

## **A Guide to Reform in the Middle Years of Schooling**

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July 2004

### **A Changed Context**

The quality of a society's education system is a good indicator of the quality of life in that society. Globally nations are striving to improve the education provided to citizens and to ensure that young people are being provided with learning experiences that equip them to be capable, confident and informed global citizens. But the rapid shifts in social, cultural and economic life and the uncertainties provoked by these changes has placed stress on and highlighted the need to reform many of our social institutions, including schools. What we are doing in schools is becoming increasingly out of step with what our young people value and what is needed for them to function effectively in a rapidly changing society.

Although schools cannot solve the problems of an increasingly complex world, unless changes are made to how schools operate they face the danger of becoming identified as a contributor to alienation, social fragmentation and economic stagnation rather than a contributor to social cohesion and economic wellbeing.

Consequently, governments and schools in concert with their communities have embarked upon various educational reforms in an attempt to make schooling more effective in promoting the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for the emerging service and information-based economies and the diverse social milieu of contemporary society. However, many reforms have tried to bring about improvement through changing external structures. To achieve improved student engagement in and the desired learning outcomes for the middle years of schooling, it is necessary to re-think the very heart of the teaching-learning interaction, in addition to its implications for other aspects of schooling.

This paper commences this process and signals some of the key new directions that are needed to help restore the relevance of schooling in the information society. Above all, the paper provides a checklist to guide schools and clusters in their quest for middle years reform and against which their progress can be measured.

### **Reform Responses**

As we learn more about the changing nature of work and the changing nature of communities what becomes apparent is that whilst many schooling practices are designed to give our young people the kinds of learning experiences that will best equip them for these changes, many are not.

Victoria's Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) project has shown that positive advances are made when:

- schools and their communities recognise that there is a need for change
- school leaders and teachers believe that they have a responsibility for sustaining motivation and improving skills of students and teachers respectively
- primary and secondary schools collaborate through clusters to build curriculum consistency and facilitate student transition
- professional learning teams are established to support teachers to plan, implement and evaluate school change
- reforms are supported by targeted increases in resources
- data-driven, evidence-based approaches to school improvement are adopted.
- three-year action plans and targets are established and tested against data.

The MYRAD outcomes and the reconceptualisation of teaching and learning and other school practices that has been supported through the MYRAD project provide a solid foundation upon which further system-wide reforms can now be built.

### **Essential learning outcomes**

Whilst this paper calls for a reorientation of schooling and substantial change in the way that schooling and learning is conceived it will still be vital that schools provide all students with foundational literacy and numeracy skills, together with traditional cultural knowledge. However, these are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. They are the tools that we all need to become engaged thinkers and to continue to engage with learning throughout life.

There is also a broad consensus that to function effectively in the information society schooling should provide young people with the capacity and motivation to be:

- a community-builder, with strong social competencies and resilience, a positive valuing of self, and a conscious personal and social values base;
- a team worker with skills in co-operation, communication and negotiation;
- able to find, select, structure and evaluate information; to be intellectually curious and able to find problems;
- a problem-solver, complex thinker, original/creative thinker, critical thinker, intellectual risk-taker, and decision-maker;
- independent of mind, responsible, persevering, self-regulating, reflective, self-evaluating and self-correcting;
- flexible and the able to adapt to change, through knowing how to learn and wanting to continue to learn throughout life.

Schools may not be able to ensure all young people fully embody these attributes and attitudes, they must however see this task as their core purpose.

A great deal has been written about the characteristics and developmental needs of young adolescents. The over-riding message is that this is a very diverse group as the profound physical, social, emotional and intellectual development changes they are going through are not experienced consistently within and between gender groups, nor are they managed equally well. They make many false starts on the transition from dependence to independence and need to be supported through these times of potential and promise, of frustration and uncertainty.

Our middle years students have a need right now for all of the thinking and learning strategies, the problem-solving and critical thinking skills, the knowledge of self as a person and learner, the flexibility, adaptability and the non-routine functioning that we can help them develop.

### **Working with Adolescents**

A great deal is known about what engages adolescents with schooling and learning and why middle years students disengage or become alienated from schooling and learning.

For example, we know students respond positively to a curriculum that links to and is meaningful in their lives outside as well as inside the classroom, an authentic curriculum. They value opportunities to explore new ideas in depth and to do so in cooperative learning situations in which they feel secure and are able to take intellectual risks. They respond well to teachers who know them well and whose teaching is student –focused and built on a sound knowledge of students’ and their needs and expectations.

Conversely, they do not respond well to a curriculum that is competitive and fails to cater for their range of skills, interests and futures. They do not respond well to learning situations in which their views and life experiences are ignored, where opportunities to make decisions about what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed are denied and where they are not valued as individuals.

We must strengthen the motivation, engagement and learning of all middle year students and to do this, many of the conditions and practices of our schools must be transformed.

## **Schooling for the Next Generation**

There is a growing body of research locally and internationally that has identified the most promising avenues to reform. Some of these reform strategies are practices that have been around for a long time but have not been adopted in a sustained way, others are relatively new practices that are generating high levels of interest and others are 'emerging big ideas' that are still being investigated and refined.

For convenience the reform elements have been categorised under four inter-related headings: organisation, curriculum, pedagogy and environment. Each of these headings is intimately related and for genuine and sustained reform to occur will require system support and whole school commitment.

### ***School Organisation***

It is clear that neither the standard model of primary schooling, which is particularly effective in the early years, nor the standard model of secondary schooling, which is effective for average and above average students in the senior years, works well in the middle years.

Our knowledge of middle years' students indicates that teaching and learning should be personalised to the maximum extent possible. By reducing the number of teachers with whom students interact on a regular basis, and having a stable team of teachers working with a consistent group of students, higher levels of rapport, trust and learning can be achieved and the potential for consistency between teachers enhanced. Each student should also have a single teacher who can act as both mentor and role model, and as their main point of reference within the school.

A focus on a team structure also provides benefits in terms of shared planning and collegiate support and increases the options available for curriculum delivery and for addressing student discipline and welfare matters. Team structures also offer increased opportunities for teacher initiative, development and leadership and the interaction with a smaller group of students enables teachers to be more informed about student learning needs. Timetabling arrangements that enable teams to exercise greater autonomy over the way they wish to engage in the learning process also enhance the possibility that conventional approaches will be supplanted by more innovative grouping arrangements.

### ***Curriculum***

Although the question of what the essential learnings for young people are will always be present in a reformist agenda, the growing consensus around the attitudes and attributes that will be needed to function effectively in the information society helps to define essential learning.

In addition to foundational and cultural studies, students will need to be able to problem-solve and exercise intellectual and moral judgement. They will need to be creative, innovative and resilient and have highly developed inter-personal skills. Curriculum programs must be developed to enable all students to master essential areas of knowledge and develop necessary personal competences and values.

The curriculum should enable students to investigate issues that are meaningful to them, in ways that require them to use and build on existing knowledge and skills. An essential part of the formal and informal curriculum will be instruction in thinking, learning and problem-solving strategies and exposure to ways of working that build personal and group competencies.

Effective approaches to middle schooling require greater cooperation and collaboration between teachers and others across the traditional primary-secondary divide, to ensure consistency of approach and continuity of education for students. In particular, there is a need to avoid overlap and repetition and to promote the integration of learning experiences. Local clusters are a means for fostering productive interaction between teachers.

### ***Teaching and Learning***

Too often it is assumed that intellectual, personal and social learning will be developed through passive involvement in an academic curriculum. As adolescents tend to vary in their development so markedly,

activities should be developed to expose them to a wide range of intellectual, emotional and role experiences and to actively engage them in co-constructing learning and reflecting on the process of learning itself.

Students should be identified as an active agent in their own learning and be provided with all necessary coaching and peer support to see the purpose of specific learning activities and achieve agreed essential learning outcomes. Students should be encouraged to accept increasing responsibility for their own learning, including the establishment of short and long term learning goals.

Providing greater choice and responsibility for how students undertake and demonstrate their learning can increase engagement and reduce the feeling that school is merely routine and dull. Students and teachers alike should be encouraged to try things out, take risks and learn from the experience.

A feature of teaching and learning activity should be practical activity linked to significant and valued concepts, principles and theories that are relevant to later learning and life. Involving students in practical activities related to real life problems appears to make their learning more relevant and challenging; especially when it is linked to generating products of real value that are exhibited to a range of audiences for feedback.

Teachers should adopt a variety of teaching methods to avoid the predictable and routine, and should demonstrate flexibility in adapting the curriculum to the specific needs of their students.

### ***The School Community***

One feature of present day life for adolescents appears to be their general segregation from adults other than teachers and family members. Students learn from interacting with adults and adult support is generally a prerequisite requirement underpinning students' willingness to take on new challenges and responsibilities.

It has been said that parents make powerful allies and dangerous enemies. Parents and the community need to become collaborators in reforming the middle years of schooling. They need to be made aware of the need for and the objectives of school reform and be involved in identifying reform strategies if they are to become genuine partners in their children's learning. Schools need to consult with parents to identify and respond to their concerns and, where possible, involve them in activities to support their children's learning. In addition, parents need to know what their children are doing, and the approaches that teachers adopt,

Schools should foster inter-agency cooperation to ensure that all young adolescents are adequately catered for in their middle years. In particular, educational opportunities for students with special needs can be enhanced when representatives from the education, health and welfare sectors work cooperatively and in structured ways.

### **A Checklist for Middle Years Reform**

Whilst it is likely that all of the reform elements outlined above can be found somewhere in Victorian schools, it is also likely that very few schools are operating to address all of the elements. The checklist below provides schools with a guide to reform in the middle years. It is premised on a whole of school approach to reform and active collaboration between schools in cluster groups.

Unfortunately there is no blueprint for middle years reform that can be applied to all school situations. Each school has its own history, culture and set of characteristics and each school will need to find its own reform pathway. The checklist of practices below is derived from research literature and reformist school practice and provides schools and clusters with signposts to the most promising approaches for transforming the middle years of schooling.

For convenience the checklist items have been categorised under seven foci for reform: values and beliefs, teaching-learning practices, school organisation, curriculum content and design, assessment, school culture and environment and, finally, primary-secondary cluster planning.

### ***1. Values and beliefs***

The beliefs underpinning reforms and the values promoted through reforms are at the heart of the changes required. Our knowledge of society, of students and of how learning takes place should drive our activities. Our reform also needs to be based on a fundamental set of core beliefs. Schools that effectively address reform in the middle years believe that:

- all students can learn, although they are unlikely to do so at the same pace and in the same way
- schools can make a difference to students' learning outcomes, regardless of who the students are and what their social circumstances are
- student effort and desire to learn will produce learning improvement and success.

They also have worked hard at making explicit their beliefs and gaining commitment to a shared set of beliefs and understandings about schooling in the middle years.

### ***2. Teaching-learning practices***

In contrast to the routine, repetitive, passive approaches aimed at transmission of inert information, teaching-learning practices should:

- embody active, sustained, in-depth understanding and building of meaning by individuals and groups
- enable students to develop the learning values, strategies, skills and attributes targeted as learning outcomes
- promote a classroom culture of constructive, supportive relationships, where teachers model the targeted learning values, strategies, skills and attributes
- provide students with structured experiences that teach them how to manage their own learning and make decisions about learning goals, processes, and evaluation.

### ***3. School organisation***

Teacher-student groupings should be arranged so that:

- the number of different students encountered by each teacher each week is reduced, to enable teachers to have individual knowledge of students and of their learning needs and progress
- a greater length of time is spent by teachers with the same students, increasing teacher knowledge of individual students and student relationships with teachers
- the number of different teachers encountered by students is reduced, for the same purpose
- small teacher teams are established, to provide greater consistency and flexibility in teaching each group of students, increased knowledge of individual students and their learning needs and progress, and increased professional learning.

Learning time in schools should be arranged so that:

- students have sustained time for in-depth learning, rather than fragmented and frequently interrupted learning time that encourages superficial learning;
- students can undertake challenging and rich, problem-based learning tasks;
- a range of learning environments can be used, both inside the school and within the community.

### ***4. Curriculum content and design***

Curriculum content and design should provide for:

- a significant reduction in the amount of content in the formal curriculum and so increase the opportunity for students to build depth of understanding, meaningfulness and thus the capacity to use knowledge.
- direct and explicit teaching of thinking and learning strategies, skills, attributes and values throughout the formal and informal curriculum

- a consistency of approach that is achieved through whole-school targeted learning outcomes and the operation of professional teacher teams.
- structured student involvement in curriculum decision-making (goals, content, process and evaluation) to enable students to learn to manage and make decisions about their own learning.
- the inclusion of substantial, open-ended and challenging problems that students tackle in a cooperative and cross-disciplinary way.
- consistency across the primary and secondary years within the local school cluster in curriculum content and design.

### ***5. Assessment***

Although this is an integral component of the curriculum, it is mentioned separately to emphasize its importance. Assessment will need to be aligned with the new educational focus. Consistent with this, students will need structured involvement in assessment process to enable them to manage and make decisions about their own learning. In addition, assessment will need to target

- in-depth understanding, meaning and use of knowledge, rather than inert and superficial facts and information.
- the complex learning outcomes for the knowledge society
- the holistic products and/or performances that are the results of the substantial, open-ended, cross-disciplinary tasks.

### ***6. School culture and environment***

The desired learning outcomes for students should be embedded in all aspects of the school culture and practice, including:

- the relationships and interactions between :
  - teachers and students,
  - teachers and teachers,
  - leaders and teachers,
  - staff and parents;
- the policies (eg. discipline, school uniform) of the school;
- the manner in which those policies are carried out; and
- the collaborative provision of community services for young people and families, so that there is consistency in the support for the whole student.

### ***7. Primary-secondary cluster planning and consistency***

Regular, frequent and on-going planning and co-ordination within primary-secondary clusters is needed to establish and maintain:

- underlying consistency of targeted, valued learning outcomes, curriculum content and design, assessment purposes, thoughtful teaching and learning practices, and characteristics of school culture, environment and organisation;
- transition strategies that support students;
- the sharing of knowledge about students, their learning progress and needs;
- the enhancement of professional learning for teachers and leaders.

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