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Transition from primary to secondary school

An initiative of the Director General's
Classroom First Strategy



Department of
Education

From the Director General

We must never lose sight of the fact that the experiences of students and the progress of their learning are the most important considerations when children move from primary to secondary school.

While 2015 will see this move occur at the end of Year 6, we know that whenever the transition takes place it is essential for school staff to have in place measures for this time to be a positive one for every student.

Indeed as educators, we have a professional responsibility to go beyond the rhetoric of K–12 education and for primary and secondary schools to collaborate more closely than ever before to make the transition smooth for students and their families.

As with all changes, strong leadership is essential in planning for success and implementing strategies. As a system we will be judged on how well we managed this change for our students.

This statement is intended as a basis for discussion about effective student transition. I trust it will contribute to conversations among staff which will lead to enhanced collaboration between primary and secondary schools.



Sharyn O'Neill
Director General

June 2013



A significant change for public schools

In 2015, Year 7 students in Western Australian public schools will attend secondary schools.

This means that students who are in Year 6 and Year 7 in 2014 will move together to secondary school at the start of 2015.

Educating our Year 7 students in secondary schools will benefit them by giving them access to the specialist teaching and facilities demanded by the new Australian Curriculum.

While this is a change for the whole public education system, it is not possible for the move to be orchestrated and managed centrally and ensure there is a smooth transition of Year 7 students in all school communities across the State.

Every single one of our schools has a role to play in this change, with central and regional offices playing important support roles.

It is only at the local level that the right programs can be devised and the best decisions taken to make the transition to secondary school a smooth and successful one for our students and their families.

Strong leadership is essential

As with any change to the established pattern, the role of school leaders in both primary and secondary settings is vital in building the confidence of parents and teachers.

From a planning perspective, school leaders need to engage their own staff in whole-school planning to ensure that a high quality experience for students results. And orchestrating greater collaboration across primary and secondary staff is a key role of school leaders.

While the logistics of moving two cohorts of students to secondary schools in 2015 is a considerable demand, it is maintaining the focus on the experience of students and their parents where leadership is most needed.

A critical time for students

Moving from primary school to secondary school is a significant event in every child's education journey.

Most students move to their new schools and thrive on the challenges of the new environment and varied experiences that secondary schools offer.

They find it both exciting and scary to be going from being the oldest group in the school to the youngest; to be moving from a familiar environment to a larger and unfamiliar environment; and from being well known by many teachers to being relatively unknown.

For some students, however, it is a wrench to leave the security of their primary schools. We know they can lose their connection with school and learning at this time. That is why it is vitally important for school staff to make the transition a positive experience for all students.

The evidence from different educational settings tells us that no matter when the transition to secondary occurs – whether it is at the end of Year 6 or the end of Year 7 – there is potential for students' educational progress to stall if particular measures are not taken to assist them to adjust to their new schools.

Evidence also suggests that, as a cohort of students transitions from primary to secondary school, up to 25 per cent of students experience a decrease in psychological health. This evidence should prompt both primary and secondary school staff to seek to identify the factors that could produce such negative effects and how they might mitigate them in their schools.

This may involve considering how to increase students' connectedness to school and their sense of belonging, or having staff they can approach easily with concerns or questions. It may mean designing new pastoral care structures to meet the needs of these students.

There is no single solution to strengthening students' psychological health during transition but it is important that, within each school, staff consider these matters and develop their own strategies to address them.

Re-thinking transition

Helping primary school students make the transition to secondary school is something our school staff have always done.

They have held information evenings, orientation events and other activities designed to inform parents about secondary school programs and requirements, and to make the move as smooth as possible for students.

With two cohorts of students arriving at the start of 2015, it is an opportunity to review and re-think how students and their parents can best be helped to make the transition. Indeed it is our professional responsibility to work together as primary and secondary educators to make the transition as educationally effective as possible.

While we may have done a good job in the past, there is always room to examine how we could take the best of primary and secondary practice to improve the work of all our schools.



Primary and secondary staff working together

The new policy of moving Year 7 to secondary schools demands a higher level of cooperation and shared planning between primary and secondary staff than ever before.

The respective leadership groups have a responsibility to initiate and support the level of collaboration between their staff that will be necessary.

A common misunderstanding is that responsibility for managing the transition is essentially one for secondary schools. While it might be the job of secondary school staff to orientate and induct students into their new environment, parents who know and trust their primary school teachers will look to them for advice and reassurance about how best to prepare their children for the transition and how best to support them once they are in secondary school. Primary school staff have an equally important role to play in the transition process.

This is not a process that can be left for the final months or weeks of students' primary schooling. It needs to be a much longer process that extends through the middle years of primary school. To be effective it needs to be based on primary teachers having a sound understanding of just how secondary school operates – including routines, structures, facilities and expectations.

One of the important tasks for primary school staff in preparing their students for secondary school is to develop in them the level of independence they will need to manage the requirements of the secondary school environment.

We all know how important expectations are. Creating positive and realistic expectations of what secondary school will be like is a key role for primary schools. And secondary schools can learn a lot from their primary colleagues about how to ensure that parents feel at ease to approach the school and to stay connected to their children's school life.

The move of Year 7 to secondary schools along with the implementation of the Australian Curriculum present a golden opportunity for school leaders to reinforce understanding among staff of both primary and secondary schools that they are partners in students' journeys from Kindergarten through to Year 12. Already some schools are collaborating in relation to the Australian Curriculum, especially from Years 6 to 8.

It is not uncommon for secondary staff to see themselves as starting from scratch with an education program that begins on the first day of secondary school. Similarly, some primary teachers don't see the need for anything more than a handover once their work is done. But our students deserve better than this – they need to have their teachers working together to bridge the gap between primary and secondary school.

The planning schools do for 2015 can enhance the understandings and learnings that primary and secondary teachers can gain from working together.

It is critical that primary and secondary teachers are actively involved in exchanging information about where students are at with their learning so the expectations that secondary teachers have of their students are sufficiently high to challenge students to take the next step in their learning. Secondary staff need to establish the right balance between support and challenge for students to achieve at their best.

Primary staff also know the students who are most at risk, academically and socially, and that will be important information for secondary staff so they can manage those students to minimise the risk of them becoming disengaged.



Relationships are the key

As professional educators we all know that learning occurs in relationships and that, if the relationships are not right, the learning is impeded.

There is an important set of questions for principals and teachers to ask themselves about how the right relationships can be fostered between students and teachers in a period of transition.

A particular challenge for secondary teachers is how to build positive relationships with students in a more complex organisational structure than exists in primary schools. While it may be more difficult, many secondary schools devise strategies to ensure that all students feel they are recognised and understood, and that teachers are interested in their concerns and care about meeting their individual needs.

Parents are part of the transition

School planning needs to recognise that transition to secondary school is an important time for parents.

It is helpful for both primary and secondary school staff to, for a moment, put themselves in the shoes of a parent whose child is just about to start secondary school and ask “What would help that parent feel more comfortable about the move?”

One of the biggest considerations for students and parents is the perception that secondary schools are impersonal places. There is a perception that no single teacher knows each child well enough to be a reliable point of contact in the event of problems or questions that parents might have.

Parents of new secondary students often wonder “Is my child known and understood, and is someone taking an interest in their overall welfare and noticing when things are a bit rocky – academically or socially or personally?”

A key question for school staff to consider in planning for transition is identifying such a person in the secondary school who can be approached by parents when they need to – a staff member whose name, telephone number and email are available to them and who is a friendly face when they have queries about their children.

For parents, one of the major transition concerns is the safety and wellbeing of their children. Bullying and harassment concerns need to be addressed by both primary and secondary staff so parents are comfortable that there is zero tolerance for such behaviour.

Planning for success

There is a range of operational planning matters that secondary schools need to manage, particularly with the arrival of two new cohorts of students in 2015.

Timetabling, staffing and resourcing matters need to be addressed to ensure Year 7 students have access to specialist teaching and facilities.

While these represent significant management challenges and require careful planning by schools, they should not cause us to lose sight of the essential outcome – for students to make the transition with positive academic, personal and social outcomes.

The ultimate test of how well we, as a public school system, have managed this change is: did our students gain a benefit from it?





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