



Placement of Year 7 Students

SAPPA Position Paper

There are diverse views about the best placement of Year 7 students in South Australian schools. This issue is of particular interest because South Australia is the only Australian State not to have Year 7 students in a secondary school setting.

The move from primary to secondary school is a key 'rite of passage' as students move from one level of schooling to another (Pratt & George, 2005). Such a move generally requires a change of school, mixing with a new and different peer group, learning new forms of school organisation and having many more teachers – with each perhaps having a different teaching style.

Secondary schools are, in most cases, significantly larger than primary schools and students are required to move to different locations throughout the day for their various classes. In contrast, primary schools provide an environment where students spend the predominant part of the school day with the same teacher in the same classroom and with the same group of peers.

There are arguments for and against the placement of Year 7 students in secondary schools.

FOR:

- Students would be exposed to a curriculum with more specialist facilities and specialist teachers in a secondary setting
- Alignment to other Australian States and Territories, providing national consistency
- The Australian Curriculum has been written assuming Year 7 students are in secondary schools
- Some secondary schools have the physical capacity to accommodate more students, as in other States and Territories.
- Some Year 7 students would relish moving from class to class, having more opportunities to develop friendship groups, and having more teachers.
- Some students are emotionally and physically developed to cope well in secondary schools.

AGAINST:

- There is no evidence in current research that Year 7 students improve their learning outcomes in secondary school settings.
- Year 7 students in South Australia are already involved in quality teaching and learning programs in Mathematics and Science. The view that primary teachers do not provide quality instruction in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) is anecdotal and subjective with no credible backing evidence.
- It is important to educate the whole child, socially and emotionally, and primary schools do this well, especially with the close relationships easily formed between the students and their class teacher. The pastoral care at primary schools is very strong.

- Such a move would be cost prohibitive in terms of setting up appropriate middle schooling facilities in all secondary schools and providing the necessary professional development for teachers.
- Some small primary schools would be at risk of closure.
- Secondary school teachers would need to be trained in teaching 11 and 12 year old students.
- Many young adolescents find secondary school to be impersonal and more competitive than primary school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000) and consequently lose interest in school.
- Not all SA secondary schools could cope with the physical demands of catering for more students.
- Year 7 students have extensive leadership opportunities in primary schools.
- Some Year 7 students would not cope well with moving from class to class, being split from friendship groups, and not developing a close relationship with a class teacher, and therefore risk of disengagement would be high.
- Some students would not be emotionally or physically developed to cope well with being in a secondary school at a younger age.
- Quality teaching and learning for Year 7 students is not about specialist facilities and/or specialist teachers.
- Community views are divided. Many parents are concerned at the notion of their children going to secondary schools at the age of 11 & 12.

Many of the above arguments could support either position, depending on the particular needs of the individual student.

Early adolescence begins at around the age of 11, and is a developmental period marked by changes in academic and psychological functioning (Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Regarding the specific needs of young adolescents, it is generally this cohort that teachers find the most challenging, as the learning of students around Years 5-8 typically falters at a time when it should be progressing rapidly; rates of disengagement and recidivism tend to be highest in the first years of secondary school; and social and emotional functionality is being renegotiated Chadbourne (2001). As such, it could be argued that schools that cater specifically for the needs of early adolescents are better placed to avoid some of the negative consequences of transition. In the Australian context, the middle schooling model addresses the educational needs of students between about 10-15 years of age.

The middle schooling cohort tends to benefit from an education that is focused on meeting the physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs of early adolescents (Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007).

With the exception of a few schools, South Australian Government schools do not have specific Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary campuses or clearly defined pedagogies to fully accommodate and address the middle schooling needs of pre-adolescent/adolescent students. This issue would not be as debatable if all SA schools provided differentiated middle school philosophies and practices.

SAPPA believes the needs of the students must be the foremost consideration for the placement of Year 7 students. There is a need for professional learning on the educational needs of adolescents for both primary and secondary educators. Middle schooling philosophies and pedagogies must be well in place before there is any change of Year 7 students moving to secondary school settings.

References

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