

# **GOOD TRANSITIONS: THROUGH THE EYES OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PRINCIPALS**

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## **PART ONE: BACKGROUND: TRANSITION AND THE EARLY ADOLESCENT**

Students in the “middle years” of schooling: years 5 to 9 (aged 10-15), have very different learning and social needs from younger children and older adolescents. This is a period of rapid development in all areas: intellectual, social, physical, emotional and psychological, and moral understanding.

Research indicates that brain growth peaks at about age 11 in girls and 12 in boys, at which time permanent consolidations begin to be made (Giedd et al., 1999). It appears that connections in the adolescent brain are strengthened through practice, and those not reinforced are lost. Clearly, this ‘use it or lose it’ principle has serious ramifications: intellectual stimulation is vital in early adolescence. Of equal importance during this period is sensitivity to complex needs, as young people move from concrete to abstract thinking, critical analysis and establishing emerging adult identity. Adolescents respond in a variety of ways to the challenges of their (internal and external) environments, and need to be offered multiple strategies for adjusting to change (Dahl, 2004).

Transition from primary to secondary schooling provides one of the most consistent challenges to the majority of young adolescents, as students face physical and social dislocation, and an entirely new learning program. At any time of life, a change of the magnitude of moving from primary school to high school would cause significant disruption; during early adolescence this is exacerbated by the developmental challenges the young people face.

Acknowledgement of these pressures upon students moving from primary to secondary school has led to the introduction of programs designed to facilitate smooth transition (Galton, Gray and Rudduck, 1999). In NSW these have included a website outlining a range of strategies and the appointment of a full-time position to assist groups of schools with their implementation. The present study aimed to examine the implementation and practicability of these strategies, by seeking the opinions of principals in both primary and secondary schools. An online questionnaire was circulated, listing 20 designated strategies and asking, with regard to each: (i) how important is this strategy? (ii) how widely is it being implemented? and (iii) if it is considered of high importance but is not being widely implemented, why not?

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## PART TWO: PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

457 responses were received to the online questionnaire. This represents just over 20% of all principals in NSW. The relative proportions from each school type were similar to the distribution across NSW, although secondary principals were slightly over-represented.

**Table 1: distribution of respondents relative to NSW school types**

Type of school	% of NSW school types	% of respondents to online questionnaire
Primary	74.2%	67.3%
Secondary	17.9%	28.0%
Central/Community	3.0%	4.0%
SSP	4.9%	0.7%
TOTAL	100%	100%

The first step in the analysis has been to gain a broad overview of the principals' responses to four sets of strategies for enhancing students' transition from primary to secondary school. These strategies represent a local adaptation of the five 'transition bridges' identified by Galton, Gray and Ruddock (1999:29) and elaborated upon by Professor Michael Barber (1999:12).<sup>2</sup> They can be conveniently grouped for purposes of exposition under the following four headings:

- Administrative
- Social and personal
- Curriculum
- Learning and teaching.

Initially the views of primary and secondary principals, including principals of central schools, are combined. Later primary and secondary responses are differentiated to discern differences in the opinions of the two predominant groups, either with regard to the importance attached to the different measures or the extent to which the measures are actually implemented, and the barriers to their implementation. Of course, not all of the measures are equally relevant to the two groups of principals and their schools and this factor is taken into account in the preliminary and subsequent analyses. The questionnaire is available on request.

## COMBINED PRIMARY AND SECONDARY RESPONSES

### Administrative measures

Four of the 20 survey items fell within this 'administrative' category. By the simple device of combining the proportions of the total sample that described a measure as being either "Vital" or "Important" (compared with "So-so", "Unimportant/Not recommended"), it is apparent that all four of the nominated administrative measures were overwhelmingly endorsed by the combined primary and secondary principals as being helpful to achieving good primary-secondary transition. Another way of assessing the afore-mentioned response categories is to treat them as an arbitrary four point scale with values ranging from 4 (vital) to 1 (unimportant/not recommended). So far as the administrative category is concerned, this approach yields average scores consistent with the view that the measures are of high utility. In the case of students with special needs, almost all (98%) of the principals judged across-school student, parent and teacher meetings and other support measures as vital or important.

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<sup>2</sup> The five 'transition bridges' are: bureaucratic, social and personal, curriculum, pedagogic, and management and learning.

And an almost equal proportion described such measures as being ‘fully’ or ‘usually’ operational. Only marginally fewer (95%) said that it is important for detailed secondary school transition and orientation information to be systematically provided and seven out of ten reported that this was happening in their school. An additional one in four of the principals said their school ‘occasionally’ implemented this strategy.

From that point a pattern of results begins to emerge that suggests that the principals have a consistently high regard for the value of the nominated administrative transition measures but they acknowledge considerable variation in the extent to which the measures are implemented. That trend becomes even clearer with later categories, especially the curriculum and learning and teaching strategies. However, it begins to appear with the administrative practices concerned with exchanging data and learning information about transiting students, and developing shared agreements and relevant working arrangements within clusters. These measures were highly regarded by 93% and 89% respectively of the principals, but were said to be implemented in approximately half of their schools. Information about the implementation of the measures reviewed was gained in each instance by asking a subsidiary question “To what extent is the practice described in the previous question currently operating in your school?” Answers ranged from “Fully” and “Usually” (assigned scores of 4 and 3 respectively) to “Occasionally” (2) and “Not at all” (1):

**Table 2: endorsement and implementation of administrative transition measures**

Administrative measures	“Vital,”/ “Important” %	Priority Rating	“Fully”/ “Usually” operating %	Implementation Rating
Year 6 students with special needs: parent, teacher meetings, familiarisation visits, other support	98.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.65	94.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.50
Detailed secondary/orientation information	95.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.44	70.0 <sup>2</sup>	2.90
Student data/learning information exchange	93.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.32	53.0 <sup>3</sup>	2.55
Shared agreement within cluster, working group/coordinator in every school	89.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.30	48.0 <sup>1</sup>	2.43

1 Calculation based on 451-455 responses

2 Based on 450 responses

3 Based on 448 responses

Possibly of greatest concern in this section of the survey is the extent to which the most basic organisational arrangements needed to administer a coordinated transition program are being implemented. Almost nine out of ten of the principals said shared agreements and designated transition role players within and between schools are vital or important but just under half described them as fully or usually operating, with a further third reporting that the nominated strategies are implemented ‘occasionally’.

### **Social and personal measures**

This was the largest component of the survey. Of the 20 transition measures placed before the principals, eight focused on ways of facilitating the personal and social adjustment of students to the structure, academic requirements and social climate of their secondary school. It is important at this stage to point out that in later sections of the survey principals did not judge all of the nominated transition measures routinely or reflexively as ‘Vital’ or ‘Important.’

However, six of the eight social and personal strategies under immediate consideration were so rated by more than 80% of the respondents. These included: orientation tours for prospective students and their parents; opportunities to explore any concerns about moving to secondary school; *taster* lessons and experiencing secondary school performances and other events; a social and academic orientation program at the beginning of Year 7; ‘home room’ classes and groups; and peer tutoring and other ongoing support. Of these six highly regarded measures, one: orientation tours of secondary schools, endorsed by 97% of the principals as vital or important, is said to be widely implemented. Eighty six% of the principals said the strategy is ‘fully’ or ‘usually’ applied. Of the remaining five highly favoured measures, the opportunity to explore concerns, peer support, and Year 7 orientation program were said by approximately half of the principals to be implemented fully or usually. Experiencing *taster* lessons and other secondary school events fared a little better but (i) the establishment of ‘home room’ classes and groups, and (ii) building relationships between students and their parents and the secondary school, only occurred fully or usually in the experience of approximately a third of the principals. Finally, just one in four of the respondents believed that building bridges between primary and secondary students who share interests and talents is a reasonably common occurrence, although three out of four principals value the strategy.

**Table 3: endorsement and implementation of social and personal measures**

Social and personal measures	“Vital”/“Important” %	Priority Rating	“Fully”/“Usually” operating %	Implementation Rating
Orientation tours of secondary schools for students, parents (layout, organization, procedures)	97.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.50	86.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.40
Commencement Year 7: provide academic/social orientation to new school	95.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.42	50.0 <sup>1</sup>	2.60 <sup>2</sup>
Peer support, peer tutoring, ongoing support for Year 7 students	93.0 <sup>3</sup>	3.40	53.0 <sup>4</sup>	2.86
Opportunities to explore concerns about moving to secondary school	89.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.18	53.0 <sup>1</sup>	2.60
Experience ‘taster’ lessons, school performances, other events, gaining familiarity with teachers, facilities	88.0 <sup>1</sup>	3.21	60.0 <sup>5</sup>	2.80
Establish ‘home-room’ classes / ‘home-room’ groups	84.0 <sup>3</sup>	3.12	35.0 <sup>6</sup>	2.43
Establish ongoing links between primary and secondary students with particular interests, talents	76.0 <sup>1</sup>	2.91	25.0 <sup>1</sup>	2.01
Build relationships between students, parents and secondary school	70.0 <sup>1</sup>	2.85	31.0 <sup>5</sup>	2.17

1 Calculation based on 451-455 responses

2 Based on 329 responses (48 declared the item ‘not applicable’)

3 Based on 373-378 responses

4 Based on 283 responses (91 declared the item ‘not applicable’)

5 Based on 446-448 responses

6 Based on 257 responses (111 declared the item ‘not applicable’)

### Curriculum measures

Four of the 20 transitional measures focused on curriculum initiatives. These ranged from sharing information about existing curriculum practices to the creation of teams to develop better curriculum continuity and the joint development and delivery of curriculum and enrichment or learning assistance programs. All four measures were endorsed by upwards of 70% of the principals as being vital or important. The importance of establishing joint teams within specific KLAs to plan and implement better continuity across Years 5 to 8 was supported by 80% of the respondents. Only marginally fewer made the same assessment of (i) meetings and workshops to share information about curriculum practices, and (ii) teams to design and implement enrichment/learning assistance programs across Years 5-8. The idea of jointly developing and delivering curriculum projects across Years 6 and 7 attracted the least support but was still rated vital or important by 71% of the principals.

What made this set of transition measures bearing on curriculum planning quite distinct from the administrative and personal support ones was the reported low level of their implementation. The extent to which they were judged to be fully or usually implemented ranged from 9% in the case of the joint development and delivery of curriculum projects across Years 6 and 7, to 14% with respect to joint primary-secondary curriculum teams within specific KLAs.

**Table 4: endorsement and implementation of curriculum measures<sup>1</sup>**

Curriculum measures	“Vital,”/“Important” %	Priority Rating	“Fully”/“Usually” operating %	Implementation Rating
Establish joint primary-secondary curriculum teams within specific KLAs	80.0	2.97	14.0	1.65
Organise joint primary-secondary meetings and professional learning workshops to share curriculum information/teaching programs	78.0	2.90	12.0	1.68
Teams of primary and secondary teachers design and implement enrichment programs across Years 5-8	77.0	2.88	13.0	1.61
End Year 6 – beginning Year 7: joint development, delivery curriculum projects/other learning activities	71.0	2.80	9.0	1.52

<sup>1</sup> Number of respondents ranged between 370 and 379

### Learning and teaching

Finally, four transition measures focused on learning and teaching. As was evident in the earlier review of administrative, social and personal and curriculum measures, the principals generally considered the nominated learning and teaching measures to have merit, a minimum of approximately two out of three rating them as vital or important. One measure: providing opportunities for teachers to develop shared understandings about student learning and pedagogy, was assessed as vital or important by 81% of the respondents. But only 10% of them considered it to be fully or usually implemented. Measures intended to provide insights into actual practices across a cluster – like lesson observations and teacher exchanges – were said by 6% of the principals to be fully or usually operating. The implementation of ‘learning days’ across Years 5 to 8 and joint meetings to discuss specific aspects of the Quality Teaching Framework was only marginally higher at 8%.

**Table 5: endorsement and implementation of learning and teaching measures<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Learning and teaching measures</b>	<b>“Vital,”/ “Important” %</b>	<b>Priority Rating</b>	<b>“Fully”/ “Usually” operating %</b>	<b>Implementation Rating</b>
Enable primary and secondary teachers to develop shared understandings about student learning and pedagogy, to enable students to experience a consistent approach to classroom learning and teaching in middle years	81.0	2.98	10.0	1.58
Arrange lesson observations, teacher visits and teacher exchanges involving primary and secondary schools	70.0	2.76	6.0	1.5
Organise joint primary-secondary meetings to discuss specific aspects of the Quality Teaching Framework	65.0	2.74	8.0	1.46
Years 5 - 8: learning days to develop students’ skills in learning	65.0	2.70	8.0	1.74

<sup>1</sup> Number of respondents ranged between 362 and 374

### **Overview of importance and implementation of measures**

The simple scaling of the principals’ assessments of the importance of different transition strategies and the degree to which they are implemented can be averaged across each of the four categories of strategies. This provides an overview of their perceived usefulness and whether or not they are being put into practice. The overall picture is one of a modest, progressive decline in the importance attributed to the items constituting the social and personal, curriculum and learning and teaching categories compared with those in the administrative category. There is a difference of 20% between the average scores for the lowest and highest ranking categories. The decline in implementation scores is sharper, particularly the considerably lower scores for the curriculum and learning and teaching categories. The last mentioned score was almost half (47.1%) that attained by the administrative category.

**Table 6: average importance and implementation scores for categories of transition measures**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>IMPORTANCE SCORE</b>	<b>IMPLEMENTATION SCORE</b>
Administrative measures	3.45	2.95
Social and personal measures	3.20	2.63
Curriculum measures	2.89	1.62
Learning and teaching measures	2.76	1.56

## PRIMARY/SECONDARY DIFFERENCES IN IMPLEMENTATION

### Administrative measures

The foregoing account summarises the combined views and experience of primary and secondary principals. In some cases, for example the uniformly high importance ascribed to the four administrative transition measures, there was little or no scope for variations in the opinions of the two groups of principals. In other cases, including the implementation of three of the four administrative measures, the results allowed for the possibility of inter-group differences. The exception was the item dealing with support for Year 6 students with special needs, where secondary principals reported a slightly higher level of implementation but the difference was not statistically significant. However, a higher proportion of secondary principals than their primary counterparts described the other three administrative measures as being fully or usually implemented and the difference in each case was statistically significant, especially in the cases of (i) transmitting student data and learning information, and (ii) providing systematic opportunities for primary school students, parents and teachers to obtain detailed secondary transition and orientation information. The Chi square ( $\chi^2$ ) significance levels are shown in the table.

**Table 7: implementation of administrative transition measures by primary and secondary principals**

<b>Administrative measures</b>	<b>Primary Fully/ Usually operating %</b>	<b>Secondary Fully/ Usually operating %</b>
Year 6 students with special needs: parent, teacher meetings, familiarisation visits, other support	92.4	100.0
Detailed secondary/orientation information	61.9	87.3 <sup>1</sup>
Student data/learning information exchange	48.0	66.9 <sup>1</sup>
Shared agreement within cluster, working group/coordinator in every school	45.5	56.7 <sup>2</sup>

1  $\chi^2$  significance level (1df),  $p < .001$

2  $\chi^2$  significance level (1df),  $p < .05$

### Social and personal measures

The primary and secondary principal groups rated similarly the importance of five of the eight social and personal transition measures. In a further two instances the secondary principals attached more importance to items dealing with building relationships with a secondary school and establishing links between students with interests or talents in common, but the differences were not great. The one difference of significance was the primary principals' higher evaluation of the importance of establishing homeroom classes and groups: 92% rated this strategy as vital or important compared with 65% of the secondary principals. This difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 39.51$  (1df),  $p < .001$ ).

When it comes to the implementation of the social and personal transition strategies there is a uniform pattern: in every instance the secondary principals report a higher level of 'full' or 'usual' application of the strategies. In seven of the eight cases the differences are statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The exception was the highly regarded homeroom classes/groups strategy. Notwithstanding its perceived importance in the minds of primary principals, it was said to be less frequently acted upon in primary compared with secondary schools:

**Table 8: Implementation of social and personal transition measures by primary and secondary principals**

Social and personal measures	Primary Fully/ Usually operating %	Secondary Fully/ Usually operating %
Orientation tours of secondary schools for students, parents (layout, organization, procedures)	81.7	95.3 <sup>1</sup>
Commencement Year 7: provide academic/social orientation to new school	35.9	78.9 <sup>1</sup>
Peer support, peer tutoring, ongoing support for Year 7 students	37.1	88.1 <sup>1</sup>
Opportunities to explore concerns about moving to secondary school	45.3	69.0 <sup>1</sup>
Experience 'taster' lessons, school performances, other events, gaining familiarity with teachers, facilities	52.5	74.6 <sup>1</sup>
Establish 'home-room' classes / 'home-room' groups	28.7	46.3 <sup>2</sup>
Establish ongoing links between primary and secondary students with particular interests, talents	18.9	37.3 <sup>1</sup>
Build relationships between students, parents and secondary school	21.4	50.4 <sup>1</sup>

1  $\chi^2$  significance level (1df),  $p < .001$

2 Not significant. The chi square value in this instance was influenced by a smaller N, the result of 109 primary principals declaring the strategy "not applicable".



### Curriculum measures

There are no significant differences between the two groups of principals with respect to the importance they accorded the four curriculum measures, but the secondary principals were more likely to report their implementation. The differences were modest but reached statistical significance in the cases of organising occasions to share curriculum information and teaching programs, and the joint development and delivery of curriculum projects at the end of Year 6 and beginning of Year 7.

**Table 9: implementation of curriculum transition measures by primary and secondary principals**

<b>Curriculum measures</b>	<b>Primary Fully/ Usually operating %</b>	<b>Secondary Fully/ Usually operating %</b>
Establish joint primary-secondary curriculum teams within specific KLAs	11.5	17.3 <sup>1</sup>
Organise joint primary-secondary meetings and professional learning workshops to share curriculum information/teaching programs	7.6	17.4 <sup>2</sup>
Teams of primary and secondary teachers design and implement enrichment programs across Years 5-8	10.1	16.7 <sup>1</sup>
End Year 6 – beginning Year 7: joint development, delivery curriculum projects/other learning activities	5.2	13.9 <sup>2</sup>

1 Not significant.

2  $\chi^2$  significance level (1df),  $p < .01$

### Learning and teaching

Secondary principals rated the importance of the observation of lessons and a teacher exchange strategy a little higher than their primary colleagues (78% vital/important, compared with 66%)<sup>3</sup>. The relative priorities were reversed with respect to learning days to develop students' skills in learning, this approach being rated vital/important by 70% of the primary principals compared with 54% of the secondary principals<sup>4</sup>. However, while the implementation of all four measures was comparatively low, the secondary principals reported levels of application that were significantly higher on three of them. This latter finding could be taken to imply a greater interest among secondary teachers in joint pedagogic projects. As we proceed to consider the perceived barriers to implementing the range of transition measures raised in the survey, it will be clear that many primary principals see the issue quite differently.

**Table 10: implementation of transition learning and teaching measures by primary and secondary principals**

Learning and teaching measures	Primary Fully/ Usually operating %	Secondary Fully/ Usually operating %
Enable primary and secondary teachers to develop shared understandings about student learning and pedagogy, to enable students to experience a consistent approach to classroom learning and teaching in middle years	3.8	19.8 <sup>1</sup>
Arrange lesson observations, teacher visits and teacher exchanges involving primary and secondary schools	2.8	12.7 <sup>1</sup>
Organise joint primary-secondary meetings to discuss specific aspects of the Quality Teaching Framework	4.4	9.7 <sup>2</sup>
Years 5 - 8: learning days to develop students' skills in learning	7.7	8.8 <sup>3</sup>

1  $\chi^2$  significance level (1df),  $p < .001$

2  $\chi^2$  significance level (1df),  $p < .05$

3 Not significant

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3  $\chi^2 = 4.68$  (1df),  $p < .05$

4  $\chi^2 = 8.25$  (1df),  $p < .01$

## **PART THREE: BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION**

Ask practitioners in any field to explain gaps between what they say they favour and the practices they actually employ and you will inevitably elicit views and information of wider reference than the specific topics at hand. That is what happened when the principals were asked to what they ascribed the non-application of transition strategies that they regarded as important. It is not possible to reproduce all of the principals' comments in the body of this text but they are available in substantial detail in the appendix and afford insights into many challenges facing public school managers today. Here the information will be used in more summary fashion and incorporate comments that illustrate themes in the principals' commentaries. Sometimes what they had to say was not directed to the issues at hand but took the form of 'throw away' comments (like 'what a good idea'). These appear in the tabulations that follow as *non-specific comments* and sometimes they are quite numerous. At other times individual comments, sometimes of considerable interest, cannot be grouped because there are no corresponding remarks from other respondents. They appear in the tables as *miscellaneous*.

### **Administrative measures**

Among the four administrative transition measures it was the one dealing with "Shared agreement within cluster, working group/coordinator in every school" that drew the greatest number of comments: 108 from primary principals and 40 from their secondary counterparts. The principals' remarks are summarised in Table 11. They introduced five themes that enlarged and contracted as the survey progressed but remained undercurrents in the principals' accounts of the gaps between the value of the 20 transition strategies and their sometimes limited application:

- Lack of or inconsistent cooperation from:
  - high schools
  - primary schools
- Primary schooling devalued by high schools
- Schools' lack of time/resources
- Complicated links between feeder schools and high schools
- Schools/clusters in some instances moving in the nominated direction.

The above themes can be illustrated by taking the 'shared agreement within cluster ...' item as an example. One in four (25.9%) of the primary principals put the absence of a shared cluster agreement and transition planning arrangement down to lack of cooperation from high schools combined with high school teachers' devaluing of the work of primary schools. A little more than half of that proportion of secondary principals (15%) made a similar complaint in the opposite direction. More extensive illustrations are in the appendix, but primary principals made comments of the following kind: "[there is] a general lack of interest from the committee members from the high school", "we are still treated as the people who don't know anything", "generally the programs offered focus on what secondary schools perceive should happen – not necessarily on what might be needed by students", "practice is hampered by a secondary 'clean slate' philosophy which is jargon for 'don't tell us we don't really want to know; we would rather start Year 7 not knowing anything that is difficult to deal with'", "high schools treat what primary schools do with little importance; all the 'real' schooling happens when they hit high school, is the prevailing attitude", and "I feel like I'm from another planet: 'small and inconsequential' is how I perceive we are regarded". For their part the secondary principals made comments like "I am struggling to convince my primary colleagues of the need to expand our network into the area of pedagogy ... our meetings are sporadic and poorly

attended” and “it is only happening to any extent because the pressure is coming from the high school ... it always seems to be ‘one way’”.

A second major theme was the lack of resources with which to implement the administrative transition measures. There was more common ground between the two groups of principals on this matter. Indeed, this perceived ‘barrier’ assumed increased importance with some later categories of transition measures but in relation to the present ‘shared agreement’ example more than one in ten of both groups raised scarcity of time and resources as the explanation for not implementing the strategy. Typical remarks by the primary and secondary principals included: “there has been no increase in RFF in 20 years but a huge additional amount of work in that time”, “teachers are already stretched to the limit”, and “[transition] is not funded at any level by DET; primary schools cannot afford to release staff to attend meetings and the like”. Both groups also focused on the practical problems associated with the number and diversity of feeder schools. There were some extreme examples but more typical was the remark of a secondary principal that “because students from feeder schools access a number of secondary high schools there is often difficulty in establishing common agreement on meetings ... often a feeder primary will be asked to meet with up to four high schools, which creates unreasonable demands on their time”.

The foregoing emphasis on difficulties and barriers needs to be balanced with recognition that 19 of the primary principals reported that steps are beginning to be taken to achieve shared agreement within a cluster to develop transition strategies. The inclusion of responses in this category required more than a vague expression of intention to consider the possibility. The comment: “A group of principals has been formed. Transition planning is now in the hands of Head Teachers, APs and Stage 3 staff to implement plans devised by them ...” was typical of remarks assigned to this category.

**Table 11: primary and secondary principals’ comments on non-implementation: shared agreement within cluster**

TYPE OF COMMENT	PRIMARY		SECONDARY	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Lack of cooperation: primary or secondary, and primary devalued	28	25.9%	6	15.0%
Requires more time/resources	12	11.1%	6	15.0%
Number/diversity of feeder schools	16	14.8%	6	15.0%
High schools competitive	4	3.7%	3	7.5%
Schools have different requirements or procedures	5	4.6%	-	-
Needs organisational assistance	2	1.9%	2	5.0%
Past neglect	3	2.8%	-	-
Formal transition not required in all cases	2	1.9%	-	-
Moving in nominated direction	19	17.6%	-	-
Miscellaneous	17	15.7%	5	12.5%
Non-specific comments	-	-	12	30.0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>

For purposes of illustration we have concentrated on the responses to one administrative measure. There were three others and among the responses to them the following results were particularly noteworthy:

- 26/72 (36.1%) of the primary principals described the high schools as not being cooperative or committed to the provision of detailed secondary/orientation information,

- 29/76 (38.2%) of primary principals complained that high schools show little interest in, or devalue student data provided by the primary schools. Again, more illustrations are contained in the appendix but the following summarises a great deal of what was said: “There is still a culture in secondary schools that students do not begin their learning until they reach high school and therefore any information that primary schools give to them is irrelevant”.

### **Social and personal measures**

Establishing links between primary and secondary students with particular interests and talents was the social and personal strategy that attracted the greatest number of comments from both groups of principals (see Table 12). More than one in five (21.1%) of the primary principals and approaching twice that proportion of the secondary group described time and resource issues as being the major implementation barrier. Illustrative comments included: “no linkages/funding supports the practice”, “time, time, time! Plus the need to be careful that these activities are not just ‘add ons’ to an already crowded curriculum”, “all of this cannot be done on good will; a carefully designed and fully funded program needs to be developed”, and “too hard to sustain the plethora of extracurricular activities we run, without adding an extra layer”.

Subsidiary themes included the perception that high schools are not interested in cooperating around this strategy, a sentiment that was progressively more directly expressed by some primary principals as the canvassing of possibilities proceeded. One principal said: “This is laughable here. There is absolutely no obvious will on the part of the high school to engage with primary schools”. Given the perceived attitudinal barrier between the two stages of education, it was perhaps to be expected that some respondents would call for more formal management of the transitional processes. “It needs on-going coordination”, was the view of one principal and as other measures came under review some claimed it is necessary to place the management responsibility at a level above the schools directly involved.

**Table 12: primary and secondary principals’ comments on non-implementation: establish on-going links between primary/secondary students with particular interests, talents**

<b>TYPE OF COMMENT</b>	<b>PRIMARY</b>		<b>SECONDARY</b>	
Time/Resource issues	16	21.1%	9	37.5%
Requires participation of high schools	7	9.2%	-	-
Needs appropriate management/difficult to arrange	7	9.2%	2	8.3%
Some teachers not recognise importance	2	2.6%	-	-
Moving towards nominated practice	9	11.8%	3	12.5%
Miscellaneous	12	15.8%	6	25.0%
Non specific comments	23	30.3%	4	16.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

### **Curriculum measures**

Overall, this bracket of four items attracted a higher level of commentary than occurred with administrative and social and personal measures. Of course, in a sense there was more to be explained since the extent to which the curriculum measures were described as ‘fully’ or ‘usually’ operating ranged only from 9 to 14%, much lower than with the administrative or social and personal measures.

In particular, barriers to implementing the establishment of joint primary/secondary curriculum teams within specific KLAs was commented upon by 89 primary and 39 secondary principals. In responding to this possible strategy the greatest emphasis was placed upon resource issues. The same was true of the commentaries upon the other three curriculum measures. In relation to the establishment of joint curriculum teams within specific KLAs one principal said “Funding and staffing resources – we simply can’t keep adding to the list of things for teachers and principals to do in their time. The rock is becoming increasingly dry.” Another added “[This] operates when funding is made available for teacher release”, a common theme underlying many of the remarks made under the resource heading by more than a quarter of the primary principals and over a third of their secondary counterparts.

Yet one of the most frequent responses by the 39 secondary principals was to say that their school was moving in the direction of adopting the recommended ‘joint KLA curriculum teams’ approach. A little under one in four expressed this view. Perhaps a clue to the less obvious enthusiasm of primary schools for this development lay in the principals’ focus upon what they described as the need for respectful cooperation from high schools. Typical of the comments made were the following: “There needs to be a genuine exchange of professional ideas – not what the public school needs to do to prepare students for high school”, and “There is little interest in finding out about the Year 6 students’ learning environment, teaching and learning strategies which have been successful ...”.

**Table 13: primary and secondary principals’ comments on non-implementation: establish joint primary-secondary curriculum teams within specific KLAs**

TYPE OF COMMENT	PRIMARY		SECONDARY	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Time/resource issues	24	27.0%	15	38.5%
Requires respectful cooperation of high schools	21	23.6%	-	-
Needs appropriate management/difficult to arrange	-	-	7	17.9%
Not all teachers convinced	3	3.4%	-	-
Moving towards nominated practice	10	11.2%	9	23.1%
Miscellaneous	14	15.7%	2	5.1%
Non specific comments	17	19.1%	6	15.4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>

### **Learning and teaching**

The bracket of four learning and teaching strategies shared with the previously discussed (curriculum) category the fact of being rarely put into practice. The extent of their deployment ranged from just 6 to 10% of schools. By the time that they were asked to comment on this fact many teachers appear to have felt that they had already said what they had to say about transition measures. However, a goodly number were stirred to comment on the core issue of developing shared understandings about student learning and pedagogy to enable students to experience a consistent approach to classroom learning and teaching in middle years. 73 primary and 32 secondary principals commented on this issue.

Some primary principals again expressed concern about gaining the cooperation of high school teachers but resource issues accounted for the greatest number of responses within both groups of principals and their comments were similar. “We have tried really hard but teachers are busy people. We should each receive some flexible staffing to investigate this”, said one primary principal. Others added: “Needs to have built-in release (not from school budgets)”.

“Impossible under current structure and resources”, and “Time and money – i.e. DET time and money not the teachers”. These sentiments were not much different from those expressed by the secondary principals: “Time and budgets are the killers for staff to be allocated this task”, and “When? There is no release time provided to do this.” This type of reaction was sustained in relation to other strategic learning and teaching possibilities. One principal appeared to speak for many in declaring: “It is all good and sound practice and way beyond the time constraints available to any teacher. I’m exhausted just contemplating what it would involve to do all this.” Another expressed a similar sentiment: “As I read through these questions and look at what the school, with rigid timetables and no funding is supposed to do, I feel ill.”

**Table 14: primary and secondary principals’ comments on non-implementation: developing shared understandings about student learning and pedagogy**

<b>TYPE OF COMMENT</b>	<b>PRIMARY</b>		<b>SECONDARY</b>	
Time/resource issues	20	27.4%	10	31.2%
Requires respectful cooperation of high schools	11	15.2%	-	-
Mutual exchanges would be difficult/require management	7	9.6%	4	12.5%
Moving towards nominated practice	5	6.8%	3	9.4%
Question relative significance	-	-	2	6.3%
Multiple high school destinations	2	2.7%	-	-
Exchanges of pedagogy would be beneficial	2	2.7%	-	-
Miscellaneous	14	19.2%	9	28.1%
Non specific comments	12	16.4%	4	12.5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100%</b>

## **PART FOUR: DISCUSSION**

There is scope for improvement in the application of the sets of transition strategies reviewed in the present survey. In so far as there are some variations in the implementation of the measures canvassed, the findings resonate with the English experience that more energy is spent on efforts at acclimatising students and smoothing the transition process than ensuring that pupils' commitment to learning is sustained and their progress enhanced (Galton, Gray and Ruddock, 1999). Research indicates the particular importance of giving attention to discontinuities in teaching approaches and helping students to manage their own learning. While such measures are deemed by our school principals to be good in theory, on their own testimony it is fairly rare for such practices to be applied.

Much has been said by the subjects of our survey about differences in the approaches to education of high school and primary school teachers. In some instances this has been interpreted as devaluing the importance of primary studies. Primary principals (and their teacher colleagues) bridle at the disregard of information compiled on primary students and transmitted to the high schools. At times the worst of possible motives are ascribed to the receiving schools. Ultimately more will be involved in making tangible progress in this field than changing the disposition of members of the two groups towards each other's work. Nevertheless, it may help to dissipate unhelpful negative feelings to point out that similar difficulties have been experienced overseas. Secondary teachers have been found to uphold the notion of giving pupils a 'fresh start', which is commonly interpreted as 'starting from scratch' (Marshall and Brindley, 1998). It may be that many of our high school teachers share the views of their English counterparts who have revealed to researchers their concern to avoid labelling novice secondary students in ways that may diminish their prospects of success. The challenge is to utilise transmitted knowledge concerning the learning experiences, learning styles and needs of transiting students without creating negative self-fulfilling expectations.

Willingness to adopt this approach depends on the opportunity to overcome stereotypical views about 'what goes on in the other school' (Galton et al., 1999). This can only happen through contact and discussion but as we can see from the responses of both primary and secondary principals there is the danger that such meetings can serve to consolidate pre-existing negative attitudes ('I am so tired of rainforests! Not the rain forest again!', or "Not another inter-planetary visit to a high school!"). The answer lies in framing such contacts with a set of authoritative ideas about quality teaching, grounded in research and promulgated as being relevant to both stages of school education. Such a template transcending stage preferences and customs is now available in the form of the NSW Quality Teaching Framework (NSW DET, 2003) and it should be a central point of reference for inter-school and cluster work on primary/secondary transitions.

Some principals were explicit in stating, others simply implied, being overwhelmed by the range of transition measures currently under consideration and canvassed in the survey. This is a common enough problem in organisational innovation where the very scale of what is contemplated can freeze the capacity to respond at any level. It is not that the 20 strategies outlined were judged to be lacking in merit. That is shown by the consistently high level of their endorsement – at a minimum two-thirds of the principals rated them 'vital' or 'important'. What is needed is an explicit degree of *decision latitude* in setting priorities among the 'transition bridges' on offer. These priorities would, among other things, be influenced by local circumstances and opportunities (including such things as geographic proximity of the schools and the number and diversity of the feeder schools), and the aspirations of the schools. The main aims, as Schagen and Kerr (1999) have stated, could include marketing, an efficient and comfortable transition, curriculum continuity or individual



progression. To which in New South Wales might be added staff professional development. Of course, none of these elements are mutually exclusive. One can only agree with Schagen and Kerr that “It would be useful to debate explicitly the issues involved, and reach a common understanding of the aims and benefits of liaison”. Depending on the priorities established, the initial focus could then be on one or another of the categories of transitional strategies covered in the survey. That would help to make the whole project more feasible without precluding the later extension of strategies to include other aspects of transition.

Technology has a part to play in overcoming some of the difficulties reported in the survey. Rather than having a multiplicity of different forms to complete for different high schools, a state-wide transition document could be designed and sent to the relevant secondary schools electronically, regardless of whether they came from three feeder schools, or thirty. Direct contact between primary and secondary students and teachers is needed to help plan students’ transition and learning in appropriate and effective ways. However this need not be an all or nothing situation. For example, video-conferencing could enable some specialist subject teachers from the secondary school to provide lessons for primary pupils (Galton et al., 1999). In a state where all public school students have the opportunity of an email account some transition communications (for example, newsletters for Year 6 students written by pupils in Year 7), can supplement more ‘hands on’ experiences.

But those who manage the public schools have made it clear that there is a bottom line requirement if transition programs are to be effectively implemented. All of the measures reviewed involve the expenditure of time as well as professional skill. And in a system which has accrued a wide range of additional tasks and functions over time, many principals say that they cannot ask staff to take on duties additional to the basic teaching and other responsibilities already assigned to them. The solution? Additional earmarked funding to purchase staff’s release from classroom duties to enable them to design and implement transition strategies. The NSW Government appeared in its 2003 pre-election document, *Stronger high schools* to hold such funding in prospect stating that from the 2004 school year, all secondary schools would be required to establish intensive linkage/transition to high school programs with their local primary schools. The past two years have seen several initiatives, the most important of which has been the conduct of transition workshops in ten school education areas across the state led enthusiastically by a secondary principal, Mr Brian Ralph, deployed to help foster transition planning. The workshops are largely based on transition support material on the DET *primary-secondary transition* website. These materials provided the framework for our survey. Among other things the site discusses how to develop an effective transition program within a cluster of schools. A combination of these influences probably account for the beginning efforts reported in our survey but to-date transition funding has been very limited.

With very few exceptions, the comprehensive sample of NSW school principals has displayed enthusiastic support for a wide range of transition strategies. But one of the principals in our survey spoke for many in saying “All of this cannot be done on good will (alone)”. There is an inevitable price tag attached to the practical implementation of transition measures. The missing commodity could hardly have been described more succinctly than by the principal who said: “Time. Time. Time!” And, of course, that time does not come free. It has to be purchased.

There are good cases that can be made about declining funding for public education over the past twenty years. They include changes to the staffing formula – the General Scale Entitlements Years 7-10 and 11-12 - and an overall decline in the percentage of the state

budget allocated to school education<sup>5</sup>. These are real enough factors in helping to explain the principals' pronounced sense of being overwhelmed by a diverse array of tasks and a shortage of resources to handle them. However, the primary argument in favour of funding transition strategies is positive in nature and has to do with consolidating quality in our public education system. The state government has already taken some commendable steps to assist our children to make a good beginning to their education. Now is the time to complete the job. The same goals of giving every young person the chance to utilise their individual abilities to the full, while adding to the state's pool of productive talent, require good beginnings to secondary education. This can be done by providing two staff members or their salary equivalent (depending on circumstances and a local management plan) for each of the networks of 397 high schools and their feeder schools throughout the state. One of the positions would be based in each high school and the other would be shared among the primary schools constituting the relevant 'feeder' network. In addition, one teacher (or the salary equivalent) needs to be allocated to facilitate primary/secondary transitions within each of the state's 67 central and community schools. There will be anomalous situations and varied circumstances that require novel adaptations but in every instance schools should be required to formulate and document a transition plan that should be audited at the regional level. The cost of this proposal would add 1% to the state's current school education services budget.<sup>6</sup> The resultant benefits to the social and economic capital of our state and the increased social justice that would flow from the measure, make this a small price to pay.

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<sup>5</sup> Expenditure on the education policy area as a percentage of all NSW Government expenditure had declined from 28.4% in 1989-90 to 22.0% in 2001-2002 (Pie Chart Series, for *Budget Paper No.2*). Budget estimates for 2006-07 show that the education policy area after allowing for the reclassification of school transport costs represent a 23.7% share of total expenses. NSW Treasury (2006) *Budget Paper No.2*, Office of Financial Management, p.2-8.

<sup>6</sup> Based on the cost, inclusive of on-costs, of a teacher at step 11-12. The cost of school education services for 2006-07 estimated at \$7,513 million.