



Reflections on the Department for Education's Leading the Way: Year 7 to High School Pilot Project Report

November 2020



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Re: Reflections on the Department for Education's *Leading the Way: Year 7 to High School Pilot Project Report*

As per my independent obligation to advise and make recommendations to State authorities and other bodies I write to provide key stakeholders with my reflections on the *Leading the Way: Year 7 to High School Pilot Project Report*. This recently released report reflects on the trial of the transition of Year 7 to high school across three South Australian schools in 2019-2020, ahead of the state-wide move in 2022.

The report contains valuable insights into the concerns and opportunities that this significant move brings. I have read the report with great interest and agree that if lessons learned from the pilot are acted upon this transition provides significant opportunities to “think differently” and “do things better at a system level”.

By reflecting on the pilot's success and challenges, complete with knowledge of the lives and development of 11 and 12 year olds, the Department for Education can ensure that every school is supported to provide every Year 7 student with what they need to be able to thrive in a high school setting and beyond.

Whilst hopeful that the early learnings from the three pilot schools will inform the state wide transition, I have concerns that the larger scale transition might exacerbate some of the issues already identified during the pilot. I am also mindful that it may potentially create new issues.

The pilot report highlights some of the “seemingly small challenges that became significant concerns”. Some of these concerns include students at a younger age navigating a larger school, managing expectations about course content and homework, and balancing this with opportunities to play and build positive relationships. To ensure that the successful elements of the pilot are replicated at a state wide level, all of the issues identified by pilot schools, educators, students and families require consideration.

I have found in my work that engaging children and young people, asking them what they see the issues are and what they need for this transition to be successful is critical for managing expectation and building successful foundations. This is also a requirement under section 7 of the *Education and Children Services Act 2019*, which states “children, students, stakeholders and communities should be consulted in respect of decisions under this Act that may affect them.” As the Act states, education is a service for children therefore their feedback is essential in any decision making process related to schools.

To engage primary school students and to find out what worries them in 2019, I sent thousands of postcards to 8 to 12 year olds in schools all around South Australia. I received 8,429 responses from 239 catholic, independent, government, Aboriginal and special schools in metropolitan as well as regional centres and rural and remote communities across South Australia.

This postcard project provided 8-12 year olds across South Australia an opportunity to share their aspirations, their concerns, what is important to them and what they would like to change “if they were the boss of South Australia”.

Many of the pilot report's key insights resonate with what 11 and 12 year olds have told me about what they need to feel safe, supported and successful, both at school and outside of school. The quotes throughout the following pages are from 11 and 12 year olds who participated in the postcard project. A complete report on the views of 8 to 12 year olds on life, school and community can be found in my [Things that Matter Report](#).

Children in this age group often tell me that they have few opportunities to have a say and adults often rely on their own assumptions about children's perspectives, experiences, capabilities and development. Findings from the pilot project reflect this, highlighting that many of the initial assumptions that schools and staff made about Year 7s were inappropriate. I urge you to consider their voice in the rollout of the transition.

The pilot schools consistently found that approaches to teaching and student wellbeing that work for Year 8s and Year 9s cannot be assumed to work for Year 7s. Year 7s "learn very differently" and are at a different level of maturity. Pilot schools achieved the best outcomes when they modified expectations and were open to exploring different strategies. This was the case not only in relation to teaching and learning, but also in supporting student wellbeing through prioritising play and building positive relationships.

The pilot schools found that the traditional view that it is solely the students who need to adapt because "they are in high school now" is no longer appropriate. Rather, the schools and the system need to adapt just as much as students in order for the transition to be successful.

With the right support, the move is expected to benefit students through enabling them to engage with the Australian Curriculum in the way it was designed to be delivered: in a high school setting with specialist teachers and resources. It is encouraging that the pilot project found that most Year 7 students "are ready for high school" and "enjoying the independence, the social interaction and challenges of high school".

While the pilot report acknowledges this was the reality for those students who are already doing well, it also found that students who are vulnerable – particularly those with disability or those from poorer families – require particular support to ensure they are not left behind.

I am aware that an initial 77 government schools have already received establishment grants to accommodate the transition. I also note the State government's significant planned investments in additional works in government schools during 2020 and 2021, which are designed to support the intake of Year 7s and future growth in enrolments.

While this investment is important, the pilot shows that shifts in culture and practice based on a greater understanding of the developmental needs and wellbeing of Year 7s in a high school environment will be just as important as investment in capital works and infrastructure.

Indeed, the pilot high schools show that there is limited understanding of children's development in high school environments. This is unlikely to be unique to the pilot schools but rather reflect a general lack of understanding in this area. Professional learning programs and opportunities for high school teachers to observe and learn from primary school teachers in a primary setting are therefore essential. The pilot highlighted that such programs proved most effective when there was a "whole school focus dedicated to exploring the needs of young adolescents".

The transition between year levels and into new classrooms is a common source of worry for many primary school age students. Year 7s talk with both fear and excitement about whether and how they will cope with the biggest school transition: the transition from primary school to high school.

During a time of uncertainty for many, it is more important than ever that we listen to children as well as their families and teachers and that we take their concerns seriously. As the pilot project clearly demonstrates, getting to know the students early not only benefits children and young people themselves, but it also improves outcomes for schools, teachers and other Education staff, families and broader communities.

I make the following comments on the report to highlight the areas that both resonate with what children have told me and, I believe, need to have a clear focus in the transition.

I am aware that the Department for Education is investing considerable resources in this area and balancing multiple competing priorities. It would however be remiss of me not to provide independent commentary and elevate the rights, interests and wellbeing of children in this significant systems change to their education.

As always I am available to provide support and advice on considerations, challenges and opportunities during the next stages of this transition.

Yours sincerely



Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People

Features of schools involved in the pilot project

It is significant that the pilot schools were selected because of their existing focus on the transition into secondary school, their “progressive approaches to teaching and learning” and “system readiness”. These schools also had well-defined feeder primary schools, which helped to target orientation support and early engagement during the pilot transition.

Yet even these well-supported pilot schools emphasised that the work has been far greater than anticipated to prepare for double cohort of Year 7s and Year 8s. Schools and school communities across South Australia have different levels of resourcing and support, all of which will impact their capacity to manage the transition successfully. Given that most pilot schools would not be defined as your “typical” school, it is crucial that the Department is ready to resource the extra work that will be required to support the state wide transition.

The pilot found that the transition is best supported when schools have “well-defined leadership structures and key transition staff to support the increased workload”. School Services Officers (SSOs) played a particularly vital role in supporting the transition of vulnerable and at risk students through building early connections with families, students and primary schools. While two of the pilot schools recruited new special education teachers, they had difficulty recruiting for these positions. This raises questions about the ability of schools to recruit staff to adequately meet student needs when the pilot expands to all South Australian schools.

By acknowledging and actively addressing these critical early insights, we have the best possible chance of ensuring that all schools, staff, students and families are able to implement strategies that the pilot has shown to be effective.

Looking after children’s wellbeing to ensure engagement

The Department for Education’s Wellbeing and Engagement Collection Survey results from 2018 and 2019 show a significant drop in wellbeing and engagement between primary and secondary school students. The decline between Year 7 and Year 8 is consistent across most indicators inside and outside of school, including engagement, learning readiness and health and emotional wellbeing.

Compared to Year 7s, a higher proportion of Year 8 students reported low levels of connectedness and belonging to their school and to their peers. Year 8s also consistently reported lower levels of interest and confidence at school (academic self-concept) and they reported being less able to stick with things and pursue goals (perseverance) or to persist with classroom tasks and generate ideas (cognitive engagement). Where 62% of Year 7s could identify an “important” adult at primary school in 2019, this was the case for only 44% per cent of Year 8 students in the first year of high school.

The impact of the Wellbeing and Engagement indicators on the ability of students to learn became evident in the significant and often unexpected work the pilot schools needed to do to ensure the successful transition of Year 7s. The pilot demonstrates that the success of learning outcomes largely depend on a school’s ability to create safe environments where wellbeing, relationships and confidence are nurtured. Only then will children be ready to learn, engage and reach their full

potential.

Prioritising relationships and modifying expectations: the need for greater understanding of child development in high school environments

Many Year 6s and Year 7s worry about the pressure they are under, even at primary school, to meet expectations set by their families and themselves. Many link their education to their hopes and dreams for the future, including being a good person, “making a good difference in the world” and “growing with a successful and happy career”.

I worry about...

“Not knowing what job I will want to do when I'm older and going to high school next year and not knowing how I'll cope”

- Barossa, Light and Lower North

“making the right choice of highschool that will benefit my future”

- Western Adelaide

Their concerns focus on whether they can manage their time, “get good grades” and “be a good role model”, with many worried about “getting things wrong”, the NAPLAN and having too much homework and assessments. Students are aware that these worries will only become magnified in high school, as they navigate increasing workloads as well as plan for the future beyond school.

Across all pilot high schools, teachers found spending the first few weeks talking with students, building positive connections and “getting to know the students” was the most important thing, more important than a focus on curriculum and learning content.

Putting restrictions on homework allowed schools and students to prioritise relationships early on. This was an effective way to support student wellbeing and calm anxieties regarding the increased workload and complexity of subjects.

The pilot report identifies the top three things that Year 7s said would help them with their learning:

1. **Hands on and interactive tasks**
2. **Short tasks**
3. **Having a choice in the activities and learning**

These findings are consistent with what I have heard from 11 and 12 year olds about what makes school more inclusive, fun and engaging. When asked what they would change “if they were the boss of South Australia”, many children focused on how they'd like to change the curriculum to better prepare students for further study and work by allowing students to have greater subject choices, “have more of a say in what they learn” and have more opportunities to learn “life skills”, be active and be creative.

Many 11 and 12 year olds wanted to invest in more spaces and opportunities for students to relax and have breaks at school. Offering meditation classes, allowing animals to visit schools, increasing

the availability of school counsellors and doing more to address bullying were all seen as central to promoting better mental and physical health at school.

If I were the boss of South Australia, I would...

“allow students to have a say in what they study in school and the way lessons are run. To have better ways for South Australians to control our climate crisis. I want kids to feel happy and respected with who they chose to like and be.”

- Northern Adelaide

“make it that we didn't get more homework because we already do six hours of work at school and could get another two hours of "homework". I know from experience this leads to stress.”

- Western Adelaide

The experiences at Wirreanda Secondary School were unique, partly due to the existing project-based learning model (PBL), which already provides teachers and students with flexibility within the curriculum and encourages students to “develop a voice” and “shape, initiate and demonstrate their learning” with a focus on “real world” problems.

The other two pilot schools, John Pirie Secondary School and Mitcham Girls High School, found it challenging to engage Year 7s with traditional lesson content and timetables or in the same way they would engage with Year 8s. They felt it important that other schools are mindful of these differences when curriculum planning and setting expectations for Year 7 students. While the pilot schools highlighted the importance of being open to changing plans, they also noted how difficult it was for some teachers to adapt their expectations and commit to exploring differentiated teaching strategies.

Given that Wirreanda’s model and focus on student agency is not implemented in all schools across South Australia, thought must be given to how this flexibility can be supported and promoted to other schools. The pilot showed whole school professional learning opportunities geared towards understanding young adolescents to be effective in improving awareness of child development in high school environments. This was particularly successful when supported by early collaboration between primary school and high school sites and staff.

The importance of play and the barriers to play

The limited understanding of child’s development in high school environments became most clear in the pilot’s findings regarding the significance of play in the lives of 11 and 12 year olds.

The pilot schools were “surprised” by how much the Year 7s “still enjoyed running around and playing games”. While none of the pilot schools had previously considered the need for play spaces or equipment, all three schools are currently exploring the introduction of physical education equipment and dedicated outdoor recreational spaces.

While investment in more equipment and play spaces or infrastructure is important, it is unlikely to be the sole answer to this issue. Findings from the pilot clearly show high schools across the state will need support to ensure that children do not lose a year of play and physical activity during this

key transition. Addressing the barriers to play and understanding the significance of play to wellbeing will require engagement with children and young people and with primary schools.

Play is the number one thing 11 and 12 year olds like to do. Whether it is online or offline, at school or at home, they recognise the importance of play to their health and wellbeing, creativity, confidence, life skills, identity and connections with others and the world around them. At the same time, they recognise that play changes as they get older. Even in primary school, there is a real sense that the demands of school work and “excessive amounts of homework” can leave little time for play and physical activity.

I like to...

“do dancing and play with my friends in school and out of school.”

- Murray and Mallee

“learn about new things because I want to teach other people new things.”

- Yorke and Mid North

While playfulness is embedded in many aspects of early childhood and primary school education settings, there are less opportunities to play in a high school setting. This is largely due to the nature of the built environments of high school, an increased focus on study and dominant social and cultural norms that place pressure on children to “not stand out”, particularly in the presence of older year levels.

As the Department’s Wellbeing and Engagement Data shows, there is a decrease in participation in organised activities and organised or team sports after school between primary school and high school students.

Play, leisure and rest are recognised as a key part of putting the Department for Education’s Wellbeing for Learning and Life Framework into action. This framework recognises that the wellbeing of children and young people is influenced by their physical and mental health and their sense of safety, belonging, and identity.

My [Press Play Report](#), released in August 2020, highlights in further detail the importance of activating young people’s wellbeing through play. Informed by the voices of hundreds of South Australian young people, it outlines several strategies to address some of the key barriers to play.

This report may guide the Department and high schools across South Australia in putting the Wellbeing Framework into action and ensuring all Year 7s are supported to exercise their right to play (Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). High schools should also be considering teaching through play, as research shows play is not only relevant and beneficial for people of all ages, not just young students.

Feeling safe at school: Bullying, relationships, and getting the right help at the right time

Although the pilot report does not mention bullying, this is one of the biggest concerns that Year 6s and 7s have raised in the context of school transitions and high school. They worry about their

relationships with friends, including how their peers perceive them and the possibility of losing friends, being bullied or struggling to make new friends.

“[I worry about...] not getting proper education about all things. Getting bullied in high school.”

- Southern Adelaide

“[I like...] Having a teacher that listening to your problems so they can help.”

- Yorke and Mid North

For 11 and 12 year olds, safety is social as well as physical – it means feeling known, accepted and valued and being able to express oneself without fear of judgment. By the time students reach Year 7, most describe school as a safe place. Particularly for those who attend small primary schools, the thought of entering an unfamiliar and often larger high school environment is overwhelming, with many fearful of “getting lost” or “falling through the cracks” both socially and academically.

Year 7s acknowledge that relationships are complex and that the dynamics of relationships – like play – also change for children and young people as they get older. Many Year 7s express their concern about the prospect of being bullied in high school and fears of “not fitting in” and not knowing anyone who will be at the same high school.

During extensive consultations as part of [my bullying project](#), children described having friends and learning how to treat others with kindness and acceptance as important parts of bullying prevention. They want teachers and other adult role models to be more supportive when they respond to bullying, and they want to be more involved in anti-bullying programs themselves.

While feeling connected to peers and trusted adults at school is a key protective factor against bullying, the Wellbeing and Engagement data shows a decline in wellbeing related to friendship intimacy, the quality of social support from peers and connection to a trusted adult at school between the final year of primary school and the first year of high school.

These issues highlight the need for the Department to support all South Australian schools to be able to build on the success of pilot schools with a real focus on “getting to know the kids” and building positive connections with students and between students as early as possible.

Eleven and 12 year olds understand that trust is essential to safe environments. As highlighted in my [Trust is a Must report](#), children and young people want to “have someone to talk to” who will listen to them, understand them and provide them with support when they need it. While many young people have told me they are most likely to turn to their friends or family for help rather than schools and professionals, many describe informal support networks that are overstretched.

They are concerned that key supports, including mental health support, only become available when things reach a “critical level”. Although schools do offer the opportunity for students to seek assistance from a school counsellor, students report limited resources such as “one counsellor for a whole public school” often make this support inaccessible.

“[If I were the boss of South Australia, I would...] make sure that each child is provided with mental help if needed as well as shelter and food and some sort of education no matter who they are”.

- Northern Adelaide

Providing information and support for families about the increased costs of high school

The “cost of things” came up a lot in the postcards I received from 11 and 12 year olds, with many worried about the impacts of financial stress on their family. Many of their ideas for change focused on ‘making things cheaper’, particularly bills and the costs of housing, healthcare and other essential items, including education and sports.

One of the most common concerns among pilot families regarding communication and engagement was a failure to clearly communicate information about additional school fees, including the cost of uniforms, course materials, laptops and other technology, excursions, camps, sports and other extracurricular activities. Although parents expected some additional costs, many were not prepared for the extent of financial pressures, and this was particularly challenging for families with more than one child entering high school and for those already doing it tough.

It is essential that the Department act on the key suggestion from parents involved in the pilot program by supporting all schools to provide families with a summary of estimated costs of the transition to allow them to plan and budget for the additional expenses. This should be accompanied by clear information regarding payment plans or alternative payment options to access digital devices or participate in sport. Such information and support is key to ensuring the full participation and engagement of young people and their families at school and in the community.

If I were the boss of South Australia, I would...

“I would try and make South Australia greater, lower prices of food, I would do something about pollution, I would put year 7 back in primary school, and do something about climate change”

- Southern Adelaide

“have better education and computers/laptops in primary school so the people going to high school will have technology skills for at high school.”

- Barossa, Light and Lower North

Supporting students with disability

Over the last four years, I have engaged with hundreds of children and young people with diverse disabilities, learning difficulties and health conditions in a range of educational and community settings.

Through online and face-to-face discussions and surveys, I have gathered their views on broad issues and in the context of specific projects, including my projects on school exclusions, bullying and poverty. In 2020, I have engaged a Disability and Inclusion Participation Officer to support my focused effort on engaging with young people with a disability in specialised settings.

Children and young people with disability have shown me they are not a homogenous group in terms of their experiences. However, communication, social and behaviour difficulties mean that these young people face similar barriers to exercising their rights, particularly in relation to

participation. Each young person I have met, regardless of their disability, experiences these barriers to a different extent across their lives. Although their disability impacts the way they experience their rights as children, they still want to be safe, happy, included and able to participate.

The systemic safety and wellbeing of children and young people with disability depends on them being listened to, involved in decision making, and having their experiences and their views respected. While children and young people with physical disabilities have raised concerns about environmental barriers, children with autism and intellectual disability talk more about connections with others as a safety factor. Where adults lack understanding or are condescending toward children, they feel unsafe and unsupported. If children are supported by adults who demonstrate kindness and understanding of their disability, they feel comfortable and included.

The pilot report highlights key learnings about supporting students with disability, including the need for schools to:

- Be highly flexible;
- Know the students well in advance;
- Connect curriculum to independence and life skills; and
- Provide safe spaces and break-out spaces, specialised equipment and assistive technology.

These considerations need to inform support for students with disability in all schools, both mainstream and specialised options.

The pilot emphasised that the recruitment of appropriately trained and skilled class teachers is particularly vital in terms of preparation, curriculum planning, staffing and transition for students with disability. Two of the pilot schools recruited new special education teachers. However, they had difficulty recruiting for the positions due to a lack of qualified candidates and poor professional development programs to upskill teachers. When the pilot transition expands to a state wide transition, this shortage of qualified support staff is likely to remain a significant problem on a larger scale.

The double cohort of Year 7s and Year 8s means double the demand for One Plans. One of the biggest challenges for pilot schools was – and continues to be – meeting this demand. Given that these plans and other information and supports have proven to be crucial in helping the pilot schools meet the needs of all students, particularly those with disability, it is essential that where possible all possible steps are taken to ensure these plans are in place at the primary school level prior to transition and as early as possible.

The most beneficial support for students with disability during the pilot came from key information about students and their specific social and learning needs. This crucial information was gathered through visiting primary school sites and meeting with students, teachers, support staff and families. The most successful transitions occurred where students were able to make connections with high school staff early and where transition activities were “comprehensive, extensive and extended”. To reproduce these successes at a state wide level requires significant support from the Department and school leaderships to foster key collaborations between primary schools and high schools across South Australia.

Crucial connections with primary schools, primary school teachers and families

The key piece of advice that pilot high schools wanted to share with other schools was the importance of effective collaboration and positive relationships between primary schools and high schools. This was central to ensuring continuity of learning for students, effective planning of the curriculum and preparing of required support services and resources prior to the move.

These early connections also helped students become familiar with the high school and calmed the most common anxieties about high school among children, many of which stem from “unknowns” about the places or people at high school.

The pilot report describes the transition of a double cohort as a “team effort, not just from within the high school, but across primary schools and Partnerships”. Having sufficient time, dedicated staff, supportive leaders and access to resources and data were central to building strong connections between primary schools and high schools. These early engagement initiatives included open days and open nights, visits and tours of high school campus, early communication with high school teachers, peer mentor programs and high school students and staff visiting primary schools.

The three pilot schools had a clear understanding of “feeder” primary schools and were supported to foster connections with future Year 7s through several visits to primary school sites well before the transition. When the transition occurs on a bigger scale, all schools will require support to identify “feeder” primary schools and engage and connect with children, families, staff and principals from these schools.

Based on the pilot’s findings, this office therefore recommends that the Department provide all primary schools and high schools with clear and consistent guidance to support mutual understanding between primary and high school settings and staff. This should include providing:

- Information to support high schools to understand the knowledge and skills that primary teachers might bring to high school settings;
- Information to support primary teachers to understand high school systems and share their knowledge and experience engaging with Year 7s; and
- Practical opportunities for teachers to share and observe differentiated teaching strategies and encourage ongoing improvement and reflection.

Other issues for consideration

11 and 12 year olds are at a stage of life between childhood and adolescence that is characterised by significant change and physical, social and emotional development. Based on what children in this age group have told me about issues that affect them, I have identified three further issues that require consideration, only one of which came up in the pilot project report.

Leadership opportunities

The pilot schools found that it was important to provide Year 7s with leadership opportunities that otherwise might be missed during transition. Where leadership roles are typically a key part of Year

7 as the final year of primary school, leadership positions in high schools are usually reserved for senior years.

During the pilot, Wirreanda Secondary established new leadership positions for the middle school, which allow Year 7 to 9 students to become house captains where previously leadership opportunities had been limited to senior year levels. The school reflected on how this has strengthened the sense of belonging for Year 7s and the overall school culture. It is important to consider how Wirreanda's success on this issue can be promoted across the board, particularly given that the other pilot schools acknowledged that they overlooked this point.

Gender and gender stereotypes

Although young people are often encouraged to do or be “what they want” to be, they don't always see a culture that reflects this. Primary school age children have told me how gender and gender stereotypes influence their behaviour, relationships and confidence as well as how they express emotions and choose to participate in activities. Young people have also told me how primary schools and high schools treat gender differently and can often exacerbate these stereotypes, with boys being taught to be strong, good at sport and “given leeway” for “immature behaviour” while girls are responsible role models and taught to “cover up” to not “distract” male peers or teachers.

This can have very real impacts on how young people access services and experience education and healthcare systems and services. While school uniforms and strict dress codes can impact a student's confidence and body image, gendered stereotypes often dictate their choices of school subjects, which in turn shapes their career paths and aspirations for the future.

“Everybody will tell me these days that gender doesn't make a difference anymore. Then they'll buy me pink clothes give me some Barbies and ask me if I want to be a nurse.”

- 12 year old

Managing periods

The issue of period poverty was highlighted in my 2019 report on young people's perceptions and experiences of poverty in South Australia. To gain further insight into the scope of this problem, I undertook two surveys throughout 2020. As highlighted in a [recent short report](#), periods can have a significant impact on student attendance and participation at school, in sport and extracurricular activities. More than 40% of primary school students who responded to my second Period Survey reported that they had missed school due to having their period.

“Students might be scared to tell a teacher or ask for help. They may feel embarrassed or stressed/anxious.”

Children and young people have described the difficulty of accessing period products at both primary school and high school due to cost, a lack of education, negative attitudes among teachers or inappropriate facilities at school. Coupled with the stigma associated with periods, this can have very real impacts on the learning, confidence and mental and physical health of young people.