

### Some Implications of the Findings

- The schools in our study had strategies in place to ease the transition from Year 8 to Year 9 and these were helpful for students. However, it was evident that there is also a need to provide ongoing, deeper-level support to ensure that students remain engaged in their schooling throughout Year 9 and beyond and continue to build on their prior learning.
- Without appropriate teaching and other support, at least some students are at particular risk of dropping out of the education system prematurely, and/or of achieving few or no qualifications.
- Some of the students at particular 'risk' of poor outcomes are those who disengage from school quite early on and arrive at secondary school with established patterns of low achievement and/or social or behavioural difficulties.

The authors of *Competent Learners @ 16*, (the most recently completed phase of the longitudinal *Competent Children, Competent Learners study*<sup>2</sup>), noted that students who became disengaged from school tended to do so before the age of 12 years, with their lack of engagement escalating in adolescence and secondary school. And evidence from the present study showed that there were some students —

in particular, those who had been in the lowest achievement quartile in one or more of mathematics, reading, and writing in Year 8 — who made little or no progress in the focus achievement areas over the course of the study.

- The study provided important insights from students about what helps to keep students engaged at school and maintain positive attitudes towards subjects, signalling a greater need for a student perspective to be taken into account, and at an early stage.
- The students' insights often focused on how and what they like to learn. For example, they emphasised the importance of receiving clear explanations or demonstrations of *why* subjects or topics were relevant to them and *how* they linked to everyday life. More generally, their suggestions included ensuring more variety in approaches to teaching and learning (not doing too much 'copy work', for instance), and the importance of incorporating a sense of 'fun' into learning.
- The findings overall have important implications for policy and practice and signal the need for further research to explore some of the issues raised in more depth, as well as to further highlight the many positive experiences that students have at school and what leads to those.

### The Reports

#### Report No. 1

This report focuses on the asTTle achievement data, together with related achievement-based information from the student interviews and from questionnaires about participating students completed by teachers and parents, in order to assess possible impacts of the transition on student achievement.

The report first presents overall asTTle results, along with a discussion of trends or patterns in achievement for all participating students. There is also a brief comparison of our students' asTTle results with asTTle data from a national sample of students within the same year levels.

Achievement trends for individual students, and for various groupings of students (eg. students achieving in the highest and lowest quartiles), are then discussed. The discussion takes into account particular student characteristics or other factors which could help account for changes in achievement patterns, including differing student experiences of and reactions to the Year 8 to Year 9 transition.

The ways in which students' attitudes to subjects and learning in general change over the course of the study are also discussed in this report (as well as in Report No. 2).

Brief profiles of a number of individual students are used to illustrate key points or themes in the data.

#### Report No. 2

This report has an emphasis on 'student voices' and is written in the form of a case study of one student, 'Emily', while making reference to data for all other students who participated in the study.

Emily's story illustrates much of 'how it was' for the majority of students in the study who made a good overall transition. It also provides important insights into the difficulties that students in general can and often do encounter during their schooling and what may need to be done about these.

#### Report No. 3

A third report on the study, *Easing the Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling: A Resource Document* is due later this year (2008).

It contains 'practical suggestions' for schools and others arising from the study findings, taking into account contributions from participating principals and teachers, most of whom had suggestions to make about improving the Year 8 to Year 9 transition for students, and from parents and students.

The report has a particular emphasis on students most likely to experience difficulties in their transition to secondary schooling.



## A Study of Students' Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling

Research Division

### Introduction

Two reports on *Students' Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling*, a study carried out by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, are now available.

This brochure provides an outline of the study, a summary of some key findings and implications, and a brief description of the reports on the study, including a third report due later this year.

#### Further Information and Contact Details

More information about the *Students' Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling* study or about the research reports can be obtained via the following website address

[www.educationcounts.govt.nz/themes/research/transition\\_primary\\_secondary](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/themes/research/transition_primary_secondary)

or

by contacting the Research Division, Ministry of Education at

Email: [research.info@minedu.govt.nz](mailto:research.info@minedu.govt.nz)

Fax: 64-4-463 8312

Phone: 64-4-463 8000

New Zealand Government

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Competent Children, Competent Learners study, by Cathy Wylie et al from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, go to <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/homepages/competentchildren/index.html>

## Background to the Study

Transition of students between primary and secondary schooling is an important international educational issue, not least because of international research that suggests there is often a decline in students' academic achievement following the move to secondary schooling. Also, in many countries there are concerns about the impacts upon students of changing schools and New Zealand is no exception.

The research literature provides some valuable insights about the various transition points in a student's education, including the complexities of the primary to secondary schooling (Year 8–9) transition. However, prior to the present study, it was apparent that very little New Zealand-based research evidence on this particular transition point was available, especially in terms of its possible impacts on student achievement.

In response to the need for more information within a *New Zealand context*, the Research Division of the Ministry of Education designed an in-depth, exploratory study. Key findings from a literature review commissioned by the Ministry and carried out by McGee et al at the University of Waikato<sup>1</sup> guided the scope and the design of the study.

<sup>1</sup> McGee, C., Ward, R., Gibbons, J., & Harlow, A. (2003). *Transition to Secondary School: A Literature Review*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

## The Study

The study followed a diverse group of just over 100 students for 18 months as they made the transition from primary to secondary schooling, progressed through Year 9, and on into Year 10.

The purpose of the research was to...

...identify the factors that seem to facilitate or hinder a smooth transition for students between the two school sectors in terms of their:

- overall learning and achievement;
- social development or adjustment; and
- attitudes towards school, learning and achieving well.

The ultimate aim was to contribute to enhanced experiences and increased successes for students in the classroom and at school generally.

### Students and phases of the study

At each of four phases of the study, students took part in one-to-one interviews and, as explained further below, were tested in mathematics, reading and writing.

During interviews, amongst other things, students told us how they felt about moving on to secondary school, how they found secondary school once they were there, their views about different subjects, and about teachers, friendships and social relationships generally. They also talked about what most impacted on how they learned and achieved, how they felt about school in general before and after transition, and how they saw their schooling in relation to future goals and aspirations.

At the beginning of the study (Phase 1), just prior to the transition, the students were in their last term in Year 8 at one of the eight primary

and intermediate schools that took part in the study. The schools were located in Auckland and Wellington.

In Phase 2, the students had now moved to one of two participating, lower decile, secondary schools, and were several weeks into their first term as a Year 9 student. As was the case with most of the contributing schools in the study, these secondary schools had an interest in processes that would facilitate the Year 8 to Year 9 transition for students and had some strategies in place.

In Phase 3, students had completed almost a year of secondary schooling, and in Phase 4, following a further summer break and a 'transition' from Year 9, were nearing the end of their first term in Year 10.

### Assessing students' achievement

To investigate how or if the transition impacted on *achievement* at school, students were assessed in mathematics, reading and writing at each phase of the study using asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning). The main reasons for using asTTle were that it enabled us to measure changes in students' achievement over time and provided a consistent measure no matter which schools the students had been attending.

### Other participants

In addition to talking with students, we also consulted parents, principals, teachers, Years 9 and 10 deans and other school staff for their views on important issues concerning the transition from primary to secondary schooling and its effect on students.

## Summary of Key Findings

### Overall findings regarding the transition

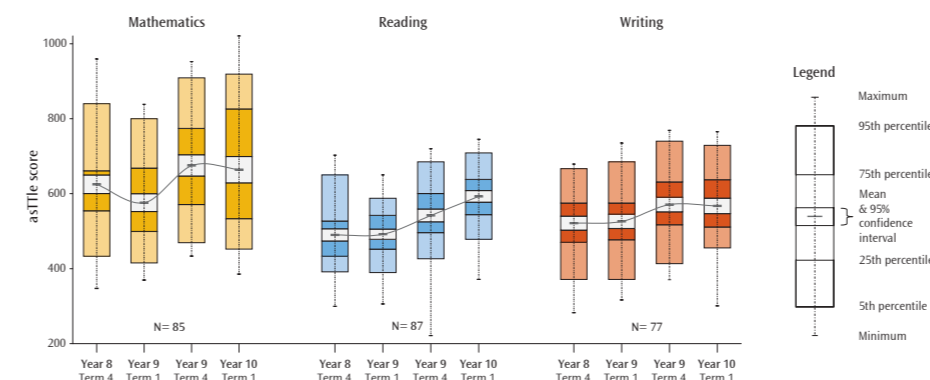
- The primary to secondary schooling transition is not the 'disaster' that is often feared.
- Most students quite quickly adapted to the more immediate changes inherent in a move from a primary to secondary school, such as finding their way around in the new school, moving classes, and becoming familiar with different rules and routines.
- Also, by the end of their first year at secondary school:
  - overall, Year 9 students reported many positive experiences at school;
  - in the majority of cases, students' asTTle test results revealed sound or good achievement gains; and
  - few students expressed a desire to 'go back to how things were' at primary or intermediate school.
- But, at the same time, the Year 8–9 transition does represent a time of significant, deeper-level change and can be generally 'unsettling' for students.
- It became evident over the course of the study that although the Year 8 to Year 9

transition seems to be commonly thought of as a particular '*event*', it should more appropriately be regarded as a '*process*'. This transition requires students to make ongoing adjustments over quite some time: for example, when encountering the different requirements and expectations of their various teachers, when managing multiple homework and other deadlines, and while getting to know new classmates.

The biggest 'danger period' for students in terms of an increased tendency to be more negative about school, their relationships with teachers, and teaching and learning in general was in the second half of Year 9, and not in the first few weeks following the transition.

Other significant findings include that for an important minority of students, the Year 8 to Year 9 transition is a particularly challenging time, academically and/or socially, and exacerbated in some cases by emotional issues or difficult home circumstances. Late in Year 9, some of these students continued to express a preference for primary over secondary schooling.

### Students' asTTle achievement results in mathematics, reading and writing



### Students' achievement results over the course of the study

- As shown in the graph on page 3, average student achievement in mathematics showed a marked decline over the Year 8-9 transition (Phases 1 and 2 of the study), supporting the findings of other national and international studies.
- There was a levelling off in average achievement scores in reading and writing over the same period.
- By the end of their first year at secondary school, the majority of students were achieving above or at a similar level to that achieved a year earlier in Year 8. Students' scores improved most markedly in mathematics over this period.
- Early in Year 10 there was a second drop in the average student score in mathematics following the transition from Year 9, although this drop was not as great as when students moved into Year 9. In contrast, students' reading scores showed a considerable increase following the summer break.
- Looking at high and low achieving students more specifically, the gap between these two 'groups' of students in terms of mathematics achievement widened at secondary school.
- Around half of the students who were achieving in the bottom quartile in one or more of mathematics, reading or writing in Year 10 had also been achieving in the bottom quartile in Year 8.

Two-thirds of the students achieving in the top quartile in mathematics and reading in Year 10, and half of the students in writing, had also been high achievers in Year 8.

The high achievers in mathematics and reading were more consistent in their achievement patterns than the low achievers. Around half of the high achieving students in mathematics or reading consistently achieved in the top quartile across all four phases of the study.

### Student attitudes and engagement

- While students generally had fairly positive attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing at the outset of the study, overall, their attitudes towards these and other subject areas declined as they progressed through Year 9 and into Year 10.
- The study also identified that students in general became less engaged in aspects of their learning at school over time and more critical about some of the teaching they were experiencing.
- According to students, reasons for increased disengagement and less positive attitudes to subjects included: having to cope with work that was at an inappropriate level of difficulty; finding subject content irrelevant or uninteresting; finding how they were learning dry and boring; and experiencing learning environments that were not conducive to learning (too noisy or disruptive; relationship issues with teachers or other students).