc@gmail.com