

# What Matters in the Transition to Secondary Level?

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## RESULTS FROM NZCER LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

**When one adds** up all the changes that can be involved in moving from primary or intermediate schools to secondary schools, they can look challenging or negative on paper. Students often move to much larger schools, sometimes from co-educational to single-sex, and they experience more teachers, and more subjects. But this is also a time when young adolescents are interested in change, and flexing their growing independence. So what are their experiences of the transition? How much should adults worry that they are changing schools at this time?

In this article, I'll draw on material from the longitudinal Competent Children, Competent Learners project. Funded by the Ministry of Education and NZCER, it has followed some 500 students from their final early childhood education in the Wellington region, through their schooling years. We have gathered data on the students from the students, their teachers, and parents, every two years. So in looking at the transition to secondary school, we can compare views of school and performance levels at age 12 and age 14.

At age 12, 59 percent of the sample was looking forward to going to secondary school, and 26 percent fluctuated or were unsure. Only 15 percent were definitely not looking forward to moving on to secondary school. Girls were unsure more than boys. There were no differences in student views about moving on to secondary school related to differences in family resources, or ethnicity.

The main reasons why students felt positive about going on to secondary school were that they felt ready for a change (32 percent), they thought they would learn interesting things or have more challenge (25 percent), and they looked forward to having more

choice and being more independent (22 percent). Those who were not looking forward to secondary school, or who felt unsure about it, did so because they thought the work could be too hard (18 percent), or because they feared the social environment of secondary school (14 percent).

But these prior views had no bearing on how long it actually took students to settle into secondary school. Most said they had settled into secondary school within two terms, but 17 percent took longer. Those who took longer to settle were more likely to experience the co-occurrence of a number of the factors below. Some of these are to do with the new environment; some are to do with their previous school experience; and some to do with the transition itself.

Students could take longer to settle into secondary school if:

- the school was not their first choice;
- they thought the discipline was stricter than at their primary school;
- they found teacher expectations hard to get used to;
- they thought there was more work to do than at primary;
- they thought the work was more challenging than at primary;
- getting to school took longer;
- they did not find school enjoyable;
- they had regular paid work;
- their parents had concerns about them at school at age 12;
- they had not had friends to help their transition;
- they were not used to having more than one teacher at their primary school;
- they had little experience of changing schools; or
- they were in schools where it was less likely that information about them from Year 8 was used.

We did not find that it was harder for students to settle in if they had moved to a much larger school than their previous one, or from an intermediate school. Nor did we find that students who had lower performance on our competency measures at age 12 found it harder to settle into secondary school.

**We didn't find any negative effect on student competency levels associated with their going to new schools: students can cope with going to much larger schools, and with making two transitions in three years if they have previously attended an intermediate.**



Does it matter if students take longer to settle into secondary school? We found that current performance levels on our competency measures were most strongly related to how well students had performed at age 12. The time it took to settle into secondary school did not affect how well students did on our reading comprehension and mathematics tests, but it did have some negative effect on how teachers

rated them in terms of their attitudes – perseverance, communication (listening and speaking), self-management, curiosity, and social skills. These attitudes are now part of the curriculum, as the Key Competencies. Other analysis within the Competent Children, Competent Learners project has shown that these are important for student learning and growth over time, including reading and mathematics (Wylie 2006).

Cathy Wylie is a Chief Researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. The most recent reports from the Competent Children, Competent Learners' project include *Completely different or a bigger version? Experiences and effects of the transition to secondary school*, and *Growing Independence*. These can be downloaded from [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz), or [www.nzcer.org.nz](http://www.nzcer.org.nz), as can a summary of all the age-14 phase findings.

Taking two terms or more to settle was also negatively related to students' confidence in their new school - feeling they belong, get all the help they need, and that it is important to do their best.

We didn't find any negative effect on student competency levels associated with their going to new schools: students can cope with going to much larger schools, and with making two transitions in three years if they have previously attended an intermediate.

Nor did we find any major patterns associated with differences in social experiences and resources: no gender, ethnic, family income, or parental education differences.

On the whole, the transition to secondary school in New Zealand is not the threat to young adolescent growth that some have feared. We did not find any dip in student performance - student performance was just as likely to improve as decline - and in fact, the degree of change in performance over this transition period was no greater than any other two year period in the lives of our study participants.

But we did find some aspects of concern. While these adolescents were on the whole as positive about secondary school as they had been about their intermediate or primary school, there was an increase in the level of boredom (from 12 percent at age 12 to 34 percent at age 14), and in those who thought they could do better work if they tried (46 percent cf. 31 percent at age 12). Eighteen percent wanted to leave school as soon as they could.

What this indicates is that in supporting young adolescents into the secondary level, as it is currently



constituted, we do need to pay particular attention to some students, both before they reach the secondary level, and at that level. Longer term, the inclusion of the key competencies into the curriculum does offer the opportunity for taking a new approach, with more project-based learning (Hipkins 2006) that is likely to engage a wider range of students, and better equip all students for a fast-changing world (Gilbert 2005).

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#### References

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