

1 February 2006

To the members of the Golden Apple review committee:

We write this letter to introduce and provide background for the two grant applications you will find attached.

These grants are proposed by the Committee on Preparing Children for the Transition to Middle School, a group of parents who are concerned with providing our upcoming middle schoolers a frame of reference as they enter the very new social situation that is middle school. The committee was created by the PTO at its October 2005 general meeting to investigate this issue and propose actions for the near and medium term.

We believe that our work can be most productive if we focus on the social and emotional transition to middle school. One of our most important findings is that a difficult transition can have dramatic effects on later academic interest and success as well as emotional health. We can do more to help prepare our children for this transition. It is vital that we conduct this conversation as a community to allow our students, parents, and educators to function using common tools and language.

After discussions that reviewed parent experiences, important sections of the existing literature, and programming developed by experts in this area, the committee has agreed on the following points.

1. The transition to middle school is a time of unique changes and stresses – for both children and their parents. Greater efforts are required to ensure that the transition is a successful one for all of our children, regardless of gender or economic circumstances.
2. Addressing the social and emotional aspects of the transition is just as important as preparing students for the changes in day-to-day school life.
3. In our work, we want to examine what can be done in the medium term: to partner with middle school staff; to partner with parents and staff at other elementary schools; and to see how our own school's curriculum can be shaped to address aggression and transition-related issues.
4. For the short term, our work ought to begin *now*, by introducing specially targeted programming to 5th grade girls and boys at Burns Park.

In the short term, we propose that these community conversations be started around three workshops, one for boys, one for girls, and one for parents. Considerable conversation revolved around whether to separate the sexes, and it was the overall feeling of the group that the separation would allow for more open discussions in each group. Golden Apple funds are not currently sought for the parent program: this program could be funded individually or through parent education funds.

The specific issues we expect to introduce in the workshops proposed in the grant applications include:

- Emotional and physical aggression;
- Critical thinking in peer situations;
- Social Pitfalls;
- Self Control;

- Talking through fears;
- Identification of positive growth opportunities;
- Tips and Techniques in getting the middle school years off to a healthy start.

In the long term, the committee would like to see this program developed into a more comprehensive one which would utilize current well functioning community circles and classroom programs to empower our children to navigate these social transitions. We also hope to work with staff and parents at our school and elsewhere to expand transition activities already in place. To this end, we have been working on a survey draft for the purpose gathering information from the parent population regarding the transition to middle school.

We appreciate the opportunity to help develop programming that prepares our children for such an important time in their lives.

On behalf of the Committee,

## **Application for Golden Apple grant**

### **Applicant Information**

Name(s): Jeannette Jackson, Pat Wells

Phone: 665-2518

E-mail: JeannetteJ@aol.com

**Applicant's Purpose:** To provide all Burns Park Fifth Grade Girls the opportunity to experience a workshop geared towards preparing them for the transition to middle school.

### **Project Details:**

**Project Description:** The 1 ½ hour workshop, facilitated by Kimber Bishop-Yanke, President of Girls Empowered (<<http://www.girlsempowered.com>>) is called "Get Ready for Middle School". In this workshop, she will facilitate identifying the girls' fears, help them see the positive growth opportunities, and give them tips and techniques to help their middle school years get off to a successful start.

The applicants have experience with this facilitator through multiple programs. She has a very tight process and is able to talk in productive, healthy ways about their challenges and successful remedies. We contemplated hiring her to do this workshop just for the fifth grade CampFire group, but instead agreed that this would be most beneficial if all Fifth Grade girls could participate.

**How this will enrich the Burns Park School community? What features make your proposal an innovative project for the school?**

There is currently an introduction to the change in physical environment which occurs with the transition to middle school provided by the school system. There is currently no mechanism in place for the children to process the concerns they have developed and to be prepared for the social changes which will occur rapidly in a new environment that does not offer the adult support to which they have become accustomed in elementary school.

Entering middle school is one of the most critical transitions in a girl's life. We see girls who were confident, outgoing, and made friends easily enter middle school and often become girls who resort to relational aggression ("girl bullying"), develop body image issues, and get caught between peer vs. parental expectations.

Our hope is that if our girls are able to develop some understanding/awareness of how to navigate this transition in ways that honor themselves as individuals and that build their ability to help each other, they will truly be on their way to a successful middle school experience. This program will provide groundwork in a common bonding opportunity for all fifth grade girls as they transition to middle school. The more these girls can share common experiences and develop an understanding of some of the challenges they might face and how they can support each other as these challenges arise, the better chance they have for a successful transition to middle school.

There will be common themes in the programs proposed for the boys, girls, and parents, so that the dialog can continue to build on a common framework outside of this initial discussion.

Total Funds Requested: \$300

## Golden Apple grant application

### Applicant Information

Name(s) Jeannette Jackson, Pat Wells, Steve Norton

Phone: Pat Wells: 214-5562

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**Applicant's Purpose:** To provide all Burns Park Fifth Grade boys the opportunity to experience a workshop geared towards preparing them for the social transition to middle school.

**Project Details:** Boys struggle differently from girls in making the transition from childhood to adulthood. The brain chemistry changes occur later in adolescence. This, combined with the physicality of their nature, are major contributing factors to the difficulty boys face with this transition. This program seeks to open the discussion to help boys recognize the pitfalls and provide common coping strategies for this transition period.

**Project Description:** The 1 ½ hour workshop will facilitate identifying their fears, help them see the positive growth opportunities, and give them tips and techniques to help their middle school years get off to a successful start.

The applicants have identified Ted Braude, MSW as a facilitator for this initial program. Mr. Braude has a well-developed program for boys, which incorporates discussion and physical movement (aikido).

### **How will this enrich the Burns Park School community? What features make your proposal an innovative project for the school?**

There is currently an introduction to the change in physical environment provided by the school system. There is currently no structured mechanism in place for the children to process their concerns and introduce the change in social environment.

Entering Middle school is one of the most critical transitions in a child's life. Boys become more peer dependent, are concerned about the appearance of success and "fitting in", and are often unwilling to ask for help. Boys at this age often experience and express the world physically, while the middle school environment is less tolerant of that same physicality. In the elementary environment, individual needs are considered. This is in sharp contrast to middle school, where the academic requirements, social pressures, larger student body, decreased play time, and multiple teachers all contribute to an increased sense of anonymity.

Our hope is that if our boys are aware of the increased expectations as well as the social challenges, we can help them navigate this transition in ways that honor themselves as individuals while giving them mechanisms to discuss difficulties as they are encountered.

This program will provide groundwork in a common bonding opportunity for *all* fifth grade boys as they transition to middle school. The more these children can share common experiences and develop an understanding of some of the challenges they might face and how

they can support each other as these challenges arise, the better chance they have for a successful transition to middle school.

There will be common themes in the programs proposed for the boys, girls, and parents, so that the dialog can continue to build on a common framework outside of this initial discussion.

Total Fund Requested: \$300

## Middle school transition: the story so far

[Ed note: Steve Norton] While I'm far from an expert in this, I thought I'd take a crack at summarizing some of the issues put forward in the extant literature (or at least that portion of it available free on the internet). Since much of this material looks at things from an educator's point of view, I also reprint below Pat Wells' summary of the issues from the point of view of the kids themselves.

### *From the literature:*

There seems to be growing attention paid to the elementary-middle school transition and its consequences for later social development and academic success. A confluence of factors at this point can dramatically shape how a student feels about herself and school: adolescence and other developmental changes within the student; changes in the structure of the school environment (how the school is organized); and changes in how students are evaluated in the classes themselves.

[Schumacher (1998) presents a good, but very condensed, *tour d'horizon* of these issues, which repeats in brief the arguments made by several other papers we have on hand. Much of this summary is drawn from that brief article. All the papers referenced here are available for download from the middle school committee web page, <<http://www.burnsparkpto.org/cmte/middleschool.php>>.]

1) **School organization:** There is worrisome evidence that students who make a transition to a departmentalized, "high-school" style school at earlier ages are in fact at greater risk for notable declines in academic performance than those whose transition takes place after 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Girls were more at risk than boys, and children from families with low socio-economic status were also at much greater risk (with, therefore, girls from low SES families at greatest risk). Calendar age seems to play a factor, as children who were younger than their classmates had more trouble with the transition.

Some studies reported that efforts made to soften the transition – either by having students rotate among classes in their last elementary year, or having interdisciplinary teams for the first year of middle school – have met with some success.

The background to this appears to be that shifting from the traditional elementary school classroom to the rootlessness of a departmentally-organized middle school puts a great deal of stress on a child, particularly as their growing desire for independence is tempered by a need to form attachments to adults other than their parents. (Some studies stress the mismatch between the developmental needs of early adolescents and the structure/performance goals of traditional middle schools; see Mullins & Irvin [2000].) Students may feel that they had more input into their classes in elementary school than they do in the decentralized environment of middle school. Combined with other factors, discussed below, this helps to erode confidence in their own abilities and consequently their academic motivation.

2) **Performance evaluation:** Some authors argue that one factor exacerbating the difficulty of the transition (and worsening its consequences on academic motivation) is a shift from focusing on task mastery and improvement to a focus on relative ability and competition [see Anderman, et al. (1996), elaborating on ideas presented in Anderman, et al. (1994)]. Their

presumption, which they confirmed in an intervention study of several Michigan schools, is that shifting from task-based evaluation to relative-ability evaluation erodes students' motivation and confidence in their own abilities. Left unsaid is that this change, coming at the same time as developmental changes which tend to make kids insecure and which also put a high premium on relationships with peers, complicates an already rocky road.

3) **Developmental changes:** As mentioned earlier, one strong current in the literature questions whether the environment of traditional middle schools is a poor match with the developmental needs of early adolescents. The more established findings of declines in self-esteem and academic self-confidence, normally attributed to increased stress from life changes, are now also being linked to the context of transition. The point being made, essentially, is that while educators may not be able to do much about the effects of adolescence, they can change how the transition to middle school is handled, how middle schools are organized, and the goal orientation of middle school classrooms. (See, in particular, Mullins & Irvin [2000].)

4) **Transition strategies:** Shoffner & Williamson (2000) offer what might be called a set of "best practices" for managing the transition from elementary to middle school. I won't repeat their lengthy recommendations here, but on the whole they stress as much contact between elementary school students and middle school staff as possible in the year before the transition. Visits to the school, contacts with current middle school students, etc., are all recommended.

#### *From the child's perspective:*

While the big-picture is useful, changes in school structure and practice can be slow. Of more immediate concern to the students about to go off to middle school are issues that affect their ability to feel comfortable with themselves and in their new environment. In her 11 November message to the group, Pat Wells identified a number of issues that ought to be addressed in advance of the transition, shown below. My feeling is that most of these are not simply consequences of developmental change, but are issues that flourish in the growth medium of middle school – where relationships with teachers are diluted, supervision drops, and students look to each other for support and as points of reference.

- Self Awareness and Self Esteem
- Body Image, Media critique
- Gossip and Instant Messaging as WMD
- Cliques/Exclusion behaviors
- Self-Definition (visualize oneself as the person you are/want to be, visualize that person in a variety of situations and prepare reactions Visualizing themselves as a certain person, feeling confident in that persona, allows them to extrapolate their expectations of themselves in all kinds of situations. 'I am funny/smart/creative/I am not vulnerable' and so when faced with a situation like others offering them drugs/meet-ups/cigarettes, this does not fit into the image they have created for themselves. They would literally have a persona they would actively have to push aside to do this behavior.)
- Peer Pressure recognition and development of Personal Boundaries

- Diversity Appreciation (NOT Tolerance) – not only racial, but diversity of thought/abilities/personality/talent
- Golden/Platinum rule (Platinum=Do not unto others as you would not have done unto you)
- Impulse Control