



*Australian Capital Territory*  
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

# Teaching and Learning in the Middle Years in the ACT

A study to support schools to meet the learning needs of  
adolescent students

2005

**A STUDY OF  
MIDDLE SCHOOLING PRACTICES  
IN  
ACT GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS  
HIGH SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

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## Foreword

It is my pleasure to introduce *Teaching and Learning in the Middle Years in the ACT*. The study provides a basis for discussion around the issues of good teaching and learning, and in particular the specific needs of adolescent students in ACT Government schools. It supports the *School Excellence Initiative*, the overarching framework for excellence in ACT Government schools that has as its focus high expectations for student achievement and learning.

Since 1999 the ACT government has made student learning in high schools a priority through initiatives such as the *New Generation of High Schools (NGHS)* and *High Schools of the New Millennium (HSNM)*.

In 2003 the government launched the *High School Development Program* as a key strategy to improve teaching and learning in ACT Government high schools. There are some exceptional programs and practices in our high schools aimed at increasing the engagement and achievement of students. It is our goal to have all students engaged and achieving well, in order to maximise their potential.

Providing high quality schooling is a priority for the ACT Government. The *Curriculum Renewal* process currently being undertaken will ensure that the ACT curriculum is strongly focused on improving student outcomes. *Teaching and Learning in the Middle Years in the ACT* will connect strongly with this work. It challenges schools and the department to look closely at teaching and learning programs in the middle years in primary schools and high schools to ensure that they are both engaging and challenging for our students.

I would invite whole school communities to discuss the ideas put forward, particularly about innovation and current practice. Education must remain relevant if we are to guide and support the learning of our young people into the future.

Dr Michele Bruniges  
Chief Executive  
Department of Education and Training





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## Part 1: Rationale and purpose of the study

It is recognised that young people between the ages of 11 and 15 undergo significant physical, emotional and physiological changes as they move towards adulthood. If students in this age group form a specific group of people then it must be acknowledged that these people have needs which are specific to them, and possibly these needs are not being met in all current school environments.

Primarily as a result of this acknowledgement, the ACT Department of Education and Training undertook a study of middle schooling to inform education programs for early adolescents in ACT Government schools. *Teaching and Learning in the Middle Years in the ACT* is a study that will support schools (and the department) to meet the particular needs of adolescent learners.

The study comprises three elements:

1. a literature review

The literature review defines and contextualises middle schooling, providing an historical perspective and outlining the evidence for success in middle schooling programs and practices, both internationally and on the Australian scene.

In undertaking the literature review it became clear that the concept of middle schooling had changed somewhat during the 1990s. Over the course of this decade and into the early twenty-first century, educationists and educational systems and institutions recognised that it was not always feasible to build middle schools. Neither was it always possible to implement middle schooling across the middle years of an existing school organisation and to set about attempting to meet the needs of adolescents, as identified in the literature.

The literature review subsequently provided the basis for identification of desirable middle schooling practices, that is practices to be implemented as part of a deliberate school strategy to meet the needs of early adolescent students, and in particular as they made their transition from primary to secondary school.

2. a qualitative survey of middle schooling practices in ACT Government schools

A survey was undertaken in a sample of ACT Government schools aimed at identifying the range of middle schooling practices in schools. The survey was of a qualitative nature and included interviews with teachers, students and administrators from a variety of different schools.

The literature review and the survey results together informed the development of a *Framework for Teaching and Learning in the Middle Years*.



### 3. a Middle Years Framework

The framework is designed to assist schools and their communities in designing appropriate structures and practices to support good teaching and learning for students in the middle years of schooling.

The framework brings together key elements identified through research nationally and internationally, and acknowledges existing middle schooling practices in ACT Government schools.

Many aspects included in the framework are not exclusive to the middle years of schooling; they apply to all phases of schooling, P-12. However, national and international research supports the ACT qualitative survey data that highlights the need for closer attention to and greater emphasis on the particular needs of students in the middle years by teachers and schools.



## Conceptual Framework for School Excellence in the ACT

Student achievement and learning is at the centre of the conceptual framework for *School Excellence* in the ACT. This is the core business of schools and is enabled through collaborative planning, use of data and assessment for learning, professional learning, the involvement of students in their own learning, organisational structures and processes, community involvement, effective leadership, and a focus on the student environment.

Figure 1

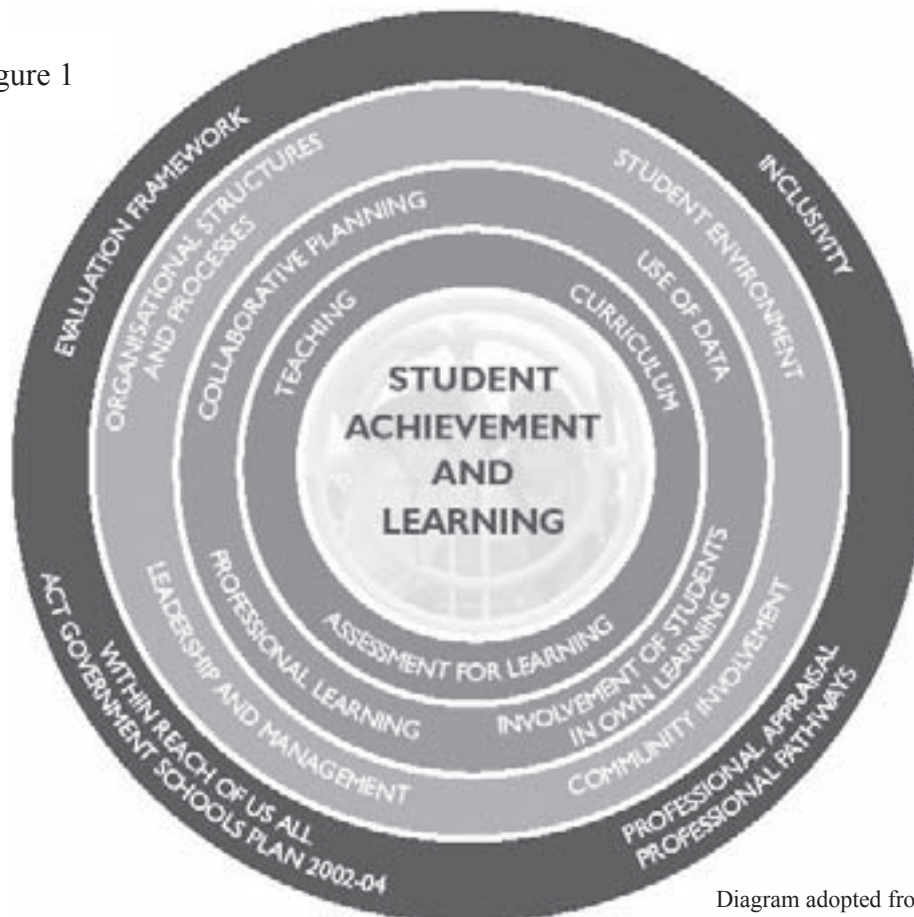


Diagram adopted from Hopkins, 2003

The complex interplay of these factors creates a different focus depending on the characteristics and needs of the specific student cohort at any educational site. For students in the middle years for example, it is imperative that they are involved in decision-making about their own learning and environment.



## Part 2: The middle years of schooling

### 2.1 Characteristics of a good learning and teaching environment

Research into the middle years of schooling began in earnest in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was prompted by recognition that many students in schools were being socially alienated and were disengaging from schooling. Research identified that this was largely a result of the teaching and learning practices which had dominated in schools for generations. The alienation and disengagement was exacerbated by societal changes such as “the escalating diversity of cultural, social and economic background of the students in our classrooms and the increasing impact of new communications technologies” (Carrington, 2004). These changes are now increasing at a greater rate ten years on.

Alienation was greatest for students in their early years of adolescence and consequently resulted in a plethora of research into teaching and learning in the middle years. The research acknowledged that teaching and learning *for all phases of schooling* needed to change; that the world is changing rapidly for societies and that traditional methods of teaching and learning may not be effective for many students. Research into students in the middle years revealed that because of the nature and characteristics of adolescents it was this group of students that appeared to be most affected by out-dated practices in schools.

Research into the middle years of schooling coincided with research in the 1990s on brain-based learning. Both areas identified how people learn in formal education settings (Bransford et al 2000). This research supported the need for traditional teaching and learning programs in schools to change for all children regardless of their age or phase of development. As a result, the *Framework for teaching and learning in the middle years* included in this study provides:

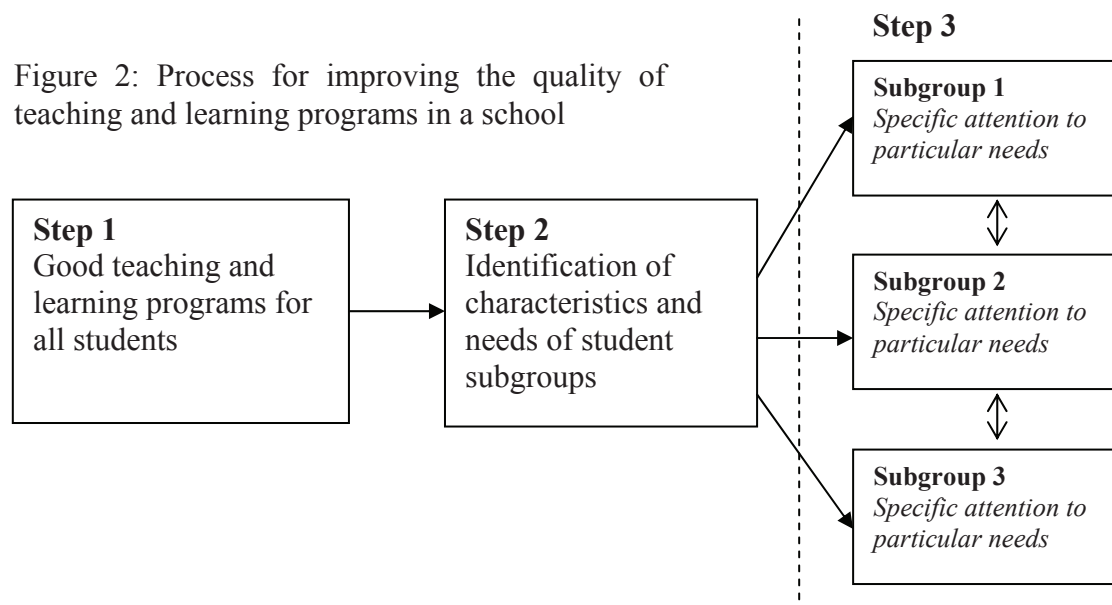
1. general identifying factors that influence good teaching and learning programs to ensure they are effective for all students, relevant, meaningful, and address changing social circumstances and pay attention to what research has revealed concerning how children and young people learn
2. a list of characteristics of early adolescent learners
3. particular aspects that schools need to address in the development of appropriate teaching and learning programs for early adolescents.



Current national and international research reveals that what makes the difference for particular subgroups of the student population, (for example boys, Indigenous students, adolescents, students in the early years) is good teaching and learning programs (Hattie, 2001, Martin, 2002, Rowe, 2004). The research identifies the characteristics of a good teaching and learning program. These can be considered under the following headings.

1. **Pedagogy**
2. **Curriculum**
3. **School Leadership**
4. **Organisation and structure**
5. **Professional practice**
6. **Community and family connections**
7. **Student support**
8. **Standards, assessment and accountability**

Schools should ensure that good teaching and learning programs are in place for all students, before focusing on the specific needs of student sub-groups. Schools might use the following process to improve the quality of teaching and learning programs for sub-groups:



## 2.2 Characteristics and needs of adolescents

It is recognised that young people between the ages of 11 and 15 undergo significant physical, emotional and psychological changes as they move towards adulthood.

Cormack describes adolescence as:

...a significant stage of life in its own right. Rather than being a way station between childhood and adulthood, adolescence has its own characteristic elements and challenges. Adolescence is a construct defined by social, biological and other factors. This view that adolescence is in part socially defined implies a significant role for school in shaping adolescence (Cormack, 1991, p.5)

Other writers, including Evers (1992), Hargreaves et al (1996) and Sagor (2002), identify specific characteristics of this stage of life. Although the following characteristics may be culturally, gendered, class and racially biased (see Cormack, 1991, p.163), they would suggest that adolescence, as a specific stage of life, is characterised by:

1. a youth culture, where
  - a low premium is placed on textual analysis
  - a high premium is placed on other forms of immediate communication (TV, video, computer, films, magazines, music, text messaging, creating and broadcasting online zines, websites and videoclips)
  - energy and movement are exalted
2. specific fashion and idiom of expression (eg. 'rap', 'tagging') are developed
3. the influence of the peer group
4. young people needing to have their own space
5. a need for a caring, challenging and purposeful environment with well-understood limits
6. a need for rewarding but non-dependent relationships (requiring extended productive time with teachers)
7. a need to be discreetly affirmed and supported by adults
8. the ability to think in ways which become progressively more abstract and reflective
9. an increasing awareness of the social and political world and acquisition of skills in being resilient and participating in these different worlds
10. a need to establish and maintain relationships with significant adults, who can provide advice and act as role models



11. the progressive development of a sense of identity through opportunities to explore capabilities
12. the progressive development of a sense of personal and social values which become part of that person's life
13. a need to experience social acceptance, and gain affection and support among peers of the same and opposite sex
14. the shaping influence of achieving success in significant events
15. gaining experience in decision-making, and in accepting responsibility for these decisions
16. growth towards independence while still needing security (a 'guide on the side') in many personal relationships and structures (such as school)
17. a need to feel competent
18. a need to feel useful
19. a need to feel potent
20. a need to feel optimistic.

### ***Pre-adolescence***

When considering adolescents' characteristics it is important to remember the pre-adolescent phase of development which describes the transition from later childhood to early adolescence. Adolescents then move beyond their often egocentric world and begin to see themselves as members of larger communities. As a result they become interested in other environments, places, people, issues and times beyond their more immediate world.

Pre-adolescent children are beginning to question what adults and teachers might tell them and to formulate their own opinions. They begin to understand and formulate other points of view, think in more abstract terms and undertake activities that require longer periods of sustained concentration.



### 2.3 Paying attention to the specific needs of adolescent learners

Schools and teachers need to be aware that many of the students in the middle years may not yet be adolescents but may be pre-adolescent for many of these years. Hence, there are dangers in stereotyping *all* students in the middle years.

Adolescent perceptions of the disparity between school as a static unchanging place and the world as a dynamic environment, can manifest in feelings that contribute to alienation and disengagement.

Mau (1992) identified four sociological dimensions of alienation which have relevance to the context of schooling:

1. powerlessness (feelings of lack of control)
2. social estrangement (feelings of social and/or physical isolation)
3. meaninglessness (irrelevance and not connected with current experience), and
4. normlessness (lack of direction and resultant rejection of social norms and rules).

An understanding of the characteristics of adolescence, combined with knowledge and empathy of the feelings that may result from increased cultural, societal and economic awareness, can be useful as a guide to inform planning. There are two major implications for schools. Schools for students in the middle years need to create:

- a. **a culture of learning** that focuses initially on engagement through relevance and meaning but does not fall short of rigour and standards. It should be learner centred and co-constructed involving students in equal partnership with teachers in deciding what is relevant and meaningful. This will empower students to make choices about their own learning, including the nature of the learning environment.
- b. **a culture of relationship** that recognises that for learning to occur, student wellbeing in the middle years is contingent on meaningful and mentoring relationships where students feel cared for but not smothered. These relationships should focus on students being treated as adults, having a say in what they are being asked to do and feeling empowered as part of the decision-making process. The relationships must feel equal; students in the middle years need to believe that their opinions matter and that their teachers listen to, trust and respect them.

*And ‘that little bit extra’...*

Schools, teachers and parents/carers need to provide that little bit extra to create a nurturing and supportive environment that meets the needs of students in the middle years. That little bit extra is about compassion and empathy. It springs from a genuine understanding of the world that adolescents are experiencing. It can result in a real



and purposeful connection being made with adolescents through meaningful partnerships between parents and schools.

## 2.4 The transition from primary school to secondary school

For many students the transition from a primary school to a high school setting means a total physical and emotional relocation; representing a cost for a large proportion of students. However, for other students, the experience is highly exciting and rewarding. These students often look forward to making the change and see the move to a high school setting as a significant ‘rite of passage’.

Ferguson (1998) and Churchill (2000) have identified several factors associated with this relocation which they believe have an impact on students in transition. These include:

- loss of a role model or key adult with whom to identify
- loss of trust and diminished responsibility in the move from the most senior to the most junior in the school
- decline in attitude and levels of motivation and interest in school and schoolwork
- loss of sense of belonging and status through changes in established peer relationships
- the environmental changes from the closeted “childish/feminine” environment to an independent “adult/masculine” environment. (Churchill 2000, p.4)

The transition from primary school to high school often involves a number of significant changes for these students. Many students are required to move from:

- a small school to a large school
- an integrated classroom style to a school organised in curriculum areas
- a setting in which they are the oldest students to one in which they are the youngest
- a setting where they have a close relationship with one teacher to one in which they have many teachers but no close relationship with any one of those
- having much responsibility and often a leadership role to having no responsibility or leadership role
- being attached to one classroom to moving between rooms and having to take responsibility for being in the right place at the right time
- interacting with a small group of peers to interacting with a large number of peers



- a teaching and learning environment which required them to have few organisational skills to one demanding a plethora of these (eg. coordinating the number of assessment tasks demanded by many more teachers)
- a cohesive classroom environment where one subject frequently flows naturally into another and where time to complete activities is provided, to one which is unnaturally fragmented and time for sustained learning may not be available
- particular pedagogical approaches and assessment styles to significantly different ones.

Although these are the issues that many students are initially confronted with *at the point of* transition between schools, they are physically, emotionally and socially going through a transition that lasts for many years.

Whilst many students find these changes demanding, others thrive on the challenges that the changes create. National research indicates there is a marked middle years slump in student outcomes, including literacy and numeracy, and engagement (see for example, Lingard et al, 2001). Data collected in the ACT about students' literacy and numeracy results at years seven and nine demonstrates that, for many students, there are no major implications for their learning in these areas of the curriculum (ACT Department of Education and Training, *Every Chance to Learn*, 2004). However, literacy and numeracy achievement levels are only partial indicators of student learning outcomes.

Schools do need to be cognisant of the potential impact of the transitional factors listed above. Many schools make significant attempts to deal with the issues through specific transition programs and practices. For example:

- arrangements for primary students to visit their new schools in the year prior to relocation
- social occasions organised for students from each side of the transition to get together
- high school teachers being seen around the feeder primary school grounds
- students new into secondary school being buddied with older students
- transition coordinator being appointed to the secondary school staff
- orientation days where students from the primary school spend days and/or half days with their next year's peers and teachers
- high school/primary school teacher exchanges
- high school/primary school students working together to facilitate school assemblies
- development of consistent student management strategies within a high school and neighbouring primary schools
- curriculum planning across primary and high schools in a cluster.



Schools using these strategies frequently report success in supporting their students to make the transition from one school setting to another. This support however, is often very one-dimensional, focusing on student support in a pastoral care sense. What is often overlooked is the need to support the transition in a *curriculum* sense that addresses what and how students have been learning.

Lingard & Mills (2002) note that supportive environments are essential but not sufficient in themselves to deliver improved outcomes for students across the middle years transition.

In order to make the transition a smooth one for students, schools and teachers from either side of the transition need to work closely with each other. This will ensure that the transition minimises duplication/repetition of content and ensures challenge is retained for *all* students whilst not making assumptions about what might have been taught and/or learned before.

It is important to value and build upon what students bring with them to the learning environment. This includes their frequently highly developed skills with technologies that are too often not utilised by the traditional classroom practices they often encounter in secondary school.

There is also a need to minimise changes in the pedagogical approaches used by teachers on either side of the transition, and across and within the secondary years, including the strategies used for assessment.

Research has also shown that a contributing factor to student disengagement and alienation is the inability of students to access what is presented in some classrooms. This may be for a variety of reasons but principally because:

- the work is too difficult
- students are being asked to cover work already done
- work is irrelevant to students and/or does not connect with their world.

Schools need to be aware that because the whole of the middle years is a transition period, it is insufficient to *only* address these factors at the transition point. Transition issues continue for adolescents well beyond years six and seven and usually carry into the college years and beyond.

Therefore 'long term' transition programs should be considered for students in high schools. Programs that focus on students exploring possible future pathways that bridge the high school/college transition will not only assist students to develop a stronger sense of who they are, (including their capabilities and goals), but will also indirectly support them through the entire transitional phase of adolescence.

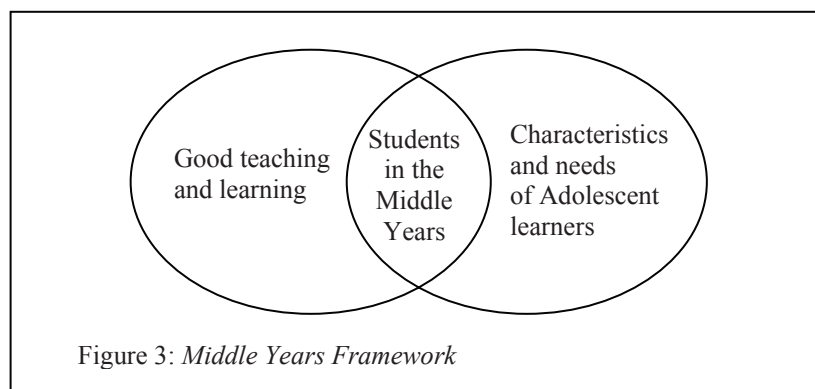


## Part 3: The middle years framework

### 3.1. The origin of the framework

The framework is designed to assist schools and their communities in designing appropriate structures and practices to support good teaching and learning for students in the middle years of schooling. Included in the framework are indicators of good teaching and learning, which apply to all phases of schooling, K-12. It is essential that schools focus on having these in place in the first instance, since attempts to focus on the needs of students in the middle years without first addressing the issue of providing the quality teaching and learning programs needed by all students, are likely to be less potent.

The aspects of a good teaching and learning program listed in part 2 can be used as framework organisers for all schools and for all phases of learning. The third column in the framework (see pp 16-23), which specifically addresses the needs of adolescents, has been developed with the specific characteristics of adolescent learners in mind, as outlined in Part 1. Diagrammatically:



The framework brings together key elements identified through research in Australia and internationally, and acknowledges existing middle schooling practices currently occurring in ACT Government schools.

It should be noted that the aspects used as organisers in the framework are inter-dependent. They are comprehensive of the elements identified through the research, but not exhaustive.

Many of the phrases and words used in the framework have been taken directly from the research, and from what students said during the qualitative survey, since listening to the 'student voice' is an important part of teaching and learning in the middle years. The intention of the framework is to promote discussion between and within school communities around issues that might need to be addressed.



### 3.2. Using the framework in a school setting

It is not intended that the indicators are used as a ‘checklist’. Were a school to address all of the indicators there are no guarantees that the outcomes of their students would be maximised. The research indicates however, that these are indicators of good practice for students in the middle years. If they are not in place, then there is likely to be a direct ‘cause and effect’ relationship between their inclusion/ omission and positive/negative student outcomes. For example, if teachers of middle years students do not actively demonstrate interest in the personal lives of their students or if they do not involve their students in decisions about the teaching, learning and assessment program, then *it is likely* that student outcomes will not be maximised and that students will be alienated from those teaching and learning programs.

In this context, it is intended that the framework is to be used to facilitate discussion and planning at the school level. It is advisable that an holistic approach is taken and that schools decide on their goals, in consultation with their communities. and carefully plan the strategies they might implement in order to get there; including the monitoring processes they might use to gauge progress and effectiveness. The following example of this process may be helpful:

1. **Determine and agree to the desired long-term goal:**  
for example, improving student outcomes and reducing disengagement evidenced through behavioural problems and truancy
2. **Choose aspects on which to focus in the short term:**  
for example, pedagogy and assessment (initially focusing on teachers using a repertoire of pedagogical practices and then subsequently involving students in negotiating what and how they might be taught)
3. **Identify strategy/s that will be used:**  
for example, professional development for teachers, mentoring or good practice, teachers sharing their strategies, teachers videoing their lessons and ‘unpacking’ their practices, teachers sharing different assessment strategies and approaches used, teachers including students in making decisions about how they will be assessed
4. **Identify indicators of success:**  
for example, anecdotal evidence of the level of engagement of students in classrooms, reduced truancy, improved student outcomes (deeper understandings) demonstrated through student work samples.

This process may take time to both put in place and show positive effects. It is important that the changes are not rushed, and that teachers commit to them and feel supported by their school leaders in doing so. For many teachers this will involve risk-taking with unfamiliar practice in ‘uncharted waters’. Encouragement and patience is essential as many teachers may feel threatened by publicly examining their own professional practice. Research has clearly indicated that changing pedagogical practice is probably the most difficult thing to change in education. (Fullan & Miles, 1992, Wallace et al, 1995, Brady & Kennedy, 2003)



In order for teachers to be committed to changing their practice, and not merely compliant, which is likely if change is viewed as being ‘top down’, teachers must be involved in both the decision-making and discussion about *why changes are needed*. If they are not able to recognise the need for change, then they are unlikely to make necessary and effective changes in their classrooms.

Managing change in educational settings is highly complex and demands commitment and perseverance. Brady & Kennedy (2003) have identified six characteristics of change:

- Change is highly complex and involves the interaction of many factors/people
- Change involves ongoing clarification to overcome uncertainty and ambiguity
- Change, even when implemented system-wide, is usually small-scale rather than widespread
- Change involves the culture of institutions and not just discrete innovations
- Change is gradual and should be thought of developmentally
- Change inevitably involves conflict and, therefore, effective personnel management.

For some schools, the degree of change demanded by aspects of the framework may initially appear to be unattainable. It is important to identify existing good practice and build on that. And it is essential that schools make realistic short-term goals when moving towards desirable long-term ones. If the timelines set are unrealistic, then the long term goals will be unachievable which may leave people frustrated and disillusioned.

Short-term goals must be negotiated with teachers. They must be involved in discussions about what they are able to achieve and how long it might take them to achieve it. This may be different for each teacher as personalities and personal attributes affect the capacities of teachers to make changes in different ways. Teachers can work together to support each other to achieve collectively identified goals; in a school there is enormous potency in group synergy. Teachers working together can achieve collective goals at a greater rate than if they work independently on individual goals.



### 3.3. A framework for learning and teaching in the middle years

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators <u>essential</u> for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
Pedagogy	Teaching and learning practices promote and lead to both engagement and learning	<p><b>Pedagogical approaches focus on</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student involvement in their own learning; empowering students through opportunities to negotiate and co-construct the teaching and learning program</li> <li>• student-centred approaches</li> <li>• an emphasis on teaching students <i>how</i> to learn</li> <li>• an emphasis on teaching that builds on prior learning ie connecting with students ‘where they are at’.</li> <li>• a repertoire of pedagogical approaches that engage students and promote learning</li> <li>• an emphasis on pedagogies that enable students to recognise their capabilities and talents through taking risks and building resilience</li> <li>• being inclusive and incorporates gender construction</li> <li>• an emphasis on pedagogies that encourage and enable students to think critically, make choices and evaluate and refine results</li> <li>• opportunities for peer and cooperative learning and cross-age tutoring</li> <li>• teacher as co-learner</li> <li>• real-life contexts and problem solving approaches</li> <li>• higher order thinking across subjects</li> <li>• the use of ICT in classrooms wherever possible to enhance learning and deepen understanding</li> <li>• instructional strategies being clearly related to teaching goals and high standards</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pedagogical approaches focus on</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teachers expecting high performance and excellence from each student and ensuring that students know this is expected of them</li> <li>• teaching being learner centred emphasising self direction, and co-constructed</li> <li>• students being involved in and supported in knowing how to make decisions about their own learning</li> <li>• students being empowered through opportunities to negotiate the things that will be learned</li> <li>• students having a say about the content (or topic) with which they engage and the skills they require to access that content</li> <li>• students not being ‘talked at’ but being made to feel like partners in the teaching and learning process</li> <li>• teachers seeking and genuinely valuing students’ points of view</li> <li>• teachers providing immediate feedback to students about their progress at the classroom level</li> <li>• pedagogical strategies including dynamic involvement and interaction with students as active, not passive, learners</li> </ul>

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators essential for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
Curriculum	Curriculum promotes and leads to both engagement and learning	<p><b>Curriculum will</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focus on enhancing student learning</li> <li>• include challenging situations embedded in a coherent scope and sequence</li> <li>• focus on essential outcomes and a variety of sufficient other content to provide an ‘all round’ education</li> <li>• include integrated approaches where interdisciplinary connections naturally occur</li> <li>• include cross-curriculum perspectives whenever possible</li> <li>• include issues of student concern and social justice</li> <li>• include opportunities to interpret, analyse and respond to a range of texts</li> <li>• include vocational and academic learning so that every child succeeds</li> <li>• include an emphasis on learning how to learn as a necessary lifelong skill</li> <li>• consider connection across the transition from primary to secondary</li> <li>• be aligned to high standards with an emphasis on deep understanding balanced with development of essential skills.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Curriculum will</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reduce breadth: focus on core knowledge and ‘big ideas’</li> <li>• provide for sustained personal endeavour, in-depth learning and pursuit of excellence</li> <li>• provide students with the opportunity to make their own connections between subjects and topics</li> <li>• include issues of social justice that support students to develop ethical and moral practices</li> <li>• be aligned with application of learning to real world problems</li> <li>• provide students with the opportunity to experience the world of work</li> <li>• provide students with the opportunity to develop their own life pathways</li> <li>• provide students with access to learning about critical and information literacies (including multiliteracies)</li> <li>• explicitly include thinking skills</li> <li>• be socially significant and relevant to the personal interests and needs of young adolescents</li> <li>• build upon previous learning.</li> </ul>

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators essential for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
<p><b>School leaders</b></p>	<p>School leaders enable and support the provision of a learning environment that is engaging and supports student learning</p>	<p><b>School leaders should</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have a clear vision for their school</li> <li>• have a strong focus on curriculum and pedagogy</li> <li>• focus school planning on the basis of student needs</li> <li>• empower teachers, students, parents and the community</li> <li>• encourage and support teachers to take risks and be innovative</li> <li>• be creative and flexible in providing time for teachers to share and develop</li> <li>• provide access to current and innovative resourcing in IT and other technologies for all staff and students</li> <li>• provide a positive and enjoyable school environment that is both physically and psychologically safe</li> <li>• share a vision of what a high performance school is and does and ensure this drives school development and improvement</li> <li>• encourage teachers and students to show leadership responsibility and accountability</li> <li>• ensure that the school holds itself accountable for student learning and success</li> <li>• ensure teacher professional development is intensive, high quality and ongoing</li> <li>• value the expertise of teachers and have a realistic view about the scope of this expertise.</li> </ul>	<p><b>School leaders should</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make decisions about how the school will be structured and staffed based on the needs for strong relationships between teachers and students</li> <li>• focus on academic excellence of all students</li> <li>• ensure school decision-making includes the student voice (qualitative and quantitative)</li> <li>• be keenly aware of teacher expertise and, if possible, not make demands of teachers to teach disciplines in which they do not have expertise.</li> </ul>

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators essential for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
<p><b>Organisation and structure</b></p>	<p>Organisational arrangements and school structures support and enhance engagement and learning</p>	<p><b>Organisational arrangements and school structures should</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• enable smaller class sizes and higher ratio of teachers to students</li> <li>• allow flexible timetabling</li> <li>• support and promote teacher collaboration</li> <li>• include small communities such as teams, to promote strong relationships</li> <li>• support a range of pedagogical approaches and allow flexible student groupings</li> <li>• support an integrated curriculum approach</li> <li>• enable staff collaboration and planning</li> <li>• ensure school policies enable equitable access and opportunity for all students.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Organisational arrangements and school structures should</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explicitly provide opportunities for professional relationship building between teachers and students</li> <li>• explicitly direct resources to allow staff reflection time and time to talk collaboratively about their programs and about students</li> <li>• ensure students have their own space for learning and leisure</li> <li>• ensure school timetables enable extended periods of time to cater for different learning rates</li> <li>• ensure student movement between classes is minimised</li> <li>• be adaptive to curriculum and pedagogy to provide real choice, time and flexibility for students</li> <li>• enable and promote discussion between primary and secondary teachers from the same cluster concerning what has been taught previously and how it has been taught and assessed.</li> </ul>

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators essential for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
<p><b>Teacher professional practice</b></p>	<p>Teachers create a learning environment that is engaging and supports student learning</p>	<p><b>Teachers should endeavour to</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stimulate a desire in their students, to learn</li> <li>• provide students with opportunities to learn</li> <li>• have high learning expectations of each student</li> <li>• support each student to develop to their full potential</li> <li>• be innovative in their approach to pedagogy and curriculum</li> <li>• use pedagogies that are motivating, engaging and challenging,</li> <li>• use a range of pedagogies that respect and accommodate differences between students</li> <li>• use a range of assessment practices that respect and accommodate differences between students</li> <li>• build strong relationships with all of their students</li> <li>• model learning behaviour</li> <li>• recognise and maximise opportunities to use ICT wherever appropriate, particularly ICT that are subject specific</li> <li>• have a personal commitment to their on-going professional learning and development</li> <li>• have an understanding of and apply, literacy and numeracy across the curriculum</li> <li>• be able to recognise opportunities to integrate the curriculum and to maximise these opportunities for their specialist discipline areas</li> <li>• focus professional practice on excellence in all school endeavours</li> <li>• ensure their own professional development is intensive, high quality and ongoing.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Teachers should</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• build strong relationships with all of their students</li> <li>• maximise opportunities to use ICT's and learning technologies wherever appropriate</li> <li>• explicitly teach literacy and numeracy through a modelled, guided and independent approach that is not patronising or 'babyish' for students</li> <li>• treat each student as an individual and not as part of an homogenous group</li> <li>• have high expectations of each and every student and ensure each student knows their teacher has this expectation of them</li> <li>• have deep and recent content knowledge</li> <li>• use a range of motivating, engaging and challenging pedagogies</li> <li>• explicitly build relationships of trust and respect with their students.</li> </ul>

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators essential for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
<p><b>Community and parental connections</b></p>	<p>Community and parental connections and partnerships promote student engagement and learning</p>	<p><b>Community and parental connections should include</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a vocational dimension</li> <li>• strong parent partnerships</li> <li>• high levels of involvement by community members including volunteers</li> <li>• community participation and involvement in school decision-making</li> <li>• links to external agencies and support organisations</li> <li>• on-site workers from other agencies where possible, eg. pastoral/youth worker, police officer, careers counsellor</li> <li>• structures that accommodate community links and build alliances with families and carers</li> <li>• all stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, community) in ongoing reflective conversation, consensus building &amp; decision making</li> <li>• regular reporting (formal and informal) of student achievement and progress to parents and carers.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Community and parental connections should include</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the creation of meaningful partnerships between teachers and carers so that they can work together to nurture and support individual students through the complex changes they are facing</li> <li>• on going building of on and off-site partnerships with pastoral/youth workers, police officers, careers counsellors etc from other agencies</li> <li>• the design and delivery of pre-service teacher training that supports middle schooling approaches and pedagogy</li> <li>• the use of industry, community and parents in maximising learning relevance and real-life connection in learning programs for individual students.</li> </ul>

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators essential for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
<p><b>Student support</b></p>	<p>Students feel safe, supported and valued</p>	<p><b>Students should have access to</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a school environment free from bullying and other forms of harassment and abuse, where they feel safe</li> <li>• a strong, connected school community</li> <li>• a classroom environment that is ‘fair’</li> <li>• strong working relationships with teachers based on fairness, respect and equity</li> <li>• an appropriate and challenging curriculum that is engaging, meaningful and relevant</li> <li>• teaching that is inclusive, where prior learning is recognised and valued</li> <li>• teachers who value students, treat them with respect, and are interested in their lives.</li> </ul>	<p><b>The school should ensure that</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student support is focused on every individual student’s development as a whole person</li> <li>• students, in partnership with teachers and school leaders, are involved in developing clear, well-defined boundaries and rules</li> <li>• the school is a safe, caring environment where students feel ‘cared for’ but not smothered and where there is mutual respect</li> <li>• students have strong relationships with teachers based on two-way trust and respect</li> <li>• teachers acknowledge the different academic starting points of students and provide learning experiences that build on these</li> <li>• teachers discover and acknowledge different starting points (home background) and provide appropriate support</li> <li>• teachers know and value their students, listen to them, and are genuinely interested in their lives, demonstrating that interest in meaningful ways.</li> </ul>
<p>Students feel safe and supported as they move from one environment to another</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teachers engage in rigorous conversations with colleagues (including from the previous primary school) concerning student outcomes, materials and topics previously studied, and pedagogical and assessment strategies used</li> <li>• students have access to seamless social transitions that ensure continuity of care</li> <li>• continuity with other phases of schooling is established and maintained</li> <li>• each student has a significant role model or key adult with whom to identify</li> <li>• students are given opportunities to develop more responsibility and trust so that they don’t feel the loss of these things from their previous school</li> <li>• that transition programs provide a ‘bridge’ from primary to secondary schooling by building and continuing a strong sense of community and belonging.</li> </ul>

ASPECT	OUTCOME	Indicators of good teaching and learning programs	Indicators essential for students in the middle years (assumes those of good teaching and learning)
<p><b>Standards, assessment and accountability</b></p>	<p>Assessment of student learning guarantees appropriate standards</p>	<p><b>Assessment will</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be used for diagnostic purposes and to inform school and teacher planning</li> <li>• be continuous and include formal and informal methods</li> <li>• be inclusive, comprehensive and ensure a variety of assessment strategies are used</li> <li>• be valid, educative, explicit, and fair</li> <li>• promote learning programs based on academic rigour and excellence</li> <li>• be authentic and address agreed compulsory studies</li> <li>• provide clear information about student learning and develop effective partnerships with parents and the community</li> <li>• be supported by a coordinated teacher moderation process focussing on student work samples</li> <li>• provide evidence of student learning and continuous improvement</li> <li>• provide every student with the opportunity to demonstrate learning to a high standard.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assessment will focus on</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students being given an opportunity to negotiate a choice and have a voice ('having a say') about how they demonstrate their learning</li> <li>• clear and explicit expectations</li> <li>• every student receiving immediate feedback wherever possible</li> <li>• the use of rich and engaging tasks that enable every student to have some success through appropriate scaffolding</li> <li>• students learning to self assess their own work against agreed performance standards</li> <li>• sufficient time being provided to meet rigorous standards.</li> </ul>

## **Part 4: Middle schooling practices in ACT Government schools**

### **4.1 Issues and areas of focus**

The literature review presented in Part 5 provides a comprehensive examination of middle schooling practices in other countries and Australian states, how they have evolved and to some extent, their effectiveness.

A survey was also undertaken of middle schooling practices in ACT Government schools. The purpose was two-fold:

1. to ascertain the extent to which middle schooling practices identified through the literature, were currently being used and delivered
2. to inform the development of the middle years framework to assist schools in their planning to better meet the needs of students in the middle years.

It is recognised that many of the schools have not instituted the practices as part of ‘middle schooling’ but rather they have been developed in response to schools implementing strategies aimed at meeting the specific needs of their student cohort.

Information was gathered from two sources:

1. a qualitative survey
2. a quantitative transition survey designed to ascertain the support mechanisms and processes in place in ACT Government high schools to ensure a smooth transition from primary school to high school.

The qualitative survey was delivered through interviews with individuals and groups of students, school administrators and teachers from a small number of primary and high schools in the ACT Government school sector.

The quantitative survey involved the development of two written forms; one for students and another parallel form for parents. The survey forms were completed seven weeks into term one by two thirds of all students who commenced high school in 2004.



## 4.2 Methodology and procedure of the qualitative survey

The qualitative survey was conducted by members of the High School Development Team in the Department of Education and Training. A number of in-depth interviews were conducted with school administrators, students and teachers of students from the middle years of schooling, that is from years five to eight.

The series of interviews consisted of open discussions with participants relating to their work, decision making at school level, and the provision of middle schooling practices that support students at the school. The interviews were based on key focus questions developed from the six essential elements of middle schooling identified by the literature review:

- Building relationships
- Innovation and rigour in the curriculum
- Explicit and systematic teaching of literacy and numeracy
- Developing skills for lifelong learning
- Authentic assessment of learning
- Supporting transition to high school

The qualitative data collected provided an opportunity to:

- Understand the perspective of key participant groups
- Elicit both positive and negative feedback and opinion
- Discuss any issues in context
- Prompt participants regarding unraised issues and concepts.

The main purpose of the interviews was to identify the issues that exist with respect to the needs of students in the middle years. Consequently, the sampling needed to cover different types of schooling situations. In qualitative research, the generally accepted way of knowing when sampling is sufficient is when no further issues are raised. It is not necessary to have a randomly selected representative sample, especially in terms of numbers representing each group or type of school, as this would be done through the quantitative data collection.

Qualitative information was collected from school principals, teachers, and students within selected schools. And it was made clear to participants that their responses would be reported in terms of their representative group.

Participants were interviewed using open-ended focus questions. Principals and teachers were interviewed individually. Students however, were interviewed in pairs or small groups to elicit more accurate and honest responses, since students would feel more at ease in this context.

Six schools were selected using the following criteria:

- Socio-economic diversity



- Geographical location
- Size of school population
- Educational structure/organisation
- Phase of schooling (primary/secondary)

The sample comprised:

- A large, primary school, south Canberra
- A K-10 multi-campus school, south Canberra
- A large, ‘traditional’ high school, north Canberra
- A small 7-10 high school, north Canberra
- A purpose-built K-10 school incorporating a middle school, north Canberra.

The interviews were carried out over a two-week period. Interviews were recorded electronically and hand-written notes were also taken. All responses were collected anonymously.

Participants were encouraged to speak openly and honestly and were invited to comment on how their school approached each of the six focus areas. They were also asked to describe their understanding of the term ‘middle schooling’. Student questions were modified to eliminate teacher professional language and rephrased using a more colloquial style of language.

Thirty-eight people were interviewed over a period of two weeks. Of these, six were principals, eight were teachers, and 24 were students. Teachers teaching years five to eight were selected at random by their principals. Students were selected on the same basis. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes.

### **4.3 Results of the qualitative survey**

The results of the interviews indicated all schools in the sample were engaged to varying degrees in middle schooling practice. Teachers’ and principals’ understanding of middle years practices varied greatly from school to school and within each school. However, all teachers and principals made recurrent reference to addressing the needs of students.

All schools recognised the importance of student relationships. Building strong relationships with students were widely valued and a number of schools were using mentoring/buddy programs to support their students. All students identified relationships with teachers and other students as critical to success at school. This was particularly evident when students made their transition from primary to high school. The majority of schools reported they had transition programs in place to support students as they completed their primary education and progressed to high school. These were often activated in term four of year 6 and consisted of high school visits



and primary visits from the high school staff and students. The latter often involved the principal and/or year advisor.

Each high school had a pastoral program in place to support students as they arrived at high school. One high school had a very strong pastoral program that was supported through school structures, timetable and curriculum organisation. The pastoral program was embedded in their sport, band and extension programs.

All staff interviewed valued innovation and rigour in the curriculum. There was a range of approaches described. A large number of teachers and principals emphasised the importance of collaborative planning and development of teaching programs as ways of ensuring innovation and rigour in the curriculum. Teachers identified the need to accommodate the range of learning needs of students in their classes and described the various pedagogies they used to sustain student engagement in learning.

Students indicated repetition of learning across and between years was problematic but considered learning that provided opportunities to discuss and have their opinions valued made school more interesting. They disliked copying notes from the board and textbooks and lessons that did not have a clear purpose and relevance to their lives were considered boring. There was a uniform dislike of textbooks. And many students identified testing as a recurrent feature of secondary assessment.

There was a consensus that the development of lifelong learning habits was a goal for students in the middle years. The majority of principals and teachers identified information literacy skills and more broadly, literacy and numeracy skills as significant dimensions of lifelong learning. Teachers used a variety of approaches to achieve this and to varying degrees of success. Students identified the development of time management skills as a key element of lifelong learning.

Approaches to literacy and numeracy development were diverse, ranging from highly structured and explicitly taught methods for all students through to a random approach determined by individual teacher expertise and student needs. Students saw the value of literacy development in their learning and valued mathematics teaching that allowed for different ways of solving problems. With the exception of targeted students in one school, there was no evidence of high schools working collaboratively with other schools in their priority enrolment area on building continuity of learning in the middle years.

All schools valued the opportunity to contribute to the study and recognised the need to further enhance their practices in middle schooling.



## 4.4 Transition survey and results

### The transition survey

Early in 2004, the Department of Education and Training undertook a survey of students who had recently entered their first year at high school. Most of these students were in year 7, since the majority of high schools in the ACT Government system cater for students from years 7 – 10. A small number of students from one K-10 school were entering year 6.

The survey was administered during weeks seven and eight of term one. Two thirds of all students in year 7 (and some in year 6) in ACT Government high schools (total = 1206 students) completed one form of the survey. A parallel form was administered to their parents (total = 690). One limitation of the timing of the survey was that some of the questions required students and their parents to *reflect*, at the time of completing the survey, on how they felt about aspects of the transition three or four months previously.

The sample was administered to only two thirds of the population of students beginning high school due to the fact that the other one third had recently completed a survey relating to school development. It was decided that two thirds of the student population would be sufficient to provide an accurate picture of school transition processes. The data would also be more reliable from this group of students; the other one third may be at risk of suffering ‘survey fatigue’ if they were asked to complete two major surveys in close succession.

The purpose of the survey was to provide information that would enable a comprehensive examination by the individual schools, clusters of schools (in particular high schools and their feeder primary schools) and the Government school system, of the transition process, in order to answer the questions about the support mechanism and processes that ACT Government high schools had in place to ensure a smooth transition from primary school to high school.

Questions (see Appendix 8.3.1 and 8.3.2) focused primarily on the ‘mechanics’ of transition and were written around areas such as the physical environment, availability of student support services and student feelings of comfort, acceptance and safety. The student survey included questions relating to the nature of what they were being taught in the high school setting.

### Survey results

The majority of parents agreed that the opportunities for student visits to the high school their child would attend, and information provided by the high school to the parents and students, (both through information sessions and written formats), were helpful in reducing anxiety for their children.

In contrast, the proportion of students who felt the same was significantly less. This may have been in part a result of the limitation stated earlier – that the students were, at the time of completing the survey, now ‘immersed’ in a new context that they may have been previously struggling with. In 2003, when the ‘one-off’ opportunities and



information were presented, the students may have presented as less anxious to their parents. One strategy that did appear overwhelmingly effective for the students was having the first day of the year at high school for year 7 students only.

Questions relating to the student support services offered to students making the transition included the value of 'buddying' strategies by older students, tutor groups and homerooms, and the provision of a range of activities such as camps to make students feel welcome. The majority of parents and students agreed these strategies and processes were helpful.

Parents were satisfied with this service while students felt less able to access this level of support. Between 10% and 20% of students did not know who to go to, to talk about friendships or issues of personal safety.

Issues relating to the academic transition focused on questions about workload, assessment, and homework. While 86% of the parents said their students were coping with the workload at school, only 69% of the students said they were coping. This may reflect the responses given with respect to the amount of homework; whereas 60% of students said that their homework takes up more time than expected, only 31% of the parents had this view. It would appear that both the parents and students had different expectations and/or perceptions about these issues.

Approximately 90% of students, at the time of the survey administration, had adjusted to having more than one teacher. Almost the same number of parents agreed with this.

Between 60% and 70% of the students indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe and supported at school. Many parents also indicated that their children were in a safe and supportive environment at school.

The quality of the teaching and learning programs offered at the school was surveyed through a number of questions aimed at the students only. Most of the questions were written to determine the amount of overlap of the content being presented in the high school setting. Results ranged from about 30% of students believing that high school English and mathematics were too much like the English and mathematics studied in primary school, to 6% saying the same about high school science.

Overall, 84% of the students surveyed believed that they were satisfied with how they managed the transition from primary school to high school, while 78% of parents said that the transition from primary school to high school was a reassuring process for their child. Additional questions aimed at parents indicated that 73% were happy with the level of transition support received by the primary school, compared with 88% happy with the support offered by the high school concerned.

In general it would appear that both the primary schools and high schools are offering some supportive structures and processes (including middle schooling practices) to address the transition issues of students moving from a primary school setting to a high school setting. There are some issues that need to be further addressed and improved. Clearly, even one student feeling unsafe, or not knowing who to go to, to discuss bullying, or needing support with his/her organisational strategies, is of concern. Similarly, issues regarding repetition of content in some subject areas are alarming, since the research around these issues, as indicated in Parts 1 and 2 of this



document, would place these students 'at risk' of lack of engagement, boredom and subsequent alienation.

#### 4.5 Case Study: Gold Creek School

The 11 - 14 age is the time when children undergo physical change. They are hormonal, and they start testing the rules. While they 'stretch the envelope', they are also yearning for security. These young people want to feel safe and be happy at school. Often their social lives take a high priority. In many cases, it is also the time when they move to greater independence at home.

The middle school program is designed to broaden the educational horizons of students at this age. It aims to provide an engaging and relevant learning program with only a few teachers who they come to know well. The program also seeks to provide enjoyable learning experiences and relationships at a time when many young adolescents are alienated from school and learning.

Gold Creek School opened in 1998. Since that time a purposefully designed middle school program has been operating, albeit within a new building that was designed for traditional high schooling where the students would move from lesson to lesson. The school's middle school program was designed taking into account the needs of learners of this age, to build an atmosphere where the students enjoy learning, and to create a climate of strong pastoral care.

The school has received hundreds of visitors; local, interstate and international, to examine the middle school since it opened. Frequently asked questions from the visitors include (with a response):

##### **How did you know where to start with a middle school?**

Once the staff had been appointed, a number of meetings were scheduled before the school opened. There was much discussion about what the curriculum and the timetable would and could look like. The staff literally had a *tabula rasa* and that was both exciting and frightening. New staff was urged to read documents such as Jim Cummins' excellent document '*From Alienation to Engagement*' (ACSA) to consider the characteristics of the students and the research conducted about their learning. Another useful and entertaining resource and starting point, (particularly useful for explaining the teaching and learning rationale of middle schooling), was found in James Beane's video in the '*Middle School Kit*'.

##### **What was the priority when Gold Creek School started?**

The important issue for the staff was an overriding concern that the students would want to come and be at school. Those teachers who are recruited to the Gold Creek middle school program know that they are going to be spending 70% - 100% of their teaching time with their own class in their own classroom. They also are aware that



they will be members of a year-level team, not a faculty. The original staff came up with this structure. This was the opportunity for the foundation staff to implement some brave new ideas in school structures, yet they were accountable to the students themselves, the parents and to the department. At one stage, vertical year 6, seven and eight groupings were considered. Ultimately it was felt that this could cause too much anxiety in a community that would already be coming to terms with a radical departure from traditional high schooling structures.

The middle school wasn't to be a high school, nor a primary school. It was something in between. It was a deliberate attempt to meet the recognised needs of students of this age. Traditionally, year 6 students have been required to make a significant adjustment after the Christmas holidays from being conditioned to having one main teacher then moving to anything up to eight or nine teachers in some high schools, at the same time adapting to a foreign organisational structure.

The close relationship with a significant other adult(s) (other than parents/carers) was also considered a paramount factor for students wanting to be at school. In Gold Creek School's middle school program students come into contact with fewer teachers than in a 'traditional' high school. They know their teachers very well and the teachers know them very well. Knowing the students well positively assists teaching and student management. Contact with specialist teachers is also extended with fewer teachers having more time with the students such as, for example, a year 7 woodwork teacher having a class for two hours per week for a semester.

### **What groundwork was done with the community before the middle school was implemented?**

Parents were prepared for a different type of school and were consulted about the wish to establish a middle school program. Four large public meetings were convened before the Department of Education and Training and the School Board approved the amalgamation of Nicholls Primary with the proposed Nicholls High School. It was necessary and desirable to involve the parents and to have their approval before implementing the Gold Creek middle school program so that they understood the rationale behind middle schooling and how such a program advantaged their child's learning. The main issue canvassed at these meetings was the characteristics and needs of adolescents (known and researched) and how Gold Creek School intended to structure the teaching and learning programs to cater for these needs.

The needs identified to parents were similar to those outlined earlier in this document:

- Children at this stage are adjusting to profound changes in their physical, social, emotional and intellectual being
- They are striving for independence and are learning about their place in the world. They are often boisterous, can be thoughtless, and test the rules (at school and at home!). Yet they still want security and safety
- They are becoming socially aware and have a strong sense of justice
- The social environment can clash with the school environment



- Adolescents gain experience in decision-making and in accepting responsibility for these decisions
- They achieve a positive self-confidence through achieving success – or lose self-esteem through not achieving success
- Adolescents think in ways that become progressively more abstract and reflective
- They need to experience social acceptance and gain affection and support from peers of the same and the opposite sex
- They establish and maintain relationships with particular significant adults, who can provide advice and act as role models
- They become more aware of the social and political world and gain skills in coping and interacting
- An adolescent is often still a child in a big body.

It is important to emphasise these characteristics with parents because these are the ingredients for bringing parents along in creating pedagogical change – the school and parents can relate to and identify with the ‘nature of the beast’. When these characteristics are discussed with a large group of parents of children aged 11 years and older it is interesting to watch the reaction. There is much head-nodding and agreement from parents who are noticing similar behaviours at home.

### **What are the main features of the Gold Creek middle school program?**

The middle school model developed by the staff has the following characteristics:

- Home-room teachers, for all classes in years six to eight, who spend a large amount of time with their class
- Teachers teach across a number of subject areas
- Students come into contact with fewer teachers - therefore students know teachers very well and teachers know students very well
- Teachers work in a team rather than in isolation
- Teams plan using an integrated curriculum, not separate faculty-based subjects
- Teams develop their own timetable using block timetabling to allow teachers time to teach across subjects and concentrate on the process of learning
- Teachers develop a child-centred, negotiated curriculum which will change from year to year
- Learning is expected to be enhanced and more engaging through I&CT
- Years six and seven are in a portable area – have their own playground space within the school; this facilitates team teaching



- Years 6 and 7 have their own set of toilets.

### **How did/do the students react to this type of program?**

Even though the school's middle school model had been carefully explained at four large parent meetings, initially some year 8 students and parents did not appreciate this model, where the students were placed in a homeroom grouping with one main teacher and one classroom. They considered that it 'didn't look right' because this did not conform to what they thought high school should look like, or the type of school that their friends were going to. To these people, early disappointments were that stereotypical high school features they were expecting, such as many teachers, moving around the school, many bells and studying discrete subjects were not there. This was primarily a concern of the school's first year 8 students who had experienced year 7 at a traditional high school elsewhere.

This did not remain an issue when this group moved into year nine, which resembled a traditional high school model, and after the first year of the school's life it did not reoccur as an issue. In one or two cases, the students of some parents in the school's early years were taken to other, more traditional high schools because our school wasn't 'complicated' enough. Again, this has not been an issue since the early days of the school's life. The middle school program has served to provide a smooth transition from the primary years to the senior high school years (years 9 and 10) where students gradually come into contact with more teachers.

Visitors almost always comment on the calm environment. For students and teachers in the middle school program, because they 'own' their own classroom, there is not the considerable time wasting of having to move to different classrooms frequently.

Many visitors, including local MLAs, have asked the students what they think of the middle school and they are invariably greeted with enthusiasm and expressions of satisfaction. The students comment that they like being able to work with their friends, that they can get to know their teacher well, and they can use the excellent facilities at the school earlier.

### **What sort of timetable do you have in the middle school?**

This is a frequently asked question, particularly from teachers with secondary experience.

There is no over-arching timetable driving the whole middle school and the simpler it is, the happier the classes and teachers are. The year-level teams are adept at devising their own timetables, which include the use of the specialist teachers attached to the team. It is the team's responsibility to develop their own timetable and, as the teams have experienced Gold Creek middle school teachers included in them, the teams generally are able to design their timetables very quickly.

The typical middle school teacher at Gold Creek School has their class for more than 70% of the time and is able to draw up a 'block timetable' with large blocks of time with their class, (eg from school commencement to recess time), which provides the opportunity of time to teach in an integrated way. The only pressures upon a home-



room teacher's timetable are presented when the class moves to a specialist teacher's area. This flexibility also allows teaching partners to schedule joint release times for planning.

### **What are the benefits of having 'home-rooms'?**

Because the students have a home-room in the Gold Creek middle school program, they have a sense of ownership and they have greater security compared to moving around the school to attend lessons. There is virtually no vandalism in the Gold Creek home-rooms. Students in the middle school program do not have to carry their bags around the school, nor worry about turning up to the right room. Another benefit is that home-rooms provide the opportunity for displaying student work around the classroom walls. This has been strongly encouraged so that students can have a sense of pride in their work and learn new ideas from their classmates in aspects such as assignment presentation. The students strongly identify with 'their' room and take pride in it.

The home-room also supports the school's emphasis on pastoral care which underpins the teaching and learning environment. There has been no need for lockers in years six to eight because the home-room teacher locks the home-room when the class moves to another area of the school. Having home-rooms adjacent to one another has also resulted in many teachers wanting to team teach or combine classes.

### **How are teachers recruited to the middle school?**

When the first staff was appointed to our school in 1998, there was a deliberate attempt to recruit both primary and secondary teachers. It was felt the primary teachers who wanted to work in a high school context would be able to provide a smooth transition from year 5 to year 6 and that the school also provided opportunities for secondary teachers who wanted to try something different. Primary and secondary teachers continue to be recruited into the middle school.

All teachers come to the middle school knowing it will be different and all probably find that working in the middle school environment is different from what they had imagined. However, since the school opened, only a handful of those who have worked in the middle school program has applied for voluntary transfer. It is usual to find that mobility teachers are reluctant to leave. After seven years of operation, more teachers have been promoted out of Gold Creek School than have sought to transfer to another school.

### **Why are year 6 students attending the Gold Creek middle school?**

The suitability of year 6 students being in a primary school context is now questionable. Many educators/teachers, especially those who teach year 6 classes, know that these students are in the wrong place by being in a primary school. Most year 6 teachers find managing year 6 students very challenging after the first term or two of their last year in a primary school. Year 6 children are yearning for a different learning environment, they now have very different interests, and many are clearly physically adolescent. These factors are different from when the traditional primary school model was designed over 100 years ago. For year 6 students, the Gold Creek



middle school program caters for the needs of not their *next* stage but their *present* stage, which is that of a young adolescent.

In the ACT high school context, students usually have the benefit of using a wide range of resources in excellent facilities, such as science laboratories, cooking rooms, technology areas and a large gymnasium. These features are most attractive to Year 6 students and if a typical year 6 student is asked what would be appealing about being in a high school right now, after mentioning the canteen, they will articulate the above features and how they look forward to being in that environment.

Having their child attend year 6 in a high school environment is sometimes disconcerting for parents. This was a major concern in the consultation stage before the school opened. Parents then expressed the view that they were worried about the possibility of their year 6 child being bullied by the older students and that they wanted to protect their child from the ‘horrors’ of high school for one more year by keeping them in a primary school setting for year 6.

When visitors ask the year 6 students if the older students bully them, they reply that, to the contrary, the older students look after them well.

### **What happens if you have a teacher who is asked to teach a subject for which they are not trained?**

As indicated above, the school recruits both primary and secondary trained teachers to teach in the middle school area. As well as home-room teachers, there are a number of specialist teachers attached to each year-level team.

At first there is apprehension from a teacher, who, for example, is a primary trained teacher and has not been trained to teach mathematics beyond year 6, or a secondary trained science teacher teaching maths / SOSE etc.

It is possible for that teacher to operate in a flexible way with another teacher by saying, “I’ll teach your SOSE if you take my maths.”

More commonly, teachers appointed to the middle school prefer to take the time and effort to acquaint themselves with the relevant content of the subject(s). An additional support is to approach another colleague who has had experience teaching in that field in another secondary school, a process which is facilitated by having the large common workroom where assistance is usually instant. The year-level teaming approach also serves to support new colleagues and teachers have the option of team-teaching. Staff mentoring and innovative ideas are regularly aired at weekly team meetings or in the middle school work-room.

Typically, primary trained teachers express reservations about how they will cope with these large people while secondary trained teachers worry about how they will cope with teaching in an area out of their expertise. At Gold Creek, the vast majority of teachers quickly come to enjoy the experience. They find considerable satisfaction in teaching ‘new’ subjects in an integrated way. Further, they comment that this type of teaching has been an enhancement to their own professional development and it has challenged teachers to move out of their comfort zone. Nonetheless, the middle



school program has continued to attract teachers who are dedicated and enthusiastic about working in this model and with children of this age.

### **How is the curriculum delivered if there is only one main teacher?**

From the outset the school adopted an integrated curriculum where the home-room teacher taught across subjects and linked them together as far as possible. Middle schooling literature talks extensively about the importance of relevance of learning to students of this age, and that segmented, fractured subject presentation where subjects are separate with different teachers, often prompts students to question ‘why do we have to learn this?’. An integrated curriculum attempts to draw the content matter across subjects together so that the students can appreciate the interconnectedness and the richness of what they are learning. Deeper understandings should be the result.

Becoming increasingly important to children of this age are issues such as sex, drugs, war, and their growing identity and where they fit in the world. This is happening at a time of increased social awareness and often self-consciousness. To increase their ownership of what they learn, the school encourages a negotiated curriculum where the teachers elicit what the children are keen to learn about and design the term unit outlines around these issues. Negotiated assessment practices, such as rubrics, are becoming more widespread. The students can contribute to the marking/assessment scales and can understand what they need to include in their assignments to achieve a good result. This more transparent assessment process appeals to the students’ sense of justice and ownership.

Another feature prevalent in the middle school classes is working in cooperative or small groups. This encourages students to learn to work with others in a team and enhances their interpersonal skills, important in preparation for the workplace.

In addition, each class has a specialist subject or two over the year. Attached to all year level teams is a number of specialist teachers. These can include specialist teachers in subjects such as music, technology, cooking, and science. The year level teams negotiate what specialist subjects they want to include for their children to the following year. Therefore the children experience a specialist subject every semester to complement their home-room work. This serves to support the home-room teachers as well as to gradually increase the number of teachers with whom the students come into contact.

The middle school is seen clearly as a three year structure which students move through and, as a result, certain steps are in place to guarantee coverage of all areas of the curriculum. For instance specialist areas per year level are set so that students are exposed to a more in-depth study of an area rather than a series of taster courses. Thus year 6 students have a semester each of music, drama and LOTE. Year 7 students have a semester of woodwork and LOTE (either French or Indonesian). Year 8 complete a semester of food technology and visual art. Students in years 7 and 8 also have specialist science and PE teachers.

Similarly there is a three-year program for integrated studies, to ensure coverage of a wide range of areas in an in-depth way. Each year level has three “set” focus questions to investigate (one term for each) with a fourth being teacher chosen/student negotiated. Teams select when and how each will be completed and resources have



been purchased to support these units. The benefits of this are many – it ensures coverage of all areas of the curriculum, stops duplication of units, adds a dimension of accountability to the curriculum, lets teachers know what has been covered previously and what is being covered next, and allows years 9 and 10 teachers to develop units to build upon existing knowledge. This practice also gives teachers a framework and basis to start planning their units of work.

### **How do the teachers communicate?**

Teachers recruited to Gold Creek School know that they are expected to be a member of a year-level team. At the beginning of the Gold Creek School's life, as there were no faculties, there was no need for staff faculty offices. It was negotiated with the department that some intended classroom walls were removed to create a large common workroom. Within this workroom, the teachers organised work areas in their year-level teams so that each team had its own area. Team meetings can be held instantly as all teachers work at desks adjacent to one another. The result is that teachers plan and assess together rather than operating in faculty groups working in isolation of one another. This has many benefits for planning and preparation where communication across the year level is facilitated. For example, there are commonly understood homework and assignment expectations which can easily be checked.

The original designated staff faculty offices were of classroom size and could be given over to be home-rooms.

### **What is the executive structure of the school?**

After the school had been operating for three years, it was decided to recruit a deputy principal whose main responsibility was to oversee the middle school program in its own right. The program was considered so important and beneficial that it merited such a position. It took into account that the needs and programs for this area were quite different from that of the school's primary site and its years 9 – 10 program. The middle school deputy principal is responsible for the curriculum in that area and the transition program with feeder primary schools as well as for transition of year 8 students entering year nine.

Each year level in the middle school has an executive teacher (School Leader C) attached to it. These officers are responsible for coordinating year-level team planning, student welfare, assessment and monitor the needs of their team. Another responsibility is to manage a subject area (such as The Arts or mathematics) and its budget across the whole senior site (years 6-10). Middle school teachers can nominate to be team-leaders who support the executive teacher and carry out other functions such as taking minutes at team meetings and writing the team's article for the school's weekly newsletter.

### **Has the Gold Creek middle school program been a success?**

The following are indicators of the impact of the Gold Creek middle school program:

- Truancy is extremely low in the middle school
- The middle school teachers have high loyalty towards the program



- Parents appreciate the in-depth knowledge teachers have of their child
- Suspension rates are very low
- The home-room teachers establish very strong relationships with their students. This allows for teacher understanding of student personalities and the advantage this creates for teaching them with this knowledge of their needs. The students, through their divulgements to their teacher, show high levels of trust in their teacher. This reinforces the notion that students of this age, with all that they are going through, are keen to have a relationship with another significant adult
- The Gold Creek model has heavily influenced the new Amaroo K-10 School design
- The use of traditional assessment processes makes it difficult to assess 'improved learning outcomes'. However, the staff and outside people brought in by the school for the *Year 9 Exhibitions* round-table assessment process have noticed evidence of outstanding student deep learning, and strong connections to real life (of content)
- There have been very few adjustments or changes to the original Gold Creek model of middle schooling devised by the staff in 1997-98, despite encouragement from the school's executive to explore different ways of teaching. One adjustment to be made in 2005 is to further facilitate the transition from middle school to the years 9 and 10 program.

