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Managing the move

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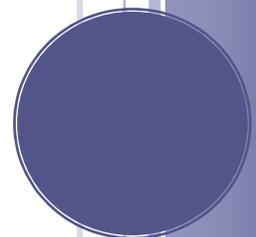
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MANAGING THE MOVE

Dr Anne Coffey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In Western Australia, the compulsory years of education have typically been divided into seven years of primary school followed by five years of secondary school. This changed in the Catholic Education system in 2009 when it was decided that year seven students should be migrated to secondary schools. A good deal of thought and planning was invested in this enterprise in the year prior to the move being executed. This report examines how the move of year seven students to the secondary environment was managed by six Catholic schools, and investigates responses from students and parents during the transition year. It is hoped that the insights gleaned will be of assistance to other schools or sectors considering similar transition arrangements.

The schools in the study adopted a variety of different approaches to the transition process and utilised different forms of organization, ranging from a traditional secondary school model to one typifying a strong middle schooling philosophy. In some schools, purpose built year seven learning communities had been constructed or modifications made to existing classrooms to provide a “base” for the students. In other schools the students simply moved from class to class as in a traditional secondary school. In some schools primary trained teachers were employed to teach in the “core” subjects and the year seven students had secondary teachers in the specialist areas. In other schools there was either a mix of primary and secondary trained teachers or the year seven program was taught exclusively by secondary trained teachers.

The research provided the opportunity for the stakeholders to tell their transition story. A mixed methods approach was adopted in which both qualitative and quantitative tools were utilized. A survey was developed for use with each of the stakeholder groups and this was then followed by semi-structured interviews with focus groups in each of the schools.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Prior to commencing secondary school, the students were concerned about making new friends, fitting in, having too much homework and getting lost in their new school. They had mixed levels of anxiety about starting secondary school but during the course of term one anxiety levels abated. They realised that becoming organized, finding their way around the school, managing lockers, coping with increased amounts of homework and mixing with new peers to be the most challenging aspects of starting secondary school. However of most significance was the fact that the students reported that they felt safe in their new environments.

They adapted quickly to having a greater number of teachers than they had been used to in primary school and most enjoyed moving to different areas of the school for their subjects. They widely reported that their “friendly and helpful” teachers, together with the year seven coordinator, had been crucial in helping them settle into their new school.

The students were both enjoying and coping with the range of subjects they were undertaking. They were also appreciative of the variety of extracurricular activities in which they had the opportunity to participate. The students were asked to identify the subjects in which they felt that they had learned the most. Across the schools, similar responses were recorded with the students identifying mathematics, science, society and environment and English. The students were also asked to identify those subjects in which they had experienced the greatest difficulty. Interestingly, they again identified mathematics, science, society and environment and English. In addition, LOTE and Religious Education were frequently identified as having been the most difficult. For students who had come from non-Catholic primary schools in particular, Religious Education was problematic. Many reported that they had experienced initial difficulty in coping with the amount of homework that was being assigned. However, the students noted that the teachers were cognisant of their concerns and had reduced the amount of homework required.

PARENT EXPERIENCE

Overall the parents were happy with the move of their children to secondary school. They had been most concerned about their children mixing with older students, coping academically, catching buses and fitting in at their new school. They noted that during the first few weeks their children were struggling with organisation, managing their lockers and accommodating a previously unexplored range of extracurricular activities. However they also noted that the teachers and year seven coordinator had worked tirelessly to help their children establish themselves in their new school. The parents also overwhelmingly reported that their children felt safe at secondary school. There was a strong perception amongst the parents that their children would be academically advantaged by completing year seven in a secondary school.

Communication was a critical factor in the transition process and parents indicated that they generally felt well informed about their child’s school. Many praised the schools for the high degree of responsiveness to their concerns and questions. However, there were some gaps, particularly for first time parents of secondary students, in that the information they had received about extracurricular activities was not always sufficiently explained. Parents had generally been satisfied with the communication that they had with their child’s teachers. Many indicated that an opportunity to meet the teachers early in term one would be welcome as they were

keen to determine how their child was settling in. It was very clear that many parents were also keen to establish a connection with the school.

TEACHER EXPERIENCE

The teachers reported that the students had appeared ready to commence secondary school but entered the school with differing levels of knowledge and skill. There were mixed levels of anxiety among the teachers about teaching year sevens which is perhaps reflective of the range of backgrounds from which they had come. Secondary trained teachers acknowledged that the year seven students were different from year eights and that professional development in pedagogy and curriculum was required. Whilst some teachers indicated that the students had lower levels of literacy and numeracy than had been expected, they were confident that strategies were in place to assist students with problems in these areas. It was clear that ongoing modifications were being made to the teaching and learning programs but little collaboration with primary schools had occurred in the development of these programs.

In some schools the year seven teachers in the “core” subjects operated as a separate team which meant that the teachers needed to find opportunities to link in with the learning areas for which they had responsibility. Some attended formal learning area team meetings. Whilst these teachers appreciated the opportunity to work as a discrete year seven team, they felt that there was a level of disconnection from the learning area teams. There was also a tension in some schools about the level of responsibility for curriculum development that resided with the year coordinator.

This report presents the results which are an amalgam of the data collected from the six schools. Segregated school data was presented to the schools for individual consideration. Overall, results strongly suggest that the relocation of year seven students to secondary schools has been a very positive experience for each of the stakeholder groups.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Schools were continuing to monitor both the transition processes and teaching and learning programs and were making adjustments where necessary.**
- **The year seven students, in the main, have adjusted well to their new secondary school environment.**
- **Parents were generally comfortable with the move of their child to secondary school.**

- **Teachers agreed that the year seven students seemed ready for secondary school but further professional development opportunities for secondary trained teachers, in particular, would be appreciated by staff.**
- **Teachers working in a year seven team environment require formal opportunities to collaborate with staff in the learning area for which they have responsibility.**
- **When developing the “educational model” for including year sevens in a secondary setting, careful consideration needs to be given to clearly defining the curriculum leadership responsibilities for the year seven coordinator and heads of learning areas.**
- **The lack of consistency across schools in the year six curriculum is problematic for the teaching and learning programs, particularly in the “core” subjects.**
- **The valid concerns raised by WACSSO in their 2009 paper relating to the perception that secondary schools communicate less effectively with parents and students and provide reduced levels of pastoral support have proven unfounded in the schools involved in this research.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **That transition programs for students should focus upon the pastoral, social and organisational aspects of secondary school life.**
- **That parents need to be informed both prior to their child commencing and during term one about both the organisational aspects of the school and the arrangements for extracurricular activities in which their children will be engaged.**
- **That schools give strong consideration to the provision of a designated “year seven area”.**
- **That professional development in both curriculum and pedagogy be provided for secondary teachers teaching in the year seven program.**
- **That formal opportunities are provided for teachers in a year seven team environment to attend learning area meetings.**

- **That schools consider provision of an opportunity mid-way during term one for parents to meet their child's teachers and discuss the transition of their child to secondary school.**
- **That opportunities to formally establish links between primary and secondary schools are explored.**
- **That schools recognise the crucial role of the year seven coordinator and give judicious consideration to the selection of the appropriate person.**
- **That consideration be given to conducting a longitudinal research project which tracks the academic progress of this group of year seven students to year nine.**

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The support of the Catholic Education Office is acknowledged for, without their permission to work with the participating schools, this research would not have taken place. I am deeply indebted to the Principals and year seven coordinators within each of the schools. In an enormously stressful work environment they graciously assisted and responded to my many requests. I also wish to thank the support staff in the schools for their assistance in arranging meeting times and disseminating correspondence.

INTRODUCTION

This project was undertaken in response to cohort reorganisation initiatives in WA Catholic schools. Due to political and historical events, the Catholic system, second in size only to the government system, found itself in a situation of unilaterally moving its year seven students to secondary schools. How this came about, and what resulted, is the subject of this report.

Across Australia year seven students are variously located in primary and secondary schools. Whilst in WA, SA and Queensland year seven students are included in primary schools, in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT year seven students have always been located in secondary schools. In the Northern Territory year seven students were moved to a middle school setting from 2008. The arrangement in WA operated well until a major decree in 2003 set into motion events that would resonate into the future.

The school starting age for students in Western Australia was changed in 2003. This was in response to a MCEETYA agreement to achieve a uniform approach across Australia by 2010. As a result of this change students entering year one from 2003 would turn six between July 1 and December 31 of the preceding year and would turn six between January 1 and June 30 of the year in which they commenced year one.

Hence in 2003 only students with birthdays between January 1 and June 30 were able to enrol in Year 1 with a resultant 50% drop in the usual number of year one enrolments. This first group of students came to be referred to as the “half cohort”. This half cohort of students will move into Year eight in traditional secondary schools in 2010. Retaining this group of students in primary school would mean that they would be six months older than the previous cohorts of year sevens. When they commenced secondary school in year eight they would be six months younger than the previous year eight students. This situation created an opportunity for exploring the nature of the boundary between primary and secondary schooling.

In 2007 the Department of Education released their report “*The Future Placement of Year 7 Students in Western Australian Public Schools: A study*” which investigated the issues surrounding the relocation of year seven students into secondary settings. The conclusion was reached that it was not feasible, at the time, for this relocation to occur because of the associated costs, incapacity of the department to provide sufficient teachers to cater for the change and concerns of the rural and remote communities (p.6). It was acknowledged that the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia had sought clarification from the Minister for Education as to where year seven students would be located in 2009 when they commenced year seven. Likewise it was also acknowledged that a number of independent schools were already planning or in the process of relocating year seven

students to secondary settings. At the time, the Catholic Education system was still considering where year seven students were best located.

CONTEXT

The notion of relocating year seven students to secondary schools is a controversial one with varying opinions amongst different stakeholder groups. Interestingly until the publication of the Department of Education report in 2007 a number of Department secondary schools had already been built or re-developed to include year seven students. This had been undertaken in a largely ad hoc fashion rather than as a system-wide initiative. At this point in the journey, neither the Department of Education nor any other sector had engaged in any comprehensive stakeholder consultation.

In the meantime, the Catholic Education Office, in anticipation of an imminent announcement by the Department of Education that all year seven students would be moved to secondary school, put into train its own transition plan for all Catholic schools. While the government was still undecided, the Catholic system publically announced its intention to commence the transition. The decision was made that in WA Catholic education would be organised predominantly around primary schools from kindergarten-Year six and secondary schools from year seven to year twelve. Other variations such as kindergarten-year 12 schools existed. This was to apply to all year seven students with the exception of those for whom a Catholic school was not available or where the existing secondary schools had insufficient resources to accommodate the additional year group. The additional resources that would become available in primary schools would be directed towards early childhood education. When the government decided to defer any decision on moving year sevens, the Catholic system was already too committed to the transition for its decision to be reversed.

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO), the peak body representing parents of students in the government school sector, has applauded the government position. In a presentation to the WA Primary Principals Association public forum on 4 August 2009 WACSSO reiterated its position that in the absence of research evidence indicating “improved educational outcomes and significant benefits” year seven students should remain in primary school. This research will address the dearth of available research evidence. There was a perception that secondary schools communicated less with parents and both students and parents would receive reduced levels of support from secondary schools. It was thought that any decision to relocate year seven students required long and careful consideration.

As in the case of WACSSO, the Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association (WAPPA) produced a position paper on the issue (2006). It adopted a stance of

opposing the move of year sevens to secondary settings “in the absence of convincing educational rationales.” The paper discusses various aspects of this issue including the absence of compelling evidence that students do better academically in secondary schools, pastoral care implications due to the cohort entering secondary school six months younger and issues related to resourcing of primary schools. The impact of reduced school population numbers in primary schools with the absence of year seven students underpins the stance adopted by this group. On their website WAPPA is currently inviting parents to complete a short survey to determine their views on the relocation of year seven students.

Contrary to WAPPA’s position the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association (WASSEA) supported the move of year seven students to secondary schools. Various issues in support of this relocation were raised in their position paper (n.d.). Some of these included the loss of year sevens to the independent and Catholic sector, lack of modification of the current primary school curriculum to cater for an older cohort of year sevens, the public perception that year seven commences in secondary school in the private sector and the positive impact on NAPLAN results for year seven students in secondary schools being taught by specialist teachers. WASSEA acknowledges the impact of the loss of a year group in primary schools and the consequent reduced funding and associated need for reclassification of some primary schools.

WASSEA’s concerns seem to have been realised as recent figures have shown that enrolments of year seven students at a number of Government primary schools are currently being adversely affected due to the drift of students into the private sector. Interestingly this phenomenon was predicted by the Department of Education in 2007:

“If the independent sector chooses to make Year 7 its intake year for secondary schooling and the public sector retains Year 7 as part of primary schooling, it is estimated that 15 per cent of the Year 7 cohort will leave public primary schools, which may have an adverse effect on programs in some public schools.” (p.11)

The State School Teacher’s Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) is currently engaging in a “Half Cohort Campaign” with a particular emphasis on the staffing implications when this group of students enters year eight in 2010. SSTUWA is currently predicting that up to 500 full time teaching positions will be lost from government secondary schools in 2010.

As the preceding dialogue indicates, the decision of the Catholic sector to include year seven students has occurred in a climate of continued debate about the merits or otherwise of such a decision. But the horse had bolted. Regardless of the merits or otherwise of the move of year sevens to secondary schools, it has occurred. This

study attempts to ascertain how selected CEOWA schools managed the transition and, in the process, provide an indication of whether or not the move of year sevens to secondary schools has been viewed favourably.

This change is, in a real sense, a turning point in education in Western Australia – a particular moment in time. The opportunity exists to track the transition process of year seven students as they move into a secondary setting and has the potential to provide an insight into the issues for each of the stakeholder groups, including students, parents and teachers. Should the Department of Education, at a future time, determine that a similar move for year sevens is indicated, the data gathered here may help inform how the transition process might best be managed.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the research is to examine how each of the six participating secondary schools in the Catholic sector negotiated the change initiative of year seven students to the secondary school environment. Of particular interest in the transition processes are the educational “models” employed by the schools.

Responses from each of the stakeholder groups were sought to gain an insight into the merits or otherwise of these processes. In the tradition of interpretive analysis, the purpose of the project was to provide participants with the forum to tell their own transition story.

The research presents an opportunity for providing feedback to each of the participating schools enabling them to modify their processes for future years, if required. At a broader level other schools and systems may learn from the experiences of the participating schools. For 2010, this research may be useful for the next wave of CEO schools transitioning year seven students. If, at some point in the future, the government school system relocates year seven students to secondary schools, there will be some evidence-based research to inform the process.

METHODOLOGY

This research intended to provide an opportunity for stakeholder groups within each of the participating schools to tell their transition story. A mixed methods approach was adopted for this research. Both qualitative and quantitative tools were selected to provide the mechanism by which this story could be told. A survey was developed for use with each of the stakeholder groups – students, parents and teachers. This was then followed by semi-structured interviews with focus groups in each of the schools with the stakeholders.

The six schools participating in the research agreed to be involved once approached, thus providing a purposeful sample. Within each of the schools one key person was identified to act as the liaison between the researcher and the school. This person was typically the year seven coordinator, head of middle school or deputy principal. A meeting was held with the liaison person to determine the best means for conducting the surveys and running the focus groups. It was most important to reduce the impact of the research upon the general school operation and impinge as little as possible on the time of the coordinator. A meeting was also held with the coordinator in order to ascertain the transition process and model of school organisation adopted by the school.

Surveys were conducted with each of the stakeholder groups during term two. The surveys comprised a series of statements about which respondents were asked to rate their reaction on a five-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree). Table 1 shows the schools involved and the number of respondents from each school. The year seven coordinator assisted in the process of conducting the surveys. In some schools the surveys were only distributed to the teachers of year seven in the “core” subjects, whilst in others they were distributed across all teachers of year seven. Parent consent was sought for the students to participate in the survey process. Survey data was analysed using SPSS Statistics version 17.0 software.

Focus groups were also conducted with each of the stakeholder groups for the purpose of exploring the key themes of the research. These themes included how the stakeholders initially coped with the transition, response to the transition processes and the nature of the teaching and learning programs for year seven students. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted towards the conclusion of term two or during term three. Groups generally ranged from six to fifteen randomly selected participants. Meetings were held on the premises of the school at a time arranged with the participants (through the coordinator). The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and the interviews were taped for later transcription. Whilst focus groups for the teachers and students were conducted during school time, those with parents were held either during the school day or in the evening for convenience. Participants consented to their participation and

parental consent was also sought for the participation of the students. The interviews were then transcribed and the responses to the key themes were analysed.

Table 1

Schools and Participants

SCHOOL	TEACHERS	STUDENTS	PARENTS
CBC Fremantle	2	43	39
Chisolm CC	46	190	109
Corpus Christi CC	6	33	36
Iona	15	33	41
John XXIII	13	156	49
Newman CC	4	51	60
TOTAL	86	506	334

THE PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Chisholm Catholic College

Chisholm Catholic College is a co-educational school situated approximately 6 kilometres north-east of the Central Business District of Perth. The College provides secondary education for over 1600 students from years 7-12. Whilst the school has five main feeder primary schools, the school has an intake of students from a large number of local primary schools – both Catholic and government. In 2009 209 year seven students commenced at the school.

The Transition Process

The Deputy Principal - Dean of Year Seven was central to managing the transition process. The incoming students are initially interviewed in year five and from then on the parents and students receive ongoing information about the school. In August prior to their commencement the following year, the students sit a placement test on a Saturday morning. This test identifies strengths and weaknesses in reading, writing and numeracy to ensure that students are placed into an appropriate level when they commence in year seven.

In Term 4 an orientation evening for both parents and students is conducted. At this meeting general information about the following year is provided and the students are informed about which classes they have been placed in, based upon performance in the placement tests. At the end of Term 4 the students from the local Catholic primary schools are invited to the school for a “Taste of Chisholm”. On this day the students spend a half a day at the school and engage in a variety of activities.

The Deputy Principal – Dean of Year Seven, accompanied by a small number of current students who attended the particular local Catholic primary school, visit the primary schools and talk to the year 6 students. This occurs in the main feeder primary schools. The counsellor from Chisholm Catholic College also visits these schools to spend time with the year six teachers in order to determine which students may require additional assistance when they arrive at secondary school.

The year seven students commence at the school one day earlier than the older students. In 2009 both year seven and eight students attended on this day. This is a further orientation day for the students. Year eleven students involved in the peer support program also attend on this day and take the students through a series of activities, talk through their timetables and take them on a tour of the school. On the following day the school timetable commences as normal.

The year eleven peer support program leaders attend a training program on the Sunday prior to the commencement of school. The year seven students have one

period of peer support a week during semester one and move through a structured program with their program leaders. The year eleven students meet each week with the coordinator of the program to discuss and plan the following week's activities.

The year seven students are allocated a pastoral care group. They remain in this group throughout their secondary school career. Each pastoral care group has three or four peer support leaders. All members of the pastoral care group belong to the same house. The students engage in regular house activities and attend Eucharistic service and house assemblies. Most of the house activities are conducted on a year seven basis. The Deputy Principal – Dean of Year Seven, who also teaches year sevens, visits each pastoral care group on a regular basis.

The student teaching and learning program is structured on a traditional basis. Students move from class to class and have a different teacher for each of the learning areas. Teachers were asked to nominate whether they wanted to teach in the Year seven program. A small number of teachers have come from a primary or middle school background but the majority of teachers have no primary background. At the end of the first semester the year seven students sat a range of exams for their “core subjects”. Students are streamed on the basis of their performance. The students move through a semester long “trial” of the various “optional subjects.”

Cluster meetings with the local feeder primary schools occur. At these meetings a number of the issues faced by the year sevens have been raised with the primary schools. Chief among these has been the issue of better preparing the students for secondary school.

CBC Fremantle

CBC Fremantle is a Catholic secondary school for boys and is located in Fremantle. Students attending the school travel from a diverse range of suburbs. Whilst there are four major feeder primary schools, the students come to the school from around 15-20 different primary schools. 64 students commenced in year seven in 2009.

The transition process

The students are enrolled at CBC two years prior to their commencement at the school. An open evening for parents is held annually at which there is an opportunity to view the facilities and work of the students. Academic testing is conducted prior to a formal orientation day for incoming students and their parents which is held in December. The parents and boys remain together until morning tea. During the initial part of the day there is much information provided about the school. A strong house system operates at the school. At the orientation day the students and their parents are introduced to the Head of House and their mentor teacher. After morning tea the parents depart and the boys are then involved in a variety of classes from across the curriculum. After a barbeque lunch the students then engage in sporting activities during the afternoon.

The transition process also includes an induction day which is held one day prior to the remainder of the year groups commencing at the start of term one. The boys are given a “guard of honour” by the year 12 students at the commencement of the day. The students attend an assembly and then spend time with their mentor teacher who explains the timetable, school procedures, use of the diary, locker arrangements and the students also have a tour of the school.

As mentioned the school has a strong house system which is central to the pastoral care system. There is no separate year seven coordinator, rather, the Head of House assumes the leading role in the pastoral care of the boys. The students are arranged in vertical house groups (i.e. years 7-12) and remain with the same mentor teacher during their time at the school. This year the year seven students were not part of this vertical tutor group system but instead boys from several houses were placed together in a tutor group. The intention was that the boys would move to the vertical structure in year eight. However the decision has now been made to change this arrangement for 2010 when year seven students will be placed in these vertical tutor groups from the outset.

The teaching and learning program for year sevens operates in a traditional secondary format with the students moving from class to class. Their “core” subjects are delivered by the two primary trained teachers employed by the school this year. The movement of the students is limited somewhat with many of their classes being conducted in the same rooms. Whilst initially the intention was to reduce the need for the boys to move to different rooms by having the teachers come to them, timetabling imperatives prevented this. The year seven teachers in 2009 operated separately from the learning areas and were situated in a separate office. For 2010, the teachers of year seven will be located in their particular learning area office. Year seven teachers will also have the opportunity to teach in other lower school year groups.

Corpus Christi College

Corpus Christi College is a co-educational Catholic secondary school located in Bateman catering for an enrolment of 1180 students in Years 7-12. Students attending the school are drawn from the suburbs of Bateman, Willetton, Applecross, Riverton and Canning Vale. The school has a middle school coordinator and a year seven coordinator. The school operates as a Middle School and a Senior School to create a learning environment catering to the needs of early and late adolescents.

The transition process

Students who attended each of the particular feeder primary schools visit that school, along with the year seven coordinator to talk to the incoming year six students about Corpus Christi College. A “fun day”, based upon the arts, is conducted in term four for the incoming year six students. The students are divided into different groups and, at the conclusion of the day, give a performance. An

information evening for parents is also conducted. At this event the parents are given a tour of the school and the philosophy of the school is explained. At a further evening in December the parents are provided with information about the operation of the school and are issued with a parent handbook.

The year seven students commence one day prior to the remainder of the students. On this day year ten students assist in conducting a range of different activities and giving the students a tour of the school. At the beginning of the school year parents are also invited to attend another evening at the school where they meet their child's teachers and are provided with information about how their child's class will run. This provides parents with a direct link to their child's teacher.

The peer support program at the school is evolving. Year ten students are selected and work through a formal program. How to best involve the year nine students (the oldest in the middle school) in the program is currently being investigated. The school is developing a strong leadership program for the students across the year groups. Likewise, opportunities to strengthen the house system and improve the vertical linkages for the students are being explored.

The teaching program for the year seven students in their first week is modified and based around providing opportunities for the students to develop relationships and begin developing organisational skills. Students are provided with a middle school diary which has been designed for young adolescents and contains a learning log and the opportunity for student reflections. Students do not commence their formal timetable until week two of term one.

The teachers of year seven come from both a secondary and primary background. Hence there is a range of secondary subject specialist teachers in addition to generalist primary teachers. The teachers in the "core" subjects teach the students in Mathematics/Science or English/humanities. The college has introduced the International Baccalaureate Middle Years program, commencing with year sevens in 2009. Hence the curriculum for the students has been devised to ensure that it is consistent with this program. Considerable integration between the learning areas is integral to this program. Students also study a second language until year nine. The school has also introduced a lap top program for year seven students in 2009 which will progress through the middle school. Students are not streamed until year 9 hence the classes have students of mixed ability.

Two members of the year seven teaching team will move with the students into year 8 in 2010. The students are located in a separate year seven teaching block in which the majority of the teaching and learning program is conducted. They move to other areas of the school for access to specialist facilities in the other learning areas. The students will move to a year eight block in the middle school in 2010.

Iona Presentation College

Iona Presentation College is located in Mosman Park and is a boarding and day college for girls in years seven to twelve. The school has students from as far away as Mandurah, Ocean Reef and Mount Lawley. Iona Primary School, a main feeder to the College is not located on the same site.

The transition process

Students are interviewed in year five – two years prior to commencing at the school. An orientation day for the year six students and their parents is held in August of the year before commencement. The students are together with their parents for half of this day and then separated for the remainder of the day. Students have their photos taken, are put into house groups, engage in academic testing and play some games. The parents and students are also provided with information about the school. The decision has been made that from this year academic testing will not form a part of the orientation day but instead will be conducted at another time. There was a perception that the testing detracted from the friendly and welcoming atmosphere that was the purpose of the orientation day.

In preparation for the transition of the year seven students the year seven coordinator visited and contacted other schools to determine what processes were being adopted. Visits were made to the feeder primary school to speak to the year six teachers and year six classes. The coordinator also spoke to the year eight students at the school to determine the issues and concerns they experienced when they started secondary school. The provision of some type of recreational equipment was investigated as the year eight students had identified that initially they felt that they had nothing to do at recess and lunch. This equipment was used by the year sevens during term one but its use declined during term two. The coordinator is satisfied that purchasing the equipment had been useful and had assisted the girls when they first arrived at the school. Year seven days in the school gymnasium have also been arranged in order to give the students something to occupy them at recess and lunchtimes.

Students have an induction day prior to the remainder of the year groups starting at the commencement of term one. Much of the information provided at the orientation day is repeated at the induction day. Year 11 and 12 students are also involved. This is a quiet day where students can again orient themselves with their new school environment.

Based upon the experience in 2009 the decision has been made that an additional information day will be held in November for the incoming year six students. It was felt that the time between the orientation in August and commencing in February was too great and that an additional day needed to be planned. Academic testing will be held on the second orientation day in November.

Students have a sleepover in week two of term one. This provides the opportunity for the girls to get to meet each other in a relaxed environment. Their teachers also attend the sleepover so there is the opportunity for the girls to also get to know their teachers. The decision was made to hold the sleepover in the school gymnasium to help the girls feel part of the Iona community.

The teachers of year seven students are all secondary trained. The students are not streamed on the basis of their performance in the academic testing; rather the test results are used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students. A traditional approach has been adopted with students attending all of their classes in their form groups. Initially it had been planned that the students would remain in the same room for their “core” subjects and teachers would come to them, however timetabling imperatives did not permit this to occur.

John XXIII College

John XXIII College is a co-educational Catholic kindergarten to Year 12 school located on one site in Mt Claremont. The school has four main Catholic feeder primary schools. The school has a strong focus on the provision of a seamless K-12 education. The school has a Year seven coordinator who teaches in the year seven program and a new separate year seven building was constructed in preparation for the students.

The transition process

An information night is held in June for parents and the classrooms are opened to allow parents to view the facilities and work of the students at the school. Later, in October the year six students visit the senior school for one day. This day is divided into three sections comprising a variety of activities – sport, arts, LOTE, science and photos are taken. Academic testing is also conducted. Information is provided to both the parents and the students about the year seven program and the school policies in general.

An induction day is held one day prior to the commencement of the rest of the school. Year 12 students and the school leaders are involved on this day. The year sevens are taken on a “Heritage” tour by the year 12 students. This is followed by a sausage sizzle. The emphasis is on providing the students with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the senior school campus, meet other year sevens and also meet the year 12 students.

During the first week of school the students work on their timetable but all of the classes for the year seven students are conducted within the year seven building. Teachers from the specialist subject areas come to this building to commence their programs. In week two the students then move to the specialist areas for their subjects. All of their core subjects are conducted within the year seven building.

During the initial weeks of term there is a strong emphasis on the life skills program.

The teachers working in the year seven program come from a mix of primary, middle school and secondary backgrounds. The teachers in the specialist areas were asked if they wanted to teach year sevens. As indicated above, the students undergo academic testing prior to commencing in year seven and this information is provided to their teachers. The information is not used to stream the students.

Newman College

Newman College is a K-12 co-educational school with campuses on three sites. The K-3 campus is situated in Floreat; the Year 4-6 campus is located in Churchlands; and the Year 7-12 campus is located in Churchlands but on a different site. The school has an overall enrolment of around 1800 students. The administration of the three sites is integrated. Students access the year 7-12 campus from a number of different suburbs.

The transition process

An information evening is held for parents during which the arrangements for the year sevens are explained and information about the operation of the school is provided. The students also attend an orientation day during Term four. Each student is placed into one of eight Guilds: Brigid, Camara, Catherine, Chisholm, Mackillop, Marcellin, Romero and Thomas More. The students participate in the orientation day activities in their Guilds. The students have a tour of the school and engage in academic testing and sporting activities.

An induction day, one day prior to the commencement of the other year groups was held. This assists the students in becoming familiar with their new school environment without having the other year groups in the school. For many of the activities the students are arranged in guild groups. A year seven camp is held during term one during which the students have the opportunity to meet many of the other year seven students.

Students are placed in pastoral care groups, based upon their Guild, comprising around 24 students. They meet in these groups each day for fifteen minutes. Teachers for each pastoral care group are heavily involved in teaching the year seven students. In addition the students have a year seven coordinator. A peer support program, utilising year eleven students also operates within the school and provides further support for the year seven students. In year twelve some of the students operate as peer mentors who can also provide advice and assistance to their younger counterparts.

A section of the campus was renovated to provide a year seven block. Students have many of their classes within this teaching area and move to other parts of the school to access specialised facilities in their other subjects. The four teachers involved in teaching in the “core” areas moved from the primary school campus to teach year sevens at the secondary school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following overall results are an amalgam of the data collected from the six participating schools. These results will attest that the relocation of year seven students to the secondary schools in this study has, for the most part, been a very positive experience for each of the stakeholder groups. This is perhaps due, in large measure to the amount of effort invested by school personnel in the transition process, particularly the year coordinators and teachers. The responses of the stakeholder groups to three key issues were examined in the research – starting secondary school, the transition process overall and teaching and learning programs. Analysis of the data revealed two related issues: homework and school organisation. These will each be discussed, in turn, in the following pages.

Starting Secondary School

Students

Being cognisant of the fact that the year seven students are transitioning from a very familiar and generally, much smaller primary school to a new, much larger, and generally unfamiliar, secondary environment is an important consideration in planning the transition of the students to secondary school. Some of the students made the move to their new school with many of their peers from primary school, whilst others may have been the only member of their year six class to move. Some simply moved to a different location on the same K-12 campus site whilst others had to travel long distances by bus to access their new school. Hence it is understandable that there were mixed levels of anxiety amongst the year seven students about commencing secondary school as shown in the results in Table 2. Students were asked to rate how worried they were prior to commencing secondary school, during the first few weeks of secondary school and at the end of term one.

Table 2

Student Anxiety

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Anxious before School	8.1%	31.6%	31%	20.8%	8.5%
Anxious in first few weeks	5.9%	24.9%	28.1%	29.4%	11.7%
Anxious at end of Term 1	2.0%	6.8%	16.5%	38.6%	36.2%

In two of the participating schools levels of anxiety rose in the first few weeks. However by the end of term one student anxiety about being in secondary school had dropped sharply. Student focus group participants reported that there were a

number of issues that caused them considerable concern about starting secondary school. These included:

- Making new friends
- Getting lost in the school
- Arriving late to class
- Having too much homework
- Adapting to different teachers and their expectations
- Remembering their timetable

The students generally acknowledged that the first few weeks had been difficult but also expressed their high degree of satisfaction with being in secondary school. This process was initially easier if they had friends from primary school accompanying them. They had enjoyed being treated more as an adult and had appreciated the range of opportunities that they had been afforded. Focus group participants spoke of the issues that had caused them concern in their first few weeks. These were remarkably similar across the schools and included:

- Becoming organised
- Finding their way around the school
- Mixing with people they did not know well
- Leaving friends behind in primary school
- More homework
- Lockers

Something as seemingly insignificant as lockers and their locks were a cause of great angst amongst many of the students. One year coordinator commented that he spent considerable time in the year seven locker area assisting students with their lockers. Some students also commented that, due to their height, they had trouble reaching their locker. Many students stated that it was easier to take all of their books with them rather than risk being late for class. This worry clearly magnified the issues associated with managing a locker. They were very concerned about being chastised by their teachers, and perhaps getting detention, as they were aware that this was a penalty associated with being late to class. Several students commented that, as time progressed, they were able to organise their lockers more efficiently and this had helped relieve their concerns. As will be discussed at a later point, the teachers were very mindful of the student concerns in this regard and overlooked student lateness.

The capacity of the students to quickly learn to better manage their lockers is reflective of their ability to adjust to their new school environment relatively quickly. Students were asked to rate the extent to which they felt they were fitting in, had made new friends and whether they felt safe at secondary school.

The results in Table 3 strongly indicate that the students swiftly settled into secondary school, despite the fact that there were certain aspects, such as organisation and lockers that were of concern to them. Students generally reported that it had taken them about half a term to feel that they were coping with the demands of secondary school.

Table 3

Socialisation

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Feel I am Fitting In	41.9%	41.7%	12.3%	2.6%	1.6%
Made new Friends	74.5%	20.8%	2.6%	0.4%	1.8%
Feel Safe	33.7%	52.1%	10.7%	3.0%	0.6%

The evidence suggests that some of their main concerns – making new friends and fitting in – had quickly dissipated. That 85.8% of respondents indicated that they felt safe at secondary school is powerful evidence that they quickly adapted to, and felt comfortable in, their new environment. Above all it is testament to the work of the school personnel in providing opportunities for the students to settle into their school. This will be discussed at greater length when the transition processes are considered.

Related to the issue of student safety is bullying. Despite the opportunity to discuss bullying, either through the anonymity of a survey or in a focus group, it was not raised as a major issue by the students. It was also not an issue that they reported as being of concern to them prior to commencing at secondary school. Whilst some students indicated that they had noted that bullying was evident in the schools some also commented that it occurred to a lesser degree than they had experienced in primary school. As is often the case, the students did not necessarily want to take the matter further for fear of being labelled a “dobber”. Focus group participants felt that bullying occurred more in groups i.e. derogatory comments directed at a group of students rather than the individual. Students within the year seven and eight cohort were identified as the most frequent culprits, whilst the students noted that the older year 11 and year 12 students were often protective of their younger counterparts. This lends weight to the powerful impact of peer support programs which, in part, provide the opportunity for the younger students to strongly identify with the older students. Year coordinators in the schools also spoke of the great benefits for the older students who had been involved in these programs. One school that had not introduced a peer support program in 2009 will be doing so in 2010 because of the tangible benefits to both the younger and older students.

The above discussion about student safety alludes to the importance of the year seven students developing a feeling of connectedness to their new school. Establishing positive relationships with their peers (which was of concern to them prior to them commencing at the school) and the older students clearly assisted in their transition. It was also very apparent from both the survey responses and focus groups that a contributing factor to the students fitting in and feeling safe was the development of relationships with their teachers. At the time of conducting the surveys – midway in term two – the respondents, in the main reported that they felt they were getting to know their teachers and also liked having a range of different teachers. Students were asked to rate the extent to which they were getting to know their teachers and whether they liked having a number of different teachers. These results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Student Perception of Teachers

	SA	A	N	D	SD
I know my teachers	30.8%	54.7%	13.0%	0.8%	0.6%
Like different teachers	31.6%	39.7%	22.7%	3.8%	2.2%

In some schools that had adopted an approach consistent with a “middle schooling” philosophy the students had fewer teachers in the course of a school day, whilst others, in a more traditional setting had a greater number of teachers. Irrespective of this the individual school results mirror the overall results above and indicate that the students quickly adapted to this aspect of secondary school life. Students in the focus groups mentioned that if they had a teacher that they didn’t like they were only in that class for a short time period – as opposed to all day in a primary school. They did note that sometimes it was frustrating when the bell went to signal the end of the lesson when they were enjoying a subject. In the primary school environment the teachers have much more discretion in the determining when particular activities might be brought to a close.

The students in each of the focus groups frequently used the term “friendly and helpful” to describe their teachers. They were very aware that their teachers had “gone easy” on them during the first term and had overlooked issues of lateness to class or forgetting particular books or equipment. As will be remembered in the above discussion about lockers, the students were very keen to avoid getting into trouble. Again, this is a powerful testament of the degree to which the teachers had invested considerable effort in helping the students to settle into their new environment and establish strong relationships with the new cohort of students.

Parents

Parents were asked to comment on both the anxiety that they had observed in their children prior to commencing secondary school and their own anxiety at the end of Term one. Parents also reported mixed levels of anxiety in their child about starting secondary school, but this anxiety had abated somewhat by the end of term one. These results are shown below in Table 5.

Table 5

Parental Report on Anxiety

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Prior to commencing	9.6%	38.3%	18%	24.9%	9.3%
I am still concerned	7.1%	24.9%	16.3%	32.3%	19.1%

Focus group participants were asked about their attitudes towards year sevens being placed in secondary school. Some expressed reservations about the move. Being around older children was the main area of concern. One parent was very concerned about her year seven daughter being around older boys. However she was very quick to point out that this had simply not been an issue.

An interesting reflection from the parents surrounded the “rites of passage” from primary school. They were concerned that their children would miss out on many of the traditional year seven events that took place in primary school. Several parents indicated that their children who did not want to move to secondary school had initially used this as reason to stay in their primary school for year seven. Interestingly a number of parents commented that they perceived year seven to be a “fun year” in primary school and that their children would be academically advantaged by being placed in a secondary environment. Several parents expressed the view that in year seven the students had less of an academic focus but rather the leadership opportunities and accompanying responsibilities, year seven camp and graduation detracted from a focus on academic work.

The data revealed that parents shared similar concerns to their children about the move to secondary school. These included their child:

- Mixing with older students
- Being exposed to more “adult” relationships (in co-educational schools)
- Coping academically
- Having to catch buses
- Fitting in at their new school

During the first few weeks they reported that their children had struggled with a number of elements of secondary school and that it had been difficult. Some parents noted that they had devoted a lot of time to helping their child settle into school. The main issue was organisation. A number of parents commented on how quickly their children had adapted and had become self-reliant. This was evident in each of the participating schools. One parent commented:

“The positive is that we perhaps baby our kids too much in primary school. They have come here [secondary school] and had to take responsibility and to cope with all that we’ve thought they’ve had to cope with. And they have!”
(Chisholm Catholic College)

Also related to the problems initially experienced by the children, parents noted the considerable angst that lockers— particularly the locks – had caused their children. Clearly the children were relaying their concerns about being late for class to their parents.

The parents noted that becoming used to the range of extracurricular activities in which their children were involved had caused them concern during the first few weeks of school. That the students had been involved in these activities (such as interschool sport) was acknowledged as having assisted their child in settling into, and feeling a part of, their new school however it had also added to the range of new experiences with which their child was coming to terms. Indeed, a number of parents commented on how tired their children had been during the first few weeks of school. Interestingly the parents also reported how delighted they were to see their children mingling with older students together with the response of these older students to the year sevens, through their participation in the extracurricular activities.

Again, related to the importance of the relational aspects of the transition process, the parents in each of the schools also acknowledged the degree to which the teachers had assisted their children during the term. Parents at Corpus Christi College, for example, noted that there was less of an emphasis on the academic program in the first few weeks so as to allow the children to settle in and to get to know each other and their teachers. The parents in the focus groups suggested that perhaps teachers could spend a little time early in term two helping the children to re-establish routines and relationships as not all children “slot straight back in.” Some of the students, particularly those who did not live close to their new secondary school friends had little contact with other students during the holidays. It therefore took them a little time to re-establish these new relationships as well as getting back into the rhythm of secondary school life.

Perhaps because the parents were comfortable that their children had made new friends, had some contact with the older students and had established good

relationships with their teachers, there was an overwhelming feeling that their child felt safe at secondary school as is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Student Perception of Safety

	SA	A	N	D	SD
My child feels safe at school	34.9%	53.1%	6.6%	4.5%	0.9%

The reticence expressed by some parents about their children being around older students had quickly dissipated. Clearly, despite the many issues their children were dealing with at their new school, parents were very comfortable that their child was in a safe environment. This was important and is, in no small measure, a strong contributor to the overall satisfaction that parents have expressed about their child being in secondary school.

Bullying was raised by some but not all of the focus groups. Year eight students were regarded as the main protagonists. The use of older students (Year 11/12) to negate the need for students to report instances of bullying to a teacher was suggested. As has been mentioned parents commented that they liked the fact that their children, through involvement in both extracurricular activities and peer support programs, were developing positive relationships with the year 11 and 12 students in particular. Indeed in one school that did not have a peer support program one parent commented:

“I don’t understand why they didn’t do that with year 7s this year because they actually need that. They needed a bit of help with the locker situation and finding their way around.”

This has been valuable feedback for the school concerned and this will be rectified for 2010 particularly given that a larger intake of year seven students will be entering the school.

In one focus group the issue of bad language was raised by the parents who felt that the use of such language had increased since the children commenced secondary school. The parents concerned did acknowledge that it was difficult for the teachers to do anything specific about this issue as the bad language was not directed at teachers but rather was used by students in talking to each other. However they did feel that the teachers should keep raising the issue of the inappropriateness of this language with the students.

Teachers

As is shown in Table 7 the teachers across the schools overwhelmingly agreed that the year seven students had settled well into secondary school. The role of the teachers in helping the students' transition effectively into secondary school cannot be understated.

Table 7

Teacher Perception of Transition

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Year 7s settled in well	26.7%	60.5%	10.5%	2.3%	0.0%

A number of teachers commented that they believed that the students had appeared very ready to commence secondary school. These views were shared by teachers from both a primary and secondary background. Some commented that they were very similar to year eight students but had taken just a little longer to settle into their new environment.

The participants in the focus groups also agreed that organisation had been the biggest stumbling block for the students – some students had felt quite overwhelmed. Again, lockers were also identified as an issue by the teachers. The students had taken some time to become used to familiarising themselves with their timetables and planning ahead. Unlike primary school, where students simply lift the lid of their desk to access all of their books and equipment, in secondary school they had to know what classes were approaching and ensure that they had all of the necessary books and equipment with them.

The teachers had worked hard to simplify things for the students and to model good organisation. They said that in following years more time at the start of the year would be devoted to teaching organisational skills. However, what was also apparent from the conversations with the teachers was that they were acutely aware of the problems the students were experiencing, were very understanding and invested considerable time and effort in lending assistance to the students. The following comment from a member of the teaching staff at Corpus Christi College echoes the sentiments of the teachers in the focus groups:

“As staff, we made allowances for the kids to allow them to settle in before teaching curriculum. Therefore I believe the transition was very smooth – my kids were settled almost immediately.”

The Transition Process

The description of the schools (pp. 14-21) reveals there were many similarities in the transition processes employed. 59.4% of student respondents had older brothers or sisters at the secondary school. Hence 40.6% of students were from “first time secondary school families.” 78.1% of students had attended Catholic Primary Schools.

Students

The students were asked to rate how well prepared they felt, at the end of year six, to commence secondary school. Table 8 indicates that the students had mixed feelings in this regard.

Table 8

Students Preparedness for Secondary School

	SA	A	N	D	SD
I feel well prepared	15%	34.7%	34.5%	12.5%	3.4%

A number of students in each of the focus groups commented that they did not have a graduation from their primary school in year six. This was also commented upon by a number of parents. It was an important event that had been missed and about which many parents expressed misgivings.

Students in the focus groups in each of the schools discussed a number of aspects of the transition process. The students had found orientation days in year six to be of value and commencing school one day prior to the remainder of the year groups had been very helpful. This had given them a chance to become more familiar with their surroundings and to meet other students.

Each of the schools employed specific events that had resonated with the students. These have been outlined in some detail previously (pp.14-21). The selection of these events appears to strongly exemplify the “culture” of the school and are also indicative of the careful planning undertaken.

At Chisholm Catholic College the students spoke highly of the peer support program as having made a big difference. Being able to establish relationships with year eleven students who “teach you how to get through high school” was roundly supported by the students. One student recounted her experience of running into her “peer support person” at a local shopping centre. Both she and her mother were delighted when the year 11 student acknowledged her daughter. Likewise the pastoral care groups had been very useful in terms of establishing new friendships

and getting to know their teachers. In a traditional secondary setting these initiatives had been really useful. The students suggested that the peer support program continue beyond first term because there were always new things to learn about being in a secondary school.

The students at Corpus Christi College commented that the year seven program, being a little like primary school, had helped in their transition. Similarly at John XXIII College one student commented:

“I think the fact that they haven’t thrown us into a full on high school environment is good. They make it sort of half and half, so you can get used to the changes from last year but at the end of the year we will be able to cope and be ready to go into year eight.”

Another commented:

“The school has made it so that we usually stay in one classroom, but still move around for some classes. This is good because it’s not quite like high school so it’s not really hard, but it’s not too much like primary school so it’s helping us change from one to the other without pushing us straight into high school.”

At both of these schools the students had a separate year seven building with which they strongly identified. Many of their “core” subjects were conducted in this building negating the need to move around the school to a significant extent. Both have also adopted a strong middle school philosophy. At John XXIII students will not be introduced to using lockers until term four in readiness for year eight. This replicates their environment in primary school. The students at John XXIII College also commented that the year twelves had shown the year sevens around the school on their induction day and this had really helped them to feel part of the senior school environment. Finding their way around such a large campus was important for the students.

The boys at CBC were given a “guard of honour” by the year twelve students on their first day. This had really helped them to feel part of the school. That the students (and parents) spoke so highly of this is indicative of the degree to which this particular event resonated with the boys.

The girls at Iona Presentation College had a sleepover in the school gymnasium. This had helped them form friendships and to get to know their teachers. One Iona parent made particular mention of the fact that, until this event, his daughter was very reticent about moving to the school. However, her attitude changed enormously after the sleepover as it had helped her get to know other girls and realise that she was not the only student who, at that stage had no other friends at the school. It had helped her to get to know her teachers in a more social setting

and was also an event that her counterparts in year seven in primary schools were not experiencing.

The students at Newman College cited the year seven camp as having really helped them to develop new friendships. They were also fully involved in Guild (house) activities. This had helped them establish relationships with older students and to feel part of the school. The students at Newman also had a separate year seven building which had provided them with a sense of “place” in the school.

Interestingly all of the students in schools with a separate year seven building spoke of the benefit of having this area to “call their own”. Students at Chisholm College, which did not have a year seven building, tended to congregate around their separate locker area and this had become the year seven area. This **“sense of place”** perhaps contributed to the feeling of safety reported by the students. The teachers noted that, as the year progressed, the students became more adventurous in moving to other parts of the school at recess and lunch. The teachers at Newman College spoke of the benefit of the geographical separation of the year sevens and eights in different areas of the school campus as having reduced any “issues” arising between these groups of students as they sought to establish themselves in the school. Parents also widely reported the advantages of their children being in separate buildings in assisting with the transition of their students. One parent at Corpus Christi College commented that she had heard from some of the older students at the school that the year seven students had been labelled the “untouchables” as the older students were not permitted in the year seven area. In schools without this separate area some students indicated that not knowing where to sit at recess and lunch had been an issue for them at the start of term.

The year seven students were also permitted, across most of the schools, to access the canteen slightly earlier than the other year groups at recess and lunch. The students acknowledged that this had made life much easier for them and had contributed to their sense of safety. It was apparent that some of the participants were more apprehensive than others about going to the canteen.

The role of the year seven coordinator was acknowledged by the students. The students identified very strongly with their coordinator. It was very apparent from the conversations with the students that the coordinator was someone they saw as being accessible and to whom they could turn to for help and advice. They felt strongly that their coordinator knew them well and would provide them with assistance. That the students would speak so strongly about their coordinator is testament to the considerable effort that each invested in the transition process.

Likewise the “friendly and helpful” teachers were identified by the students as having really helped them to adjust to secondary school.

“They’ve asked us if there is anything hard about the move then they talk about it at meetings to see if they can make anything easier.” (CBC Fremantle)

“The school hasn’t done anything that stands out dramatically, but they have just been supportive when we need help and don’t get too mad when we are late for class or forget things, at the start of the year especially.”

(Newman College)

The importance of such comments cannot be understated. The students clearly felt comfortable in their new environment and felt that their concerns would be both listened to and dealt with. They were receiving support from many quarters within the school.

Parents

Parents were asked to rate whether they felt there were good levels of communication about the school during year six, during term one in secondary school and with their child’s teachers. The results in Table 9 indicate that overall parents were pleased with the processes employed by the schools and the level of communication they had received both prior to and during the 2009 school year.

Table 9

Parent Perception of Communication from School

	SA	A	N	D	SD
During Year 6	29.1%	51.1%	14.1%	4.5%	1.2%
During Term 1	30.7%	49.7%	13.7%	4.8%	1.2%
With my child’s teachers	24.1%	45.2%	21.4%	8.6%	0.6%

Being kept fully informed about the school and the transition was cited as being a very important part of the transition process. One parent commented:

“The school held a number of information evenings for parents prior to the beginning of my child’s year 7. These were reassuring in that I felt confident the school was developing a program that would be ready for the new intake. Being kept informed was crucial. We also received much information that was sent by post. Our confidence was conveyed to our child who consequently was quite happy to move to year 7.” (John XXIII College)

Parents appeared to have differing views about the timing of information regarding the secondary school. Whilst some were happy to receive it toward the end of the

year others commented that they would have preferred to receive the information earlier. One parent commented:

“[NAME]’s transition to high school was relatively smooth. However, most of the information about high school (paperwork, orientation etc.) came at the end of year six. I think an introduction throughout the year would have been better as [NAME]’s anticipation and questions increased without answers up until the very end of the year because we didn’t have the information. Once at high school everything has gone very well and I feel the school is going beyond their requirements to help the girls settle in.” (Iona Presentation College)

The regularity of information, particularly in year six was noted by the parents as being very important. Parents clearly wanted to be in a position to talk to their children about their new school. Also of importance was information about what the students needed to bring on their first day of secondary school. Parents, particularly first time secondary parents, wanted to know this. Whilst this was overlooked by some schools and the students commented that they brought all of their books and equipment, at other schools parents felt very well informed about what was required. At CBC Fremantle the parents were quick to point out that “what the school said would happen did happen”. What the boys required on the first day was very clearly explained.

“I found [NAME] was preparing himself because it was very clear in black and white. He was also told so he could take the initiative of getting ready [for the first day] which I found was very important. This has lasted. He started out the way he has carried on and it was well directed and very simple.” (CBC Fremantle)

Whilst they generally felt well-informed, some parents commented that the information regarding extra-curricular activities could be improved. Interestingly this was raised by each of the focus groups. Whilst they felt well informed about “big picture” issues such as school organisation, there were gaps, particularly related to the organisation of extra-curricular activities – most notably interschool sport. This was more so of an issue for first time secondary parents. One parent relayed her experience of waiting for 1 ½ hours for a bus to return from an after school sporting fixture. She had not received information about when the bus was to return and felt that this knowledge had been assumed by the school. Whilst her son may have been entrusted by the school with the responsibility for informing her, she felt that some acknowledgement of the young age of the students needed to be taken into account. Parents were also keen to point out that many of them did not believe that their children were old enough to have a mobile phone so schools should not assume that they could be readily contacted by their child.

However, what was also apparent from the conversations with each of the parent groups was that they had found the schools to be very responsive to their questions and felt very comfortable in contacting the school should the need arise. Clearly in each of the schools the teachers and year seven coordinators had worked hard to respond to the parents. This was valued by the parents whose views were typified by the following comment:

“School is excellent with their communication with the parents. They have firstly got the diary – any information you want to give to the teacher or the teacher to you. You ring up teachers and they return your calls. They give you what you need to know. It is fantastic the school here. It is commendable the type of staff they’ve got here. It has a lot to do with the Year Head. The kids have felt safe, names are known and if there is a problem it is always followed through.” (Chisholm Catholic College)

Communication with their child’s teachers was also an important consideration for the parents who had been used to greater levels of access to primary school teachers. Meeting the teachers fairly early in term one simply to check on how their child was settling in was considered very important by the parents. It had been difficult to “let go” and “break the mould” of being a primary school parent who generally had enjoyed ready access to their child’s teachers and had frequently attended a parent/teacher evening early in the school year. Some opportunity to meet the teachers would have been appreciated. One parent commented that she had met her year ten child’s teachers before those of her year seven child. She had been far more concerned with how her younger child had settled into her new school.

Parent respondents were asked to provide suggestions as to how the transition process could be improved. The following is typical of suggestions from across the schools:

- Use of the school diary to provide dates
- Provision of social opportunities for the parents to meet each other
- Provision of class contact lists for parents

Parents were keen for opportunities to meet each other as they found that their child was establishing new friendships and they wanted to meet the parents of these children. It was apparent from discussions with the parents that, in a number of schools, some parents were taking the initiative and arranging social functions. It is also important that schools acknowledge that parents too need to be “transitioned” into a new secondary school environment and many are looking for opportunities to establish a connection with the school.

The relational aspect of the transition process has been identified as a key aspect for both parents and students. The importance of developing strong relationships

between parents, students and teachers in achieving positive outcomes for students cannot be understated. The above discussion has focussed upon the students and parents and will now turn to a consideration of the teachers.

Teachers

The teachers were asked to rate how well the students had settled into secondary school and whether there were appropriate processes in place to monitor the transition process and provide pastoral care for the students. The teachers agreed that the students had settled well into secondary school and most believed that the schools were monitoring how the year sevens were transitioning into their new environment. They also agreed that measures had been put in place to attend to the pastoral care needs of the students. These results are shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Teacher Perception of Overall Transition Process

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Students settled in well	26.7%	60.5%	10.5%	2.3%	0.0%
Transition monitored	18.6%	37.2%	19.8%	19.8%	4.7%
Good pastoral care	40.7%	46.5%	8.1%	3.5%	0.0%

The teachers in each of the focus groups commented on how well the transition processes employed by the school had been received by the students and helped them to adjust to their new environment. The small size of the cohort in some of the schools was cited as a factor that perhaps had contributed to this. A smaller than normal group of year sevens had enabled the school to respond quickly to issues as they arose.

The year coordinator was mentioned as being the pivotal person in managing the transition process. Contact with the year coordinator, to raise general concerns or issues related to particular students, occurred frequently.

The teachers had been pivotal in helping the students settle into their new environment. Irrespective of whether they were from a primary or secondary background they appeared very aware that the students would experience difficulties in the first few weeks. One teacher with experience in working in middle schools in the UK commented:

“I have found that every bunch of year sevens that come in have the same problems no matter what procedures we put in place. We try and give them different bits and pieces along the way – every year it is the same problem.

They are just not accustomed to it [secondary school]. They find that settling in takes them a term to half a year before they start to get organised.”

(Corpus Christi College)

This awareness is important. For example, at Corpus Christi College the general teaching program was suspended for the initial weeks of term as the teachers worked to establish the organisational skills with the students and get them settled in. Likewise the peer support programs run by some schools frequently had a significant focus on formally teaching the students organisational skills. At Newman College this was done incidentally in the teaching program as the teachers modelled good organisation and spent class time working with the students on this aspect of their development.

It is also important to acknowledge the degree to which the teachers in each of the schools understood and responded to the issues with which the students were struggling. As has been mentioned above the students frequently alluded to their “friendly and helpful” teachers as being an important part of their move to their new school. Participants in the teacher focus groups also suggested that perhaps there was a need for year six teachers to better prepare the students for secondary school and spend time developing the organisational skills of the students.

Teaching and Learning Programs

The description of the schools (pp. 14-21) illustrates the range of approaches to the teaching and learning programs.

Students

The students were asked to rate the degree to which they were finding their subjects interesting and how well they were coping with their subjects. Results from the surveys, together with the responses from the students in the focus groups indicated that they were generally responding well to their subjects. These results are shown in Table 11. They spoke enthusiastically about the range of “electives” they were undertaking and the particular facilities in which they were taking these subjects.

Table 11

Student Perception of their School Subjects

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Subjects are interesting	22.2%	43.8%	27.5%	5.0%	1.6%
I am coping well	21.4%	56.8%	18.6%	2.2%	1.0%

The students were asked to identify the subjects in which they felt that they had learned the most. Across the schools similar responses were recorded with the students identifying mathematics, science, society and environment and English. The different “electives” were also identified variously across the schools. The students were also asked to identify those subjects in which they had experienced the greatest difficulty. Interestingly the students again identified mathematics, science, society and environment and English. In addition LOTE and Religious Education were frequently identified by the students as having been difficult. For students who had come from non-Catholic primary schools in particular, Religious Education was problematic for them.

Various reasons were given by the students for these responses. They identified the pace of the work and amount of homework given by their teachers in these subjects as being an issue for them. It appeared that, from the student’s perspective there was little time for consolidation, they were learning many new facts and some indicated that they had little previous exposure to some subjects in primary school, particularly to science and society and environment. However, despite the difficulties that the students were experiencing it is interesting that they did acknowledge that these were the subjects in which they felt they were learning the most.

Interestingly there was also a strong perception amongst the students, irrespective of whether their teacher was from a primary or secondary background, that they were being taught by specialist teachers. For example one student commented:

“I feel that I have learnt the most in maths because at my old school my teachers taught all the subjects and they didn’t know what they were teaching that well. Whereas, at this school my maths teacher is meant to teach maths.” (John XXIII College)

They were also very enthusiastic about being able to do “real” science experiments despite the fact that they also indicated that they were struggling with the jargon associated with science.

The students in the focus groups in each of the schools mentioned the higher standards of work that were expected in secondary school. One student commented:

“Sometimes you think with your work you’ve done a really good job but then you see others and you feel kind of bad.” (Corpus Christi College)

Interestingly, the students at Newman College, who knew their teachers from primary school, were the only group in which the students had mixed views about whether the standards expected were higher.

The students also acknowledged that they liked being challenged:

“That’s really good because they might raise the expectation but that raises your standards as well. Because if the standards weren’t really as high as this in secondary school you wouldn’t really have to try as hard. But this way you can really push yourself.” (John XXIII College)

The students at Chisholm Catholic College, who had undergone a series of exams in term one acknowledge that sitting exams had been stressful. They had received study tips, through their peer support program, which they indicated had really helped them. Feedback from the students indicated that overall the process wasn’t as difficult as they had first envisaged.

Where the students were streamed, the students appeared to regard this positively and liked the idea of being in a class where all students were at the same level with “no one to hold you back.” However the notion of streaming young students is a controversial one. Interestingly, students in the focus group at John XXIII (where students were not streamed) commented that sometimes it could be frustrating when they felt that they were waiting for other students in their class to catch up. However the students also noted that they had had different levels of exposure to the various subjects in the different primary schools they had attended. One student commented:

“I think my hardest subjects are maths and science by far. I just feel I am being left behind and the other kids are really good. I also found it hard because the other kids have learnt different things in different schools.”
(John XXIII College)

Interestingly, teachers at some of the participating schools indicated that they could identify which primary schools the students had attended by what the students knew (or didn’t know) in the different subject areas. Teachers clearly needed to ensure that all students attained similar levels of skills before moving onto concepts that would be new for all class members. Consistency of curriculum across the primary schools is therefore an issue for the secondary schools. In recent times there has been considerable flexibility in the primary school curriculum. Secondary schools have therefore seen students enter with different skill sets and different levels of exposure to certain aspects of the curriculum.

Parents

Parents were asked to rate the extent to which their children were finding their subjects interesting and challenging and whether their child was coping with their subjects. They responded positively to both questions as the following results in Table 12 attest.

Table 12

Parent Perception of Student Interest in and Ability to Cope with School Subjects

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Subjects are interesting	25.1%	59.6%	12.5%	1.8%	2.0%
Child coping well	24.9%	55.7%	12.3%	5.1%	2.1%

Parents in each of the focus groups felt that their child was academically advantaged by being in a secondary school. They commented on the access to specialist facilities that would not have been available had they remained in primary school. There was also a strong perception that the standard of work expected of the students would be higher. One parent commented:

“[NAME] has been average at everything. He’s not particularly talented but to come here and he’s getting 90s on his end of term report. I’m thinking “What has happened?” The difference is he’s come to a high school environment and there’s been the pressure to step up. I hate to think what would have happened in Year 7 in primary school. He would have just doddled around for a year... He would have mentally just sat there and done nothing.” (CBC Fremantle)

In those schools with laptop programs, the parents were generally satisfied with this innovation but did comment on the weight of the children’s schoolbags to and from school. The parents did not raise the issue of the use of laptops as having been a major problem or a significant advantage so it may be assumed that, for the most part, they were happy with what had transpired in the schools to this point.

There were large differences in levels of concerns expressed in the parent focus groups about the difficulty of the work that the students were undertaking. Some felt that the jump between primary and secondary had been difficult. For some there was also a perception that their children were being taught at a year eight level. One parent commented:

“My big thing would probably be the curriculum. I have a year seven and a year eight and I can honestly tell you that there isn’t very much of a variation in the curriculum. So these kids in year seven are learning a lot of year eight matter and that’s quite factual. What happens next year? Are they going to learn year nine? At the end of the day they are probably going to be much better off than my year eight will be because they are being pushed.”

(Chisholm Catholic College)

Interestingly, in the discussions with the teachers, which will be outlined more fully below, it was indicated that, at the commencement of the year, particularly amongst secondary teachers, there was a little apprehension about where to “pitch” the content. However, in contrast, other parents felt that the children’s teachers (some of whom were from a primary school background) had a good understanding of how to teach year seven students but were not extending their children sufficiently. They particularly focused on the lack of development of IT skills. In other focus groups the parents were quite comfortable with the curriculum to which their children were being exposed. As might be expected the parents at Corpus Christi were a little unsure about how the International Baccalaureate (IB) program worked. However they did acknowledge that the information from the school had been very useful. It is important to acknowledge that this is the first year in which this program has been implemented at the school so it might be expected that general levels of knowledge about the IB may be a little more limited.

Teachers

Teachers were asked about their level of anxiety prior to commencing teaching year seven students and if, at the end of term one, they were still anxious. As would be expected with the range of primary and secondary teaching backgrounds among the teachers, there were varying levels of anxiety about teaching year sevens prior to the commencement of the year. These results are shown in Table 13. The primary trained teachers tended to teach in the “core” areas whilst across all of the schools the teachers in the year seven program in the elective areas were all secondary trained. There is no doubt that some secondary teachers had found the adjustment to teaching year sevens to be a challenging one.

The teachers, in the main, had been asked whether they wished to teach in the year seven program. This was an important aspect of the planning by the schools for the year seven cohort. Teachers at Corpus Christi were also preparing for the implementation of the IB program.

Table 13

Teacher Anxiety

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Anxious at start of year	2.3%	14.0%	17.4%	26.7%	39.5%
Still anxious	1.2%	4.7%	9.3%	29.1%	55.8%

Teachers in the focus groups, particularly those from a secondary background, reported that there was some degree of “fear of the unknown” in taking on year seven students.

One teacher commented:

“Do you speak to them as little kids or do you speak to them as you would year 8s, 9s, and 10s. You know the language that you use with them.” (John XXIII College)

Several participants in the focus groups mentioned the need for more professional development in both pedagogy and curriculum for teachers who were new to teaching year sevens. One survey respondent commented:

“I feel that teachers who had year sevens for the first time in classrooms should have been in-serviced more about how 11-12 year olds react, behave, learn etc. They are not that different to year eights but you can still see that they are less mature! Maybe get an experienced year seven primary school teacher out to talk to staff.” (Chisholm Catholic College)

Because they had known that year sevens would be entering their school it was very apparent that the teachers had become as prepared as possible. In some focus groups the participants reported that there had been reservations amongst their colleagues about teaching year seven students. This was mainly centred upon the lack of time to prepare programs and a level of uncertainty as to what year sevens would be like.

Teachers were asked to comment on how they had found developing teaching and learning programs for year sevens and whether this had adversely impacted on their workload. The results in Table 14 are perhaps reflective of the different primary and secondary backgrounds of the respondents.

Table 14

Teacher Perception of the Development of Teaching and Learning Programs

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Easy to develop	25.1%	59.6%	12.5%	1.8%	2.0%
Felt well prepared	23.5%	41.2%	14.1%	16.5%	4.7%
Consulted primary schools	8.2%	17.6%	23.5%	23.5%	27.1%
Workload increased	9.3%	33.7%	22.1%	25.6%	9.3%

The above indicates that little consultation with primary school teachers occurred in developing the teaching and learning programs. For some schools with a large number of feeder primary schools this is an issue although one year seven coordinator indicated that cluster meetings could be better used to discuss curriculum issues. Similarly, another year seven coordinator indicated that contact

with the major feeder primary school (not co-located on the same site) is going to be a priority for 2010. It is again noteworthy that in a number of schools, the year seven students were being taught by primary trained teachers for whom developing teaching and learning programs for year sevens was not perceived to be a significant issue. One such teacher commented:

“There wasn’t a problem. We just had to get on board with what the various departments were doing with regards to assessment and fit that into our programs.” (CBC Fremantle)

Teachers in the focus groups generally expressed satisfaction with how the teaching programs had been progressing. Ongoing modifications were being made as the year unfolded. The flexibility to make these modifications was appreciated by the teachers. It is also indicative of the high level of formal and informal collaboration in which the teachers were engaged and also their level of commitment to their students. Teachers at Newman College, John XXIII College and CBC Fremantle had fewer issues with program development because the teachers were largely from a primary teaching background. The teachers did acknowledge that they did link in with the particular learning areas in which they were teaching within the secondary school. Many attended learning area meetings despite being located in a separate office. The teachers had developed a clear understanding of what was required in the subjects from the Head of Learning Area and developed their programs from there. Interestingly the primary trained teachers were not consulted to a significant degree by their secondary colleagues for advice about teaching year sevens. Such consultation happened only occasionally and on a very informal basis.

In the remaining schools, with a mix of primary and/or secondary teachers there had been more difficulty in establishing the teaching and learning programs. One teacher commented:

“I was concerned about basic literacy skills and even how to really teach spelling or anything like that because you don’t really have any time to do any of that kind of stuff in the senior school. I was worried about having a big range of students, which there are, in a class and of the really weak ones and how I would assist them.” (Corpus Christi College)

At Iona Presentation College, in one learning area, the decision had been made to use a particular year eight text and to cover different chapters during years seven and eight. However the teachers found that the students really struggled and that literacy levels were lower than they had expected. Comprehension skills, in particular, were lacking. Teachers acknowledged that they had adopted a range of strategies to accommodate the students but that pedagogy for year seven students needed to be addressed.

“They are still in that concrete stage. They need to develop abstract thought. We are going straight to the abstract thoughts rather than showing them how to do it. Kids still need the hands on.” (Chisholm Catholic College)

Related to this comment a focus group participant relayed her experience:

“My feeling with my [NAME] class is that they haven’t been asked to think much and hadn’t been asked to create things themselves. They may have had worksheets and so on. We asked them to do a poster exercise and it became bigger than Ben Hur – making a poster for heaven’s sake – we thought how easy could it be? They just could not face it...I think it’s telling on their initiative too. They are so used to being given something and they do it and they finish it and that’s it, instead of being given something and saying how are you going to do this?” (Iona Presentation College)

Such comments reinforce the notion that some consideration should be given to the opportunity for secondary teachers in the year seven program to attend some form of professional development around the teaching and learning needs of year seven students. Utilising the expertise of primary school teachers to deliver such professional development is recommended in those schools in which they have been employed.

When asked whether they felt that appropriate strategies were in place to accommodate issues with literacy and numeracy, 65.1% responded in the positive. Only 7% disagreed with this statement. The schools used a variety of strategies to support literacy and numeracy. In some schools a learning support teacher took groups of students with literacy problems in a separate class. Alternatively, in other schools, specialist support teachers might also come into the general classroom to assist the students.

The teachers also found that the students required a lot of reassurance and praise and some commented that they had found the year sevens to be a little less mature than they expected. They were not simply a “younger version of year eights.” A focus on the need to teach basic skills such as note taking, research, essay writing and study skills was mentioned by both the teachers and echoes the comments made by some of the parents.

The lack of age-appropriate resources for year sevens was also noted by some teachers and parents. One parent commented that her child was using her older child’s year eight text and some of the worksheets were marked “year eight”. Whilst this was an issue, particularly in the first year of having a year seven cohort, some schools had invested to a greater extent than others in the purchase of resources and the reorganisation of the library to accommodate an additional and different cohort.

However, at the time of conducting the research there was wide acknowledgement that the provision of appropriate resources was an important consideration.

Despite the “teething” problems outlined many of the teachers were enjoying the experience of working with this cohort as is evidenced by the results in Table 15.

Table 15

Teacher Experience with the Year Seven Students

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Teaching Yr 7s has been very challenging	0.0%	17.4%	24.2%	39.5%	18.6%

Focus group respondents were generally very enthusiastic about their experiences with the students. One teacher commented:

“I have loved the attitude and enthusiasm of the year sevens. I feel supported by the year seven pastoral care team...and I think the sevens have really stepped up to the challenges of high school.” (Iona Presentation College)

Homework

This issue was raised as an issue to varying degrees by focus group participants across the schools. Students were asked whether they were finding it difficult to cope with the amount of homework they were receiving whilst parents were asked if they were satisfied with the amount of homework being given to their child. These results are in Table 16.

Table 16

Student and Parent Perception About Levels of Homework

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Students finding it hard to cope	11.1%	17.7%	36.5%	24.6%	10.1%
Parents satisfied with level	24.9%	55.7%	12.3%	5.1%	2.1%

The students in some schools identified homework as one of their major issues early in the academic year. There was a strong perception that teachers did not coordinate the amount of homework that was being assigned. The following comment typifies the sentiments of the students in this regard:

“...more different classes, more different teachers and you get homework from every teacher. At primary school you just have the one teacher so they know at the end of the day they give you a certain percent [of homework] for each subject.” (Chisholm Catholic College)

The students also commented that they found it difficult to manage revision, homework and assignments. One student commented:

“Sometimes we have like heaps of tests in three days. One time we had five tests in two or three days. We had to study for our tests and do our homework and sometimes we have assignments as well.” (Iona Presentation College)

Whilst parents were generally satisfied with the level of homework, at the time of completing the survey, some parent respondents indicated that in the first term the level of homework had impacted upon their family life. At a number of schools initial amounts of homework were found to be excessive.

“The complexity of the homework in Term 1 was too advanced for my son’s learning level. There seemed to be a huge jump in what was expected from year 6 to year 7 which he has found stressful.” (CBC Fremantle)

Some parents had felt compelled to provide considerable assistance to their children in teaching study skills and assignment presentation. Several parents commented that providing the students with exemplars of assignments/presentations would have been useful and given their children an idea as to what was expected.

“Due to the level of homework expected in year seven more input from teachers to parents as to the way their child is completing it [would be useful]. I have not had any feedback on what my child has done, if it is correct or not. It is difficult to monitor if you have a child that says all is okay only to find they may be struggling when we sign test results.” (Chisholm Catholic College)

Another commented:

“Explaining to children that teachers no longer chase them for work i.e. handing in completed homework. My son was used to being reminded to hand in his work, so when this was not happening, he was not handing in his work. As a result of this his report indicated that he was not completing homework, however this was actually not the case. I had to bring this up at a parent/teacher interview.” (Newman College)

Other parents commented that whilst their child was complaining of the level of homework, the poor organisation and time management skills of their child also exacerbated the problem.

The issue of homework tended to be raised with the year coordinator or at a parent meeting early in the year. The parents acknowledged that they had been afforded an avenue to raise this issue with the school and acknowledged the expeditious reaction by the school to reducing the level of homework assigned. Some parents commented that they now felt that their children were not receiving sufficient homework. At schools where there was a perception that the children were not receiving sufficient homework some parents commented that they were concerned that their child would not be able to cope in year eight if they received a higher level of homework. It is apparent that clear expectations about the level and complexity of homework would be appreciated by the parents.

The teachers also raised the issue of homework and some (particularly teachers from a primary school background) commented that they had initially assigned more homework than they ordinarily would have because of a compulsion to fit into the learning area expectations. The teachers also pointed out that poor organisation and time management on behalf of the students had led to the perception that there had been inordinate amounts of homework assigned. Both of these factors would be considered in future years when considering homework expectations for year seven students.

School Organisation

Each of the schools has a slightly different form of organisation for the year seven program ranging from a very traditional secondary school approach to one typifying a strong middle school philosophy. A number of teachers, both in responses to the questionnaires and in the focus groups, chose to comment on their model in their school. Some felt that the students should have been permitted more time to settle into secondary school, whilst others felt that the year seven students needed to be treated as secondary students from the outset.

“In isolating the year sevens from the rest of the college, the administration limited the students’ ability to interact with the older students and therefore their access to significant role models among their more experienced peers. This also extended to tutor groups where they were not given the opportunity to mingle with other students of high school age. As a result, it has taken longer than would otherwise have been the case for the year seven students to develop positive organisational and social skills.” (John XXIII College)

Very different views were expressed with respect to the model adopted by the school. This may also be, to some extent, reflective of the different philosophies of education inherent in any large staff. Differences in approaches to education were also

apparent between the primary and secondary trained teachers. Many teachers from a secondary background felt that the organisation of the year seven program should reflect the typical specialist learning area approach in years 8-12. Teachers from a primary background took a much more holistic view and were more focussed on nurturing the students and mirroring the approaches they had used in primary school. At Chisholm Catholic College, for example, there were very different views expressed about the merits of year seven students sitting exams.

The following typifies the views expressed by teachers from a primary background:

“One thing that concerns me is that a lot of the high school teachers still expect them to be high school kids. They are not really aware that they are still really young and really immature and they need a lot more scaffolding. Things like reporting and parent nights need to be different. They [parents] need a bit more time and a bit more feedback from the teachers to the parents. They [teachers] expect it to be here’s your report and see you later. Year seven parents still want a bit more. They still want to see you and talk to you and have that interaction with you. Although they have moved back to the drop off and leave they still want a bit more from you as a teacher. Some of the senior school needs to be a bit more aware of that. They are getting there. The administration particularly still looks at things from a very high school perspective. Year sevens are different.” (Corpus Christi College)

These divergent approaches were reflected time and again, particularly in the focus groups comprising teachers from both backgrounds. However, it was also clear that the primary trained teachers had enjoyed the move to a secondary environment. Establishing relationships with their new colleagues was acknowledged as being of a high priority for them.

As has been alluded to in the discussion about teaching and learning programs, the teachers in the schools indicated that they met both formally and informally with the learning area teams in the subjects for which they had responsibility. The lack of opportunity to collaborate with the learning area teams and/or the year seven teaching team was mentioned as being problematic. However, there was considerable informal collaboration both between the teachers of year seven and with the teachers in the other learning areas. This led to productive dialogue occurring about the teaching and learning programs and hence continual modifications were being made.

The tension between the learning area team environment, typical to secondary schools, and the year seven teachers being located as a separate team was raised by the teachers. In some schools the “core” teachers of year seven operated as an autonomous team located in a separate office, whilst in other schools the teachers of year seven were part of the learning area team. Teachers working in the year seven

team environment expressed difficulties in linking in to the specific learning area/s for which they had responsibility. By not being located in a learning area office, there were fewer opportunities to engage in incidental dialogue about the teaching programs or develop a clear sense of the teaching programs in that subject for other year groups. However they appreciated the ability to consistently collaborate on the development of the year seven program and to discuss the progress of the students. The teachers at Newman College for example (from a primary background) commented on the benefits of being able to share in the pastoral care of the students. In a primary school environment one teacher had the responsibility of managing and socialising the students in their class. In the reverse, teachers located in a team environment had access to both formal and informal learning area discussions but expressed a desire to collaborate more with other teachers of year seven.

Similarly, there were problems for the heads of learning areas. This issue was summarised by a focus group participant:

“I think even within our LAC [Learning Area Coordinator]– leadership group – their comments when we have had LAC meetings have been that they are still not quite comfortable with the situation (year sevens in secondary school). Some of the issues with it are still not quite resolved for them – teaching and organisation...it is difficult for the learning area coordinators, the LACs to know where their role starts and finishes and where the year seven coordinator’s starts and finishes. That seems to be, I’ve spoken to other Deputy Principals, and it seems to have been something which is typical.”
(John XXIII College)

This comment also highlights the issue that has emerged with respect to the tension surrounding responsibility for curriculum leadership that had arisen between the role of the year seven coordinator and the heads of learning areas. Year seven coordinators had varying degrees of responsibility for curriculum leadership but all had a strong role in pastoral care. However, in each of the schools, the stakeholder groups acknowledged the enormous efforts of the year seven coordinators.

The above discussion clearly highlights that significant learning by school personnel had occurred during this first year with a year seven cohort. For example one teacher commented:

“We were fortunate to have a smaller number of students entering year seven this year. This allows us as a year seven team of teachers to work closely and overcome issues quickly as they arise.” (Newman College)

Such flexibility and responsiveness was apparent in each of the schools. The overall learning that has taken place in the school this year may well lead to modifications being made by the schools to the year seven program for 2010.

CONCLUSION

The move of year seven students to the Catholic secondary schools involved in this research has been, for the most part, very positive. In conducting the research, what has emerged was an appreciation that many of the issues encountered by students and parents in the participating schools, new to a secondary environment, were issues which year eight students and their parents traditionally faced. The issues discussed in this report are not peculiarly related to year sevens, rather they relate to the transition of a cohort of students from a primary to a secondary school environment. The focus upon this transition has been amplified for year seven students perhaps because of their younger age and the unique nature of this innovation in secondary schooling in Western Australia. Hence it is important to stress that year seven students are different to year eights and this needs to be taken into account in school planning. The year seven coordinators, teachers and administrative staff in the participating schools had clearly placed considerable time and effort in planning and managing the transition of the year seven students into their schools. The apparent success of this move is, in no small part, due to the ongoing efforts of the school staff.

The following concluding comments are now presented.

Conclusion: Schools were continuing to monitor both the transition processes and teaching and learning programs and were making adjustments where necessary.

It is also important to acknowledge that the schools involved in this research were themselves transitioning from a traditional Year 8-12 to a Year 7-12 mode of operation. In the K-12 school a level of re-organisation was also being undertaken. Hence this research maps the experience of the schools during this first year. It was apparent that considerable learning had taken place and modifications to the initial processes instituted by the school were being made for the next group of year seven students. Continual refinement to both the teaching and learning programs and transition programs was apparent and changes were being planned and implemented.

Conclusion: The year seven students, in the main, have adjusted well to their new secondary school environment.

The research clearly indicated that the year seven students, after the initial difficulties experienced in term one, had adapted well to their new secondary school environment. They had made new friends, were coming to terms with the organisational aspects of secondary school life and were responding well to their curriculum. They had become more self-reliant and liked "being treated as an

adult.” Most of all the research strongly indicates that the students were feeling safe at their new school.

Conclusion: Parents were generally comfortable with the move of their child to secondary school.

Parents clearly indicated that they had felt well informed about the school both prior to and during term one. Parents frequently expressed the view that they felt that the schools were responsive to their concerns. They believed that their child was coping well with their academic programs and, importantly, felt that their child was safe at school. Parents did note there were some “gaps” in communication. They were also keen to meet their child’s teachers and ascertain how their child was settling into their new school.

Conclusion: Teachers agreed that the year seven students seemed ready for secondary school but further professional development opportunities for secondary trained teachers, in particular, would be appreciated by staff.

Whilst there were issues for some of the teachers in the year seven programs, particularly for those from a secondary school background, teachers were largely enjoying their work with this new cohort of students. Many of the teachers, from both a primary and secondary background, commented on the readiness of the students for secondary school. They acknowledged the time and difficulties that had been associated with developing new teaching and learning programs.

Conclusion: Teachers working in a year seven team environment require formal opportunities to collaborate with staff in the learning area for which they have responsibility.

Newly appointed primary school staff also acknowledged that they had taken a little time to adjust to working in a new secondary school environment. The connections that the primary staff have now established with the particular learning areas for which they have responsibility will only strengthen over coming years. In some schools there will be opportunities for the primary trained teachers to teach in other lower school programs.

Conclusion: When developing the “educational model” for including year sevens in a secondary setting careful consideration needs to be given to clearly defining the curriculum leadership responsibilities for the year seven coordinator and heads of learning areas.

For teachers in some of the participating schools, issues have emerged regarding the organisational model whereby a separate year seven teaching team is operating alongside a traditional secondary school model of year 8-12 model of learning area

teams. This has created some difficulties both for the teachers and heads of learning areas with respect to communication. Likewise it is also necessary for issues to be resolved surrounding the demarcation of responsibilities for curriculum leadership between the year coordinator and head of learning area in schools where this has been problematic. It is anticipated that such issues would be discussed at an administrative level.

Conclusion: The lack of consistency across schools in the year six curriculum proved to be problematic for the teaching and learning programs, particularly in the “core” subjects.

The research has also highlighted the lack of consistency in the primary school curriculum. This has been an issue for secondary school teachers for several years. It was evident that meetings between the secondary schools and their main feeder primary schools could be used to more effectively discuss curriculum issues. Traditionally there has also been little contact between primary and secondary teachers. Exploration of opportunities to allow such collaboration and better define the year six curriculum would clearly assist teachers of year seven. Teachers in the focus groups also suggested that year six teachers could assist in developing the organisational skills of the year six students to better assist their transition to secondary school.

Conclusion: The valid concerns raised by WACSSO in their 2009 paper relating to the perception that secondary schools communicate less effectively with parents and students provide and reduced levels of pastoral support have proven unfounded in the schools involved in this research.

It was evident that parents felt very happy with the overall level of communication that they had received both prior to their child commencing at secondary school and during first term. Similarly students reported that they felt safe at secondary school and spoke frequently of their positive relationships with their teachers and the year seven coordinator. The social and emotional well-being of the students was central to the transition processes employed by the participating schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of this research the following recommendations are made for the next group of CEO schools as they take on year seven students. Similarly if, at some point in the future, the government school system, through the Department of Education, relocates year seven students to secondary schools, these recommendations may serve to inform the process.

1. That transition programs for students should focus upon the pastoral, social and organisational aspects of secondary school life.

Students reported that their main concerns about coming to secondary school centred upon making new friends and fitting in. The main issues confronting them during term one at secondary school related to organisation and finding their way around the school campus. Transition programs developed by school staff should acknowledge these factors.

2. That parents need to be informed prior to their child commencing and during term one about both the organisational aspects of the school and the arrangements for extracurricular activities in which their children will be engaged.

Parents clearly want to be involved in and informed about their child's new school. Many, particularly first time secondary parents, felt that the school in some instances assumed that they had knowledge about school arrangements. In each of the schools involved in the research parents did note that there were gaps surrounding their level of knowledge about extracurricular activities. Given that many of the children were involved in interschool sport from early in term one, the lack of information about such arrangements was problematic.

3. That schools give strong consideration to the provision of a designated "year seven area".

The sense of safety reported by the students may, in part, be due to the fact that in many of the schools the students had a separate building or area that was designated for year seven students. As the year progressed and confidence and familiarity with their new environment grew many students progressively moved further afield.

4. That professional development in both curriculum and pedagogy be provided for secondary teachers teaching in the year seven program.

Teachers widely reported that year seven students were different to year eights. Access to professional development in pedagogy and curriculum development for

these younger students is recommended. This may be coordinated centrally through the Catholic Education Office.

5. That formal opportunities are provided for teachers in a year seven team environment to attend learning area meetings.

If the organisation of the school is such that a year seven teaching team is created it is important that this team not be seen as a discrete and separate facet of a secondary school environment. Teachers need the opportunity to link closely with the particular learning area for which they have responsibility. Formal opportunities to attend learning area meetings and access by the teachers to the heads of learning area are important.

6. That schools consider provision of an opportunity mid-way during term one for parents to meet their child's teachers and discuss the transition of their child to secondary school.

Parents are keen to establish contact with their child's teachers. They have been used to ready access to their child's teachers in a primary school environment. To this end an opportunity early in term one for parents to meet their child's teachers and ascertain how they have settled into secondary school is considered important.

7. That opportunities to formally establish links between primary and secondary schools are explored.

Within a K-12 education system there is, for the most part, little dialogue between primary and secondary teachers about curriculum. In recent times the flexibility inherent in curriculum development has led to children commencing secondary schools with different skill sets and different levels of exposure to different subject areas. Opportunities to strengthen the links between primary and secondary schools to permit detailed discussion about curriculum are required to overcome this issue. Furthermore, the need for the final year of primary school to mirror aspects of secondary school such as allocating regular homework, organising lessons according to a timetable and a focus on developing organisational skills in the students will assist the transition of students to secondary school.

8. That schools recognise the crucial role of the year seven coordinator and give judicious consideration to the selection of the appropriate person.

In each of the participating schools the year coordinator was central to the successful transition of the year seven students. Students and parents identified very strongly with the year coordinator. The coordinators were widely considered to be approachable, responsive and an advocate for the year sevens. Most importantly, there was a strong feeling that the coordinator had utmost concern for the welfare of the year sevens and knew the students well. The sense of safety reported by the

students may well be attributed, in part, to the strong relationship the students had with their coordinator.

9. That consideration be given to conducting a longitudinal research project which tracks the academic progress of this group of year seven students to year nine.

This research focused on the social and emotional well-being of the students as they navigated the move from primary to secondary school. There is still a dearth of evidence comparing the benchmark data in the NAPLAN tests of year seven students in primary school settings to those in secondary schools. Tracking this group of year seven students through to year nine, when they next undertake the NAPLAN tests would provide some indication as to whether their current secondary school environment has been able to deliver improved outcomes.

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