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District High Schools Greet 1,200 Fresh Faces

Ninth-Graders Shifted In as City Eliminates Junior High

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Nikolas Mikolaski bobbed his way through the throngs of students at [Woodrow Wilson Senior High School](#) on a recent day, lugging his textbooks in a backpack because lockers for ninth-grade students hadn't arrived yet.

The 15-year-old dropped his heavy bag to the floor and sat down to lunch with a group of fellow freshman, displaying none of the sheepishness that sometimes accompanies being at the bottom of the high school totem pole. Better to be a lowly freshman, he said, than to have stayed another year in junior high.

"I like my teachers. I like my classes," he said. "It's awesome."

For the first time since the 1940s, the D.C. school system has shifted all ninth-graders to high schools and turned its eight junior high schools into middle schools, joining 12 middle schools already in existence. The move affects about 1,200 students.

The adjustment puts the District in the company of other Washington region school systems, such as those in [Prince George's](#) and [Fairfax](#) counties, which use the middle school model. If sixth-graders are shifted out of elementary schools in the 2008-09 school year as planned, all middle schools will have a full complement of sixth- to eighth-grade students.

Students and parents say they are excited about the transformation plan and optimistic it will lead to higher academic achievement.

Research shows that ninth grade is a critical educational juncture. It's when students leave a highly structured environment for the maze of high school, with more teachers, more homework and more independence, academically and socially. Students who don't adjust to the added responsibilities at that turning point are more likely to drop out.

To accommodate the ninth-graders, Wilson officials have put them in a wing decorated with international flags as a tribute to student diversity and a sign that reads "Freshman Academy." Lunch is one of the few times during the day when the younger students mix with older ones

All D.C. high schools have freshman academies, but they differ depending on the needs of the schools and its students, officials said. According to the city's Master Education Plan, the purpose of turning junior high schools into middle schools is to have students grouped together in age-appropriate environments.

"Ninth grade transition is a great way to introduce incoming ninth graders to the new graduation requirements as well as jumpstart their high school experience in an environment that focuses on college readiness," [Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee](#) said in a statement.

Rhee is convening a task force to study the sixth-grade transition to middle school next year, spokeswoman [Mafara Hobson](#) said.

Numerous national foundations have been funding initiatives that focus on ninth-graders and the transition to high school.

Rebecca Dedmond, director of the School Counseling Program and Freshman Transition Initiative at [George Washington University](#), said being part of a smaller group can cushion the shock of freshman year.

"In middle school, students are nurtured and have small classes and have an identity," Dedmond said. "They go from that to ninth grade and say to themselves, 'Where's my locker? How am I going to find my way to class? The teacher doesn't know my name?' " In the midst of the confusion, Dedmond said, students must lay the foundation for their futures as they pick classes and hear about impending SATs and college applications.

Dedmond has worked with several school systems on creating a course, known as an "advisory," in which a smaller group of students meets with a teacher and works on developing social and academic skills.

In the District, the advisory will come to [Ballou Senior High School](#) within weeks, Principal Karen Smith said. At the Southeast school, ninth-grade students take their core classes -- English, math, science and social studies -- on one floor and such electives as art, music and physical education in other parts of the building.

On a recent night at Wilson, about 40 parents gathered in the school library for an orientation about what their children can expect this year. Counselor Emyrtle Bennett gave a brief overview of new graduation requirements and told them that most freshmen would be taking the PSAT next month.

Freshman Academy director Gregory Bargeman explained that ninth-grade teachers are divided into teams that work with a group of students. The team meets weekly to discuss field trips, student attendance and academics.

Jackie Mikolaski, Nikolas's mother, said she was reluctant at first to send her son to Wilson because it has so many students, close to 1,500. She offered him his choice of high schools, including private school.

But he wanted to go to Wilson. She said she felt reassured after orientation that the interim principal, Jacqueline Williams, and the teachers would take care of the students. And Mikolaski was impressed when, over the summer, an information packet came in the mail stuffed with facts about high school. "They are very organized for a big school like that," she said.

The freshman class at Wilson jumped this year to 362 from 154. The ninth-grade lockers arrived and were installed last week. Nikolas signed up for one.

"It's a lot better," Nikolas said. "Now I don't have to lug my stuff around all over the place."