



The Ups and Downs of 3rd Grade

A collaborative web of support can help students thrive as they meet the new challenges of 3rd grade.

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At the beginning of each school year, elementary schools are filled with students excited about using that new backpack, getting their favorite teacher, or seeing their friends again. Most students look forward to starting the school year fresh, and they confidently expect to do well. New 3rd grade students, however, tend to have a different attitude. Over and over we hear, "I can't believe I'll have to take the end-of-grade tests this year!"

Siblings, older students, and even teachers have been telling these students for many years about the realities of 3rd grade and the pressure of standardized testing. Although most students express excitement about beginning 3rd grade, they are also acutely aware that they will face greater challenges. Meanwhile, their

parents typically see this as just another school year. Even education research says little about the central shift that happens between 2nd and 3rd grade.

Our experience in elementary school counseling tells us that the transition into 3rd grade provides a window of opportunity during which schools need to take both responsive and proactive measures to keep students on track for success.

Developmental and Ecological Changes

Developmentally, most 3rd grade students look forward to enjoying more independence, acting and feeling more grown up, and making more friends. Their brain development has advanced to the point where they can begin to learn the formal rules of reading, writing, and math. Yet these 7- and 8-year-olds still tend to feel anxiety when separated from familiar people,

surroundings, and routines. Although they eagerly take on tasks where they can be successful, they are sensitive to criticism and shy away from risks (Armstrong, 2007; Santrock, 2008).

Concurrently, the school context in 3rd grade shifts. At a time when students' competence and confidence are just emerging, the academic and social demands increase exponentially. The curriculum moves away from basic reading instruction; students are now expected to read independently to learn core content in the subject areas. Students are also expected to write in a formalized format, develop strategies to solve multistep problems, and take standardized tests. These are all dramatic changes in the career of a student. Most important, these tasks are inter-related; the abilities to read independently and solve multistep problems are important for success in standardized testing. In addition, teachers expect stu-

dents to demonstrate social skills, such as helping, cooperating, and talking through interpersonal problems independently (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

Here are some typical comments we have heard from students:

We used to get up a lot, but in 3rd grade, we sit down more. We don't do as many centers as we used to do.

In 3rd grade, we have to pay attention so we can learn a lot of stuff for EOGs [end-of-grade exams]. In 2nd grade, we really didn't have tests.

In 3rd grade, you have to write about a lot more things, and you have to write in a lot more subjects. In 2nd grade, you get to write what you want.

Because of the increased academic demands, students who are already struggling in reading and math often fall further behind in 3rd grade (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). At this age, when students are developmentally sensitive to criticism and reluctant to take risks, they are more likely to give up when tasks become difficult for them. These students need multiple levels of intervention, often from multiple sources both inside and outside the classroom.

Recommendations for Schools

A variety of strategies and practices can help schools support students and boost achievement through the 3rd grade transition. Our experience has shown that when school staff members collaborate, reach out to targeted students, promote student strengths, and evaluate school practices, students thrive. The following recommendations are therefore organized under a framework we call COPE—Collaborate, Outreach, Promote, and Evaluate.

Collaborate

Collaboration is essential in helping students make a successful transition into 3rd grade. Second and 3rd grade

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teachers as well as teachers in the lower grades, administrators, and support staff (counselors, instructional resource teachers, Title I teachers, cross-categorical resource teachers, and so on) are all important participants in the collaboration process.

Many of our examples are taken from Hilburn Drive Elementary School and other schools throughout the Wake County Public Schools in North Carolina. At Hilburn, educators work together in teams to create a watch list

grade teachers within the first few weeks of school and then meets with grade-level teams weekly to touch base about students' progress and intervention needs.

For example, Sean had difficulty with number and letter reversals in 2nd grade, which affected his writing and math. His 2nd grade teacher created an intervention in which she told him the number of reversals he had made each time he turned in a writing or math assignment, and he was then respon-



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of students who are not meeting reading or math benchmarks at the end of 2nd grade. This list describes individual student strengths, areas of difficulty, and successful interventions. When 3rd grade begins, the watch list is given to an intervention specialist—a support staff member who helps teachers create, implement, and monitor the progress of interventions. The intervention specialist shares the watch list with 3rd

sible for using a highlighter to identify and fix the mistakes. As Sean showed improvement in reducing his reversals, his grades improved and his self-confidence started to build. Because this intervention was described on the watch list, Sean's 3rd grade teacher was aware of it and quickly initiated the same process when 3rd grade began, providing the proud student with another highlighter. Sean continued to make

great strides in his writing and math.

Direct collaboration between 2nd and 3rd grade teachers can be especially helpful in reducing the stress of the transition. In most schools, teachers meet frequently within their grade level but less commonly outside their grade level. At Hilburn, 2nd and 3rd grade teachers have vertical curriculum planning meetings a couple of times throughout the school year. These meetings enable teachers at the two grade levels to share their essential learning outcomes—the pieces of the curriculum that all students should master. Third grade teachers discuss what they expect students to have mastered, enabling 2nd grade teachers to ensure that they teach those areas explicitly. Second grade teachers share their classroom practices so that 3rd grade teachers can provide some continuity in teaching styles.

In addition, a no-cost experience that we have found very helpful is asking 2nd grade teachers to substitute for 3rd grade teachers and vice versa in the spring. This practice helps them get further insights into grade-level expectations and curriculums so that they can better align academic vocabulary and expectations.

Outreach

All members of a school community can proactively reach out to students who are at risk of experiencing difficulty with the transition into 3rd grade. For example, at Hilburn we employ tutoring and mentoring programs involving both adults and older students as mentors and tutors.

One successful peer tutoring program is called Math Masters Cross-Age Tutoring. Fifth grade students who are nominated by their teachers as math leaders provide nine weeks of tutoring to 2nd grade students who are performing below benchmarks in math. Tutoring sessions, which take

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place before school, include whole-group meetings, weekly progress monitoring with one-minute addition and subtraction tests, a word problem of the day, and math games that focus on specific math objectives. Tutors receive training in which they learn strategies for helping students solve math problems, giving compliments, and handling student frustration. At the beginning and end of the program, tutors write personal letters to those they tutored that focus on encouragement, support, and motivation. The school counselor coordinates, supervises, and evaluates the program with support from the K–2 intervention teacher.

Jasmine entered the first tutoring session timidly, sitting in the back of the room and rarely looking up. When she was paired with her tutor, she nervously looked around the room. Her tutor recognized her apprehension and immediately began with enthusiasm and praise. She would say, "Wow! You've improved so much. You're probably going to be beating me at these math games soon!"

As the sessions progressed, Jasmine began to smile and show more independence when solving math problems. Her tutor acknowledged her successes. By the end of the program, she had begun to share her mathematical thinking with the group. She developed confidence in herself and feelings of self-efficacy in

math. She met math benchmarks both at the end of 2nd grade and throughout 3rd grade.

This kind of peer support can give a boost to 2nd and 3rd grade students who lack confidence in their math abilities and are reluctant to take mathematics risks. In the past two years of implementation, approximately 70 percent of participating 2nd grade students have shown improvement in at least one math objective. Twenty-five percent of students who participated in the program met or exceeded benchmarks on their third-quarter report card in 2nd grade, and 33 percent met or exceeded benchmarks on their first-quarter report card in 3rd grade.

Promote

Third grade commonly brings students' first experience with high-stakes standardized tests. When asked for their feelings about the end-of-grade tests they would take in the spring, a group of new 3rd grade students unanimously gave a thumbs-down. "We have so many more tests now," complained one student.

Most 3rd grade students are unfamiliar with the format and expectations of such tests (filling in bubbles, not talking, following explicit instructions, and so on). Research has shown that students benefit from instruction in testing strategies and techniques (Spatig, 1996). Teachers at Hilburn have indicated that, in particular, 3rd grade students need further instruction on test-taking vocabulary, test format, and anxiety reduction.

Strengths-based classroom lessons can help prepare 3rd grade students to succeed in these tests. At Hilburn, the school counselor collaborates with teachers to provide such lessons starting three weeks before standardized testing begins. After encouraging students to identify their academic successes and discuss which accomplishments

they are most proud of, the counselor conveys that end-of-grade tests provide an opportunity for students to “show off” everything they have learned and accomplished so far.

During these lessons, it is helpful to familiarize students with test-taking vocabulary, such as *compare*, *summarize*, and *solve*. (In fact, schools can proactively help students develop such vocabulary if classroom word walls in the primary grades include common testing words and their definitions.) Further lessons address testing formats, giving students practice filling in bubble sheets or aligning numbers on the answer sheet. Last, students learn strategies for keeping cool and confident during tests, such as deep breathing, positive thoughts, restorative breaks, and visualization. In an informal survey before classroom test-taking instruction at Hilburn, 85 percent of 3rd grade students indicated nervousness related to testing. After the instruction, only 25 percent indicated nervousness.

Providing students with an awareness of the testing process and strategies they can use to do their best often helps increase confidence. Students who still exhibit signs of anxiety could receive additional support in small-group sessions with the school counselor.

Evaluate

Any intervention, strategy, or program should be evaluated to assess its overall effectiveness, its effects on individual students, and potential areas of improvement. At Hilburn, we have used many data sources to evaluate the supports we have put in place. Sources include process data (the number of students who are affected by the intervention); perception data (gathered through surveys measuring how student perceptions, thoughts, or feelings change as a result of the intervention); and results data (end-of-grade test scores, quarterly report card grades,

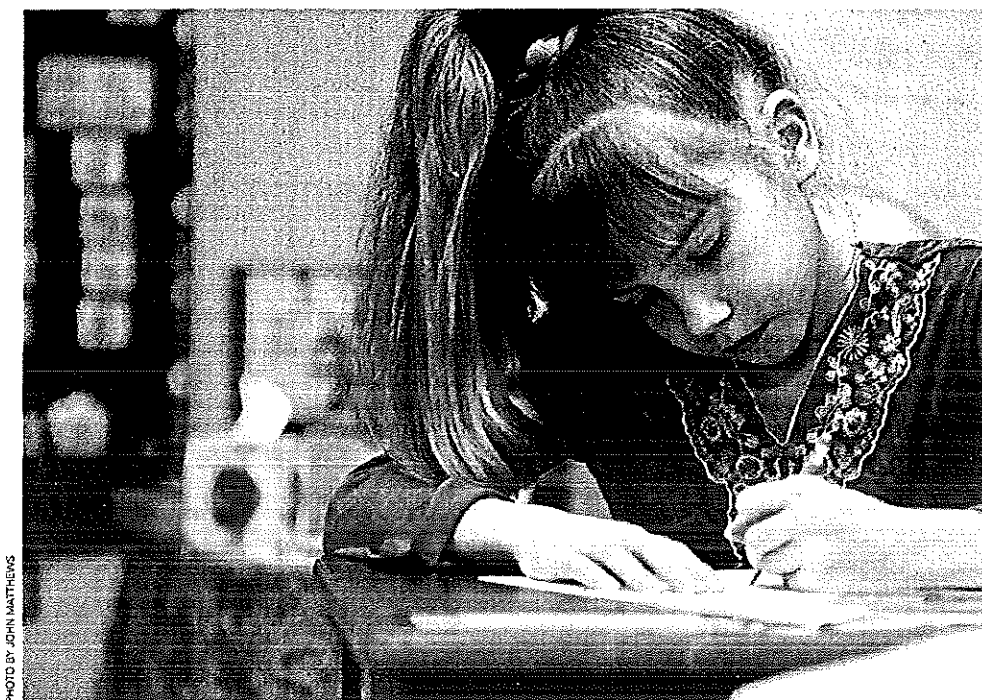


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and school attendance and discipline records documenting how student behavior changes) (American School Counselor Association, 2005).

A Continuum of Supports

Successful transitions require communication, partnerships, and a continuum of research-based supports. When schools support students as they make the crucial transition into 3rd grade, students, parents, and schools all benefit. “Third grade has descended upon our family, and it is a challenge,” noted one parent. “Education is a journey, and we are really just at the beginning of a long, exciting road filled with responsibilities, challenges, and hopefully, a lot of fun” (Linden Fee, 2008). ■

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