

Focus on the middle years of schooling

A summary of a Strategic Initiatives Directorate response to *Excellence and innovation*

The middle years span primary and secondary schooling, from Year 5 to Year 8. They correspond to the developmental period of early adolescence and include young people aged approximately 10 to 14 years. During these years, some students experience social alienation and slower educational progress.

Needs of students in the middle years of schooling

The middle years of schooling literature suggests that adolescence is a significant stage of life in its own right and as such has its own characteristic elements and challenges. Young adolescents are a particular group undergoing rapid physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. This development is complex, variable and interactive.

Adolescence itself, as it is understood and experienced in most advanced industrial societies, is the transition from childhood to adulthood, beginning with puberty. It is a period of development more rapid than any other phase of life except infancy. Adolescent development is neither singular nor simple, and aspects of growth during adolescence are seldom in step with each other, neither within individuals nor among peers.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989)
Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century
The Report of the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents
New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York

Young adolescents have a range of developmental needs which may be regarded as developmental tasks to be accomplished. For example, these tasks are to:

- adjust to profound personal changes: physical, social, emotional and intellectual
- grow towards independence
- gain experience in decision making and accept responsibility for these decisions
- gain positive self-confidence through achieving success in significant events
- develop a sense of identity which incorporates a set of personal values
- establish their own sexual identity
- gain acceptance, support and respect of their peers of the same and opposite sex
- develop their capacity for reflective and abstract thinking
- become more aware of their social and political environments and become more skilled in their interaction with those environments
- establish and maintain relationships with particular adults who can provide support and act as role models.

Hargreaves, A and Earl, L (1990)
Rights of passage: A review of selected research about schooling in the transition years
Toronto: Ontario Ministry for Education

The need for change

Literature reports that students are potentially at the peak of their personal, social and educational development during the middle years of schooling, and that what students need is the opposite of what is often provided.

The curriculum, pedagogy and organisation of the Middle Years are inadequate... We compound the problems of primary–secondary transfer by teaching young adolescents poorly and expecting too little of them, with the result that they experience a dip in performance which is only compounded in the following school year (Year 8) and a loss of motivation that continues into Year 9 as well...

The Middle Years of Schooling should be so busy, so demanding, so active, so adventurous, so spectacular that young adolescents should barely have time for brooding introspection or watching Australian soap operas.

Barber, Michael (1999)

Taking the tide at the flood – Transforming the Middle Years of Schooling
National Middle Years of Schooling Conference
Melbourne March 1999

Many teachers have come to realise that neither a slightly more demanding version of the early years of primary school, nor a watered down rendering of post-compulsory requirements is appropriate for these students.

Barratt, Robyn (1998)

Shaping Middle Schooling in Australia – A report of the National Middle Schooling Project
Australian Curriculum Studies Association

While there has been extensive interest in the area of middle schooling, ‘...much remains undone’ and ‘...the practices that are supposed to go hand in hand with the philosophy have not’ (Rand Report 2004).

Some NSW public schools have begun to develop and implement innovative middle schooling strategies and organisational structures in response to the need for a more stimulating and nurturing environment for adolescent students. Other schools have yet to meet this challenge.

Central to the need for change is the key message that a focus on the middle years of schooling has the capacity to benefit the citizens of NSW, both today and in the future.

Benefits of change

Research provides evidence that appropriate educational programs during the middle years of schooling can prevent the adverse effects that have been documented and create a strong platform for further secondary and post-secondary learning.

Studies have overwhelmingly concluded that middle schools do an effective job... The notorious Year 7 dip tends not to happen.

Haigh, G (2004)

A golden age that could disappear (16/11/2004) in Times Education Supplement

http://www.tes.co.uk/section/story/?story_id=2054616

accessed 10 January 2005

National and international research findings suggest that a renewed focus on pedagogy, teacher professional learning and curriculum development in the context of learning from Years 5 to 8 can create the conditions for a positive cultural change in schools. This change is characterised by improved teaching practice leading to improved student engagement with learning.

A plan for change

While a number of focused strategies and initiatives have been implemented within the DET including, for example, the Languages Continuity Initiative (1999–2003) and Linkages (2000–2003), there is yet to be a coordinated approach that addresses the full range of middle schooling issues. A coordinated approach provides an opportunity to build on the successes of previously isolated strategies and pull together resources and expertise from across directorates for the benefit of schools and their students.

In this context, it is essential that the critical juncture point of transition from primary to secondary school be strategically addressed and that existing links between primary and secondary schools be strengthened.

There are significant issues for NSW public schools associated with sustainable reform in the middle years of schooling. These can be grouped as seven areas for action, each of which generates the need for teacher professional support and development.

Areas for action

- **School culture**

Schools are encouraged to build a culture that is characterised by an increasing understanding of the developmental needs of young adolescents and a greater congruence across Years 5 to 8. This is typified by positive relationships and increasing student empowerment and responsibility.

Possible actions include:

- conducting professional learning about features of young adolescents and strategies that support their learning and development
- developing and implementing effective programs for transition between primary and secondary schooling
- embedding, in practical and tangible ways, a valuing of middle years students in the curriculum, structure and organisation of the school.

- **Curriculum and assessment**

A challenging and relevant curriculum, provided in a continuum across Years 5 to 8, is central to maintaining students' engagement with learning. Equally, it is crucial that students receive regular and meaningful feedback on their progress and are provided with strategies to assist them to improve. Furthermore, it is likely that a curriculum that is outcomes-based and standards-referenced for assessment purposes would be more accessible if it were not constrained by the current mandatory Departmental time requirements.

Possible actions include:

- employing links between local primary and secondary schools to create a continuity of learning, for example, in literacy, numeracy and selected subjects, across Years 5 to 8
- providing more flexible time requirements in Departmental policy, empowering schools to better tailor curriculum to students' interests and needs
- developing transdisciplinary and/or integrated units that reduce curriculum fragmentation.

- **Teaching and learning**

The integration of *Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools* into teaching and learning approaches that respond effectively and sensitively to the developmental needs of young adolescents has the capacity to enhance deep learning, improve the quality of the learning environment and build higher levels of significance.

Possible actions include:

- developing frameworks synthesising Quality Teaching principles and syllabuses for Stages 3 and 4, to provide support schools and teachers
- developing, trialling and disseminating case studies about models and strategies for innovative and effective practices for the middle years
- implementing teaching teams in each year from Years 5 to 8.

- **Student welfare**

Students expect schools to be safe, fair and creative places where they are respected as individual learners, challenged to excel and supported in exploring and developing their identity within a range of relationships. Students also expect to develop a strong sense of belonging within groups at school.

Possible actions include:

- providing enhanced regional and within-school support, particularly at the primary–secondary transition, tailored to students at risk of disengaging and students with special needs
- implementing a positive, whole-school approach to student welfare
- developing meaningful leadership and community action projects for students in the middle years.

- **School organisation**

School organisation should have the flexibility to accommodate the developmental needs of young adolescents and to facilitate continuity of learning. This is characterised by creative timetabling, curriculum adjustments, flexible use of space and innovative teaming of teachers and students.

Possible actions include:

- compiling and publishing case studies of effective structures for the middle years of schooling, representative of the range of public schools across NSW
- creating home-rooms and flexible learning spaces for middle years students
- facilitating visits and joint activities for primary and secondary students and teachers.

- **System support**

Through its policies and procedures, the system recognises, values and supports teaching in the middle years of schooling. The system has the capacity to provide strategic coordination of system resources, leadership for system-level planning and implementation support for middle years initiatives.

Possible actions include:

- recognising skills and experience in teaching middle years students and creating positions of responsibility related to middle schooling
- providing professional learning opportunities about middle schooling issues
- developing and implementing primary–secondary transition programs.

- **School–community links**

A planned approach to include the community into all phases of the development and implementation of middle years initiatives has the potential to grow confidence in public education, enhance parent–teacher–student communication and draw on local expertise across a range of areas, for example, curriculum content.

Possible actions include:

- creating support networks linking teachers, teacher educations, researchers, community workers, parents and others in collaborative research and educational development
- enhancing links between schools, local businesses and community organisations
- providing information to the community through media releases and school newsletters and web sites.