

# parents *a parent's journey to middle school*

BY CHERYL M. RICHARDSON

It was the first day of school—again. As I approached the building where my son, Kyle, would be a middle school student for the first time, I saw two staff members. I watched this two-person team, one woman and one man, greeting the arriving students with smiles and a firm “Welcome back.”

This was a wonderful way to start off a new school year, I thought. It was going to be a different kind of year in more ways than one for me, a parent—and for Kyle it would be extremely different. In June he had said good-bye to his elementary school and I knew that middle school would be a time of huge transition. After all, he would no longer remain in one classroom, nor have the same two team teachers each day. His workload would be increasing and the demands of the new curriculum might be taxing. I was concerned about how this might affect him academically and physically, as well as socially.

## Kyle's Early Education Story

I recalled the previous years and his former schools and then I thought back to how it all began. . . . Kyle was approaching his third birthday. He had a limited vocabulary and the pediatrician recommended that he have a hearing evaluation. This led to a language evaluation, which showed that Kyle had receptive (taking language in/hearing and understanding) language delays and expressive (speaking) language delays. I remembered the fear and panic I felt at that time along with the many questions I had.

One event led to another and a formal Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) evaluation was suggested. The CPSE evaluation included an educational evaluation, a social history, and a psychological report. The

evaluation report recommended that Kyle receive full-time, 12-months-a-year preschool services. He did.

Those years at his preschool prepared him to be a well-rounded individual for the elementary school years that followed. The decision to have Kyle placed in the special education preschool program had proven to be a wise one. I feel (and teachers and other professionals have confirmed) that Kyle's work and progress resulted in a higher level of cognitive and academic functioning than he would otherwise have had.

## Elementary School

As he began a new chapter in his life with elementary school, new challenges began to appear. As a parent and educator, I

knew that the need for and challenge of developing early literacy would begin to play an important part in his life. There would be an extreme emphasis on reading and writing, which might be difficult for him.

I referred to his time in the 1st-grade class as the “getting his feet wet” stage. Kyle had to get used to his new class, the new environment, new teachers, a bigger school, and more work. I knew that as a parent, I would have to adjust my personal time in order for Kyle's adjustment to be successful.

The 2nd grade proved to be an eye-opener for Kyle. He had two of the best teachers that he had ever had (I still think they are two of the best). They were thoughtful and their love for their students was evident in their instruction and their interactions with the parents. Their own love for reading was contagious and spread to their students. Kyle began to love and enjoy books. His writing was getting better, and his thought processes were coming clearer as he began to write more frequently.

Kyle's 3rd grade, to me, was an extension of what had happened in the 2nd grade, but things began to pick up in the 4th grade. Everyone in the City of New York, especially all educators, knows that 4th is a major grade in the elementary school setting. Fourth grade is the one that New York State looks at to see what headway in literacy the schools and students are making.

My fears increased because I knew that the pace of 4th grade might be too much for my son. Fourth grade was hard. The assignments became

longer. Kyle read for 20 minutes and wrote in his writing journal each day. Sometimes Kyle wrote to his teachers about what he thought about their assignments. At that time, the after-school literacy program kicked in, and Kyle complained bitterly about it each day he had to attend. His teachers drilled and drilled in literacy and math on a daily basis.

At one point, Kyle received a “promotion in doubt” letter stating that if he did not meet the required standards at the end of the year, he would have to repeat the 4th grade. The letter tore my inner being totally apart. How could this be happening? How would I explain this to Kyle? The explanation was short and to the point. At the end, Kyle knew he had to work hard in order to get ahead. We intensified our work at home and began to spend more time on everything he brought home.

I began to feel as if I was repeating the 4th grade even though I did not recall this level of pressure when I was in school. His hard work paid off: at the end of the year his literacy and math progress were enough to get him promoted to the 5th grade.

I had thought that Kyle’s 2nd-grade teachers were the best—they now had competition, because his 4th-grade teachers were in the race with them. They supported him from day one. They were aware of his strengths and weaknesses and adjusted their instruction so that his needs would be accommodated.

At the end of the school year, I received a letter that informed the parents that the 4th-grade teachers would be “looping up” with the class.

“Looping up” meant that the teachers would move up with the entire class to the next grade. Kyle’s teachers told me that they were excited about it because they had great plans for the students for the next school year.

I could understand their excitement—here were two teachers who loved working together, demonstrated true teamwork, and enjoyed teaching their students. We were all happy. As a result, 5th grade felt like a continuation of 4th grade—as though the students were just continuing where they had left off in the early summer. Looping up saved the teachers time that might have had to be spent on assessing their students, because they already knew them, and it saved me the time I would have spent getting used to two new teachers. Fifth grade was actually fun even though the academic pressure increased tremen-

dously for everyone. This grade consisted of preparation for junior high school and instilling independent habits in the students.

I had seen such growth in Kyle over the years. He had entered PS 164 as a shy little boy and now was becoming a mature individual. Kyle, along with another student, was selected to lead the school each morning on the loudspeaker with the school’s mission statement, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the introduction of the principal for the day’s announcements. When I heard that he was doing it, tears came to my eyes. Here was a boy who only had 20 words in his vocabulary at the age of three, and now he was speaking on the loudspeaker for all to hear. He became a celebrity—most adults in the building knew him because they recognized his name and his voice. I was overwhelmed by the entire event.

Nevertheless, I was beginning to go into a panic because I had no idea where Kyle would attend junior high school the following year. I began to look at all my options. I asked colleagues for their recommendations on schools they were familiar with. I decided to go to the person who had assisted me in finding Kyle an elementary school, which turned out to be a wise decision. She was honest with me and gave me her picks for junior high school for Kyle that had collaborative team-teaching programs, which he had become accustomed to. By early June, we knew that Kyle would be going to William McKinley Junior High School in September. I was happy with the decision, but Kyle was showing anxiety and some fear.

## Transition to Middle School

I knew as a former student and junior high school teacher that changing rooms from class to class, having a binder with dividers and having a different teacher for every subject would be hard to get used to. I thought about what I could do for my son. My first step was to take him to the school during the summer. We circled the school two or three times to show him how different his new school looked, how much larger it was than his elementary school. The second step was to give him pep talks on how capable he was of doing the work he would be receiving and how this was an opportunity to meet new friends. He was listening.

On the first day of classes, I drove up to the school to observe the students arriving. I walked over to the yard and saw teachers and administrators with the students.

**I thought to myself that this was a very good sign of community.**

I noticed the principal at the corner of the building and wondered if it would be a good idea to introduce myself to her. I decided it was. The principal welcomed my son and me to her school and assured me that I would be happy with the 6th-grade collaborative team teachers. Sometimes new beginnings can be scary, but they can also be adventures.

When Kyle returned home that first day, he was excited about the changes in his school life. He had received textbooks for every subject. I was concerned that the books were too heavy to carry in his backpack, but I was pleased to learn that each student had an additional set of books at school, which allowed them to leave their books at home. Kyle and I continued to prepare his binder with the necessary dividers, and labeled folders and notebooks for the subject areas that requested them. I knew that structure had to begin at home in order for him to be successful in school.

Kyle's new school was made up of three schools, focused respectively on math, science and language arts. Kyle was in the school that focused on science, which was great because this was a subject he happened to enjoy. His program consisted of math, science, social studies, language arts, art and gym. At this school, math was scheduled for two periods three times a week and language arts for double periods each day. I was pleased that there was a great emphasis on literacy and math. This was good not only for Kyle, but for all the students in his school.

As the week progressed, I received a call from the special education teacher, Ms. Marshall. She introduced herself to me and spoke about the school and the class. She informed me that though the collaborative team-teaching class had a different general education teacher for each subject area, she moved with the entire class, which consisted of general education students and students with special needs. Ms. Marshall and I began what

would become an ongoing relationship, and I felt comfortable knowing that if I needed to contact her at any time about anything, it was acceptable to do that.

The schoolwork began to come home at a pace that was comfortable for Kyle. The classroom and home assignments were appropriate. It wasn't too much, but just right. I knew that it was comfortable for Kyle because his complaints, moans and groans were decreasing. Kyle began to do a lot of his work independently and did not hesitate to ask for assistance if he needed it. To me, this was a sure sign of maturing academically, as well as socially. In school, if more time was needed to complete a test or class assignment, there was no hesitation in doing this the next day. The teachers also allowed their homework assignments to be typed, which meant less pressure for him than if he had had to re-copy a first draft of writing.

His speech services with his speech provider, Ms. Hannibal, were aligned with his work in class. Ms. Hannibal was preparing the students to take notes from what they were hearing—a task that can be hard for students with speech difficulties. (They had become used to copying notes from the board.)

As time went on, Kyle began to enjoy school. I began to see the enthusiasm in his attitude. He was determined to do well in all of his classes. His determination paid off; he was a participant in both the social studies and the science fairs. Although he was disappointed he did not get first place in the competitions, he got to compete and that was what was important.

It encouraged him to see that he was performing academically, just as his peers were performing.

**His report cards in elementary school were good, but in junior high school they are great.**

I was concerned by the first report card because the content area grades ranged from 75 to 85. I wondered if Kyle would be able to keep up to that standard. The second report card came and my worry was proven groundless. His lowest grade was 80 and his highest was 93. He had progressed in each content area by at least five points—and his highest grade was in communication arts. Could it be the change of scenery? Could it be the change in instructional practices? Could it be that he is just growing up? I am uncertain what the answers are but I know that I am pleased with the developments thus far.

## Transitions to Come

Presently, Kyle continues to do well in school. I have begun to think about 7th grade and how I can prepare him to be ready for the new challenges it will bring.

Transition can be difficult for students who are making such large changes, yet it can be a positive event when everyone is working together. At the spring festival, Kyle's principal eloquently said that she was glad that we (meaning the families) had made their school a part of our children's lives. I was glad too.

## FURTHER READING

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Gurian, A., Goodman, R., and Schwartz, S. Transition Points: Helping Students Start, Change, and Move Through the Grades. NYU Child Study Center. Online: <http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/transitionpoints.html>.

Richardson, C. (1997). When the Child Is Yours. *Special Edition*, 9 (1), 38-39. New York: UFT Teacher Center.

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