



The transition to secondary school

School resources

During their years of schooling students make a number of transitions within and between schools. The transition from early childhood to primary school involves noticeable changes in curriculum content as well as a shift towards more structured learning practices. The transition from primary school to secondary school involves further changes in curriculum and the structure of learning, and the stakes become higher in regards to assessment of academic achievement and its impact on future plans.

This transition from primary school to secondary school is made more complex because students undergo significant cognitive, social and emotional changes at this stage of their development. During this period it is common for young people to strive for more autonomy while at the same time becoming more self-conscious and acutely aware of their own perceived shortcomings. It is also a time of significant growth and change for young people: their personalities and characters develop along with more formal operational thinking skills, which allows them to engage in social environments in new ways. For some, these may be reflected in a desire for greater independence from their families, an increase in responsibilities, and a developing interest in romantic relationships.

Why is the transition to secondary school important?

Experiences of transition to secondary school correlate strongly with secondary school graduation rates. A number of studies conducted in New Zealand and internationally highlight that **ill-prepared transitions can impact negatively on both student wellbeing and academic achievement**. Some students feel particularly vulnerable when transitioning between schools because of the organisational, social and academic changes they encounter.

There is also evidence that **the likelihood of students staying in school can be heavily dependent on the success of their transition into secondary school**. Some studies have shown that secondary school drop-out rates are lower when students' contributing primary schools have clear secondary school transition programmes to help students prepare socially and academically for the upcoming changes. A key reason for this is that comprehensive transition programmes work to achieve a balance between building on the excitement of starting secondary school while also providing students with enough information that they feel supported.

It is important that schools view transitions as **a process of adaptation and change that students and teachers work through over time** rather than as a stand-alone event. New Zealand research has identified that students are often still adjusting to learning the new systems and expectations at Year 9 several months after they first start secondary school. During this time it is common for attention to be diverted away from learning and towards coping with their new environment. Support from peers, parents and teachers plays a critical role in influencing adolescents' experiences as they navigate through this change.

Student-teacher relationships

The relationships that students have with their teachers play an important role in their ability to adjust to the changes at secondary school. While the transition process can be disruptive and unsettling for adolescents, teachers who are sensitive to how the changes occurring during transition impact on

student learning and wellbeing are better equipped to provide the necessary guidance and support. The extent of **teachers' preparedness and ability to support their students** during this transition is linked to increased academic commitment, improved social and emotional wellbeing and greater motivation to learn¹. Moreover, there are strong links between the emotional support provided by teachers and the repertoire of students' social skills.

Students beginning secondary school encounter a greater number of teachers than at primary and intermediate school, each with their own expectations for learning and behaviour. For some students this can be stressful: they may worry that their secondary teachers do not know them as well as previous teachers, and these changes may have a negative impact on both their relationships with others and their academic achievement. An important part of the role of Year 9 teachers is to **provide guidance and support to students** as they adapt previously learned patterns of learning and behaviour to their new school environment.

Success at school is associated with students developing a strong sense of belonging. Teachers can **foster of a sense of belonging** in the classroom by showing their students that they are interested in them and want to know their strengths and learning needs. This includes demonstrating value and appreciation for students' cultural knowledge, values and languages. Having their culture affirmed by their teachers has been identified as being particularly important for Māori and Pasifika students, and it is key in formulating positive student-teacher relationships. It is important that teachers of Māori and Pasifika students show care and prioritise the building of relationships.

Key challenges and issues that students can face during transition

Students face a number of challenges when transitioning to secondary school: they will have different teachers for each subject, they will need to follow a timetable, the school environment may be much larger than what they are used to, their peer group will change, and they will need to learn and adjust to new rules and administrative requirements.

- **Academic challenges.** The expectations for young people increase significantly at Year 9. At secondary school, students will encounter a wider variety of subjects, with subjects tending to be compartmentalised in contrast to the more integrated approach common at many primary schools. Homework is generally more challenging and given more often. Students will also encounter completely different internal and external assessment procedures at secondary school, with many experiencing high-stakes external assessment for the first time.
- **Social and emotional challenges.** Students may experience a range of emotions as they start secondary school. At this critical time of change in their lives, young people's awareness of emotional support available to them from their teachers, peers and school is vital as they seek to build new networks of friends. For some students, the transition to secondary school can lead to decreased academic achievement and motivation, and there is some evidence that a decline in academic achievement at this transition may result from a lack of positive relationships with teachers or poor self-belief.
- Adolescents may also experience a decreased sense of belonging as they begin secondary school, due in part to being in a new environment apart from their usual peer groups. Peer relationships can change and, for some, it will be the first time they have been separated from their friends. Being regrouped according to different subjects and year levels can cause anxiety about maintaining friendship groups. Some young people can experience a sense of loss as they transition to secondary school. There is evidence to suggest that peer friendships play an important role in

successful transition, because the friendships that young people make during adolescence also serve as critical sources of support.

What does a positive transition to secondary school look like?

Evidence from successful school-based transition programmes identifies two major components. First, they include parents, teachers and students across primary and secondary school settings, and second, they take place over the course of the whole school year, with preparation beginning several months before the transition and support continuing well into the new school year. Six key factors signal whether students have experienced a successful transition:

- Students experience a sense of belonging and are included in school programmes and activities
- Their teachers show an interest in them and their interests, and recognise their strengths and areas in need of development
- They feel their culture is valued and acknowledged
- They are offered opportunities to try out new interests and skills
- They make progress academically
- They can envision where their learning pathway leads beyond secondary school

Supporting successful transitions

Well-designed and implemented transition systems help to balance the excitement of starting secondary school with providing students with the right amount of information to alleviate trepidation². During the period of transition, the importance of communication and connection between schools, their communities and families is critical. The relationships between primary and secondary school, between schools and families, and between schools and their community networks are key in building a foundation based on active collaboration and communication for facilitating positive transitions.

The role of primary schools

There are a number of **practical strategies** that can be implemented to facilitate a seamless transition such as³:

- Arranging visits to secondary school well before the students start Year 9.
- Inviting local high school visits to primary schools.
- Supporting families with the enrolment documentation for secondary school and other requirements of the enrolment process.
- Communicating information related to the upcoming transition to parents and whānau.
- Sharing important information about learning and achievement with the student, their family and the future secondary school.
- Ensuring that secondary schools are aware of the learning and emotional needs of vulnerable students.
- It is also important to help students prepare for the new **academic requirements and expectations** of secondary school by:
- Introducing students to the different types of classwork they may encounter at secondary school.

- Taking steps to equip students with the organisational skills necessary for secondary school such as planning and homework.
- Preparing students realistically for the changed expectations at secondary school in regards to rules, behaviour and classwork.
- Primary schools can also help students anticipate and prepare for some of the **social and emotional changes** that the transition to secondary school will bring by:
 - Being open and clear with students about the fact that their social relationships and friendship groups may change.
 - Communicating to students about how to access the forms of support available at secondary school, such as explaining the role of the Year 9 dean and form teachers.
 - Encouraging students to take advantage of the new opportunities, friends, cultural activities and learning they will encounter at Year 9.
 - Actively fostering their students' sense of resilience, their ability to cope with challenges, their independence and their interpersonal skills such as active listening and cooperation.

The role of secondary schools

Secondary schools can support successful transitions by providing **pastoral and academic care systems** developed as part of a code of care and responsibility for students. The component of pastoral care involves offering support to students across the entire first year, not only during the first term. Embedding consistent processes that focus on monitoring the progress and wellbeing of students is a key part of pastoral care. It is also important to implement systems that monitor the wellbeing and progress of vulnerable students as they transition, and to proactively provide support that includes appropriate specialist resource teachers.

Secondary schools can also support successful transitions by implementing **orientation and communication systems** to help students and parents become familiar with the school environment, meet school staff, and learn more about what the school offers. Inviting parents to school events such as powhiri and fono, and ensuring that form teachers make contact with families during the first few weeks of the term are important processes which will build relationships with the parents of Year 9 students. These activities help students to adjust to the new environment and serve to welcome families into the school community. Implementing support systems between Year 9 and senior students can also help with orientation.

The role of parents and whānau

The needs of children change drastically during adolescence, which means that the types of support parents offer in earlier years may not be as effective once their children reach Year 9. Parental involvement tends to decline as children progress through their schooling, although there is strong evidence that family engagement continues to be an important influence in secondary school student success. Some parents reduce the extent of their involvement because they feel less equipped to support their children with the more challenging curricula they encounter at secondary school. Unfortunately, this may lead to schools misunderstanding parents' decline in involvement as a lack of interest in their child's education.

In addition to working closely with teachers and schools, there are a number of effective ways that parents can support their children as they transition to Year 9. Consistent support, active involvement, monitoring of their children's learning and regular attendance at parent-teacher conferences are associated with young people being more likely to have a smooth transition from primary or intermediate

to secondary school. In addition, the social support that parents provide to their children as they begin secondary school helps young people to have more positive attitudes towards school, reduce their stress levels and help them feel better equipped to manage the many changes at secondary school. Further studies have identified that parents' involvement with their Year 8 children's learning is positively associated with related academic achievement. The strongest finding across multiple studies is **the importance of parents' educational aspirations for their children**. Parents' high academic aspirations are strongly associated with academic achievement for primary and secondary education.

References

- Andrews, C., & Bishop, P. (2012). Middle grades transition programs around the globe. *Middle School Journal*, 44(1), 8-14.
- Chen, W. B., & Gregory, A. (2009). Parental involvement as a protective factor during the transition to high school. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 103(1), 53-62.
- Cox, S., & Kennedy, S. (2008). Students' achievement as they transition from primary to secondary schooling. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- Fraire, M., Longobardi, C., Prino, L. E., Sclavo, E., & Settanni, M. (2013). Examining the student-teacher relationship scale in the Italian context: A factorial validity study. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*, 11(3), 851-882.
- Hall, G. S. (1904). *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relation to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion, and education* (Vols. I & II). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hanewald, R. (2013). Transition between primary and secondary school: Why it is important and how it can be supported. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(1), 61-74.
- Longobardi, C., Prino, L. E., Marengo, D., & Settanni, M. (2016). Student-teacher relationships as a protective factor for school adjustment during the transition from middle to high school. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7.
- Mac Iver, M. A., Epstein, J. L., Sheldon, S. B., & Fonseca, E. (2015). Engaging families to support students' transition to high school: Evidence from the field. *The High School Journal*, 99(1), 27-45. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(02\)00495-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(02)00495-0).
- Ministry of Education Research Division (2010). *Easing the transition from primary to secondary schooling: Helpful information for schools to consider*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- West, P., Sweeting, H., & Young, R. (2010). Transition matters: Pupils' experiences of the primary-secondary school transition in the West of Scotland and consequences for well being and attainment. *Research Papers in Education*, 25(1), 21-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802308677>

Endnotes

¹ Fraire et al., 2013.

² Andrews & Bishop, 2012.

³ Ministry of Education (2010). Easing the transition from primary to secondary schooling: Helpful information for schools to consider. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/easing-the-transition>

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Emma Cunningham

Emma is an intermediate school teacher, writer and researcher living in Auckland. She recently completed her PhD, which explored the role of parents in their children's learning across the transition to secondary school within the context of Pasifika families. Her research interests are in the field of home-school partnerships, Pasifika education, literacy and the transition to secondary school.