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Moving year 7 into high school: what does it mean for your kids?

Catholic schools in SA are moving year 7 into high school next year. For a successful transition, good communication between parents, teachers and school leaders is essential.

A good starting point is to ensure that everyone understands why this change is happening. To help, experts are providing their insights on the reasons behind the shift, and the best ways for schools, teachers and parents to ensure it is a positive experience for young learners.

Year 7 has long been part of high school in Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales; Queensland and Western Australia made the move recently. But moving year 7 into high school isn't about copying other states. It's part of a more targeted approach to teaching different age groups. By bringing years 7 to 9 together to form junior high schools, schools are better equipped to address this group's specific needs.

Dr Katharine Swain of Flinders University is an expert on middle years education with decades of teaching experience, and is advising SA's Catholic schools on the move. She's worked closely with Professor Pendergast of Griffith University, a key architect of the move in Queensland, which involved working with 258 school leadership teams and delivering professional learning to over 2000 teachers.

Dr Swain and Professor Pendergast say that year 7 is a logical time to start addressing adolescents' needs. Students this age are ready to expand their social horizons and tackle more complex thinking. At the same time, it's common for puberty to set in at this age, placing students on a rollercoaster of psychological, emotional and moral changes. Students are challenged to forge a new identity, to develop their values, and to find new ways of relating to friends, family and learning.

Student wellbeing and a sense of belonging

This period—particularly during the transition from primary school to high school—is when Australian students are at greatest risk of losing interest in school. Kids from 11 to 14 place high value on friendships, and one of students' biggest concerns when they move to high school is fitting in. Poor relationships with peers predict lower wellbeing, lower grades and a higher risk of drop-out.

As Dr Swain puts it, students this age “are more interested in being invited to the right party than whether they get an A for English.” To meet their emotional and social needs, junior high schools need to be caring, reinforce such values as respect, honesty and compassion, and take swift action on bullying.

Junior high schools must be committed to fostering a positive school culture by building a strong sense of belonging for new students. This helps students stay grounded, make friends, and support each other through the challenges they face, making for a safe, welcoming and productive school environment.

This is essential for year 7s new to high school, who can otherwise feel lost or intimidated (the same was true of year 8s). Each school can achieve this in its own way, but research shows it helps to have special events, home room groups, and provide year 7s with a space that's just for them.

Parents and students in WA schools said that orientation days the year before the move reduced their anxiety and helped ensure a smooth transition. Other events with great success in WA schools were a sleep over for the new year 7 students and a special induction day to celebrate the year 7s arrival, when they were welcomed by a “guard of honour” of year 12 students.

Events like these are great opportunities for parents to get involved. Parents can also help by speaking with their child about the move, with their year 6 teacher, and with the staff responsible for intake at the new school. It's best to prepare early for the shift. It's a major event in kids' lives, and plenty of support

helps to ensure it's a happy and exciting one. As always, there's no substitute for parents taking an active interest in their children's learning and school community.

Leadership and teaching

Many students entering adolescence are frustrated by a lack of meaningful challenges. To engage students and show them that class is relevant to their lives, it helps to bring different subjects together into bigger themes that harness students' interests. Rather than just learning Science and History, for example, they might use the skills they learn in each to do a project on environmental sustainability, great inventors in history, or any relevant topic that allows them to integrate the skills they're learning.

To lead such learning and support students, teachers need a strong understanding of young people. Many adolescents, says Dr Swain, feel teachers aren't interested in them. "You have to demonstrate to them what productive adults are, as this is when they're developing the values they'll take with them into adulthood. So teachers must be positive, have a love of adolescence, and want to be there."

Teacher leadership helps junior high schools coordinate subjects and work in harmony with the rest of the school community. A good example is having a teacher in charge of the year 7 transition: this received great feedback at a school in WA, where the teacher was responsible for year 7 students' wellbeing, communicating with parents, and building a year 7 identity.

A focus on student leadership is also invaluable. Leadership opportunities give young students the chance to learn new skills, to develop their values and communication skills, and to be positive role models for others. It offers them a sense of purpose and ownership over their learning, contributing to a positive culture in their cohort. Student leadership roles work best when they're focused on serving others: whether by raising money for a charity, representing peers or helping to organise events.

The small stuff matters

Dr Anne Coffey of Notre Dame University is an expert on the transition from primary school to high school, with extensive knowledge of the year 7 shift in WA. On the whole, she found that students and parents in the Catholic schools she studied were very happy with the way school leaders and staff managed the transition.

The transition was eased by clear communication between primary schools and the high schools receiving students. Giving primary teachers the chance to move to the new school with their students provided familiarity. So did placing students who knew each other in the same classes. It's a good idea to offer new students a grace period in early weeks as they learn new organisation skills: such as timetables, knowing where to go, and managing their lockers.

It was often small things like managing lockers that students in WA struggled with. As such, it's important for parents, educators and kids to listen to each other's concerns, however small they might seem, and work together to support students during their move to high school.

If you'd like to know about the steps being taken to ensure a smooth transition for your child, and how to get involved, don't hesitate to ask your child's teacher and the staff at their receiving high school.

You can find more expert insights on middle years education and the year 7 transition here:

Donna Pendergast et al. (2015). '[The Education Change Model as a vehicle for reform: Shifting Year 7 and implementing Junior Secondary in Queensland](#)' *The Australian Journal of Middle Schooling*.

Anne Coffey et al. (2015). '[Transitioning Year 7 Primary Students to Secondary Settings in Western Australian Catholic Schools: How Successful Was the Move?](#)'. *Research in Middle Level Education*.

Katharine Swain (2014). '[Middle years students' perceptions and reactions to NAPLAN: The student voice](#)'. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Griffith University.