Small Groups

12 Steps To Successfully Transition From Sunday School to Small Groups

The Hardy Group
All Things Church
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When it comes to transitioning from Sunday School to Small Groups, churches must do so with great care and strategy. Sunday School brings with it a rich history, and many God-fearing individuals have invested their lives to help Sunday School succeed.

Many churches feel the need to switch from Sunday School to Small Groups. The reasons vary from church to church, but the process remains the same for all. Each situation may present unique variations to this process, but closely following these 12 steps will ensure your church successfully transitions.
1. Pray for Direction and Favor.

There’s nothing more important than prayer when embarking on a journey like this. The significance of a jump from Sunday School to Small Groups requires nothing less.

When you consider the rich history of Sunday School along with the memories created and emotions of individuals who’ve invested their lives in this ministry, it’s imperative that you seek favor from God and those involved as you begin this journey.
2. Determine which model of small groups to implement.

For a church to successfully transition from Sunday School to Small Groups, it’s important to identify a single model to follow. There are a variety of great ministry models for small groups, and determining which one fits your church’s context will help you clearly lead the church through this transition.

We recommend identifying 3-5 churches who have strong small groups ministries and evaluate their model of ministry. Does their model fit your context? Can you modify what they do and implement it in your church setting?
3. Define the small group ministry.

In this step you want to begin identifying the details and logistics. Some starter questions to consider are:

• What will you call your small groups?
• How will you get people involved in them?
• Who will oversee the Small Group ministry?
• What are the requirements for Small Group leaders?
• What is the process for future leader development?
• How will you track groups?
• What will they study/discuss?
• When will they meet?
4. Prepare to adjust programming of other ministries as needed.

Whenever you make changes in one ministry, more than likely it will affect another ministry. As you prepare to shift away from Sunday School, how will the other ministry programs be impacted?

The most obvious examples are kids and youth ministries, but there may be other ministries that are affected as well. Thinking through these areas and preparing to make adjustments to your current programming will display the type of preparation you’ll need for this transition.
5. Create a promotion plan.

Developing your plan to promote this transition is one of the most important steps in the process. The vision you communicate to the church about this shift will determine its success.

A well-thought promotion plan will go miles in helping you strategically and carefully roll out the announcement to your congregation. Mapping out your plan in advance will help you avoid pitfalls that can occur by “winging it.”
6. Present the transition plan to the key leaders.

Now that you’re about ready to start releasing the transition plan, first help your key leaders understand the nature of the shift to Small Groups.

Presenting the plan to them first helps you gain buy-in. It also gives them an opportunity to think through potential questions people might ask so that you can begin preparing a response for when those questions arise.
7. Prepare for and respond to resistance.

Any type of big transition like this one will result in resistance. The more you talk with your key leaders, the more you’ll begin to identify the push back others will have.

It’s important to have thought about the resistance you will face so that you have prepared answers ready when the resistance comes. There’s nothing worse than being caught off guard, unable to give a definitive answer when called upon.
8. End Sunday School *before* launching Small Groups.

It’s a little counter-intuitive to completely end Sunday School before even starting Small Groups. Most churches have an overlap period, or at the very least, conclude one and begin the other simultaneously.

Ending Sunday School prior to launching Small Groups has two major benefits:

1. It creates distance in people’s minds of their memory of Sunday School.

2. The lack of programming during that transition window creates a longing for something else, which will ultimately be fulfilled through Small Groups.
9. Recruit and train Small Group leaders.

You cannot have Small Groups if you have no one to lead groups. Personally recruiting Small Group leaders is the most effective way to initially launch. This way ensures you have the right people leading them with the greatest chance of the Small Group surviving despite the transition.

Additionally, we recommend staff and pastors (including the lead pastor) lead a Small Group. Leading by example will show the value you place on them and will increase participation which you want during this transition.
10. Develop the plan to place people into Small Groups.

Having an effective assimilation plan is critical to the success of a Small Groups ministry. If it’s confusing or difficult for people to join, they simply won’t join, and you’ll start out of the gate with people already choosing not to participate.

In your research of Small Groups (Step 2), find out what churches feel is effective for placing people into Small Groups. Then contextualize that for your ministry and develop a plan.
11. Speak on the subject at the time of the launch.

Making a few announcements on a Sunday morning is not sufficient to successfully transition from Sunday School to Small Groups. We recommend preaching at least once if not a couple times on the importance of discipleship and community, and how the church’s new mechanism to make that happen (i.e. Small Groups) will benefit them.
12. Open the opportunity for people to join a group.

Simultaneously as you preach on Small Groups, it’s important to open up the opportunity for people to join a group. During this launch period you will want to give people ample time to think about their options.

When making a relational decision, it takes time for people to process which group they might like to try out. Providing multiple opportunities gives people time to think about it and make the decision they feel is best.