



# **NEW SOUTH WALES TEACHERS FEDERATION**

SUBMISSION TO THE  
PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES

## **RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS**

INQUIRY INTO  
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

**Authorised by**

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## Response to Questions - Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 in NSW

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### Middle Years Schooling

#### Question 1

**The Transition to Year 7 program, which is part of the middle years strategy, will be expanded from 30 public secondary schools and central schools in 2008 to 246 in 2009. It will be further expanded to all 463 public secondary and central schools by 2010. Are there strategies that are not in the Transition to Year 7 program that you consider should be introduced to improve the transition of students from primary to secondary school?**

The Transition to Year 7 program as expressed in policy by the DET, like the rest of the Middle Years Strategy is very vague; it is long on good intentions and vaguely worded statements of intent, but short on how the objectives would be achieved, and silent on matters of resourcing to make them happen. Words do not implement a policy, or make it effective.

Many schools both on, and beyond those on the "official list" for funding have very successful transition strategies, and they are to be commended for making them happen. However, in nearly every instance they are entirely un-resourced and rely on the good will of teachers undertaking additional voluntary work to ensure they happen or require other programs to be collapsed. This is no basis upon which to structure the future of the program.

In other schools, there is funding. This is the case in some schools receiving additional funding through the Priority Action Schools Program. One large multicultural high school in western Sydney reports a highly successful program, which is properly resourced allowing teachers to be released to run the program. It runs with Year 5 and 6 students from all the feeder primary schools, and each primary student will be engaged in classes and activities with the high school several times a year. High school teachers can also have the opportunity to observe primary classes.

Top priority is that transition programs must not rely on teacher goodwill to pick them up as an additional responsibility – It needs to be properly resourced to pay for personnel to implement it, through releasing teachers at both primary and secondary schools to put the program in place, run it, evaluate it and maintain contact with students.

The Government's policy of school choice combined with selective high schools – academic, sport, performing arts – means that students may miss out on participating in a transition program.

Any transition program needs to go beyond familiarisation with school routines. Information on the learning needs of year 7 students needs to be transferred to year 7 teachers in a timely manner. Students in Year 7 can lose valuable learning opportunities because class teachers may not be aware of specific needs. Extra attention needs to be provided for those students going to special education classes or receiving integration funding. This includes support for individual transition to high school plans.

#### Question 2

**In your opinion, how effective have the NSW Department of Education and Training's strategies been to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning practices for middle years students, and what further initiatives do you consider are required?**

The Federation welcomes the Quality Teaching initiatives. Federation always supports the highest quality professional development for teachers in order to maintain the quality public education system we have.

There is always room for high quality professional development. The theory needs to be capable of being translated into practice. Thirty growing adolescent students can crowd a classroom; because of rooming pressured students may be in classrooms inadequate for the activities desired and resourcing differences between schools mean that some students may have access to a video studio for multimedia activities

whilst others are denied these opportunities. Timetabling restrictions means that students can be studying subjects requiring higher order skills on a Friday afternoon.

### Question 3

**The Federation has identified that reducing class sizes in Years 7 and 8 would be beneficial. What evidence is there that this leads to improved learning outcomes for this age group? How does this compared with approaches such as enhancing the quality of classroom teaching and learning practices?**

Evidence is available through talking to teachers about what they need to do their job properly and effectively. Parents, students and teachers all know that if a class has 25 students, it is much more effective in terms of student-teacher interaction than a class of 30 – currently the norm in most subject areas in junior secondary, and Years 3,4,5 and 6. With fewer students, teachers have a greater opportunity to spend more time teaching and less time on classroom management. Thirty growing adolescents in classrooms the same size as for primary age students provides a very cramped workspace for the important work of education. There may not be the proper space for additional adults who may be working with selected students – support teachers and school learning support officers let alone storage of teacher' student resources and equipment.

It is no accident that many private schools boast on their websites and in their prospectuses about the low class sizes they maintain, including in the middle years. Here is one example amongst many: [http://www.haileybury.vic.edu.au/home/small\\_class\\_sizes](http://www.haileybury.vic.edu.au/home/small_class_sizes). Haileybury is one of the most elite private schools in Melbourne. It guarantees class sizes of no more than 18 in Years 5 to 9.

It is interesting to note that several decades ago the importance of smaller classes was recognised in the senior years (Years 11 & 12), when class sizes were reduced from the maximum then of 25, to 24 students. Yet, in the very important stage of adolescence, there has been no attention of movement.

There is some research evidence that gains made in early primary years can be lost in the junior secondary area if quality is not maintained.

New York Mayor Bloomberg proposed an initiative to reduce class sizes in grades 5 to 8 in New York City schools in order to cap classes at 28 students. (see [www.ibo.nyc.ny.us](http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us) )

Enhancing teaching strategies and effectiveness goes hand-in-hand with this; they are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

Of particular concern are practical classes. There is no logical explanation other than that funding was ceased to explain why art classes in Year 7 are a maximum of 20, and then suddenly become 30 in Year 8, especially now that the curriculum proceeds in Stages generally covering the 2 year period of Years 7 and 8.

Other subjects which are strongly practical, eg Music, PE, Science have class sizes of 30, others in the Technology areas (Food, Design, Industrial) are 24.

### Question 4

**The current NSW Department of Education and Training's Middle Years Strategy is from 2006-2009. If a subsequent strategy is developed, what do you consider it should emphasis?**

Any new strategy is to must emphasise resourcing to make sure actual commitments are met and done, rather than vague statements expressing good intentions.

## **Equity initiatives**

### **Question 5**

**Are you aware of any issues particular to students with a disability when they transit to high school and, if so, how could they be addressed? Are these issues likely to be addressed in the Department's Transition to Year 7 program?**

Students have to be re-assessed at movement between primary and secondary. This can be a frustrating and time-consuming event, as well as potentially disruptive to continuity of educational experience.

That there is no mention of students with disabilities or special needs is a glaring omission in the current policy. Teachers need accurate information for class placement, allocation of resources and to inform teaching practice. It is too late in Term 3 to find out that a student had been on a special reading program in the primary school when the parent is phoned to discuss a student's lack of engagement with the work.

### **Question 6**

**What sort of programs and support is in place for students in the middle years with literacy problems? How should these initiatives be enhanced?**

Programs such as the Learning Assistance Programs (LAP) can be effective, once again, as with transition programs, if they are properly resourced. However, too often, programs are ad hoc, or badly thought out, and/or disappear after a short period of time. The funding is inadequate and rationed. It is hard for secondary school teachers to ensure the more challenging lessons are taught when the school learning support officer is timetabled.

One example is the deployment of Learning Assistance Co-ordinators. Eighty additional places were funded, but instead of them being added to the pool of Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) who currently teach in schools, co-ordinating programs for students needing particular support, brand new positions were created. By and large, no-one knows what they are meant to do, or whether this is an effective use of an additional resources. It was put in place in great haste, seemingly without reference to what already existed, or where shortfalls may occur, and are vulnerable to disappearance in one of the frequent, almost routine, restructures that the DET is subject to.

### **Question 7**

**What alternatives are available for middle year students who have been suspended from school and how can these be strengthened?**

Return to school after suspension programs can be as effective as they are well resourced. In some places they consist of a returning student wandering the corridors with a piece of paper asking individual teachers to tick a form to say they can come back to class; in other places there are well structured programs which may involve part time attendance at a Tutorial centre.

There are long waiting lists for attendance at Behaviour Units and Tutorial Centres. Demand is not met. There is problem of access in regional areas.

All students who are suspended should have an appropriately funded place in an alternate setting while their needs are assessed, and then a proper program put in place to meet their needs. This is especially important now that the school leaving age is to be raised. Students cannot be left to languish at home in front of daytime television during the compulsory years of schooling.

## **School/community interface**

### **Question 8**

**The Federation has recommended that funding be made available to create and maintain out-of-schools hours care for children aged 12-14. What sort of programs should be put in place, and what types of organisations should be involved in providing these programs?**

This is an interagency question. All sorts of programs need to be funded as part of a community initiative – ranging from homework centres to low or no cost sporting and cultural activities which excite and engage early and mid adolescents. At the moment involvement in sport outside school costs a lot of money in fees, equipment and registration.

Community organisations such as PCYC, YMCA, Youth Centres, Cultural groups, sporting organisations need to be funded to provide activities.

Many libraries and schools already offer ad-hoc homework centres, running on the good will of librarians and teaching staff. Need to be properly supported.

Too often young people in the critical stage of early adolescence are blamed for social tension and ill-will, but it seems resources and places to keep them actively engaged in healthy pursuits are hard to come by, and not properly funded.

Too often great programs start up on an ad hoc basis, with seed funding, or no guarantees of continuity of funding. Continuity and consistency is the one area where adolescents are reliant on provision from the adults they are in contact, and the agencies and programs set up to work with and for them.

Some of the money spent putting young people at risk into detention could be diverted to programs supporting young people and their families.

### **Question 9**

**What discussions, if any, have taken place in recent years in relation to full service schools? What are the Federation's views about full service schools?**

There have been discussions at various times about this concept. One example in Sydney was when Alexandria Park Community School was being planned, there was talk of it becoming a "full service school." Nothing came of this; it became a victim of cost-cutting and the usual "big words, no action" modus operandi of the state government. A similar thing happened some time ago in Narrandera.

Federation has again been involved in discussions about the future of the public schools in Walgett, again without any noticeable action on the part of the DET.

Federation is more than willing to engage with tangible proposals, and eagerly awaits the DET getting beyond the tea-and-biscuits stage of planning for something effective.

### **Question 10**

**Several submission to the Inquiry have recommended that the Schools as Community Centres program should be extended to secondary schools. Do you think that this would be desirable, and should it be more widely available in NSW primary schools?**

Schools As Community Centres are a great idea, where they work, which they do in various places. They should be independently evaluated because there is real potential to expand them, including into secondary schools.