

CHAPTER 3:

Easing shorter-term aspects of the transition

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The finding that many students are more fearful than excited about moving on to secondary school emphasises that this transition represents much more to them than simply the next step as they progress through their schooling.

Ensuring that policies and practices with a specific focus on transitioning students are in place is unquestionably important.

Preparing Year 8 students well and accurately for the immediate impacts of the transition helps reduce fears about secondary school and gives students a sound base on which to build their continuing learning and education.

And providing a special welcome, as well as sufficient assistance to quickly become familiar with what is required of them in their new setting, better enables newly arrived students to begin their secondary schooling with a positive outlook.

While there is no universal formula to ensure ease of transition for students moving from primary to secondary schooling, the thinking and practices outlined throughout this chapter (which are derived from our transition study findings, the transitions literature review and other information) have been found to be helpful. They are also a valuable basis for discussion about any transition-related issues and possible solutions, amongst the different parties involved in the primary to secondary schooling transition.

The material in this chapter is presented under two main umbrella sections. The first of these discusses preparing Year 8 students for secondary school. Factors discussed in this section are summarised in Figure 1 below. The second of the two umbrella sections (p.34 following) focuses mainly on helping students settle and adjust at secondary school.

McGee et al (2003) in their review of the transitions literature found that:

- It is important for schools to provide students with sufficient information about the transition and what to expect at secondary school and to have support networks in place.
- Family support, school responsiveness and student involvement in school extra-curricular activities are important [for a smooth transition].
- Most students have their own stories to tell of stressful aspects of transition, but with transfers between schools often being better handled than they once were, it appears that most students don't experience anxiety/problems with the actual 'transition' for long.
- Providing students with adequate information and ensuring that there are social support activities that help students to form friendship networks are crucial factors in their ability to cope with transition.
- Positive relations and a sense of school belonging are strongly related to students' positive attitudes about school, and to self-esteem.
- Involvement in sports, arts and other activities in school, and time spent in extra-curricular activities is positively related with academic success in the first years of secondary school.
- Well coordinated transition arrangements contribute to successful transition, and decrease adjustment time.

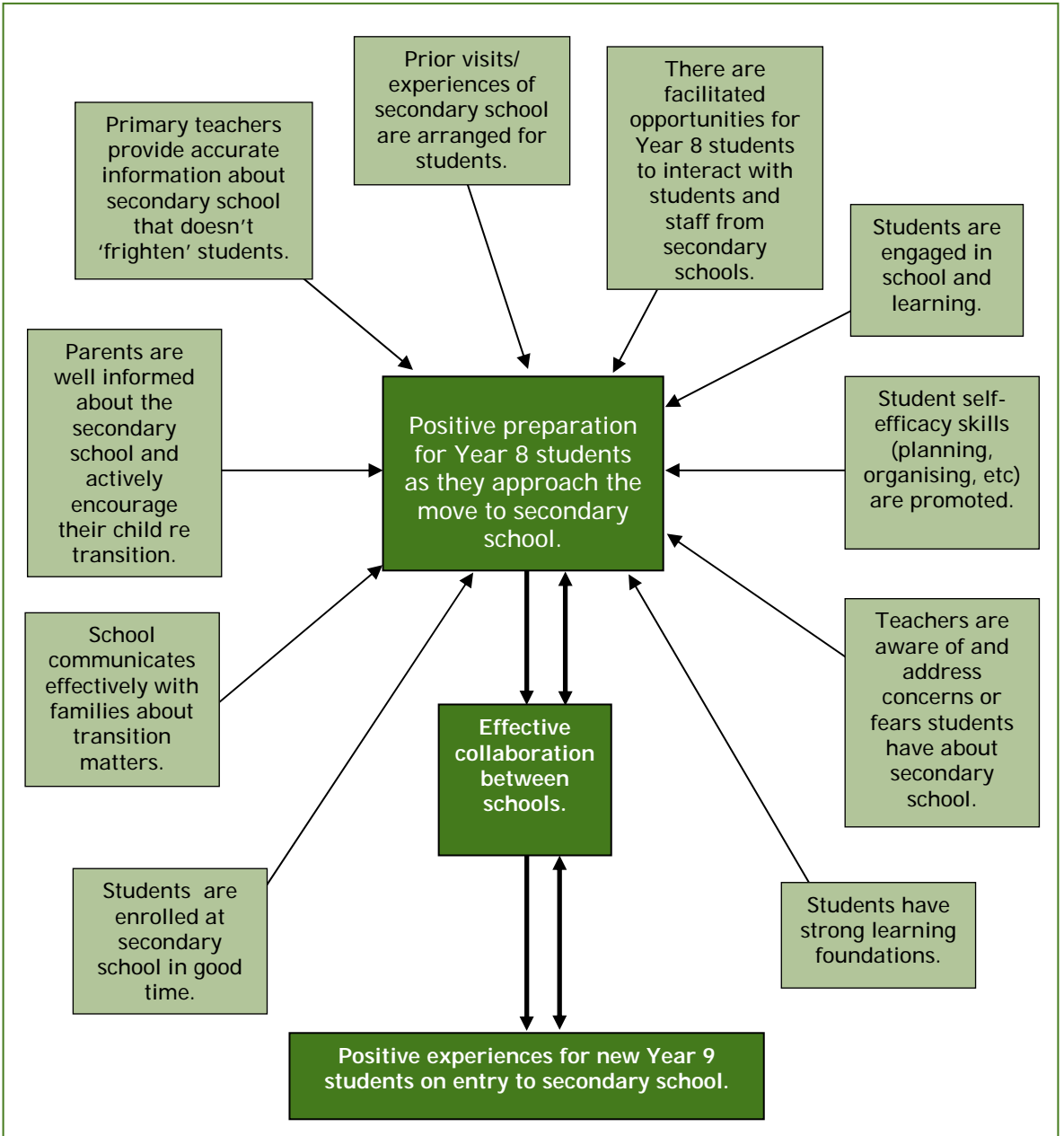


Figure 1: Important factors for a smooth transition to secondary schooling

Preparing Year 8 Students for Secondary School

Timely Enrolment

Study findings emphasised the importance of Year 8 students knowing as soon as possible which secondary school they are to attend so that they have a better idea of what they are working towards.

Some students do not know which school they will be attending until the last moment.

When students do not know which school they will be attending until the very last moment, amongst other things, they miss out on the steps that secondary schools take with incoming students as a basis for class placements. They also

miss out on activities to ease the transition organised by the feeder and secondary schools prior to the beginning of the new school year, such as an open-day visit to meet key people and gain some familiarity with the secondary school. And, as well, they cannot join in discussion with friends and peers about the school they will be attending.

It is therefore very important for primary schools to assist parents to enrol their child in good time, being especially aware when a child's family may find it difficult to understand or negotiate the steps involved in successfully completing the enrolment procedures.

Also, when schools have waiting lists for potential new students, they should ensure that they make decisions about successful candidates as soon as possible to allow families and students (who may have applied to two or more schools) enough time to prepare adequately for the transition.

Questions to consider

- In this school, are we aware of any families likely to have difficulty in enrolling their Year 8 children at secondary school in good time?
- What steps could we take to help parents with the enrolment process to ensure a more positive transition experience for both students and family?
- Would it be of benefit to enlist the support of key community leaders to promote timely enrolment and help solve potential barriers for individual families? How could we facilitate this?

Destination Secondary School

For many Year 8 students, the secondary school they are to attend will not necessarily be one that they or their parents 'choose'. Instead, matters such as school waiting lists and cost and travel implications will be the deciding factors. Both primary and secondary teachers therefore stressed the importance of helping all students feel that

whatever secondary school they go to, there will be valuable opportunities there for them.

For example, primary teachers noted that it was important not to be perceived by students in their classes as considering some secondary schools better than others, as this could be de-motivating and hurtful for students destined for schools seen as perhaps less prestigious.

Similarly, a number of the secondary teachers felt that students and their families who had missed out on a preferred secondary school were sometimes demoralised and lacked commitment to the alternative secondary school. They emphasised that it is important that parents/caregivers, in particular, avoid conveying personal disappointment about the destination secondary school to their children.

In addition, some teachers particularly emphasised that it is crucial that *all* schools should expect, and

be prepared to cater for, student cohorts likely to differ widely in terms of personality, learning needs, interests, goals and other characteristics such as ethnicity and socio-economic background.

Samantha's and Melody's stories (Case studies 2 and 3) illustrate some of the potential dilemmas associated with any given student's destination secondary school.

Case Study 2: Destination secondary school (1)

Some students are unable to attend the school of their choice.

Samantha was one such student. In Year 8, she was attending a high decile intermediate school, and, along with a group of her classmates, her particular friends, was keen to attend a secondary school with an equivalent decile rating.

But Samantha found herself attending a considerably lower decile school instead. This caused her to feel particularly negative on entry to the school, especially when her friends had successfully gained entry to the preferred school. Some students in similar circumstances adjust well after a time to the school they end up at; Samantha, however, did not. She continued to be unhappy and dissatisfied with everything throughout Year 9 in what she perceived as a much less prestigious school than she was used to. She chose not to join up for extra-curricular activities, did a minimum of work in her classes, and passed up opportunities for new friendships in favour of maintaining out of school contact with her Year 8 school friends.

Samantha felt that her teachers were not interested in her as a person and reported that no-one in the school had tried to encourage her to consider activities at school she might enjoy or to take part in the wider life of the school.

Perhaps fortunately for Samantha, the cycle of negativity was interrupted when her family did manage to achieve a transfer to the desired school for the beginning of Year 10.

Case Study 3: Destination secondary school (2)

Sometimes there is a 'poor fit' between the student and the school.

Melody, for example, did not like, and felt anxious about, all the 'rough, older boys' at her new secondary school. She would have much preferred an all girls school, but this was not an option available to her because of where she lived (the distance to travel) and family circumstances.

As she was a less assertive student and particularly in awe of more senior students, this meant that activities during breaks became more confined for her and she felt much less at ease about being at school than she had the previous year. Whereas at primary school she had enjoyed lunchtime sports activities with a group of well-established friends, at secondary school she felt intimidated by the older boys in particular and did not want to play games in the same spaces that they were in. She was also conscious of needing *"to sit in a ladylike way"* when wearing a skirt in the presence of male students.

While an older sibling attended the same school, this in some ways further reduced Melody's confidence as her more outgoing sibling enjoyed the school and had fitted in well from the outset. Melody also considered her older sibling to be much brighter and more successful than herself.

For Melody, feelings of belonging and being settled at secondary school were considerably delayed. However, she did gradually adjust, in large part due to the mentoring and support she received from a teacher assistant at the school (who also had links with her wider family), who helped her through the first difficult weeks and months.

Prior Links with the Secondary School

Some young people are in a position of knowing quite a lot about the secondary school they are to attend because of older relatives or friends already there. This is often¹¹ an advantage as it links them into social networks, helps them gain a sense of the atmosphere and systems of the secondary school and generally makes the new school seem less strange.

There are also Year 8 students who have regular opportunities, not to do with the transition itself, to

become familiar with the secondary school, such as when their primary school uses the secondary school's technology facilities or borrows its hall for concerts and other special events.

While it seems that many students have some prior contact with their destination secondary school, teachers in our transition study often felt there is scope for a lot more. For example, in the case of Year 8 students who have little or no opportunities for prior contact¹², it was felt that schools and teachers need to instigate particular procedures to ensure that students gain some familiarity with the site of their future schooling.

¹¹ Some respondents cautioned that these existing contacts are only helpful if the older students are good role models/ feel positively about the secondary school themselves, suggesting that it is important to keep an eye on newcomers whose older siblings or relations may be at odds with their schooling to help them avoid the same path.

¹² For example, when students attend small primary schools that are geographically distant from the secondary schools they are to go to.

Steps that can be taken to ensure prior contact or links (whether directly or indirectly via their teachers), include:

- secondary school staff and students visiting primary and intermediate schools to promote their school and answer students' questions;
- primary/intermediate schools arranging for Year 8 students to attend secondary school open days during school-time;
- maintaining ongoing contact between schools in a range of ways (eg, music classes, school productions);
- arranging exchange visits for teachers. This can provide opportunities for learning more about teaching and learning approaches in the other sector that have proved to be particularly effective, enabling teachers to then pass on the benefits of this knowledge in the sorts of experiences they provide for their students.

A teacher participant also talked about her experience within the Scottish schooling system: in

Year 8 students benefited from organised links with older students in which they learned that 'positive things happen at secondary school'.

a group of involved schools, towards the end of the school year, each year group went to the next year level for three days, in order to gain some first-hand experience of what the next stage of their schooling would be like.

A number of primary and intermediate teachers

mentioned too the value that resulted when they or their colleagues arranged for secondary school students to coach their Year 8 students in sports. The students benefited not only from the coaching itself, but also from the links formed with older students and the informal opportunity to learn that 'positive things happened at secondary school'.

Year 8 Teachers Preparing Students for the Transition

To prepare their students for secondary school, Year 8 teachers in our study most often:

- tried to ensure that their students were 'well-grounded in the basics' (ie, possessed strong learning foundations);
- emphasised to students the need to be well-behaved, diligent, and flexible in order to cope with multiple teachers, different expectations and lots of homework;
- warned students that they would find the work 'a lot harder' and the discipline a lot firmer;
- worked to give students the skills to work independently, and think for themselves;
- provided tailored academic and social opportunities for individual students, designed to maximise their particular strengths and minimise weaknesses so that they could go forward with greater confidence;
- encouraged students to have a positive attitude to change, and to always be prepared to take up new opportunities;
- promoted practical strategies, such as having students develop a personal notebook of key concepts, formulas, and vocabulary that they had learned during the year, as a helpful reference/reminder once they were at secondary school;
- listened to and responded to students' worries or concerns about going on to secondary school.

In preparation for secondary school, teachers particularly emphasised the importance of giving Year 8 students opportunities to develop

responsibility and/or take on leadership roles, as confident, independent students are likely to fare better at secondary school, both socially and academically.

Examples of opportunities to exercise responsibility made available to Year 8 students included:

Confident, independent students who are able to take responsibility for their own learning fare better at secondary school.

- helping in the library;
- acting as bank-tellers within the school;
- helping to run the canteen;
- mentoring or tutoring younger students;
- becoming student mediators;

- becoming sports team leaders;
- helping organise school camps, concerts, and other special activities;
- special projects or activities, such as helping re-model part of the school grounds or taking responsibility for school livestock/pets.

The teachers expressed the hope that students would be able to 'slot in' to similar activities at secondary school. In similar vein, they noted the importance of Year 8 students having some current involvement in extra-curricular activities that could provide a focus for them at secondary school and facilitate their integration.

Year 8 teachers further anticipated that because students would be 'more on their own' in secondary school with regard to their personal organisation and learning, they needed to develop good organisational skills prior to the transition.

An example given by one teacher to address this need was to draw up a contract with Year 8 students, gaining their agreement to complete

stipulated tasks over the course of a week, but leaving it up to them to decide when to complete each task.

Conveying an Accurate Picture of What to Expect at Secondary School

Teachers at Year 8 level also tried to prepare their students well for secondary school by simply talking to them as much as possible about what it was going to feel like in a strange, new environment and what to expect.

But while the teachers sought to prepare their Year 8 students for the transition, they often also stated that they were not sure 'what happened' at secondary school.

"Primary teachers don't know what we're doing and we don't know what they're doing."
Year 9 teacher

Also, some teachers admitted that they sometimes particularly emphasised that students would find many aspects of secondary school more difficult than their present experience of school and would have to learn to cope with less support than they currently received. They did this in an attempt to reduce the level of 'shock' for students when faced with different expectations and requirements at secondary school, or to try and 'spur on' disengaged students.

Correspondingly, secondary participants noted that students often did not seem to have an accurate view of what secondary school would be like when they first arrived: that there was a common perception among incoming students that the demands upon them in their classes would be much greater than previously, but that this was not necessarily the case.

Students may not be given an accurate view of what secondary school will be like, sometimes inadvertently fuelling their fears.

"A lot of teachers, I think with very good intentions, have held secondary school over kids' heads — how they'd have to behave, and the amount of work they'll have to do — in an attempt to motivate. I suspect in some cases that has backfired and we now have kids who think they're going to fail when they get here, or have a fear of the discipline, and the detentions."

Year 9 dean

Thus, for some students, at least, fears about the Year 8 to Year 9 transition may be inadvertently fuelled by usually well-meaning attempts by others — parents, and older students or siblings, as well as some teachers — to help them understand what they will find at secondary school.

Questions to consider

- There is evidence that some students are led to 'expect the worst' when they reach secondary school. How can we ensure that students receive information about secondary school that is accurate and appropriately encouraging and motivating?
- What steps can we take to ascertain and address the worries or concerns students may be experiencing about the transition?
- How aware are we of what students are most looking forward to about secondary school? Do we know whether different students' hopes are realistic or whether they may be facing possible or likely disappointment in some areas? What might need to be done about this latter situation?

Other Steps to Reduce 'Culture Shock'

Primary and intermediate schools sometimes attempt to replicate the procedures or practices in secondary schools as a way of accustoming Year 8 students to some aspects of secondary school organisation.

The procedures mentioned included:

- timetabling students' use of computers and other equipment so that they become aware that they 'need to think ahead' and not just expect free access at any time;
- requiring students to move between classes and teachers so that they know what it feels like to be taught by different teachers who do not necessarily have an overview of everything each individual student is doing;

- students having to carry their books and equipment with them rather than having a personal desk in which to store belongings;
- giving students more responsibility for organising their own learning;
- giving students work that they felt would be similar to what they would encounter in Year 9;
- requiring students to complete activities as a group (sometimes out of class time) to enhance their organisational abilities.

In contrast, a few respondents felt that rather than primary schools organising their Year 8 classrooms to be more like secondary school, it would be more appropriate for new Year 9 students to stay in one classroom initially and have a small number of teachers come to them. Despite a common

perception that it is particularly difficult for secondary schools to change organisational arrangements in order to cater for their students in different ways, there is evidence that successful changes of this nature can be achieved. For example, while acknowledging that 'there is no blueprint ... that can be applied to all school

situations — each school has its own history, culture and set of characteristics and will need to find its own reform pathway', Cole (2005) provides research-derived suggestions (see insert box below) for changing certain school structures to make them more suitable for the learning and other needs of Year 9 and other middle years students.

Considering School Structures and Procedures

Extract from Cole (2005, pp.8-9):

'Suggestion: Provide structures and procedures that deliver timetable flexibility and enable a strong bond to be developed between staff and students.'

'It is clear that neither the standard model of primary schooling, which is particularly effective in the early years, nor the standard model of secondary schooling, which is effective for average and above average students in the senior years, works well in the middle years.'

'Our knowledge of middle years students indicates that teaching and learning should be personalised to the maximum extent possible. By reducing the number of teachers with whom students interact on a regular basis, and having a stable team of teachers working with a consistent group of students, higher levels of rapport, trust and learning can be achieved and the potential for consistency between teachers enhanced. Each student should also have a single teacher who can act as both a mentor and role model and as their main point of reference within the school.'

'A focus on a team structure also provides benefits in terms of shared planning and collegiate support and increases the options available for curriculum delivery and for addressing student discipline and welfare matters. Team structures also offer increased opportunities for teacher initiative, development and leadership and the interaction with a smaller group of students enables teachers to be more informed about student learning needs. Timetabling arrangements that enable teams to exercise greater autonomy over the way they wish to engage in the learning process also enhances the possibility that conventional approaches will be supplanted by more innovative grouping arrangements.'

'The ability to deliver schooling on a more personalised scale is the most important reform ingredient, as it is a precondition for so many other practices of benefit to young adolescents such as team teaching, knowing students well, knowing and engaging with parents, effective student management, interdisciplinary studies, program spontaneity, and community based learning. However, regrettably, it is also one of the solutions most overlooked by schools as teachers are reluctant to confine their teaching to a particular sub-group of students within the school and consequently perpetuate student and teacher alienation.'

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'Some strategies for improving structural arrangements and processes [are as follows].'

Structures and procedures could be improved by schools adopting:

- A teacher allotment policy within the school that results in a team of teachers with a range of teaching and extra-curricular skills and interests working exclusively or for extended periods of time with the Year 9 student cohort.
- The practice of the Year 9 teaching team working cooperatively to plan and deliver the diverse learning, social and emotional needs of young adolescents.
- The practice of designating an area or identifying classrooms within the school as the Year 9 area and whenever possible giving priority to timetabling Year 9 classes within this area.'

Questions to consider

- How do we feel about the concept of feeder schools 'replicating' secondary school procedures? For example, could this mean simply training students to 'fit in' with existing practices at secondary schools irrespective of whether the practices are best suited to the well-being and learning needs of the students?
- Would we like to see secondary schools become 'more like primary schools', especially for the newest/youngest students? Why or why not?
- What alternative or additional ways might there be to help students bridge differences in systems and procedures across the sectors? Are particular strategies to address these differences necessary for students to make a successful transition?

Teachers Gaining Knowledge of the Other Sector

The evidence suggests that teachers often do not have recent experience of how the other sector operates.

This lack of knowledge impacts on:

- primary teachers' ability to provide their students with accurate information about what secondary school is like;
- secondary teachers' ability to understand the experiences and perspectives of their new Year 9 students;

- all teachers' ability to plan and implement programmes of work that will connect smoothly with what the students have been doing or will go on to do at different levels of their schooling.

Suggestions for increasing teachers' knowledge of the other sector in order to facilitate students' transition from primary to secondary schooling included:

- ensuring regular, ongoing discussions between Year 8 (and sometimes also

"There's a huge amount of value to be had from staff at primary schools having more contact with staff at secondary school (and vice versa)."
Year 8 teacher

Year 7) teachers and Year 9 deans in their students' destination secondary schools, regarding curriculum integration and other student-related matters;

- arranging professional development opportunities whereby teachers visit schools in the other sector, and spend time in classrooms in order to directly observe how the other sector operates;
- arranging regular cultural, sporting and subject-based activities between primary and secondary schools to build awareness of the other sector in a range of contexts, and so as to facilitate and oversee links between primary and secondary students.

Schools' knowledge of the other sector is discussed in more depth in Chapter Five.

Helping Students Settle Well at Secondary School

Figure 2 provides a brief overview of factors to consider for assisting the settling-in process for incoming Year 9 students. As shown, a central feature is that of 'effective collaboration between schools' throughout the transition process.

Input by Year 9 Deans

In secondary schools, Year 9 deans have overall responsibility for the incoming group of new students. This responsibility is multi-faceted:

"You need a lot of knowledge of how systems within the school work: 'Who's responsible for what?' You need to be the 'middleman' in a lot of instances between the DP, teachers, form teachers and various parts of the school. In terms of skills you have to learn how to deal

with parents in an effective way, that's really important. How to get students on board yet still maintain discipline. How to not get stressed. Time management skills."

Year 9 dean

The role of a Year 9 dean is a demanding one, frequently stretching those holding the position.

"The Year 9 group this year have settled well and taken advantage of the opportunities available. This is, I believe, because we spent a lot of time with them prior to their arrival. We visited them in their schools, brought them in here, interviewed all the families ... so we were well known to the students when they arrived. We also taught the more needy students in their first year in the school which meant they got to know and trust us and to see we had their best interests at heart. This has helped to stop issues occurring for these students. But the cost has been high and neither of us are continuing with deaning after this year."

Year 9 dean

As well as regular teaching duties, deans have a range of responsibilities such as those outlined below.

Before the students arrive at secondary school, deans:

- liaise with Year 8 teachers and primary/intermediate school principals to gain information about individual Year 8 students, including those with special needs;
- visit feeder schools to administer tests or arrange for Year 8 students to come to the secondary school to take the test;
- visit feeder schools to talk to students about the secondary school;

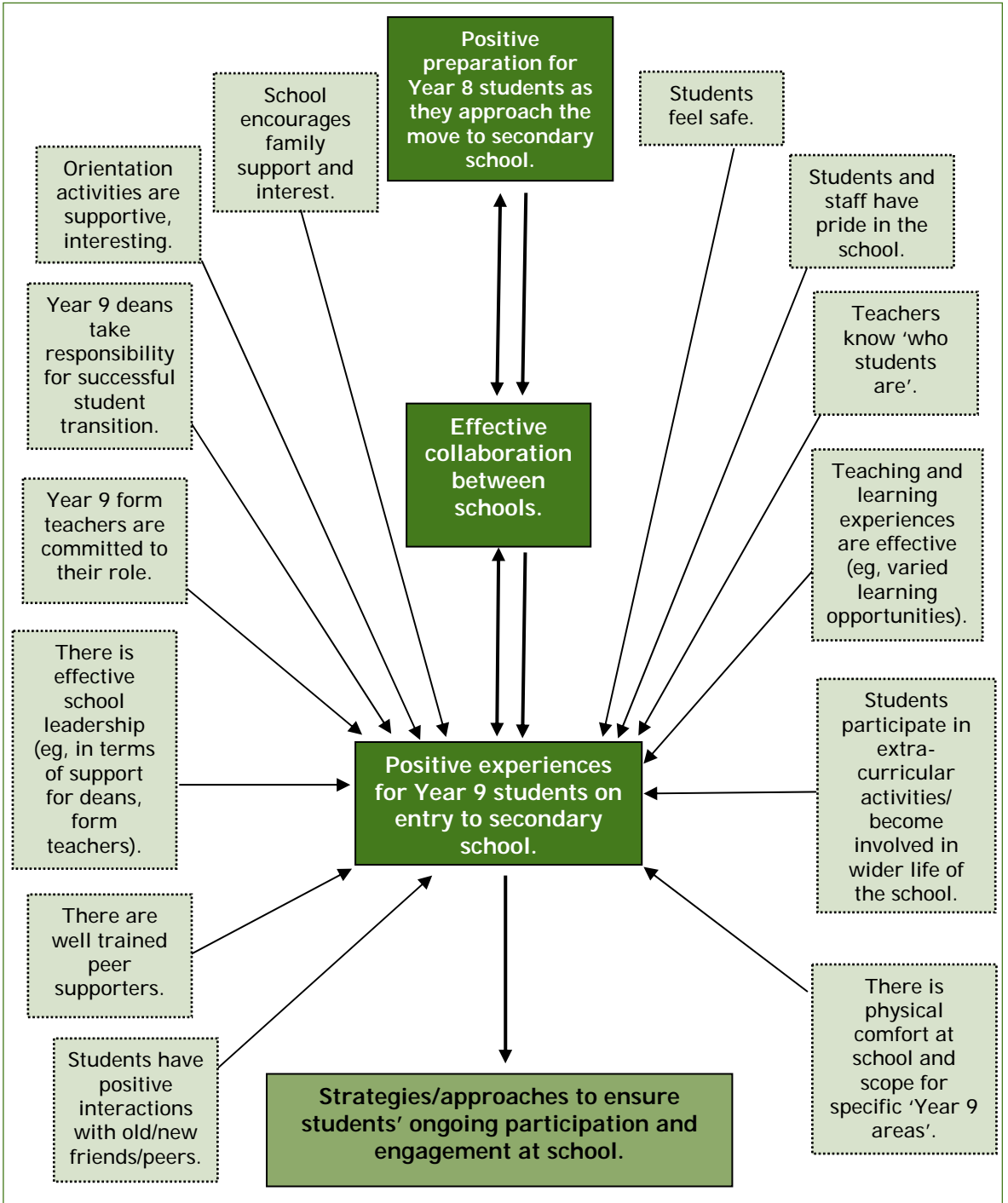


Figure 2: Important factors in helping Year 9 students settle well at secondary school

- interview parents and students as part of the enrolment process;
- create class groupings for Year 9 form/subject classes;
- meet with individual Year 8 students as required.

After the students arrive at secondary school, deans:

- oversee orientation and other Year 9 whole group activities, such as special outings or camps;
- take responsibility for information about students' academic and social needs, and arrange for this to be passed on to teachers as appropriate;
- oversee pastoral care and discipline for the Year 9 group as a whole. This involves liaising with teachers, counsellors, senior management and others to coordinate the support or discipline required for individual students;
- contact parents with information about students as required.

This extensive list of duties, and in light of the preceding quote from a Year 9 dean, strongly indicates how important it is for school leaders to allocate appropriate time to allow deans to perform all aspects of the role expected of them. If this does not happen, there is the risk that the deans will 'burn out', with the further consequence that the school would no longer benefit from their hard-won knowledge and experience.

Issues and Concerns Regarding the Role of the Year 9 Dean

Managing information about individual students is one of a dean's key roles. While some secondary teachers praised the way deans had passed

necessary information on to them, there were also concerns that important health and academic information about students did not always reach classroom teachers. This was said to be because the deans lacked the time to go through the information properly and make sure it was passed on in a timely manner. (Sometimes, however, the teachers admitted that they preferred to use information about students they had gathered themselves, rather than referring to information compiled by others. This suggests an ongoing need for more effective communication amongst teachers about the nature and purpose of any shared student information.)

For many primary and intermediate teachers of Year 8 students, the deans, sometimes in combination with the principal, are their main source of contact with the secondary school. While they appreciated the efforts that deans made to come and talk to them about their Year 8 students, they also expressed a number of concerns. Many of these were to do with how effectively, or even whether, the secondary schools used the student information that was passed on to deans during interviews with them, or provided by means of portfolios, letters or reports prepared for the secondary schools.

As deans have so many students to oversee, primary school teachers were also concerned that they would not have the time to get to know students individually or to make sure their needs were well catered for. Specific examples were mentioned where it was felt that poor decisions had been made about class groupings, despite the secondary school having access to information which suggested that certain student combinations would not be desirable (for example, where there had been a prior history of a student being intimidated by others either at school and/or in the neighbourhood out of school time).

Participating deans, too, mentioned that they would like to know students better before they reached Year 9, but that their teaching and other responsibilities prevented them from going out into primary schools sufficiently often to achieve this.

Study participants suggested that:

- it would be of benefit if deans could have considerably more contact with Year 8 students before they arrive at secondary school;
- consideration should therefore be given to the concept of a 'super-dean': whereby deans would make regular visits to their main primary/intermediate feeder schools throughout the year, rather than just in term 4, in order to get to know the Year 8 students and observe them in their primary school setting.

Despite the issues and concerns inherent in their role, participating deans noted that they had met most of the incoming Year 9 students several times (eg, when conducting enrolment interviews), and were positive about being 'a familiar face' at least for the students when they arrived.

Selecting Staff for the Role of Year 9 Dean

The extensive range of responsibilities that falls to those in the role of dean highlights the importance of ensuring that ongoing training and/or mentoring opportunities are made available to deans. It also underlines the need to carefully select deans with the right professional and personal characteristics to perform the role well.

Some important selection criteria to consider in respect of prospective deans is that they:

- have a good level of knowledge of key student assessment tools and their interpretation;
- have an in-depth understanding of the needs of young adolescent learners;
- are acknowledged among their teaching peers in the school as an effective teacher of Year 9 students;
- possess strong organisational skills;
- are able to effectively/skilfully communicate with a wide range of adults in the course of their work, including parents, and principals and teachers within and beyond their own school.

Questions to consider

- The role of Year 9 dean is clearly very important in the primary to secondary schooling transition. It is also very challenging. Do we in this school need to do more in terms of allocating time and resources to enable deans to more effectively carry out the requirements of the role and not suffer burn out themselves? If so, how could this realistically and equitably be managed?

Considering Parents/Caregivers in the Transition

Families are a key player in the transition process. One basic role that parents/caregivers need to play in transition is ensuring their child is enrolled in a

Parents and families play an important role in helping their child feel positively about the move to secondary school.

secondary school in a timely manner. They also play an important role in helping their child look forward in a positive way to secondary school. As well, parents have a part to play in keeping their child focused on learning and achievement. This can be

through showing an ongoing interest in their children's activities at school, and by monitoring the amount of leisure time the child spends on watching TV or playing computer games, so that valuable learning-enhancing activities such as reading are not seriously compromised.¹³

But many participants noted that the transition from primary to secondary school is potentially as much, if not more, worrisome for parents than it is for the students.

Also, while the great majority of parents value education highly and wish their child to do well at (secondary) school, some parents do not feel

confident about interacting with the secondary school or confident enough to support their child's learning in the most effective way.

Acknowledging both the integral role of parents in the transition and, often, their need for reassurance and support, the secondary schools in our study facilitated communication with the parents of Year 9 students through such means as:

Schools had strategies to facilitate communication with parents and bring them into the school community.

- interviewing all parents/caregivers of Year 8 students enrolled for the following year;
- the Year 9 deans holding evening meetings at feeder schools to tell parents about behaviour and other expectations at secondary school and to answer their questions;
- the Year 9 deans sending out an initial letter plus follow-up correspondence to parents before the new school year, to introduce themselves, outline stationery and other requirements, and offer guidelines to parents/families on how to effectively support students at secondary school;
- inviting parents along to the orientation day powhiri/welcome assembly for Year 9s;
- holding a special evening assembly for Year 9s and their parents early in the year: this included handing out information about the school, including expectations of students and the opportunities available, followed by each Year 9 form teacher spending time with their particular class of students together with members of the students' families;
- encouraging all form teachers to ring parents at home to introduce themselves and to let parents know how and when they can contact them if they wish to talk about their child.

¹³ Recent work by Mei Kuin Lai, Stuart McNaughton and others has identified what they refer to as 'summer learning loss'. In other words, loss of or 'plateauing' of certain achievement gains made by students during the school year over long summer vacation periods. The researchers emphasise that this is a particular concern when students are already more vulnerable in terms of their achievement and subject mastery in school, and who typically have lower reading attainment. The concept of summer learning loss highlights the importance of young people being able to experience interesting/stimulating activities or pastimes during breaks from school, and maintaining at least some level of reading activity. Ideally, too, awareness of the potential for summer learning loss will help focus collaboration between school sectors, and parents and schools, in such a way as to minimise enduring effects of any learning losses that occur.

Hughes et al (2008) offer some suggestions for how schools can help parents feel more relaxed and informed about their child's transfer from primary to secondary schooling. They describe a sample of suggestions as follows.

'In one primary school, Year [8] parents were invited to an informal evening at the school along with Year [9] parents from the secondary school. Year [8] parents expressed their hopes and concerns about secondary school and shared these in small groups with other Year [8] and Year [9] parents. Through these discussions, parents came to see how they could act as a resource both for their own children and for other parents.'

'Parents of [Year 9 students] were invited to informal, small-scale parents' meetings early in the [first] term. This enabled them to meet their children's teachers and to find out how the children had settled at a very early stage in their secondary school career.'

'One secondary school with a large Somali population held an event in the school which celebrated the Somali parents' cooking and other skills. The event was intended to provide recognition of the funds of knowledge in the Somali community and to generate ideas about how they might be used in school. The event was well supported by the headteacher, teachers, students and other parents.'

Orientation Days and Powhiri

The secondary schools ran orientation days for their Year 9 students at the beginning of term 1, before the return of the older students. These featured fun, getting-to-know-each-other activities (among students and between students and teachers), 'map reading' tasks designed to assist students to find their way around the school, and information sharing sessions to help students become familiar with key procedures and personnel within the school.

"[Just] them and their teachers and their peer support people. So they have a full day with them. That orientation day with no other seniors around is really important. The Year 9s feel entirely safe and they can find their way around. And they have a range of activities, so that they can get to know other students in a more relaxed, fun way."

Secondary school counsellor

"With the peer support leaders they go around the school, they have an orientation booklet and have activities around names of teachers, names of certain buildings, where's the library, where's the gym. ... Parents come in on that first day too. They are welcomed onto the marae, parents and children. That first day of school for Year 9s is important."

Year 9 teacher

Following orientation day, the whole school came together for a powhiri (welcoming assembly) in honour of the new Year 9 students. These included performances and presentations from more senior students to celebrate the different cultures within the school and to showcase a range of particular opportunities open to students within the school.

"Orientation day made me feel that there was no need to hide from going to school."

Year 9 student

Orientation days are generally agreed to be essential in order for Year 9 students to:

- have sufficient time and space to physically find their way around the school without the pressure of keeping to the timetable of a regular school day;
- receive undivided attention and support from their teachers and a small number of older students upon arrival in their new school;
- become acquainted with their form teacher and with other students in their form class before the real work of the year begins.

Orientation day, senior student peer supporters, and the powhiri were what students most often referred to when commenting on what their secondary school had done to help them settle in. Most comments were very favourable.

Some teachers, however, emphasised that, ideally, orientation-type activities should continue over a longer period than just the one day that new Year 9 students typically receive.¹⁴

"If it was possible to give them more than one day at the beginning of the year to get to know the school better and where they could just be in their [Year 9] group together and teachers could spend time with them so they get to know them better before classes start."

Year 9 dean

"I think we need to reduce the amount of the change for the students, stabilise them more. Perhaps keep them in one place a bit longer, with one teacher. And perhaps have a few more days which are based outside the classroom, like outdoor education or cultural activities. More things that would encourage the kids to mingle with each other and this would help them to feel less threatened. We do a bit of this on the first day of the year when they are with their form class and they do activities. We do other things in the first term but I think we could do more of it."

Year 9 teacher

¹⁴ However, if schools were to adopt an approach, such as that suggested by Cole, 2002 (see pp.32-33 of this document), in which a particular group of teachers and others was assigned to spend extended time throughout the school year working exclusively with Year 9 students, further orientation-type activities per se would probably be less important/necessary.

Questions to Consider

- What checks do we do on how welcoming and useful our new Year 9 students find our orientation activities?
- Might some or all students benefit from more or different orientation-type activities? If yes, who, what, and why?
- Should more and/or different people be involved in organising orientation activities? For example, could the previous year's Year 9 students be asked what they most and least appreciated about their orientation, and what they would have liked to see more or less of? Could parents/families have a role?
- Should there be a separate orientation day just for parents/caregivers? If yes, what key elements should be covered (eg, who parents can contact if they need to discuss their child and how they can do this)?
- What steps do we currently take to ascertain and address worries or concerns students may be experiencing as a result of their move to secondary school? Are there ways we could do this better?
- Students can be discouraged if they find that particular hopes they had about secondary school do not seem to be realised. Are we as aware as we could be about the hopes and dreams that students arrive with when they begin Year 9 so that we can better cater for their (appropriate) expectations and positively redirect any more unrealistic expectations?

The Role of Year 9 Form Teachers

Along with deans and peer supporters, form teachers are key contact people within the school for Year 9 students. Some participants saw Year 9 form teachers as potentially *"the most skilled teachers in the school"*, and emphasised that they should be selected for their empathy with, and ability to relate to, younger students.

"I would love to see a growing emphasis on building relationships within form classes."

Year 9 teacher

"I would love to see a growing emphasis on building relationships within form classes, something that's smaller than the whole school, where kids can feel they belong, feel connected. Quality time spent with form teachers is important, maybe

looking at goal setting, interviewing each kid individually, but also doing things like having inter-class sports challenges, doing fun stuff together, working through life skills within their form classes and letting the kids develop that relationship with a significant teacher."

Year 9 teacher

"I know that with my form class I've got to be a bit like a mother, you've got to have a band-aid and you've got to be prepared to spend the time to listen to them talk."

Year 9 form teacher

Ideally, the role of a form teacher is to:

- create strong relationships with the students in their form class and take responsibility for their pastoral care;

- foster class bonding within their form class and help Year 9 students feel they have a place where they belong within the school;
- act as a link between subject teachers, deans, counsellors and the student in relation to discipline or pastoral care issues;
- engage in activities with their form class designed to help students develop life and study skills;
- create strong relationships with students' parents.

Issues and Concerns Regarding the Year 9 Form Teacher Role

Finding from our transition study

The form teachers at secondary school often did not know the students in their form classes particularly well, especially if they only saw these students at form time [and not in any of their subject classes]. This was particularly the case for the form teachers of many of the low achieving students.

While participants identified a range of desirable aspects of a Year 9 form teacher's role, it was recognised too that there can be a gap between ideal practice and reality. Factors that can prevent form teachers from fulfilling all aspects of the role include:

- insufficient time to spend with the class: some form teachers do not teach their form class in any subject, and so may only see their form class students for 10 or 15 minutes a day, and with that time mostly taken up with administrative tasks such as reading notices;
- lack of the necessary enthusiasm or skills to undertake pastoral care or help with the ongoing development of their students' study and life skills. It was observed by some study participants that whereas some form teachers interacted a lot with their class, others simply

chose to focus on calling the roll and checking on absentees.

Although many form teachers do a good job of caring for their Year 9 students, it is clear that they do not always receive sufficient support to fulfil the important pastoral care and life-skills development aspects of the role, and to establish and maintain effective relationships with parents.

School leaders therefore need to decide how best to allocate sufficient time, training and resources for the support that form teachers require. For example, while one school in our study had attempted to put in place a training programme for form teachers, this had not succeeded due to the extra time commitment it required of teachers. This outcome called for a critical review within the school of what had gone wrong, and to establish how this could be remedied.

Selecting Staff for the Role of Form Teacher

As for the role of Year 9 dean, consideration needs to be given to the professional and personal characteristics that will best equip appointees to the role of Year 9 form teacher. Important attributes would include:

- an ability and inclination to mentor students;
- an in-depth understanding of the needs of young adolescents;
- sound experience of working with this year group;
- ability to liaise effectively with other teachers and the Year 9 deans regarding individual student needs;
- ability to communicate well with a wide range of parents;
- ability and inclination to monitor student progress across the spectrum, including academic and social development, and the nature and extent of their involvement in the wider life of the school.

Questions to consider

- What do we consider to be the most important aspects of the Year 9 form teacher role in this school? Should it mainly be a pastoral care role, or something else?
- Are the form teacher arrangements in this school working as well as they could be in terms of student well-being and needs? What are the main strengths and weaknesses of our current system? For example, how important is it, or might it be, to ensure that form teachers also teach their class in at least one subject area?
- Should we 'match' form teachers and classes in terms of certain, specified characteristics? Why or why not? If yes, what do we consider to be the most important matching criteria?
- Do we know what the particular pressures and positive aspects of the form teacher role are for the teachers involved?
- To what extent do our form teachers receive specific mentoring or professional development opportunities to support them in their role? Is it sufficient? If not, how could this lack be rectified?
- Should form teachers have a greater role in parental contact than a student's other teachers or should all teachers have equal responsibility for this?
- Are our form teachers (and/or other teachers) presently able to keep in regular contact with parents about student progress and well-being? If not, how might this be better achieved?
- Is there a need in this school for regular, timetabled meetings so that Year 9 deans and form teachers can spend time together to discuss and address the needs and progress of their students?

Peer Supporters

In common with other schools in New Zealand and overseas, both secondary schools in our study had a

Senior student peer supporters help Year 9s more quickly feel part of the school.

peer support strategy in place, in which between two and four previously trained Year 13 students were assigned to each new Year 9 class. As much as possible, the senior students were 'matched' with the

particular class they were assigned to. These Year 13s took part in the orientation activities with the incoming Year 9 students, following this up by introducing and leading various group activities with the students in form time throughout the first

term. Sometimes, too, the peer supporters worked alongside teachers, contributing to activities within subject classes. In most instances, the peer supporters remained involved with a form class for the entire year, albeit at a lower level after the first term.

Teachers commented that the intensive, initial support provided by the Year 13 students, as well as the ongoing support they offered, had been highly successful. (The students too provided very positive feedback on how the peer supporters had helped them settle at secondary school.)

The teachers felt that the senior students helped the Year 9 students more quickly feel part of the

school. Also that they acted as good role models, and helped to create cohesion and group feeling among students within each of the Year 9 classes and, to some extent, for the Year 9 group overall. The Year 13 students were further seen as additional or alternative sources of pastoral care and support for students, and as a help to teachers in identifying Year 9 students in need of extra academic or social support from the school.

Another positive aspect of the peer support strategy was that it helped dispel some of the fears held by the newest, youngest students in the school about 'older students', in particular that they would be bullied by them.

In addition, positive interactions between the different year levels or age groups in the school helped create a more integrated, unified student population and the opportunity for greater exchange of ideas, knowledge and skills.

Year 9 students commenting on peer supporters:

- *"The peer supporters helped us get to know our classmates really well. And they are really helpful for the Year 9s — can ask them if you don't know something."*
- *"Peer supporters — we do fun games with them. I really like that."*
- *"Talk to peer supporters sometimes when I need them. They introduced me to other people."*
- *"When peer supporters come to our social studies classes, they do activities with us and make it [learning the subject] more fun."*
- *"Peer supporters: if you need help you can count on them."*

Ensuring Good Practice in Peer Support Programmes

Several points about establishing peer support programmes were raised.

- Peer supporters need to be carefully chosen, ensuring that those selected fully understand the serious nature of the year-long commitment and have the personal qualities that mean they can relate well to younger students.
- Peer supporters need to be well trained in what is expected of them.
- The peer support programme must be well organised and supported, so that the Year 13 students who are selected have, for example, a range of activities at their disposal to undertake with their Year 9 charges, and the time and resources to carry these out.
- Having Year 13 students in the Year 9 classes for the whole year was consistently seen as beneficial for the Year 9 students. The leadership and mentoring role was further considered to be a valuable learning experience for the Year 13s themselves. Some caution, though, was advised in that the peer supporter role does separate the Year 13 students from their own peer group for at least some of the time, and means extra work and responsibilities on top of their own studies and other commitments. These potential disadvantages for the students involved need to be carefully managed. (It was however noted that with suitable preparation and planning some of the peer supporters' work could count towards NCEA credits. And the peer supporters themselves gave very positive feedback about the experience.)

The peer support programme needs to be well organised and supported.

Questions to consider

- If we wanted to introduce a peer support system into this school or if we think our existing peer support system could be more effective, how could this be achieved? Should there be 'peer supporters' from other year levels as well (eg, Year 10) rather than just Year 13 students?

Year 13 Students Commenting on their Role as Peer Supporters

Several peer supporters at each of the participating secondary schools in our transition study provided feedback about their experiences.

The purpose of the peer supporter role

Commenting on their role as a peer supporter, the senior students believed that they were there to help the Year 9s settle into secondary school. They talked about being a friendly face, smiling at the younger students in the corridors and being available to help with directions, information, and any worries or issues the students wanted to talk about. Some described their role as inducting Year 9 students into the culture of the school to *"give them an understanding of school values and expectations"* and some saw themselves as being expected to model good behaviour. A few added that the peer supporters provided an alternative view of senior students who are sometimes perceived by younger students as likely bullies.

More specifically, the peer supporters encouraged the Year 9s to get involved in extra-curricular activities. They also helped teachers in various ways, including organising sports and other activities, and providing feedback about individual students to help teachers more effectively *"monitor their [the Year 9 students'] progress"*.

Apart from general advice about school events, the peer supporters felt they helped Year 9s *"feel safe"* (eg, by dissipating bullying incidents) and acted as a sounding board for general worries and concerns. One peer supporter commented:

"They have a lot more on their minds than the average person would expect."

The peer supporters further stated that various Year 9 students *"ask why school's so boring"*, discuss problems they are having with particular teachers, and talk about present and future subject options. The peer supporters felt they were able to give the Year 9s a perspective on what school would be like for them in the future, sometimes even talking to them about possible future careers and *"what they want to do with their lives"*.

The Year 9 students were reported to particularly value the interpersonal and 'moral' support they received, and to be grateful for the visibility of the peer supporters as it helped them feel safe in the school grounds. And, especially in the first days and weeks at secondary school, they appreciated the peer supporters being available to guide them when they were lost. The peer supporters also saw themselves as advocates for the Year 9s when they got into trouble with teachers. Having *"been through that stage"* themselves, they felt they had knowledge about Year 9 students' concerns and issues and were therefore in a position to empathise.

continued ...

continued ...

Selection, training and ongoing support

Commenting on selection and training to become a peer supporter, all of the participating peer supporters felt that the camp they had been on together had been very valuable for promoting a shared sense of purpose and commitment, learning how to relate to a wide range of people, and for establishing a strong bond amongst themselves.

"This required a great deal of concentration combined with hard work. We learned to really open up and connect with people in a way we never thought possible. Involved were several activities that helped me gain a better understanding of what peer supporters would possibly go up against."

However, although all of the peer supporters agreed that the camp they had attended had been very helpful, they also emphasised that people who wanted to be peer supporters should already possess the "basic fundamentals" as *"most of what we do comes from how we feel about other people"*.

The peer supporters gave each other ongoing support, discussed situations with their form teachers, and met more formally as a group from time to time to raise issues of concern and collectively discuss possible solutions:

"We discuss real-life incidents that happen at school and how to tackle them."

The ongoing training sessions, and also the day-to-day work of the peer supporters, were overseen by teachers who had undertaken this particular responsibility. One of the peer supporters observed:

"We are encouraged by the help and the great wisdom of knowledge of our peer support teachers who have inspired us in a great way."

The rewards of the peer supporter role

Commenting on what the best thing for them personally was about being a peer supporter, the students often referred to the recognition and respect that resulted:

"The amount of respect that my peers show to me because I am a peer supporter and how everyone soon gets to know you and wants to be my friend. Also the difference you make in the confidence of the Year 9s [you work with]".

"People saying 'hello' to me; knowing I can help keep students on track."

There was also reward in the knowledge that what they were doing was worthwhile and could make a difference to younger students:

"The idea that there is a group of young, positive leaders who are eager to help the younger crowd coming in."

"For me personally it is that we can effect change. This gives me a chance to voice my opinions and be heard. Also I enjoy being a good role model and being a good influence on the younger students."

continued ...

continued ...

Some of the peer supporters simply enjoyed being with and helping younger students. And some saw the role as enabling them to give back to the school some of what had been provided for them. It was also observed that the role gave them an opportunity to develop skills that would be helpful later in life.

Challenges of the peer supporter role

The peer supporters took their responsibilities very seriously. But they acknowledged that there were difficult aspects of the role, including anxieties about *"letting everyone down"*, *"not living up to the image"*, *"fear of slipping up"*, or not being able to *"provide them with everything possible"*.

A number of peer supporters also experienced a tension between their desire to be a 'friend' and having to deal with disciplinary issues, as having to take a disciplinary stance could lead to unwanted confrontation. And one student found it hard to *"control a noisy class in the absence of a teacher"*.

Commenting on possible solutions to such difficulties, one student reflected that she needed to focus more on what was going well rather than worrying about possible failure, while others suggested that in terms of discipline that *"getting to know Year 9 students really well so they know who you are"* would help a lot, although the student having trouble with controlling a noisy class felt that she had to *"get tougher and involve the teacher"*. But overall the peer supporters felt that any issues they encountered were able to be solved effectively through consultation with the other peer supporters and with the teachers supervising the peer support programme, as well as teachers generally.

The following comments sum up how much the students valued the experience of being a peer supporter:

"I believe it is necessary to have these types of programmes in schools. And it has helped me a lot and will do so for many years."

"I've had the most rewarding experiences that I'll never trade for anything. I'm glad I became one and hope that I've done enough to make those before me proud and inspire those after me to carry on something special like our current accomplishments. The things I do I don't consider work, I consider it helping out."

"As a peer supporter I was given an opportunity to keep my word and do something for my school. It has also taught me how valuable my life and time can be to other people. What I learn as a peer supporter is how to value myself for the difference I can make by doing small, everyday things that mean a lot to someone else. Most people worry we peer supporters will struggle to balance study and duty, but I can see no reason why we can't do both and have proven to ourselves that we can handle it."

Friends and Social Interaction

The transition is seen by some students as an exciting opportunity to make new friends. Other

Facilitated social opportunities help students develop a sense of belonging in their new school.

students however particularly miss having their old friends with them and/or are more tentative about making new friends when they arrive at secondary school.

Before and after transition, 'friends' are almost always

mentioned by students as a key reason for enjoying school, and as a 'best liked' aspect of school.

Generally speaking, transition is easier for students who have at least a few existing friends or acquaintances at the new secondary school.

But irrespective of whether students come to their new secondary school in the company of established friends, it is important to ensure that new Year 9 students are able to develop a sense of belonging in their new school situation through form class-based activities (where possible, aided by peer supporters), and other facilitated chances to socialise, such as sports days, camps, and special events.

A particular aspect of students' social interactions on arrival at secondary school emphasised by teachers, and by some students and parents in our study, is the need to 'acclimatise' to the often much greater diversity among the student population.

Incorporating cooperative learning activities into subject classes was recommended as a good way of helping students integrate and to form a positive classroom learning environment.

Our data also indicated that ensuring that students of different year/age levels have chances to interact together in positive, non-threatening situations is of benefit — for example, to help Year 9 students

interact more naturally with older students, rather than fearing them or feeling they needed to keep out of perceived 'senior student areas' of the school.

Knowing the Students

Teachers either side of the transition talked about the need to get to know new students as individuals as quickly as possible.

It was evident too from our study findings that students have a strong desire to be known as an individual by their teachers.

"I think the most important thing is getting to know the individual."
Year 8 teacher

While it was acknowledged that the 'getting acquainted' process could be particularly challenging within a secondary school setting, given the greater number of students each teacher has to get to know, participants recommended developing personal techniques for achieving this.

For example, one Year 9 teacher's strategy was to ask each of his new students to write a little bit about themselves, emphasising what they wanted to highlight. With their permission, the teacher then took photographs of the students and together with the brief 'bios' compiled them into a folder. This served as a valuable reference until the teacher became well familiar with everyone.

A practice with a similar purpose was described by some of the primary teachers: this was to have their Year 8 students write a letter to their forthcoming teachers telling them about themselves and identifying what they would particularly like the new teachers to know about them.

Other teachers mentioned making a point of greeting their students as they passed in the school grounds to facilitate the getting-to-know-each-other process.

Questions to consider

- What strategies do we use to get to know our new Year 9 students? As individuals, do we ever seek out student information compiled by the students themselves, by former teachers and/or our colleagues who take our students for other subjects?
- How much do we know about what other teachers do to learn about their students: would it be helpful to share our knowledge and skills about this?
- How well do we feel we know individual students in our different classes?
- How important do we think it is to know as much as possible about individual students (eg, in terms of interests, abilities, home circumstances, and so on)?
- Are we as teachers (regularly) able to incorporate what we know about individual students into teaching and learning interactions in the classroom? If yes, what are (or will be) the benefits of this for us and for different students?
- If no, would we like to (more often) incorporate student interests into class activities? If we feel there are barriers to doing this, how might we go about overcoming these? What sort of help do we most need to achieve this? Would it be possible to obtain assistance from each other here in this school, or from somewhere else (eg, via the Internet/online discussion)?
- As students do not remain 'static', how do we personally keep up with changes in their lives or in them as individuals that are important to know about in terms of their learning and progress?

The School Environment and Facilities

Ensuring a Student-friendly Environment

Students quite often find the physical differences in their secondary school compared to primary school somewhat alienating.

Amongst other things, students in the transition study:

- felt there was less 'comfort' offered by the physical environment at secondary school. They particularly disliked being locked out of classrooms at lunchtimes during winter months, for instance, or having no shelter (eg, from covered pathways) when walking between

They felt there was less 'comfort' at secondary school.

classrooms in the rain;

- considered the secondary school environment generally to be less attractive (eg, more litter in the grounds, less colourful or well set out) than at primary/intermediate school;
- found carrying their books and other belongings around with them all day troublesome and tiring. Even when there were lockers available, students often chose not to use them because of the risk of damage and theft.

To facilitate students' transition to secondary school and feelings of belonging, suggested considerations include:

- ensuring that places are made available for students where they can be warm and comfortable when the weather prevents outdoor activities during breaks;

- finding solutions to the issue of how best to provide secure facilities (eg, in homerooms) in which students can safely leave belongings during the day and readily access them as required;
- displaying students' art work and evidence of other achievements and interests in prominent places in the school to be appreciated by students and staff and also parents and other visitors to the school;
- brightening colour schemes and general presentation of the school to reflect its main users — adolescents — and to promote school pride.

It was also emphasised that the school environment, in all senses of the word, should be as good as it can be, particularly for students with difficult personal or home circumstances.

Dedicated Spaces for Year 9 Students

Students in the first term or so in Year 9 often miss having an established space of their own in the school grounds in which to play games or 'hang out', which they had taken for granted at primary school. They particularly miss the relaxed, fun, or comfortable lunch-time breaks they had been used to. It was evident that this experience was making it more difficult for some students to adjust to secondary school, especially those who tended to be more unsure about the presence of older students.

Taking into account student feedback it seems important to ensure that:

- a range of lunch-time activities are available for different groups of students;
- students are well informed early on about what activities and facilities are available to them and regularly updated;
- for a time at least, Year 9 students have the option of spending their lunch breaks in dedicated spaces in the school grounds, or, alternatively, that the use of different parts of the school grounds is monitored to ensure that different groups/year levels have equitable access.

Cole (2005) also advocates 'providing [an] ... environment dedicated to Year 9', for example, through 'identifying a distinct physical location within the existing school facilities for Year 9' and 'supporting students to decorate or landscape their [own] learning areas'. He stated (p.11) that:

'Year 9 should be an experience that students are looking forward to and one that they look back on as being something very special. Establishing a dedicated location for Year 9 schooling assists in making the experience "unique" or in breaking the pattern of the previous years' experience. It also assists in building students' attachment to school and in generating a sense of belonging.'

Questions to Consider

- To what extent are we aware of how secure and comfortable Year 9 students feel about being at our school?
- What are key factors, from the students' point of view, that enable them to feel a sense of belonging at this school?

Students Feeling Safe

Year 9 students feeling safe and secure includes being sufficiently equipped to confidently handle

“Some of them don’t feel safe here.”

Year 9 teacher

such matters as finding their way around the school and seeking help with problems if necessary. It also includes

physical safety, in particular, freedom from fear of and actual bullying.

All groups of participants in the transition study — teachers, students, parents — talked about a certain level of bullying occurring at school.

There are many reasons for bullying and recommended steps to deal with it. While

discussion about these is beyond the scope of this document, comments from a number of participants in the study suggested that an important, practical, consideration concerns minimising areas and situations within the school where bullying is most likely to occur or go on undetected.

For example, toilet blocks were identified as areas where students encounter bullying.

Students talked too about the bullying or harassment that often occurs when students have to queue for most of their lunch breaks in order to buy food at the school canteen.

Questions to consider

- Are we as aware as we could be of where in the school, or in what circumstances, bullying is likely to occur, especially that which involves Year 9 students? What more might we need to do, or do differently, to prevent incidences of bullying?
- If students are experiencing long wait times to buy food at the school canteen, are there steps we could take to improve the relevant systems so that students are served faster, and opportunities for student misbehaviour are reduced?
- If Year 9 (or any) students have fears about using school toilet facilities, are we taking effective steps to resolve this issue?
- Do we provide a sufficient range of organised activities for students during breaktimes to encourage constructive participation and leave students less opportunities for bullying and other misbehaviours?

Minimise areas and situations within the school where bullying is likely to occur.

Promoting School Pride

Different but inter-related aspects of 'school pride' include students appreciating the physical

"They just need to feel that they belong in the school. ... We are trying to foster school pride."

Year 9 teacher

environment, and feeling proud of the accomplishments of everyone in the school, including themselves.

In contrast to students who are careless of the school environment (eg, damaging items and littering), and do not

respect the standing of the school, students who are proud of their school feel a greater sense of belonging and loyalty, and are more likely to experience — and create — positive interactions with other students and with teachers and other adults in the school.

Dinham and Rowe (2008) reported that findings from a study within The Longitudinal Surveys of

Australian Youth (LSAY) project conducted by Fullarton (2002) included:

- 'that levels of engagement were higher where students believed that their school had a good climate, that is, that their school had high quality teachers, effective discipline, high levels of student learning and a positive school spirit';
- 'that overall level of student engagement [pride] in the school was a strong predictor of [individual student] engagement and that high engagement at the school level moderated the negative effects of socio-economic status and [ethnicity], indicating that the school environment has an important influence on student engagement.'

'Levels of engagement were higher where students believed their school had a good climate and a ... positive school spirit.'

Questions to consider

- To what extent do we — staff and students — at this school feel a sense of school pride?
- To what extent do we feel that our families/community feel a sense of pride in the school?
- As a school, do we need to do more to promote or maintain a sense of pride in the school among students and families/community? If yes, what might we need to do to achieve this?
- What strategies that are seen as positive rather than punitive by students do we, or could we, use to minimise incidents of littering, theft, and damage to property within the school? How might students themselves take a lead in devising and implementing any such strategies?
- How good are we in this school at ensuring that we celebrate student and staff successes? Do we include parents/families/community in celebrations often enough?

Students' Involvement in Extra-curricular Activities

All groups of participants in our transition study recognised the importance of student participation

Students who regularly participate in and enjoy extra-curricular activities tend to do better at school and in life.

in extra-curricular activities for aiding the integration process throughout transition, for facilitating the interactions which are integral to social adjustment and well-being, and for providing additional opportunities for students to learn new skills or hone existing

ones.

For all of these reasons it was often emphasised that students should, where appropriate¹⁵, be actively assisted to become and stay involved in extra-curricular activities at school that they would personally enjoy. This was to help them feel more connected to the new school and in many cases to feel a greater sense of continuity with their primary school and/or after school or weekend experiences.

There are other important reasons, too, for keeping an eye on the extent to which individual students get involved in extra-curricular activities.

Evidence indicates that students who regularly participate in and enjoy extra-curricular activities tend to do better at school and in life generally than those who do not participate. For example, Wylie et al's (2006) *Competent Learners @ 14* (part of the longitudinal *Competent Children, Competent Learners* study¹⁶) reports that students who were engaged in the wider life of the school were more likely to have interests that provided them with goals and challenges and a sense of achievement.

Similarly, Fullarton (2002) found that an ...

'...emphasis ... on extra-curricular activity is important. Strong participation in such activities more closely connects students to the school and "...[results in] 'flow-on' effects to more academic parts of the curriculum".'

Reinforcing these findings, data from our transition study indicated that the high achieving students, particularly the high achievers in reading, were generally more likely to be taking part in extra-curricular activities at primary and secondary school.

They were also more likely to take on special responsibilities at secondary school, such as library or canteen duties or representing their class on student council.

Kassie's story (Case Study 4) below illustrates how students who miss out on finding a place for themselves in the wider life of the school can increasingly fall behind both socially and academically.

¹⁵ Depending on a student's home circumstances, cultural considerations, and involvement in activities outside of school it may be necessary to consult with a student's parents/caregivers to discuss the student's participation in certain activities.

¹⁶ For more information about this study go to: www.educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/ho-mepages/competentchildren/index.html

Case Study 4: Involvement in extra-curricular activities

Some students tend to miss out on valuable social and other opportunities at school (eg, being in a school production, or joining a sports team) because, unlike other students, they do not 'know' how to join up, and do not have the confidence, resilience, or social maturity to find out. Alternatively, they may be too influenced by certain friends who don't want to participate.

Students least likely to have participated in extra-curricular activities at school often appear to be in greatest need of this sort of involvement to help them become well assimilated into the school environment. Once at secondary school, such students may also be at particular risk of 'getting lost' without the level of monitoring or overseeing that they had often received at primary school.

Kassie was one such student. She was a very quiet, shy girl who found it difficult to talk to anyone she wasn't familiar or comfortable with. Although she was progressing quite well in her school work, her Year 8 teacher indicated that she was working below potential in that she didn't like to ask questions to clarify her work, and stayed on the fringes, especially when there were out of the ordinary learning activities on offer. Kassie tended not to talk to her parents or other family members about school, and her parents were of the opinion that everything was going as it should for their daughter at school before and after transition.

Kassie did sometimes take part in lunchtime sports activities with classmates in Year 8 and acknowledged that she especially liked netball but 'didn't know' why she had not joined any team within or outside of school so she could play more regularly (it was evident that she had talent in the game).

Once at secondary school, Kassie continued the same pattern of behaviour, only more so, keeping a low profile and mixing almost exclusively with two or three friends from Year 8, mainly just wandering around the school grounds together at break times. Again, she did not join up for any sports or other extra-curricular activities, and because of her ability to 'hide herself away' she tended to get overlooked in favour of the more 'obvious' demands of other students in class time. Her form teacher commented that students like Kassie could be 'hard going' (it was difficult to assess what she was thinking and feeling) and admitted preferring more outgoing students. By the end of Year 9 Kassie was judged to be 'losing ground' both academically and socially in the much bigger environment of a secondary school where she had not yet found a particular niche for herself.

Questions to consider

- How important do we feel it is for students to become involved in extra-curricular activities?
- Should involvement in extra-curricular activities apply to all students or some more than others? If the latter, which students in particular?
- Who should monitor or oversee student involvement in extra-curricular activities (eg, ensuring that they either take part in something, or alternatively do not overdo things, and/or that they choose activities that will benefit them)?
- What are the implications for staff workloads and responsibilities and for managing these?
- What dialogue should there be with parents/caregivers about their children's participation in extra-curricular activities? What worries or concerns might they have about their child's involvement? Should they be able to prevent their child participating?
- What, if any, decisions might need to be made about the balance between students' school work and their involvement in extra-curricular activities? If necessary, how can this best be managed?

Pastoral Care

A significant aspect of orientation activities for new Year 9 students is to provide them with information about who they could go to in the school — school counsellors, Year 9 deans, form teachers, peer supporters — if they have problems they wish to talk about, and when and how they can do this. It is important to actively check with students that they have registered and understood this information and to remind them of it as often as seems necessary.

Many participants, including those involved in guidance services or in delivery of the health curriculum in particular, emphasised the importance of schools having programmes and processes (such as mediation) in place that specifically address Year 9 students' social needs, including health, sexuality and bullying matters. They felt that the availability of well developed systems within the school, coupled with good attention by staff to what was going on in students'

lives, aided overall student development, and contributed to the creation of healthy learning environments in individual classes and throughout the school.

"I think that maintaining a high level of pastoral care when they get to secondary school — so that they still have someone they can talk to on the same level that they would have talked to their classroom teacher last year — is really important. The interpersonal touch: you don't want them closing off or shutting down because there's no opportunity to communicate."

Year 9 teacher

"Being connected to a trusted adult. That's the key to it."

Secondary school counsellor

Manu's story (Case Study 5) shows how his teachers worked with him, his parents and others to help him work through personal/family issues and get back on track at school.

Case Study 5: Impact of personal issues on attitudes to school

In contrast to students who arrive at secondary school with low levels of prior achievement, there are students with the ability and prior learning to maintain very good or better levels of achievement and make significant progress, but who become progressively less positive about school and what they are learning. They also become less positive about extra-curricular activities, and sometimes less socially successful (getting off-side with teachers, choosing less desirable friends). This has the potential for putting them in as much, if not more, danger of dropping out of school prematurely as students significantly struggling with their schoolwork.

There may be many different reasons for a student's decreasing positivity about school, including: disengaging from learning because they do not feel challenged enough at school and lose interest; or because of problems that arise in their personal or home circumstances.

In Year 8, Manu was a bright, capable student, making good progress at school, academically, socially and in sporting and other extra-curricular activities.

However, when his parents separated quite unexpectedly towards the end of his last year at primary school, this came as a shock to him, and he did not react well. He became increasingly hostile to everyone at home and at school, and his schoolwork suffered. Nevertheless, at first, the good relationships he had built up over the years with teachers, and especially his current teacher, and peers at his primary school helped him.

But following the move to secondary school where he was no longer well known, he did not have a desire to form good relationships with his new teachers, did not want to put effort into his schoolwork (although his ability and prior achievement helped him 'coast' quite adequately in his first months in Year 9), did not want to join any extra-curricular groups or teams, and was drifting towards students with a tendency to get into trouble.

However, Manu's form teacher and a Year 9 dean were working with Manu, and with each of his concerned parents, to try and keep him on track and not waste his potential. His parents had also contacted his primary school teacher who had offered to collaborate with his Year 9 teachers. There was therefore an ongoing 'watching brief' on Manu to try and minimise the impact of his personal problems and coax him into a more positive frame of mind. At the same time, both school and home were aware that they could not be seen to be condoning some of Manu's more unacceptable behaviours.

Questions to consider

- How sure are we that our Year 9 students know who to go to in the school if they have problems? Do they feel comfortable about approaching those people?
- Do we know whether students feel personally connected to one or more trusted adults at secondary school? Are there students who do not? If this is the case, are these students likely to be in particular need of this sort of contact? What might need to be done to bring this about?
- Do we believe that the current pastoral care provisions in our school are adequate/sufficient? Why or why not?
- How effective do you think an 'at risk' register would be in helping to prevent (further) problems for students? What would be the main benefits or difficulties? What would the implications be for the nature and extent of information shared between teachers and schools about individual students?
- Who in the school should have access to such a register? Whose responsibility would it be to ensure the register is up-to-date? How would the information be used?

Setting Clear, Consistent Boundaries for Behaviour

Teachers before and after transition emphasised

"We try to be consistent so they know where they stand. ... It gives them a bit of stability within the system."

Year 9 dean

that students need to have clear and explicit boundaries for acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour early on. And, echoing a concern expressed by many students, it was also emphasised that these boundaries should be well-maintained and enforced in a

consistent way for all students.

While stressing that clear and consistent standards for behaviour were necessary, a number of teachers advocated that Year 9 students require time to learn and adapt to the rules at their new school, and that their teachers need to be flexible and to 'go easy' on students in the early part of the year.

"Teachers took it easy during the first week or so, didn't feel we were overloaded. Didn't do any work on the first day, just walked around and got used to places, and found out what the rules and expectations were."

Year 9 student

Questions to Consider

- How well do we do in ensuring that all Year 9 students clearly understand the rules and expectations of the school? Do some students need more help with this than others? If yes, do they receive the help they require, or are they more likely to receive detentions, etc, for non-compliance? If the latter, is this effective, or is it more likely to encourage disobedience and disengagement among (some) students?
- How effective are we across the school in ensuring that our rules and expectations are consistently applied so as not to favour or penalise individual students or groups of students? Can we be better at this and if so what would we need to do?

Sending Positive Messages Home about Student Progress

Students, teachers and parents talked about the value of sending home positive messages about student progress, attitudes and effort, as a way of encouraging students and their families, and helping them relate well to the school. Messages of this kind were especially appreciated in the early weeks following a student's transition to secondary school.

"Two 'good letters' have come home, sent through the mail. Both were for [my son's] social studies work. He was very excited about getting them. He knew the first one was coming as he kept asking if any mail had arrived: he was waiting for it."

Parent of Year 9 student

Pitching Classroom Work at the Appropriate Level

Year 9 students need to have academic work pitched at an appropriate level from the outset to help them settle in and feel positive about their secondary schooling experience. There is considerable complexity inherent in this issue.

Opinions can be divided over the appropriate level of difficulty of the work for new Year 9s. One view, for example, is that the students should be given work that is easily within their capabilities, so as to foster feelings of success and competence, and a sense of familiarity or clear continuity with their previous schoolwork.

Alternatively, there is a view that it is better to assign work that is more advanced than that undertaken at primary school to ensure students feel stimulated and stretched.

Principals and teachers made very frequent reference to the importance of links between the sectors. A consistent emphasis in their comments

concerned the effective sharing and use of achievement data and other information about transitioning students to assist in establishing appropriate starting points from the outset of their secondary schooling.

Appropriate starting points for Year 9 (and all) students at the beginning of a new school year also underline the importance of teachers in general being informed about well-researched assessment tools and how these can be implemented and interpreted to assist in targeting their work with students. However there is evidence (eg, Amituanai-Toloa et al, 2010¹⁷; McKinley et al, 2009¹⁸) that this is an area in which teachers often need support and more opportunities for professional development, again highlighting a challenge for school leadership.

The topic of appropriately pitched work for students is discussed further in Chapter Five (p.75ff).

¹⁷ Details about Amituanai-Toloa et al's *Pasifika Schooling Improvement Research* can be obtained via the Ministry of Education website. The summary report can be downloaded from:

www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/61649 and the full research report from: www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/61650.

As a result of findings from this research regarding the effective implementation of assessment tools, a team from the University of Auckland is developing a document to specify how schools can most effectively collect, collate, analyse and use student achievement data to inform teaching and leadership decisions. Support will then be provided to schools that took part in the study to help them effectively implement the recommendations in the document. For more information about this, please contact the research team (of the abovementioned publications) at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, The University of Auckland.

¹⁸ McKinley et al's work, as part of the Starpath Project being undertaken by The University of Auckland, provides valuable information about establishing longitudinal data sets (academic profiles) for each individual student, both to help students achieve their academic aims (and increase student retention) and to facilitate overall academic performance through a systematic, whole-school approach to student achievement.

Questions to Consider

- Do we have an adequate understanding of how our Year 9 students feel about the level of work they encounter when they arrive at secondary school? Do we know if they mostly find it too hard, too easy or about right? How do we establish this? Are our main sources of data: What we collect ourselves within our individual classrooms? Data from previous teachers/schools? Data from standardised assessment procedures? Some other data? How well do we understand the relative strengths and limitations of each approach?
- To what extent are we successfully able to assess students' achievement and establish starting levels based on those assessments?
- If or when we adopt an overall starting level for a class, what do we think the main effects of this are, for the class as a whole, and/or for individual students or groups of students? Would the answer to this question be the same for all classes?

Homework

Research evidence (eg, Cooper et al, 2006; Robinson et al, 2009; Vatterott, 2009) indicates that homework assignments, under appropriate conditions, can have a positive impact on student learning and achievement. However, it is also acknowledged in the literature that homework is often a highly controversial topic, with wide-ranging views expressed among and across schools, teachers, parents, students and others about its necessity and value.

For a number of reasons, homework can be problematic.

Views expressed about homework by participating teachers and principals in the transition study reflected this same trend of diverse views.

Some of the points made included that:

- homework can be helpful for secondary students, but needs to be carefully planned and managed;
- homework shouldn't be the same for everyone in a class;

- it has to have educational purpose and not be assigned just because it is assumed to be good for students;
- schools need to have well-developed policies regarding homework;
- it is difficult for teachers to provide students with meaningful feedback on homework;
- homework can be inequitable, depending on a student's skills, knowledge, home circumstances, and so on, with students whose parents are unable to provide the resources for their child to complete homework being further disadvantaged;
- there can be mis-communication between schools, teachers, and parents over the nature, extent, and place for homework in a student's education, and the nature of support required of families for their child's education.

Also, although most students in our study understood, in theory at least, that homework was important because it could complement their learning in class and help to prepare them 'for the future', at the same time, many students perceived

the homework they encountered in their first year at secondary school as a worry and a burden.

This was usually less to do with the amount of homework, or the difficulty of it, but more about juggling assignments from different teachers, meeting deadlines on time, and understanding different expectations.

In a few cases, however, it was reported by parents and students that the homework *was* too difficult, and, although this would not have been the teacher's intention, that it necessitated the student (and sometimes a parent too) spending hours struggling with it, resulting in a very negative overall experience.

A number of students also felt that they were having to do at least some homework 'for the sake of it', rather than for any useful purpose they could see. And others noted that some homework was assigned as 'punishment' for not completing certain tasks during class-time, rather than as a way to extend their learning.

Hattie (2009) reports that while homework during students' middle years of schooling can benefit their learning and achievement, there are important cautions to keep in mind.

He refers (p.235) to research which 'focused on identifying the key components of homework that make the difference, with a particular emphasis on untangling the interactions between homework and student characteristics. [The researchers] found that a lot of homework and a lack of monitoring seem to indicate an ineffective teaching method. They warned against homework that undermined a students' motivation and that led to the student internalising incorrect routines, and they favoured short, frequent homework that was closely monitored by the teachers ... [as] teaching does matter when it comes to students' learning.' He added (on p.236) that 'homework in which there is

no active involvement by the teacher does not contribute to student learning'.

Hattie further reported (p.235) that the 'positive] effects [of homework] are greater for higher than for lower ability students and for older rather than younger students. For too many students, homework reinforces that they cannot learn by themselves, and that they cannot do the schoolwork.¹⁹ For these students, homework can undermine motivation, internalise incorrect routines and strategies, and reinforce less effective study habits, especially for elementary students.'

It is beyond the scope of the present document to go into the intricacies of best practice regarding assigning homework that will benefit students' learning and progress, but a clear message in respect of transitioning students is that in their first year or so of secondary school approaches to homework need to be carefully considered if students are to benefit from and not be disadvantaged by homework.

Vallerott's (2009) book (for example) provides a valuable reference for developing and implementing effective homework practices to cater for the needs and realities of today's students and families.

¹⁹ This resonates closely with Davey's story in this document — see Case Study 10.

Questions to Consider

- To what extent do we have an accurate picture of how our middle years students (particularly those in their first year at secondary school) feel about the amount of homework they are receiving, its difficulty level, and its relevance or appropriateness? What actions do we, or could we, take on the basis of student experiences and views about homework to modify overall school policies regarding homework and/or individual practices?
- How well are we doing in this school as far as coordinating homework assignments for (Year 9) students go so that workload across subjects is spread in a realistic way? Should we be implementing more formal coordination strategies across school subject departments and/or individual teachers in order to do this better?
- To what extent do we feel that the homework we assign for our middle years students is primarily intended to fulfil an important function for student learning?
- Are we as aware as we could be of when a student is having genuine difficulties with homework rather than just being disobedient by not completing it or by doing it poorly? How do we establish this?

Understanding Adolescence

The 'adolescent state' is a key feature of student–teacher relationships throughout the transition from primary to secondary schooling period and beyond. There is the ever present challenge of understanding and responding appropriately to

There is the ongoing challenge of understanding and responding appropriately to adolescent needs and 'state of being'.

aspects of adolescent behaviour and 'state of being' with teachers acknowledging that, at times, professional development and support opportunities in this respect would be welcomed. A recent study of Years 7 to 10 teachers in relation to teaching and learning in the middle years (Durling, Ng, and Bishop, 2010),

for example, found that teachers would like to know more about the theory of adolescence as a developmental phase, and to know more about

learning and social theories in relation to 'best practice' for this age group (Years 7–10).²⁰

There is also evidence from the relevant literature, as well as feedback from our transition study participants, underlining that the 'adolescent state' is not simply a stage that all young people progress through in a 'standard' way. It is observed that because adolescence begins at different ages for different individuals, this can make it even more complex for schools and teachers to adapt

²⁰ A helpful resource document *Understanding early adolescent development and its implications for teaching and learning: A literature review* by S. Cox is in progress and will be available from the Ministry of Education's Research Division later in 2010.

Amongst many other helpful insights, the report cites evidence which shows that certain behaviours exhibited by boys in the middle years of schooling — such as constant fidgeting, often incorrectly perceived as deliberate 'acting up' — are due to the physical changes that young adolescent boys undergo. These physical changes also explain why boys in particular respond much better to active learning activities at school at this period of their lives, rather than being required to sit still for long periods taking notes or listening to a teacher.

structures, systems, and approaches to best suit the needs of the individual, at the same time as catering for the student cohort overall.

Pania, Reuben, and Susannah's stories (Case Studies 6–8) illustrate how young adolescents of the same age may be at quite different stages of readiness for various changes in their lives, including the Year 8 to Year 9 transition. Also while some may be coping well academically at secondary school, in certain social areas of their lives they may struggle.

However, despite the diversity among young adolescents in terms of the ways in which they experience the physical, social, emotional and intellectual developmental changes they are going through, Cole (2005, p.3), for example, asserts that:

'...a great deal is known about what engages adolescents with schooling and learning and why middle years students disengage or become alienated from schooling and learning.'

'For example, we know students respond positively to a curriculum that links to and is meaningful in their lives outside as well as inside the classroom, an authentic curriculum. They value opportunities to explore new ideas in depth and to do so in cooperative learning situations in which they feel secure and are able to take intellectual risks. They respond well to teachers who know them well and whose teaching is student-focused and built on a sound knowledge of students and their needs and expectations.'

'Conversely, they do not respond well to a curriculum that ... fails to cater for their range of skills, interests and futures ... where their views and life experiences are ignored ... and where they are not valued as individuals.'

A summary of the 'characteristics of young adolescent students' according to Cole (2005, p.4)

'Young adolescent students:

- are 'intellectually at risk' because whether they engage with academic learning, or do not, can have lifelong consequences.
- learn what they consider to be useful, and enjoy using skills to solve real-life problems.
- prefer active over passive learning experiences and favour working with their peers during learning activities.
- tend to be moving away from dependence on family to establishing autonomous views and modes of operation.
- derive standards and models of behaviour from their peers and acceptance by the group is central to confidence and well-being.
- want significant adults to love and accept them and need frequent affirmation.'

Case Study 6: Maturity and coping with change

Some studies have found that the comparatively nurturing environment and child-centred approach to teaching offered by primary schools means that transition to secondary school is more than usually stressful for some students — often, the 'less mature'.

Students who continue, well into Year 9, to say they would prefer to be back at primary school, are less likely than other students to have handled the transition well, taking longer to adjust to the overall changes. These students continue to miss teachers and the general environment of their former school, preferring the greater consistency and security of one teacher, one class.

This applied to Pania. In addition, she was upset by the disruption to her friendships from previous years and, in particular, felt very sad without her best friend who had gone to another school. As a result Pania would also have preferred the other school but had not been supported in this wish by her family. Compared to the friendly, relaxed girl she had been the previous year, Pania lost confidence, and became surly and disinterested in her work, although she was a competent mid-range student. She was also disinclined to form positive relationships with her teachers, or, on the whole, other students. Throughout most of Year 9, Pania returned to her primary school at every possible opportunity to see her former teachers and spend time with the younger students she had enjoyed 'looking after'. She pulled herself together when she reached Year 10, eventually realising that it was just too hard being cut off from everyone and not enjoying any of her classes, especially when she was essentially interested in things around her and in other people.

Pania's transition to secondary school was made more difficult by her lack of participation in extra-curricular activities where she could have met other like-minded students and found something to particularly enjoy. Although she liked sports she did not join teams because of after-school and weekend commitments (helping her family with their business and looking after other family members, plus other chores). Also neither her family, who were largely unaware of how she was feeling about school in Year 9, nor anyone at school took steps to ensure her participation.

Pania had especially enjoyed competitions and other activities at primary school which were organised around 'whānau groupings'. She wished there could have been similar arrangements at secondary school as she felt that this would have helped her feel a sense of belonging at her new school early on and get to know people more easily and in a fun way.

Case Study 7: Adolescence — social adjustments (1)

Some students, while academically and socially successful at primary or intermediate school, do not settle as well as expected at secondary school: sometimes because other events arise in their lives to distract them from school concerns, and sometimes because of situations such as finding that being socially successful in a relatively small primary school does not necessarily transfer to being socially successful at secondary school, where there is added 'competition'.

Reuben was tall, verbally skilled, energetic, and apparently very confident and outgoing. He (and his parents) felt that his abilities in all areas were at a very high level. However, although he was a generally capable student, his Year 8 teacher advised that Reuben tended to over-inflate his own achievements. Together with his quite boisterous personality, this tendency could sometimes seem quite overbearing to other students. But because Reuben was well-known to everyone at primary school he was largely accepted for who he was; also, his Year 8 teacher was skilled at channelling Reuben's energy in positive ways. For example, Reuben successfully played an important role in the school production.

Once at secondary school, Reuben began to find that his interactions with other students were less than successful. What had worked for him as a 'quite big fish in a small pond' no longer worked so well, especially as he did not have a teacher who knew him well to help modify his behaviour when required. Reuben now found that he had many more potential 'rivals' than before and that some of the skills he had thought so superior didn't compare as favourably as he might have hoped with those shown by some students from other contributing schools. He also 'annoyed' other students, who felt he boasted too much and told him so.

Reuben learned to tone down his behaviour a little but generally felt less successful at secondary school and less 'at home' than he was used to. By the end of Year 9 he had negotiated with his family to enrol him in an all boys school for the beginning of Year 10 where he felt the structure and greater formality would suit him better.

Case Study 8: Adolescence — social adjustments (2)

Susannah was academically able and coped well with all her school work before and after transition. But social aspects of her new secondary school environment were much more of a challenge for her. She was a very reserved, introspective girl who could seem quite cold and aloof, with the exception of when she was with her family and one or two trusted friends she'd known all through primary school. Her reserved nature wasn't so much an issue at primary school, where she had frequent positive interactions with her special friends, was well known by her teachers (as was her family), and was well respected by her classmates because of her ability to quietly make valuable contributions to class projects, etc.

At secondary school, however, Susannah tended to shun friendly advances from other students (or, rather, because of her reserved nature *appeared* to do so) and preferred to work alone rather than take up any opportunities for shared activities/projects. While she was achieving well in all her subjects, her teachers felt that her social limitations were holding her back. After consultation with her parents, Susannah was encouraged (early in Year 10) to take part in a special programme for young people which focused on cooperative activities in community and outdoor settings. The aim of the activities encompassed by the programme was to encourage trust, resourcefulness, and effective collaboration among students in problem-solving situations, while at the same time having fun together. The programme was a considerable commitment, largely taking place in school time over much of the school year, and requiring skills to balance responsibilities of the programme with regular school work. At the end of term 1 of Year 10, Susannah reported enjoying being part of the programme and more than one of her teachers felt that her experiences were helping her interact more naturally with a wider range of students.

Summary Comments

There are many factors to consider before and after students undertake the move from primary to secondary schooling, for transition to be widely successful.

As well, many different individuals become involved in the processes that are put in place for helping transitioning students, including principals and teachers in each of primary, intermediate and secondary schools, parents and families, peer supporters, and the students themselves.

To briefly recap, it is important to:

- help students in the lead up to the transition to maximise their strengths and broaden the scope of their knowledge and experience so they can go forward with confidence;
- ensure that students gain both an accurate and realistic picture of secondary school, and are not unnecessarily alarmed by inaccurate or misleading information;
- encourage students to look forward to the positives about secondary school — such as the wide range of people to get to know, and new learning and extra-curricular experiences — and think about how they personally can make the most of the opportunities available, especially in terms of reaching shorter- and longer-term goals they might have;
- be aware when students new to secondary school may be experiencing particular difficulties, such as how to mix successfully with other students and establish new

friendships, cope with their class work, or engage with the wider life of the school.

As helpful tips:

- Ask students and their parents what they think will be the best and not so good things about secondary school. This could be managed by means of a survey tool developed within the school, which would contain a number of agreed upon questions. The answers obtained (perhaps through having parents come to the school to answer the survey in a group situation) could be used as a valuable starting point each side of the transition for helping ensure that:
 - the 'best' things about secondary school anticipated by students, and parents, do eventuate;
 - the things students dread most, such as bullying, and in the case of parents, in particular, their child becoming 'lost' or 'overlooked' in a much larger pool of students, are unlikely to occur.
- Arrange for senior students (diverse in terms of interests, achievement, ethnicity) with positive experiences of secondary school to visit primary and intermediate schools and talk with Year 8 students about secondary school.
- Where possible, facilitate teacher exchange visits so that Years 8 and 9 teachers have an opportunity to observe and interact in each other's classrooms and schools from time to time.
- Consider developing a custom-made survey form for use with staff, so that knowledge and views within the school regarding transition-related matters can be gathered in a systematic way. Those developing the survey form could perhaps turn some of the 'questions to consider' from this document into survey form items. The data generated, specific to your own school, could then serve as a focus for subsequent discussion and planning around transition.