



WORK LIKE THE BEST

Review of middle schooling in the Northern Territory

Vic Zbar

September 2014

Final Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

Executive Summary

Background

In 2003, the Ramsey *Report on Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory* recommended new stages of schooling 'to deal with the wide span of learning required in secondary school, and the very different pedagogies (teaching and learning practices) needed to appeal to younger secondary-aged students, as compared with those required for young people approaching adulthood.'

More specifically, Ramsey proposed a shift to two clear stages of secondary schooling, the 'later middle years' (Years 7-9) and the 'senior years' (Years 10-12), necessitating a staged shift of Year 7 students to high school where that wasn't already the case, and Year 10 students to senior schools.

The introduction of these two stages was to be accompanied by changes to curriculum and pedagogy for each stage, and also changes to the pre-existing organisational and physical structures of schools. It was proposed in this context that the Department of Education develop a policy and strategy for the Territory-wide implementation of curriculum and pedagogy for the later middle and senior years.

As a result, the Territory introduced Year 7 to 9 middle schools in 2007 and developed a suite of documents to support schools and teachers in this regard — i.e. a guide to planning, teaching, assessing and reporting learning, along with a range of advice and tools.

Review of Performance of Middle Schools

In May 2014, the Minister for Education, the Hon Peter Chandler MLA, commissioned Vic Zbar, from Zbar Consulting, to conduct a review of the middle years schooling in the Northern Territory, with a view to strengthening the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of education for middle years' students in Northern Territory Government schools.

The review process utilised quantitative (e.g. examination of enrolment and attendance, NAPLAN, NTCET and VET data) and qualitative methods (e.g. interview and focus groups) to develop a set of recommendations regarding middle schooling. The review evaluated the impact on attendance, retention, Year 12 completion rates, student outcomes, student wellbeing and parent and community satisfaction.

The review was limited to the six provincial middle schools in Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs and four larger comprehensive schools, as follows:

Middle Schools

- Centralian Middle School
- Darwin Middle School
- Dripstone Middle School
- Nightcliff Middle School
- Rosebery Middle School
- Sanderson Middle School

Comprehensive Schools

- Katherine High School
- Nhulunbuy High School
- Taminmin College
- Tennant Creek High School.

Findings

The Final Report from the review was presented to the Department in September 2014. The review found significant variation in practice and performance between and within Middle Schools throughout the Northern Territory, a situation that is not unique to this jurisdiction. Research suggests that the greatest source of improvement for any school or system comes from the extent to which this variation can be reduced so that more schools and teachers do 'Work like the Best.'

The discussion in the report is designed to provide the direction and support needed to enable middle schools and their principals and teachers to improve their performance to improve the overall educational experience and achievement of students.

The research, visits, teleconferences and consultations conducted for this review demonstrated that working like the best depends on:

- developing a compelling shared vision to provide the motivating moral purpose for middle schooling in the Northern Territory, and the report provides a sample vision statement to get the discussion underway;
- leadership for whole-school improvement supported by an accredited leadership coach for the principal of each middle school;
- a disciplined and orderly learning environment based on the successful School Wide Positive Behaviour Support framework, where each student feels there is a teacher who knows and cares for them;
- a curriculum framework appropriate to young adolescents that ensures an adequate base of literacy and numeracy (with some necessary training for teachers in this regard) and access to rich, engaging interdisciplinary projects that tackle big questions and meet a range of standards for the Australian Curriculum;
- consistent assessment across the middle years to enable system and school monitoring of student achievement and planning to improve it;
- good, collaborative planning of lessons by teachers using an instructional model to spread consistently better teaching practice through each school;
- continued improvement of already good transition arrangements in place by ensuring formal transition plans that enable every student to be known by staff on entry to year 7 and then be prepared for success when leaving for year 10; and
- systemic leadership and support that reports on progress in implementing these strategies and fosters constituencies of middle school leaders and teachers that enable their voices to be heard and their professional practice to improve.

The report contains recommendations for each of these elements for further improving the middle years of schooling in the Northern Territory. There are also recommendations to ensure the necessary data regime is in place to support better planning and monitoring of performance by the system and that quality exemplars (models) are developed for schools and teachers to adapt and implement so they can 'work like the best.'

Detailed Overview and Context for Recommendations

The 2003 report on *Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory* recommended that two clear stages of secondary schooling be established in the Northern Territory; middle schools¹ catering for students in Years 7 to 9, and senior schools catering for students in Years 10 to 12.

The transition to the new structure commenced in 2006, with the first students to complete the entirety of their secondary schooling under the new model graduating from Year 12 in 2013; making a review of middle years schooling timely.

In 2014, the Hon Peter Chandler MLA, Minister for Education, commissioned Vic Zbar, of Zbar Consulting, to conduct a review of middle schooling in the Northern Territory. The review encompassed the six provincial middle schools in Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs and four larger comprehensive schools. More specifically, the ten schools covered by the review are:

- Centralian Middle School
- Dripstone Middle School
- Rosebery Middle School
- Katherine High School
- Taminmin College
- Darwin Middle School
- Nightcliff Middle School
- Sanderson Middle School
- Nhulunbuy High School
- Tennant Creek High School

The review's focus on these ten schools accords with the view adopted by Wilson in his Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory that '*secondary education should, with some exceptions, be delivered in the NT's urban schools in Darwin, Palmerston, Alice Springs, Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Tennant Creek*' (2014:12). This is the subject of specific recommendations in that report, including recommendation 27 that the Territory should progressively move to deliver '*the majority of middle years schooling in urban schools with a critical mass of students*' (Ibid:22).

The review comprised: detailed analysis of systemic data and documents as well as a range of material provided by schools; desktop research on middle schooling to inform the review report; visits to the urban middle and comprehensive schools and some targeted senior schools, supplemented by extended teleconferences with other relevant schools, support centres and regional offices/departmental staff; stakeholder consultations including student and parent forums in Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs; interviews with relevant Department personnel; drafting of the review report; briefings for key stakeholders and School Councils in Greater Darwin and Alice Springs; and finalising the review report.

This methodology enabled the development of a review report that analysed current performance in middle schools; forming the basis for discussion around how it can be improved, taking account of the nature of the cohort and the implications this has for middle schooling in the Northern Territory.

Following a range of visits and discussions conducted through the review, along with the detailed document and data analysis, it is clear that there is much good practice occurring in the middle years of schooling in the Northern Territory. The issue is that there is a lack of

¹ For the purpose of this report, the term 'middle schools' should be taken to refer to Years 7 to 9 in all schools unless specified otherwise. This is designed to avoid having to continually specify that the review applies to both the urban middle schools and the comprehensive schools providing education for students in Years 7 to 9.

systemic direction for schooling in this phase, with a consequent lack of consistency that prevents good practice being generalised across schooling for the middle years. The result is substantial variability of effectiveness in generating improved learning outcomes for all students in Years 7-9.

A significant focus of the review report is on identifying best practice for schooling in the middle years; based on successful experience, relevant research and mechanisms by which it can be implemented strategically and hence consistently across middle and comprehensive schools. The intent is to support more schools and teachers to apply best practice methods, as this is the greatest source of improvement in any system and school. This process is outlined in terms of a framework for schooling in the middle years and is derived from elements of the research on effective middle schooling which suggests the needs to be addressed — including, a vision for schooling in this phase, leadership for whole school improvement, structuring provision to ensure an orderly learning environment where students are well known, curriculum and assessment for the middle years, pedagogy for the middle years, transition into and from the middle years, and systemic leadership and support.

The recommendations advanced are designed to be pragmatic and replicable across schools and classrooms, strategic so they focus on what matters most to make the difference in middle schooling in the Northern Territory, and aligned to strategies, approaches and support already in place.

Nature of the recommendations from the review

The reviewer is impressed with the criteria Wilson adopted for framing recommendations in his review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory and hence has sought to mirror the approach.

More specifically, the recommendations are designed to be:

- **Pragmatic**, so they are replicable across middle school sites and classrooms, and based on what schools, principals, teachers and other educators can realistically deliver in the Northern Territory.
- **Strategic**, in that they focus on what matters most to make the difference in middle schooling in the Northern Territory, rather than seeking to tackle everything schooling in the middle years does. *'The focus', as Wilson puts it, 'is on those areas where action is most needed, is most likely to achieve significant improvement and is likely to require a manageable level of resourcing'* (2014:14).
- **Aligned**, to strategies, approaches and support already in place so the system and schools can build on what exists, rather than seeking to reinvent the wheel.

This reflects a view discussed in detail in Chapter 5 that a range of reviews and supports have only haphazardly been implemented, with the result that significant change has been initiated, but its implementation insufficiently consolidated to have the intended positive effects.

A 'snapshot' of performance

It is important to emphasise that this review is of the models of middle schooling in the Northern Territory, and not a formal review of each middle school. That said, it is necessary to underpin the review with some consideration and analysis of school performance in the middle years. A range of performance data was therefore analysed to enable a 'snapshot' of performance to be gained in the context of the different circumstances of each school.

The review process revealed many examples of excellent practice that contributes markedly to improved student outcomes in the middle years, however overall practice is variable between and within the schools.

Enrolments, retention and attendance

Enrolments have generally been either stable or increased over time in middle schools, in contrast to middle years enrolments in the comprehensive schools (excluding Katherine High School), though this sometimes is for reasons beyond the control of the school e.g. a refinery closure in the town.

Raising real retention from Year 7 to the end of Year 9 is a challenge to nearly all of the schools and appears to relate more to proximity or distance from Greater Darwin than it does to whether the school is a middle or comprehensive school. Similarly, there is no evident pattern of attendance to suggest a difference between middle and comprehensive schools as structures in their own right, and attendance levels across the board need to be significantly improved

Improving government middle schooling so it is chosen by more parents in the Territory therefore is a focus of this component of the review report, rather than any structural change to the delivery of education to students in the middle years.

NAPLAN results

The Department's Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel provides a generally positive picture of National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) performance though improvement is greater in the primary than the middle years.

The value schools add in this context is variable from year to year, though there is no discernible difference between the middle and comprehensive schools. This suggests that other factors than structure determine the outcomes the schools achieve and hence the focus of this component of the report is on what research suggests can make the difference to student learning outcomes in the middle years.

Data for informed decision making

NAPLAN is the only consistent assessment that applies in Northern Territory middle schools and needs to be supplemented by a variety of high-quality data that can help the system to gain a richer and deeper appreciation of the overall performance of its middle schools, and the schools themselves to determine their key successes on which to build and the major challenges they need to address.

While there is substantial data available in the Department, it commonly is disparate and disconnected, so it is hard to gain a clear sense of performance on a range of indicators that can help devise appropriate strategic responses at both the school and system level. There are also some significant gaps, such as the absence of stakeholder opinion survey results and readily available systemic data on Year 12 completion rates that could inform any meaningful judgment of the impact of middle schooling in this regard. In addition, the

assessment data collected by schools aside from NAPLAN, while extensive in some cases, is not consistent, comparable or shared.

Put simply, the Department needs better and more comprehensive data to know what its middle schools are doing and how they are performing, and the schools themselves need better, more user-friendly data to inform their planning at the local level.

Recommendations

1. That the Department of Education initiate a project to:
 - consolidate the range of data needed to inform school and system planning and the monitoring of performance against school and system goals; and
 - analyse the data collected in order to provide consolidated reports to schools and the Department, including the identification of emerging systemic trends that may need to be addressed and, where appropriate, reviews of targeted innovations to determine the evidence for their effectiveness and continued use.

The use of such consolidated data sets should first be trialled with a sample of primary, middle and senior schools and refined as needed to ensure that they contribute to more informed decision making in the Department and schools.

2. That the current staff opinion survey in the Northern Territory be updated to reflect nationally agreed requirements and include a variable on teachers' views of student motivation to learn. The updated survey should be administered annually to staff in the middle schools.
3. That a student opinion survey be developed for students in Years 7 to 9 and administered annually to all students in these years. Further, a parents' survey should be developed with appropriate translations, and administered to a sample of at least 30 parents each year in middle schools.

The nature of the cohort and its implications

As a group, young adolescents reflect important developmental characteristics, albeit at varying rates, which have implications for the way in which they are taught, and puts a premium on the need for clarity about the purpose of learning and hence the extent to which teachers' learning intentions are clear.

Peer relationships assume greater importance and teachers need to support students to establish the mode of peer interaction that ensures they make appropriate decisions about learning and their work. The slower maturing capacity to control emotions suggests a need for clear boundaries for students linked to an orderly learning environment where students are well known by the staff.

The policy context

There is a range of policy documents designed to guide the delivery of middle schooling in the Territory and support the work of principals, teachers and schools. Some of these are no longer available for use by teachers and schools and most are pitched at a high level without sufficient examples to enable them to be readily implemented in schools. A need exists to provide a structure that can help schools to effectively plan, implement and support the sort of capacity building that will enable more schools and teachers to work like the best.

The Assessment and Standards Middle Years project² is a welcome initiative in this regard that can help shift what are often broad brush policy statements to the sort of finer detail that can help form part of the actual picture that applies in schools. Potentially as valuable is the work of the Department's Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel and the opportunity exists to align the work of these two.

Recommendation

4. That wherever possible, Department policies designed to guide schooling in the middle years be accompanied by exemplars to support schools to effectively implement them at the local level. Further, the Department should seek to ensure a formal connection exists between projects that are established with similar and/ or related objectives and hence potentially overlapping work, to ensure consistency of approach, economies of scale and the provision of coherent advice to schools.

Adopting a strategic approach

Reading the range of reports and policy documents provided as input to the review, one is struck by the fact that a lot seems to have been tried, with variable implementation success and arguably no substantial improvement in student results. This may in part reflect a search for the 'silver bullet' that never is found and the fact that nothing is really bedded down.

It is well-known from research and experience that organisations commonly experience an implementation dip as they seek to implement change. When schools or systems continually review direction or seek further change they effectively set off further dips and nothing gets properly implemented as a result. School principals, teachers and the system all need time to consolidate and successfully implement change. Thus, rather than seeking to point to major systemic changes required to middle schooling, the review focuses on identifying the few big things in middle schooling that can have a significant impact, and then planning to do them well.

A vision for middle schooling

While the middle schools themselves all have vision and/or mission statements to guide their work, there does not appear to be a systemic statement of vision for middle schooling in the Northern Territory.

A compelling, shared vision should be crafted to provide the context for specifying more concrete goals for middle schooling, and the strategies that will bring this about in ways that carry stakeholder support. Just as important as crafting the vision, however, is the process by which it occurs, so that buy-in to the outcome and its subsequent implementation can be assured. The report provides a sample vision statement and the core beliefs on which it is based to inform the process the Department initiates subsequent to this review.

A vision statement specific to the middle years of schooling could also help to inform the development of a statement of what it means to be a leader and a teacher in the middle years, and their training through the relevant tertiary institutions.

² The Assessment and Standards Middle Years project is led by the Curriculum, Assessment and Standards team within the Northern Territory Department of Education's School Support Services directorate.

Recommendations

5. That the Department, through a collaborative process, develop and implement a set of core guiding beliefs for schooling in the middle years; using the set provided in this report as a basis.
6. That the Department develop, consult on and adopt a vision statement for the middle years of schooling taking account of the sample provided in this review report to in turn inform school level vision statements crafted together with the local school community.

Leadership for whole school improvement

Leadership and the existence of a cohesive and effective leadership team is a fundamental precondition for whole school improvement to occur. Implementing any vision for middle schooling in the Northern Territory depends on the nature and quality of leadership at the school level and systemic support for it to continually improve.

All middle schools are trying to develop more effective leadership teams and are at different stages along the way. In some schools the team has been developing for a number of years and a stable team exists that works together well and where team members complement each other's skills. In others, the teams have been established relatively recently, often under a newly-appointed principal who is working to build the team's capacity to oversee improvement in the school. Other teams have been less stable and need more time to develop as aligned and cohesive groups that can really impact the school.

In his review of Indigenous education, Wilson identified the need to strengthen principal quality in remote settings through a range of measures which, with some minor contextual adjustments, could equally apply to principals in middle schools.

All principals, and by extension their leadership teams, could benefit from having a leadership coach in the same way as top level leaders in business, industry, the public sector and indeed many schools around the country do. Coaching is a key mechanism for strengthening the quality of leadership in schools. Expert advice sought for the review suggests a minimum of ten significant coaching sessions is needed in a year to have a lasting impact on the leader being coached.

Until the recent appointment of the Director for Secondary Education, middle school leaders did not feel as if they had any representation in the Department or the principal forums it conducts. In the course of developing the more strategic and coherent approaches to improving schooling in the middle years sought by this review, significant value can be gained by fostering a constituency for middle school leaders that could also run a significant annual conference for middle school leadership teams.

Recommendations

7. Recommendation 44 of the Indigenous Education Review (IER) proposes the implementation of a range of strategies to raise the quality of principals in remote schools. It is recommended that appropriate elements of this recommendation (i.e. 44a, b and e in particular) be extended to encompass middle school principals and be developed to supplement the implementation of the IER.

8. That the Department support each middle school principal and leadership team to have a leadership coach. More specifically, the Department should provide seed funding for one year to enable each principal to select an appropriate coach from an accredited panel of leadership coaches the Department identifies who will provide ten significant coaching sessions face-to-face and/or online (with at least the first and last two sessions conducted face-to-face), and ongoing liaison as needed in between. Any extension of coaching arrangements beyond one year will be at the school's expense.
9. That the Department provide funding for personnel support to one of the middle school principals selected by their peers to establish and maintain a middle years leaders' network that will meet regularly to: share experiences and build leadership capacity in middle schools; and serve as a conduit between the Department and its leaders in middle schools. In addition, the Department should support the conduct of an annual middle years leaders' conference managed by the network to address significant issues and research relevant to improving schooling in this phase.

Structuring provision in the middle years

The issue of structure is not so much one of middle versus comprehensive schools as it is a question of how well each school is structured to ensure the students are known well and supported to succeed. Successful middle schools, according to the National Middle Schools Association in the US, provide organisational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning, thereby contributing to an orderly learning environment in the school.

Available data suggests significant levels of disruption in most middle schools which not only affects the students involved, but also detracts from the learning of others in the class. While significant variability of approach exists, a growing number of middle schools are using the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework to ensure an orderly learning environment exists. The approach, which is proving successful where it is used, should be extended to all middle schools and (where possible) combined with the 'Good Standing' program processes in ways that can be adapted to the context of each school. Such consistency in turn would enable the provision of more comprehensive advice as part of the Department's SWPBS webpage.

The 'Good Standing' program has been implemented in schools across Australia and a number of middle schools in the Northern Territory. The program can be adapted to suit the school context, but in general terms encourages the students' development of such positive qualities as work ethic, punctuality, self-discipline and respecting the rights and responsibilities of others and themselves. Satisfactory attendance, punctuality, participation in learning and appropriate behaviour place students in 'Good Standing'. Loss of 'Good Standing' can result in students being refused permission to attend non-curricular events or access to particular rewards.

Regardless of the behaviour management policy and processes adopted, the research is clear that successful middle schools enable young adolescents to form relationships with adults who understand how to support their intellectual, social and emotional development.

A range of approaches are in place in middle schools with varying degrees of success, and some schools are better structured to ensure their students are connected to their teachers, feel cared for and are well known. The Department can assist by providing models for schools to consider, such as the one provided in this report, along with advice on how to effectively use structured home group time.

One thing most middle schools have begun to develop in more effective ways is the range of opportunities for students to exercise leadership in the school and thereby develop as role models for others. This is a trend that should be encouraged since it contributes to improved student engagement at school, a greater willingness for students to take responsibility for the school and its activities, improved teacher/ student relationships and the sort of positive role models who can influence other students in the school.

Recommendations

10. The review notes recommendation 38 of the Indigenous Education Review to mandate School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) for Priority 1 schools and recommends the approach also be adopted and combined with a 'Good Standing' approach to have maximum impact in ensuring an orderly learning environment in all middle schools.
11. That all middle schools be expected to examine their structures for ensuring students are well known by the staff and there is an adult advocate for each student in the school. The Department should provide advice and exemplars of structures that meet this need to inform school deliberations on it.
12. That existing support materials and links on the SWPBS webpage be expanded to include advice and links to support schools and teachers in working effectively with students in the middle years who present with mental health issues and/or who have experienced trauma in their lives.

Curriculum and assessment for the middle years

Consistent with what is known about the phase, curriculum in the middle years needs to address not only the knowledge and skills students are expected to gain, but also the process by which this is to occur, the capabilities young adolescents need to develop and the learning habits to be attained. This implies a greater use of substantial interdisciplinary projects that align to the Australian Curriculum, and tap into young adolescents' emerging ability to understand complex concepts and make connections across subjects in ways that address the goals of instruction and the interests they have. Assessment needs to be aligned to the curriculum for the middle years and the educational focus it adopts, so it both diagnoses students' learning needs and evaluates the progress they have made.

Literacy and numeracy as the base

Literacy and numeracy are the foundations for students to become engaged thinkers who continue to engage with learning throughout life. The Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel identified seven 'fundamental expectations' arising from the research to inform planning, teaching and assessment at the school level. These expectations and associated advice provide an important starting point for guiding and supporting middle schools to improve their literacy and numeracy approaches and thereby raise student achievement as a result.

Significant concern was expressed in this context in some schools about their teachers' capacity to really improve literacy and numeracy outcomes in the middle years, especially given the spread of student achievement levels in most middle school classrooms. This may suggest a need for some targeted, systemic coaching, consistent with the efforts some schools are making to implement an explicit teaching approach. More specifically, schools should be supported to identify one or more literacy and numeracy learning leaders who can be trained in evidence-based literacy and numeracy improvement approaches for students in the middle years, and how to support other teachers in their school to implement these

(e.g. Munro's *High Reliability Literacy Teaching Procedures* and its numeracy equivalent program each offered by the Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER] and Direct Instruction as recommended by the Indigenous Education Review, especially as an intervention for students 'at risk'). To be effective and enable such literacy and numeracy learning leaders to have an impact in their schools, the approach would need to be maintained for a minimum of three years.

Interdisciplinary projects in the middle years

There is substantial consistency around the core subjects that all students take in Years 7 to 9 in middle schools and a degree of commonality about the broad categories of electives they provide. This is underpinned by substantial systemic curriculum support and comprehensive curriculum documentation in some schools. Much of the support, however, appears to be aimed at highly engaged and capable teachers rather than those who are not, but who also have a greater need for it. There is a need to more explicitly show teachers curriculum (and associated teaching and learning and assessment approaches) they can use to better effect, which in turn helps equip them to improve.

The research about young adolescents cited in the report suggests that a challenging and engaging middle level curriculum adopts more of an interdisciplinary approach where essential questions are posed. A need exists to rebalance the curriculum structure and delivery towards a stronger focus on projects where students use inquiry and problem solving to tackle issues they face in their everyday world. This is not to suggest that single subjects ought to disappear from the curriculum, but rather to signal that opportunities should be sought for an interdisciplinary approach where it contributes to meeting the knowledge and skill requirements young adolescents have, and enables the requirements of the Australian Curriculum to still be met.

Ensuring there are more such projects in the mix requires some quality exemplars on which schools and teachers can draw, as they cannot be expected to develop them on their own. Developing quality exemplars is a systemic task that requires time, research, collaboration, trialling and amendment as needed to ensure the exemplars do meet the needs of students in the cohort and will be used by teachers because they are too good to ignore.

An important role for VET

To some extent, another version of interdisciplinary projects with a substantial product at the end, which meets the needs of a significant proportion of students in the middle years are VET courses that middle schools offer, supplemented by the programs offered by the Darwin Area Middle Years Training Centre. Another program of particular importance in this regard is the development of the Employment Pathways Model, which the Indigenous Education Review recommended should be trialled and evaluated and then considered as potentially applicable to all urban middle and senior schools.

Assessment for improved learning in the middle years

The Assessment and Standards Middle Years project is pursuing a range of outcomes and outputs to help ensure a more coherent assessment regime exists in middle schools that reflects high expectations for all students, makes valid and reliable judgments particularly in relation to A to E grading in the school, and is used to inform teaching to enable the full range of student learning needs to be met.

A survey the project conducted, along with data gathered for this review, shows a lack of consistency about assessment practices in the middle schools and hence variability in the quality and effectiveness of the approach. In particular, there is no common and consistent

test to supplement NAPLAN to inform school and system level monitoring and hence planning to improve. The Assessment and Standards Middle Years project, in consultation with middle school principals, should identify a common and consistent assessment regime to adopt, taking account of ACER Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs) and On Demand tests which already are in use in a number of schools. Consideration should also be given to extending this from Year 5 through to Year 10 to support the flow of information to improve transition between schools.

It should be expected that the outcomes of the assessment regime adopted, along with school-based A to E assessments are included on the Department's Student Assessment Information System (SAIS) to ensure a comprehensive database of student performance in Northern Territory middle schools.

Recommendations

13. The review notes and endorses the seven fundamental expectations identified by the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel to inform planning, teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy in middle schools and the development of support materials and professional development aligned to these.
14. That the Department support training of one literacy and numeracy learning leader in each middle school in proven programs for significantly improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for students in Year 7 to 9, and working with other teachers in the school to implement them. The specific training programs to be used should be determined on the basis of advice from the Assessment and Standards Middle Years Project team after consideration of programs available, including the Munro-designed ACER literacy and numeracy programs outlined in this report and Direct Instruction advocated in the IER. The approach adopted should be implemented for a minimum of three years, with a review of implementation and impact in year three to determine if any extension is required.
15. That the School Support Services Division initiate a project to develop an initial set of two quality interdisciplinary project exemplars for each of Years 7, 8 and 9, comprising:
 - advice on the learning intentions and content for the project;
 - the pedagogy for teaching it effectively;
 - assessments, along with success criteria, rubrics and work samples;
 - links to the Australian Curriculum standards;
 - advice on extending higher performing students; and
 - suggested follow up topics, themes and activities.

The project exemplars developed should be trialled in at least two middle and two comprehensive schools to be amended as needed and provided to schools and teachers to adopt and use as they deem appropriate. Following implementation, a feedback loop should be established whereby schools and teachers are encouraged to develop their own interdisciplinary projects and/or improve on the exemplars with a view to submitting these after successful use in schools for quality assurance and inclusion on Learning Links.

16. The review notes recommendation 30 of the Indigenous Education Review to trial and evaluate the Employment Pathways Model in four schools and recommends that, if successful, the outcomes be advised to all middle schools to inform curriculum planning and provide a means of ensuring a blended learning opportunity is available so the learning needs of all students can be met.

17. That all middle schools be expected to implement a common and consistent assessment regime to support the monitoring and improvement of student achievement within and across schools. The nature of the assessment regime should be determined by the Department on the advice of the Assessment and Standards Middle Years Project team in consultation with middle school principals, with specific consideration given to ACER PAT and On Demand tests which are already in use in a number of schools. In addition, all schools should be expected to include their test data, along with teachers' A to E assessments on the Student Assessment Information System the Department maintains. The Assessment and Standards Middle Years Project team should also consider and advise on the applicability of extending the approach from Year 5 to Year 10 to support the flow of information to improve transition between Year 6 and Year 7, and then Year 9 and Year 10.

Pedagogy for the middle years

Teaching is the variable within the control of the school that has the biggest impact on student learning outcomes. That said, we also know that not all teachers have the same effect, and the greatest source of improvement in any school comes from narrowing the gap by supporting more teachers to work like the best, which leads to consistently better teaching in each class.

Good planning, and especially collaborative planning, is arguably the key means to support more teachers to work like the best, and using an instructional model can help to improve teacher planning in schools. A number of middle schools have begun to go down this path though, as has been the story throughout this review, it is a path that has been inconsistently trod.

Visible Learning and an instructional model to consider

Central Region has adopted *Visible Learning* and increased the extent to which evidence-based teaching practices are consistently used. The Indigenous Education Review recommended that Visible Learning should be progressively extended to all schools over time, after an initial review of progress to determine whether the extension ought to be conducted on the same basis as undertaken in Central Australia. This review endorses that view.

In the meantime, however, consistently better teaching practice can be fostered in middle schools by using an instructional model to guide teachers' planning, which can have even greater impact when combined with the sort of curriculum exemplars advocated in this report. The impact of such an approach can be further strengthened by the adoption of routines in class to increase the amount of engaged time on task. Such routines contribute positively to the orderly learning environment in the school, can readily be aligned to complement the use of the SWPBS framework and could be the subject of advice and exemplars the Department provides.

The primary/secondary teaching mix and its implications

One issue that does emerge in the context of any consideration of teacher planning and practice is the possible impact of different teaching traditions in middle schools because of the mix of primary and secondary trained teachers they contain. While too much can be made of this issue, since strong and effective leadership and whole-school processes for better planning of teaching can influence practice in the classroom, it can be relevant where these preconditions do not exist. More specifically, it can sometimes manifest in a lack of sufficient content expertise in some core areas, most notably science and mathematics, with

the result that students in Year 9 in particular may not be sufficiently challenged and/or adequately prepared for Year 10, as some who were consulted in the senior colleges suggested is the case.

A suite of strategies is required, designed to improve the content knowledge and associated teaching skills of the staff in each school, regardless of the basis of their training, most of which are contained in recommendations throughout this review report.

Professional learning to underpin improved teaching

Collaborative professional learning in teams is arguably the key means that schools have to build the collective capacity and effectiveness of their staff, focused on what happens in the classroom and the student learning outcomes that result.

All middle schools have developed whole-school approaches to professional learning, with varying degrees of effectiveness and impact. Most of the schools are well on the way to providing the means for their teachers to plan together in systematic and structured ways. They are arguably less successful in ensuring consistency of the quality of what is planned and that it will make a positive difference to what happens in class.

The professional learning strategy that seems weakest is classroom observation designed to de-privatise teaching in the school. Classroom observation is central to helping teachers improve since it informs feedback and broader collaborative work, and provides a mechanism to spread good teaching practice through the school. The Department can support classroom observation in schools by providing sample pro formas that schools can adapt and use.

A constituency for middle years teaching

Just as there is no obvious constituency for middle years leaders, so too there is no group that appears to provide middle years teachers with both targeted professional learning appropriate to the phase, and a coherent and consistent voice. The Department could support the formation of a middle years teachers' association which conducts an annual teaching-focused conference for its members in schools.

Recommendations

18. That all middle schools be expected to identify and adopt a common instructional model to inform teacher planning of better lessons and units so more teachers can work like the best. The Department should provide one or more sample models that schools can adopt along with advice on developing teaching routines that increase students' engaged learning time on task.
19. That the Department use the vision statement developed through Recommendation 6 to inform both discussions with Charles Darwin University to ensure the inclusion of middle years-specific content in undergraduate training courses and the development of training modules for teachers without a middle years background from outside the Northern Territory who are seeking employment in Northern Territory middle schools.
20. That all middle schools be expected to have a systematic structure in place to enable teachers to plan collaboratively and engage in school-based professional learning to help them to improve. Further, schools should be supported to progressively introduce classroom observation as part of the process as a means of providing improvement-focused feedback to teachers by their colleagues and as an adjunct to the collaborative planning they undertake. The Department should provide such resources to support

these processes as advice on structures to adopt for collaborative teacher planning and pro formas to support a positive approach to classroom observation in schools.

21. That the Department provide seed funding for three years to support the development of a membership-based middle years teachers' association, including support to conduct a major teaching-focused annual conference for teachers in middle schools.

Transition into and from the middle years

As the phase between primary and senior secondary schooling, the middle schools have to focus on transitions into and out of the school; this applies just as much to student movement between Years 9 and 10 in the comprehensive schools since students do then move to a different curriculum and teaching and learning approach.

Transition from feeder primary schools is an area where the middle schools generally seem to be doing reasonably well and are improving. There is substantial commonality of approach, with the one gap that some schools have been trying to fill of consistent assessment data to inform the grouping of students and the extent to which teachers know their students' learning needs from the start of the year. Beyond this, the schools could further strengthen their relations with feeder schools by moving from the positive informal relationships that have been developed to more formal Year 6 to 7 transition plans agreed between the schools.

Transition arrangements from Year 9 to 10 are less comprehensive than into Year 6, though also improving on most counts. More formal processes and plans are needed to ensure that students can enter Year 10 being known to some extent, especially in terms of their current levels of learning and consequent learning needs, and that curriculum content is not unnecessarily repeated in Year 10.

Engaging parents in the school

While not strictly part of transition, engaging parents has a key role to play in any school. This depends on providing a mix of information about what the school is doing and why, to gain their support, and advice on how they can support their children's learning at school.

Middle school websites provide lots of information for the engaged parent who is prepared to search the site. Some schools supplement this with a downloadable parents' handbook and two schools have developed their own app to connect parents more closely to the school. Nearly all of the schools provide good, comprehensive information to parents about their key policies and operations. The missing element is clear advice for parents on how they can really support their children's learning at home. Schools need support in this regard and the Department could provide a short, readable handbook of advice that can be rebadged by schools for distribution to parents in print and/or electronically, with an introduction from the principal of each school.

Recommendations

22. That each middle school be encouraged to develop an agreed Year 6 to 7 transition plan in consultation with its feeder primary schools and their councils, to enable students to be well known when they enter Year 7.
23. That each middle school and its associated senior school be encouraged to develop a transition plan in consultation with their school councils for Year 9 students moving to Year 10 to ensure they are appropriately prepared to succeed in senior school.

24. That School Support Services develop a short, readable handbook of advice for parents on how to support their children's learning and the work of the school that can be badged by schools, with an introduction from the principal to distribute in print and/or electronically to the parent community.

Systemic leadership and support

There is a strong and consistent feeling in middle schools that they are not valued and less understood than either the primary or senior secondary schools. This is something the discussion and recommendations about the need for a vision for middle schooling and the need to build and support constituencies for middle school leaders and teachers are designed to address.

The accompanying feeling the schools have of being left on their own without targeted support can be addressed by the recommendations for common assessments, instructional planning tools, behaviour management approaches and exemplars of various sorts.

The excitement that seems to exist about the appointment of a new Director for Secondary Education provides an opportunity to act to align and support this group of schools.

Implementation of the range of recommendations in this review report can help ensure consistently better middle schooling occurs throughout the Northern Territory, as all schools and teachers are both challenged and supported to work like the best.

Effective implementation will depend on relevant recommendations being included in the annual plans of both the Department and schools, along with regular reporting on progress to the community as a whole.

Recommendation

25. That schools and the Department include the implementation of relevant recommendations from the report in their annual plans and provide an annual report on progress to the community.