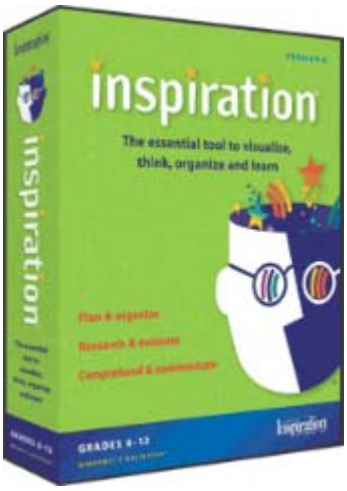
Middle School Students Use Inspiration® to Create Presentations That Ease the Transition for Rising Fifth-Graders



Incoming sixth-graders typically encounter a fair amount of anxiety about leaving the comforts of elementary school and entering the unchartered wilds of middle school. They're leaving behind recess and a single classroom and teacher – and learning to navigate their way from class to class, use a locker and acclimate to a much larger social structure. However, at Hartford Memorial Middle School in White River Junction, VT, new sixth-graders are finding the transition is nearly painless, thanks to an innovative project.

Located in the picturesque Ottauquechee River Valley where Vermont borders New Hampshire, White River Junction is one of five "villages" in Hartford, a town of 10,200 residents. With three elementary schools, a middle school, a high school and a vocational school, Hartford School District serves 2,200 students.

Five years ago, the district's educational technology specialist, John Minelli, and teacher Ray Hathorn developed a program in which a class of sixth-graders creates presentations revealing everything rising fifth-graders need to know about middle school. The goal is to minimize incoming students' stress so they can succeed in their new setting right from the start, as well as to provide a monumental learning opportunity for the sixth-graders involved in the project.
The sixth-graders' primary tool in planning and creating their presentations is Inspiration®, the essential tool to visualize, think, organize and learn. Inspiration provides powerful support for critical thinking, comprehension and writing in all curriculum areas.

"This project is way at the top of the list of the most memorable things our students have ever done at school," said Minelli. "Everyone is busy and focused. They're running a major transition activity, and it's very exciting."

Using Inspiration to Navigate the Challenges of Middle School

Each year Minelli works with a teacher to lead a class of sixth-grade students through the project, and this year it is Tristan Kennedy, language arts and reading teacher. "We probably spend about 20 class periods to complete the project so it takes a teacher who's really committed to it," said Minelli.

On the first day of the school year, the sixth-graders develop graphic organizers using Inspiration, recording their fears, concerns, expectations and questions about middle school. "The reason we do this on the first day is that by four days into the school year, nothing makes them nervous anymore," said Minelli. Students store their work in network folders until February, when they revisit it and begin to address what information would ease the transition for next year's class. "With this project, there is only one requirement," explained Minelli. "They need to document everything in Inspiration, every step of the way. Inspiration is a core component of the entire project," he said.

Planning and Developing Multimedia Presentations

Armed with their data from the first day of school, Kennedy works with the class using Inspiration's RapidFire® tool to brainstorm and map their combined data, creating a giant Inspiration graphic organizer on the whiteboard. The class then develops a list of project topics, breaking down the information into individual webs. Next, the students choose topics and divide into five groups of three to address the areas they will cover.

Typical topics include the principal and office staff, team teachers, discipline, what's cool about middle school, and a day at middle school.

Once groups are set, "students are in complete charge of their own direction and outcome," said Minelli. They use Inspiration to create concept maps for meeting group responsibilities and deadlines. They diagram and write interview questions, outline appointment times and determine the technology tools needed for each step.

The students are free to use the school's digital audio recorders, cameras and a video recorder to incorporate interviews with teachers and students into their presentations. "It's not often that a teacher will hand a 12-year-old a $500 video camera to use, but our students take great pride in this project, and nobody's ever broken anything," said Minelli.

Using Inspiration To Take The Show On The Road

After completing their work in Inspiration, students seamlessly transfer their work to a PowerPoint presentation. Near the end of the year, they take their "show on the road" to the elementary schools. Fifth-graders see digital photos of students, staff, places and things at the middle school, accompanied by audio of staff welcoming the incoming students and explaining their roles. "The students are excited to tell the fifth-graders about all kinds of things – the dances, the snack bar, discipline, the loss of recess and the social aspects of middle school," said Minelli.

In previous years, the transition was limited to a question-and-answer session at each elementary school and a brief tour of the middle school, conducted by guidance counselors. The fifth-graders are very receptive to the new student-directed approach, said Minelli. "They're more relaxed and more apt to ask questions that they might not ask adults, such as what happens when you don't do your homework."

While the incoming middle school students are reaping the rewards of this project, so are the sixth-graders who participate in it, said Minelli. "There's a huge level of satisfaction in creating a product they are really proud of." In addition, this project teaches the sixth-graders problem-solving skills they will need down the road—in college and in the work force, he said.
Minelli said Hartford School District's use of Inspiration extends far beyond the middle school transition project, and is particularly useful for the secondary students' development of writing portfolios. "It is really seamless, and it's the most intuitive product I have ever seen," he said. "Inspiration is as easy as can be to use, and our students are accomplishing amazing things with it."