The Middle Phase of Learning
State School Action Plan
The State Government's massive and far-reaching improvements to Queensland's world-class education system outlined particular emphasis on the early and senior years of schooling. Now the circle is being completed by improving the middle years.

This Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan developed by Education Queensland recognises the importance of getting the middle years of schooling right for the sake of our children's future.

Research shows that children in this age range are starting to think in a more abstract way about global issues. They are for the first time thinking beyond the home and family. It is also a time when these young people are experiencing the greatest physical, emotional, intellectual and social changes in their lives.

Recent studies have shown that this is a time when many students lose their enthusiasm for learning, disengage from classroom activities and make the least progress in learning. While some students surge forward, others find the challenges too daunting, their interest falls, their progress slows and they are more likely to leave school early.

We want to inspire these young people to keep learning and to provide a smooth transition between Years 7 and 8 and then on to the senior years of schooling.

This action plan recognises the special needs of students across Years 4 to 9 and provides actions for implementation.

Anna Bligh
Minister for Education
INTRODUCTION

Background
In the past five years, Queensland has been a world leader in the pursuit of educational excellence appropriate to the 21st century through a series of major initiatives:

- Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study;
- QSE-2010;
- New Basics Trial;
- Productive pedagogies;
- IDEAS project;
- Outcomes-based curriculum;
- Assessment and Reporting Framework.

The lessons learned from these initiatives – the examples of what works, the evidence of limitations and strengths of current practice, the direction setting and the frameworks – have been used to shape the way forward for the Middle Phase of Learning.

Most recently, the Education and Training Reforms for the Future (ETRF) has seen action commence in the early years, the senior years and in the use of ICTs for learning. The ETRF Green and White Papers signalled the need for equivalent action in the middle years of schooling. Wide public consultation and the report by the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal (MACER) provided clear messages on the need to address:

- curriculum and policy issues associated with adopting a Middle Phase of Learning;
- innovative ways to improve student achievements in the middle years;
- the provision of continuous support to students through different phases of learning;
- specific strategies for students at risk of leaving school early;
- stronger links between primary and secondary schools.

The Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan responds to the MACER report The Middle Phase of Learning.

Rationale

Why focus on the Middle Phase of Learning?

The impact of simultaneous physical, emotional, intellectual and social factors as students move through the Middle Phase of Learning creates needs and challenges for this age group that are significantly different from the needs of younger children or older adolescents.

Recent studies have shown that students are making the least progress in learning and the gap between low and high achievers increases markedly in the middle phase. Students with continuing difficulties in literacy and numeracy find the transition from primary to secondary schooling, and then into senior schooling, especially problematic. These students need to consolidate the building blocks including the foundations of numeracy and concept formation to enable further learning.

Some students become gradually disengaged through classroom activities that are not suited to their learning styles and they lose enthusiasm for learning.
For others, the middle phase can be a watershed. It is a time when their work at school calls for more sophisticated skills, especially in literacy, and greater engagement with abstract knowledge. All students need to engage intellectually, see how school activities are connected to the real world and to their own experience, and be able to use tools to participate successfully in the knowledge economy.

In the Middle Phase of Learning young people begin to think more about the larger world beyond home and school. They begin to think abstractly about important ideas and start to investigate the world around them. They need to develop as autonomous learners. Research tells us that, while a supportive environment is essential, students in the Middle Phase of Learning need to be challenged intellectually to remain engaged.

In addition, profound changes in society mean that students in the Middle Phase of Learning are engaging with diverse cultures and technologies and a far more complex and uncertain world outside school. Most classrooms today include students with considerably different backgrounds, knowledge, skills and talents. In particular, classes in the Middle Phase of Learning have students at the broadest range of stages of physical, social, emotional and intellectual development.

**Definition and approach**

The Middle Phase of Learning typically occurs across Years 4–9 and falls into two distinct stages:

- The first stage signals the transition from the early foundation years. For many students this is a time of expanding curiosity and eager exploration of a broader and deeper range of learning experiences. For others, the challenges are daunting, their interest wanes and progress slows.

- The second stage is characterised by the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of early adolescence. Once again, there is considerable diversity in how and when students move through this stage and what the impact is on their attitude to and success in learning. It is essential in this stage to maintain students' interest and motivation and provide opportunities for them to “catch up” and make fresh starts when progress slows if they are to be ready for the senior phase of learning.

Recent research\(^1\) shows that effective programs in the Middle Phase of Learning do not result specifically from structural change but from a school ethos that focuses on success for each student. In line with this and other findings, the focus for the Middle Phase of Learning in Queensland state schools is on student engagement and achievement rather than physical structures or setting up “middle schools”. Effective middle schooling will occur in the full range of school settings:

- P–7 schools and 8–12 schools, working collaboratively;
- P–10 and P–12 schools;
- schools of distance education; and
- special schools.

\(^1\) Brisbane Catholic Education, *Directions for Middle Phase of Learning 2003*
KEY ELEMENTS OF THE ACTION PLAN

Purpose

Years of research and volumes of reports have focused on what does and doesn't work in the Middle Phase of Learning. Considerable and constructive developmental work in middle school curriculum and planning has been undertaken in Queensland schools over many years, led by innovative teachers and heads of department. There is evidence of strong, diverse teaching and innovative practice but success has been localised and often dependent upon the enthusiasm of individuals.

The New Basics Project has been systematically exploring, testing and mapping the way forward in trial schools, and in the process (without pre-empting the results of the trial) developing resources and methods that can be applied across the state.

The Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan builds on this foundation, moving from research into action and from pockets of innovative practice into system-wide implementation. The Action Plan recognises the Middle Phase of Learning as unique and important and as an organisational principle for the delivery of education services.

The Action Plan sets the direction, clarifies expectations and accountabilities, and commits systemic support for excellence and improvement in the Middle Phase of Learning in every Queensland state school over the next few years.

The cornerstone of the Action Plan is alignment in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to bring greater consistency and rigour to what is taught and greater reliability in and accountability for how it is assessed:

- curriculum – a redefined approach based on a defined range and balance within syllabus requirements and a focus on literacy and numeracy skills;
- pedagogy and relationships – differentiated and high-quality teaching methods that respond to the diversity of students in the middle phase of learning and promote deep learning;
- assessment – statements of standards for key junctures and a combination of teacher-generated tasks and standardised tests for assessing student performance against the standards.

Within this framework, flexible, targeted and timely intervention programs will be introduced to engage those students most at risk, to maximise achievement in literacy and numeracy, to build success, and to strengthen partnerships between schools, home and community.

All programs for the Middle Phase of Learning will reflect the principles of inclusive education, responding to diversity of students and communities through differentiated pedagogy, curriculum pathways and support.

The Action Plan represents Education Queensland's commitment to a renewed focus on the Middle Phase of Learning to ensure every student in Years 4–9:

- engages in purposeful, intellectually challenging learning;
- is provided with opportunities to achieve success;
- is supported in their transition from year to year and from primary to secondary education; and
- interacts with teachers who are prepared to meet the distinctive and diverse needs of students during early adolescence.
The critical role of teachers means that this commitment necessarily involves systemic and local action to improve and increase:

- professional collaboration between teachers across year levels and across primary and secondary years;
- learning and development in the characteristics and needs of students in the Middle Phase of Learning; and
- recognition for middle schooling teachers.

At the heart of the Middle Phase of Learning philosophy that underpins the Action Plan is the critical need to free teachers and students from unproductive "busy-work", to increase the time available to students for deep understanding and engagement, and to provide opportunities for teachers for planning, reflection, collaboration, mentoring and sharing of ideas and learning strategies.

The Action Plan does not attempt to describe all the necessary components for school reform and effectiveness in the Middle Phase of Learning. Rather it focuses on key leverage points – the key action areas that will act as catalysts for change and improvement across the board.

**Key action areas**

The Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan has five key action areas:

- **Focus and accountability** – Putting the Middle Phase of Learning on the map – legitimising the Middle Phase of Learning as an organisational principle in schools and embedding it in school planning and reporting frameworks
- **Curriculum, teaching and assessment** – Improving and connecting the curriculum to promote deeper understanding and higher levels of engagement for students and assessment and reporting based on standards at key junctures
- **Achievement** – Raising the bar for all – increasing flexibility and targeted interventions to lift achievement especially in literacy and numeracy
- **Transition** – Bridging the gap – improving continuity of responsibility, information, curriculum and pedagogy across Years 7–8, and from Year 9 into the Senior Phase of Learning
- **Teachers** – Support, learning and development, and recognition
Focus and accountability

**Challenge:**
*That the status of the Middle Phase of Learning is not equally recognised with other phases of learning and needs to be promoted and acknowledged*

The challenge is to refocus attention and action on the Middle Phase of Learning and legitimise the organisation of classes, events, programs and other school and systemic processes around support, opportunities and challenges for students in Years 4–9.

The Middle Phase of Learning will be embedded as an organising principle in state schools to inform programming, resourcing and planning and, through enhanced accountability mechanisms, to drive improved performance in this phase of learning.

**Action 1:**
*A Middle Phase of Learning Strategy will be implemented in state schools.*

State schools will implement a strategy to actively promote, amongst parents, teachers and the wider community, a renewed commitment to and focus on the Middle Phase of Learning. It will promote a greater understanding and knowledge of the specific characteristics of young people as they move through the middle phase and the impact of these characteristics on learning and teaching. Middle Phase of Learning events, networks, resources and best practice examples will be coordinated and promoted for maximum impact.

**Action 2:**
*The class size targets in the Middle Phase of Learning will be reduced.*

The class size targets will be reduced to support and enhance the positive benefits that can accrue from innovative resourcing models. The current class size targets of 1:30 in Years 4–10 will be reduced to 1:28 by the commencement of the 2007 school year. This will allow teachers to put a greater focus on the pedagogy of middle phase learning.

**Action 3:**
*Curriculum Coordination Time will be increased to allow for greater planning and preparation time for teachers to implement the Middle Phase of Learning.*

Curriculum Coordination Time in middle to large primary schools and special schools will be increased to provide more time and greater flexibility for planning and preparation by teachers and for increased collaboration within and across schools in the primary and secondary sectors.

A curriculum leadership position at Band 4 will be developed to provide focused leadership in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices for access by primary schools which may choose to aggregate Curriculum Coordination Time.
Action 4:
Accountability for outcomes in the Middle Phase of Learning will be strengthened in school planning and reporting processes.

Schools will build into their school improvement and accountability framework a distinct component for the Middle Phase of Learning addressing teaching and learning; assessment and reporting; teacher learning and development; leadership; school organisation; monitoring and early intervention followed by ongoing tracking of individual progress; home, school and community partnerships.

Targeted intervention programs will be implemented in schools that are least effective in delivering Middle Phase of Learning outcomes. The programs will be informed by research on school improvement and whole school reform processes.

Action 5:
The Middle Phase of Learning will be embedded as an organisational principle for state schools through introducing greater flexibility in management arrangements within and across schools.

The structure and organisation of schooling in the Middle Phase of Learning will be characterised by flexibility – in timetabling, student groupings and the use of space and resources – to create communities of learners and a sense of belonging and challenge.

Schools will trial innovative curriculum delivery and clustering arrangements to improve outcomes in the Middle Phase of Learning. Guidelines to support the implementation, where appropriate, of actual and virtual middle schooling precincts will be developed.
Curriculum, teaching and assessment

Challenge:
That students are making least progress in learning and the gap between low and high achievers increases markedly during the Middle Phase of Learning. There is a need for more engaging and intellectually challenging learning, teaching and focused intervention in this phase.

Despite the high quality of Key Learning Area syllabuses and documents, the sheer volume of outcomes statements is daunting for teachers, may reduce the capacity of teachers for timely intervention based on the learning needs of individual students, and may work against curriculum consistency across classes and schools.

The literature on school reform argues strongly that over-elaboration of curriculum content, outcomes and goals has the effect of limiting depth, relevance and intellectual engagement.

This situation has been compounded by the perceived lack of rigour and externally defined standards for assessment and reporting in the Middle Phase of Learning. In the Middle Phase of Learning, there is no mandatory or externally moderated assessment beyond the national literacy and numeracy testing program in the primary years. Improving engagement and achievement in the Middle Phase of Learning brings with it the need for an accountable and reliable assessment regime.

Action 6:
The middle phase curriculum will be reviewed to provide a greater focus on in-depth and authentic learning across Years 4–9.

"Uncluttering" the middle phase curriculum in state schools will provide more space and time for students to achieve deeper understanding and higher levels of engagement in learning. This will be accompanied by greater curriculum consistency across classrooms and schools, and greater continuity across year levels. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment will be aligned.

A Middle Phase of Learning Core Curriculum Project will:
• Define the range, balance and continuity of learnings that will comprise the core curriculum in Years 4–9; and
• Establish trials of clustered teachers developing sample work programs.

Action 7:
Assessment and reporting requirements and accountability for student performance and engagement will be strengthened in state schools.

Standards-based assessment and reporting will occur at key junctures through a combination of teacher-generated tasks and standardised tasks for assessing student performance against the standards. The current work deriving from the Assessment and Reporting Framework will be escalated with a target of system-wide implementation by 2007 (or earlier).

A pilot study of the Assessment and Reporting Framework in Years 4–9 will commence with a view to reporting student achievement against common state-wide standards to parents and the system at key junctures in the Middle Phase of Learning. A review of the current junctures will investigate Year 4 (beginning) and Year 9 (end), rather than Years 3, 6 and 9 as key reporting points for the Assessment and Reporting Framework (Queensland Standards Map).

Destination 2010 targets will be revised to include new targets around the Middle Phase of Learning as well as achievement of the national Year 7 literacy and numeracy benchmarks by 2005.
Achievement

Challenge: *That students make the least progress in learning during the Middle Phase of Learning.*

Recent studies have shown that students are making the least progress in learning and the gap between low and high achievers increases markedly in the middle phase. Students with difficulties in literacy and numeracy find the transition from primary to secondary schooling, and then into senior schooling, especially problematic.

**Action 8:**
*Student progress in literacy and numeracy will be monitored closely and targeted and timely support will be provided.*

State schools will make better use of benchmarking data, in association with school-based assessment, to identify students requiring additional support in literacy and numeracy. While specialist support personnel may be available to support these students, timely intervention is the responsibility of the classroom teacher.

Through the Partners for Success strategy, schools will investigate and implement, with parents and local community members, pedagogy surrounding the teaching of literacy to Indigenous students.

**Action 9:**
*State schools will work with parents and students to increase access to a range of extracurricular activities and options to ensure students in Years 8 and 9 continue to engage in relevant learning.*

For many students, high levels of achievement, leadership and participation in school and extracurricular activities in upper primary years are not matched by opportunities in the junior secondary years. Schools should actively encourage the involvement of students in a range of innovative curricular and extracurricular activities both in and out of school.

Students at risk of leaving school early and those with special talents, interests and needs may require specialised programs beyond those currently offered in schools. Partnerships will be encouraged with the community to extend curriculum, support and mentoring in the Middle Phase of Learning.
Transition

Challenge:
That, in the transition from Years 7–8, a mismatch often exists between primary and secondary curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting practices, and organisational arrangements.

The shift from primary to secondary school can place pressure on students, especially those whose academic or social skills are less developed. Schools need to ensure that this transition is positive – providing continuity for all students to build on their earlier learning and the challenge to feel they are making worthwhile progress. Maintaining the quality of the relationship between students and teachers during these years is critical.

Action 10:
State schools will identify and trial arrangements that ensure a greater degree of alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices in upper primary and lower secondary schooling and improve the transition between Years 7 and 8.

Given that most students experience a change of school site between Year 7 and 8, more comprehensive and consistent assessment and reporting on Year 7 achievement is required. A set of reporting templates for Year 7 achievement will be developed. The scope of reporting will include but extend beyond literacy and numeracy and be based on the curriculum identified in the Core Curriculum Project.

Schools will cluster to facilitate consistent curriculum planning and pedagogy and to share information to improve the seamless transition of students within and across primary and secondary schools.

Districts will investigate innovative staffing and curriculum delivery models across school sites to enhance team planning and teaching arrangements across the transition years.

Teachers

Challenge:
That teaching in the Middle Phase of Learning is not identified as a discrete and valued career option for many teachers and there is a perceived lack of identity, status and recognition for these teachers as a cohort.

This challenge has emanated from the traditional separation of teaching into ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sectors which does not recognise that there are (at least) three discrete phases of learning and that a major physical transition (from one school system and site to another) occurs during this middle phase.

The relationship between teachers and students is especially crucial in the Middle Phase of Learning. Effective practice is contingent on teachers who are able to respond to the distinctive and diverse needs of students; to changing economic, social, and technological conditions; who have a strong desire to work with students in this phase of learning; and who are willing to adapt their teaching strategies to maximise learning outcomes for this group.
Action 11:
Professional development and learning of teachers and principals in the Middle Phase of Learning will be prioritised and promoted.

From 2004, an existing Student Free Day(s)-will be identified for teacher professional development on Middle Phase of Learning issues and effective practice.

A short course on the Middle Phase of Learning for face-to-face and online use will be developed. This course will focus on developing teachers' understanding of student development and the specific pedagogic approaches for the Middle Phase of Learning.

Recognition of the Middle Phase of Learning should be embedded in current and future programs in areas such as literacy; numeracy; science and ICTs for Learning. Learning and Development Centres and Centres of Excellence will provide focused programs for Years 4–9 teachers incorporating Middle Phase of Learning principles.

Action 12:
Negotiations with tertiary providers will be undertaken to review pre-service and post-graduate provision for teaching in the Middle Phase of Learning.

Negotiations with Deans of Education and the Board of Teacher Registration will be undertaken to initiate changes to existing, or the development of new, pre-service and post-graduate qualifications to better prepare teachers for the Middle Phase of Learning.

Action 13:
The contributions of teachers working in the Middle Phase of Learning will be recognised.

All existing teacher and student awards will be reviewed and where appropriate include a Middle Phase of Learning category.
Library Digitised Collections

Author/s:
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