Transitions easier with jump-start

Programs at many schools let incoming students address their fears before a new school year begins.

By MICHELA SAUNDERS
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

As she pulled open the locker 2483, the tension in Amber Bartling’s 15-year-old face crumbled away.
Amber, who will start sixth grade Monday at Millard’s Kawneer Middle School, has been worried about that locker.

Worried about forgetting the combination. Or which locker is hers. Or worse — being the only one left in the hall who just can’t get it open.

Three times in a row, then four, she got her locker open during a half-day program at the school. Kae- neer’s program is one of many across the Omaha metro, the Midlands and the nation geared toward helping students conquer fears of a new school before the first day.

Transition programs are most common as students enter middle and high school. Districts with high mobility — such as Skinner — offer events during the year to welcome students.

“Now I know where everything is,” Amber said after just a few hours at Kawneer, near 156th and Howard Streets.

Going to a new school — whether because of a move or through the natural grade progression — can be stressful for students and parents.

“It’s a family process really,” said Sue Sheldon, director of the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. With the transition to kindergarten, from elementary to middle school or into high school, expectations of students and the role of parents will change.

Some children will be excited for that transition. Others might be anxious or scared.

While Amber is anxious, Peter Brumling, 12, who participated in the same program and will be her classmate, is calm and collected.

Peter will take the bus for the first time, but he already has a lot of friends from a select football team who will be there, and he’s looking forward to it.

That doesn’t mean Peter doesn’t need someone to talk to about school. His mom, Julie, and Amber’s mom, Linette Bartling, said they’ve talked with their soon-to-be-sixth-graders about their fears, as is the start of middle-school years.

Such conversations, Sheldon said, will go a long way toward ensuring a smooth transition.

That parent-child communication is really, really important,” she said. “Let them know you really care.”

Tessa D’Agosta talked with her mom, Chris, before selecting a half-day program.

The 14-year-old attended Millard West, then had school from kindergarten through eighth grade. Her best friend will attend Omaha Marian.

Tessa, who excels in math and is hoping to become an engineer or a teacher, decided on Omaha North. She said the Omaha Public Schools‘ magnet for engineering, math and technology was the perfect fit.

Kate Lehigh struggles with her locker during a program for sixth-graders at Millard’s Kawneer Middle School.

Tips for any school transition

Go to the school. Sports camps or transition programs are often available, and most schools are open during the day for tours.

Prepare for the school routine by adjusting curfew or bedtime before school starts. Get sleepy early so you can and pick out an outfit the night before class to reduce anxiety.

Parents and students need to keep talking. Parents play a large role in setting rules or routines, and open communication will make that easier.

Tips for the new high school student

Understand the importance of credits. If you don’t understand what credits mean and how they relate to your future graduation, ask now. Don’t wait until you’re a junior or senior to think about it.

Get involved in something — sports, drama, music, clubs or student council, or find out how to start a new club. Activities you choose to join will be your interests.

Challenge yourself. Don’t choose elective classes that will be easy in high school or classes that relate to an interest or allow you to branch out.

Tips for the new middle school student

Understand the importance of credits. If you don’t understand what credits mean and how they relate to your future graduation, ask now. Don’t wait until you’re a junior or senior to think about it.

Get involved in something — sports, drama, music, clubs or student council, or find out how to start a new club. Activities you choose to join will be your interests.

Tips for the new kindergarten parent

Get to know your child’s teacher and principal. If you work as a team, your child will have the best possible support.

Read to your child. Ask your child’s teacher for other activities you can do at home to help reinforce lessons from class.

Be aware of your child’s progress. Talk with the teacher about what to expect at school and help by setting a routine.

Compiled by Michelia Saunders