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CAMP ARMSTRONG-
A Middle School
Orientation Program

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IN THE CLASSROOM

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Camp Armstrong

A middle school orientation program

Each year, as students complete either fourth or fifth grade, they have the opportunity to remain in a K-6 elementary school, an environment where they feel comfortable and have established friendships. They may also venture off to a new and unfamiliar environment known as middle school. Should children stay with the self-contained class they know in the elementary school or should they move to a new environment where the scope is wider and the classes



are inhibited with teachers and children they have never met before? An orientation program for the middle school may make the decision to venture into uncharted territories more appealing for these children.

Anytime people are given the option of venturing into a new situation, they may feel more comfortable staying where they are, staying with the known. New experiences thrust upon someone, especially at this age level, can be scary and overwhelming. When children begin learning to ride a bicycle, they may scream and cry out of fear. They

may want you to hold them secure because they could lose their balance and fall. With practice, they become good at their task, they feel more comfortable performing, and their sense of fear diminishes. A way to remove or lessen the new school anxiety is to develop and implement a method by which the incoming children can become familiar with the new school building and make new friends. An orientation camp in the new school prior to regular instruction in August or September helps children to overcome their fears of this unknown. A one or two week summer camp/orientation program prior to

the fall term lessens the anxiety of moving to a new and larger environment, different from any these children have ever encountered before.

Goals of Orientation

During this orientation program, students should achieve two main goals. First, they should learn the physical characteristics of the new school building. Where can they find the library, gym, lunchroom, auditorium, and classrooms? Second, they begin to build relationships by working in groups and interacting with other students. By becoming familiar with the building and meeting future classmates and teachers, a sense of community among the new entering students is established. Care must be taken not to further enhance their fears by thrusting a heavy workload on them. It is important that they become familiar with

their new classmates and teachers while learning that school is a place where they can become educated and also have fun. Keeping this in mind, an orientation program should emphasize recreational activities along with academic subjects.

The program which we have set up at The Louis Armstrong Middle School helps to make a new situation less frightening for the incoming students. Since this is a magnet school, drawing its population from a variety of neighborhoods, students often do not live near each other. This poses a problem because students may be coming to this environment without knowing a single person. This program, called Camp Armstrong, helps to change frightened faces into inquisitive faces that want to come and learn.

After arriving with their parents on the first day, students are presented with a slide show and a question and answer

period hosted by several of the students already enrolled and attending the school. As guides, these students lead the new-comers around the building, in groups, showing them everything, from the boys and girls locker rooms to computer rooms and the cafeteria, leaving no stones unturned. Groupings are established based on the September class structures. In this way, students will begin to form bonds and develop friendships with students that will be in their new class. Children should be encouraged to obtain phone numbers of the other kids so that they can call each other to ask questions about their new situation or just to talk as new friends.

Building Game

To allow the children to learn the building faster, we play a game follow-
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Classroom

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ing the initial school tour. Children are given the task of guiding the group around the building on a quest to find specific classes for the teacher. The teacher may request that a child direct the class to the gymnasium, the general office, the floor's eraser room or possibly the science lab. With each passing day while playing the game, students are becoming more familiar and comfortable with the school's physical structure. On any given day, students take three classes of mixed academic and recreational subjects that use hands-on cooperative learning strategies to foster education. Classes including nature studies, math games, sports, reading, dance, and drama. Students

are given three of these classes a day on a rotating schedule. They begin to move about the building as a class from room to room. At first, monitors escort them, but eventually, they move to class on their own.

This is not only a new situation for our incoming students; it is a new situation for their parents as well. Along with an orientation for students there is a need for parents to get together to find ways to open channels of communication between themselves, the school, and their children. We hold a one day parent workshop during the orientation. This program acquaints new parents with the school programs and presents them with a description of the typical school day for a fifth- or sixth-

grader. Parents often have concerns about such things as bus schedules, homework, grouping, and electives. We develop and present curriculum maps and a curriculum index to help them understand their child's future course of study. We also allow for question and answer sessions to field concerns and worries that parents harbor, bring in guidance counselors to present workshops on the nature of adolescence, and invite the local PTA.

An orientation program to a new school for both children and parents will help alleviate the fear of the unknown and will pave the way for a new chapter in the education of middle school children. Camp Armstrong is one among a host of possibilities. ☺