

Homebush West Public School: A 'middle school' approach

Introduction

This case study looks at the 'middle school' approach Homebush West Public School (HWPS) has introduced to help students prepare for the transition to high school. It outlines the main features of the Year 5 and 6 teaching strategy. This strategy includes individual student timetables that require students to change classrooms, classmates, and teachers according to ability and subject; and utilising a holistic approach to transition.

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Background

Homebush West Public School (HWPS) has an enrolment of over 500 students and is located in the inner west of Sydney. The school community is diverse, with 95 per cent of students coming from a language background other than English. The school's Family Occupational Employment Index (FOEI) of around 60 is higher than the state average.

Students at HWPS have a strong sense of school culture and a strong sense of who they are and where they fit in the school community. From Kindergarten to Year 6, all students at HWPS are encouraged to be Homebush West 'STARS'. Students are explicitly told what it means to be STARS – safe and strong; team players; active learners; respectful; successful – and encouraged to continually uphold this ideal.

The school makes a conscious effort to communicate with and involve all members of the school community. Student voice is captured and used in many of the school endeavours. For example, student opinions have influenced the design of future school buildings and other physical spaces around the school. Parents at HWPS are kept informed of school policies and procedures. Parents are invited to an information session and expo which gives them short, sharp opportunities to touch base with key school staff through workshops repeated across the night. Parents are also supplied with a parent information book that outlines the 'middle school' approach and the school values that reinforce this approach.

The 'middle school' approach to transition

"Transition is not one special program, it is everything we do, embodied in high expectations, school culture, a strong focus on wellbeing and learning support and the approach we call 'middle school'."

Principal, HWPS

Student leadership

At HWPS, Year 5 and 6 students are introduced to the concept of 'middle school' at the start of Year 5. 'Middle school' is a notion that is openly and deliberately shared with Year 5 and 6 students to emphasise the important transition that they will soon face – their transformation from children in primary school to young adults in secondary school. They are consciously distinguished from their younger peers by being designated leaders of the school. When students reach Year 5 they are given the responsibility of being leaders and mentors to all other students and must, in turn, teach their younger peers how to be Homebush West 'STARS'. All middle school students have opportunities to step into leadership roles and are encouraged to take these roles seriously (e.g. Student Representative Council,



environmental officer, library monitor, peer support). They are also granted special privileges such as providing input into the school's look and feel; and given opportunities to participate in Year 6 only extracurricular activities such as ukulele group and drumming group.

Co-teaching

In Years 5 and 6, students are taught by a team of teachers, and attend classes in a similar way to high school students. Throughout the school day students physically move – with responsibility for themselves and their belongings – to different classes with different peers and different teachers. They begin the day in their home class but move into ability-grouped English and maths classes and other groupings for science, history, geography and personal development, health and physical education throughout the day. Maths and English ability groups are not fixed and students can move across levels during the school year. As a result, students develop their ability to adapt and be flexible by engaging with different teachers and teaching strategies. They build relationships with more than one teacher and must adapt to differing teaching styles and teacher expectations. It also encourages them to continue making new friends in Years 5 and 6 with whom they share different classes. The students themselves say it gives them a chance to get a taste of 'what things are going to be like in high school'.

To enable this 'middle school' approach, the staff at HWPS believe that collaborative and reflective teaching is essential. They recognise the need to continually refine practice and have the capacity to differentiate learning to meet the needs of all Year 5 and 6 students. They also attest to the high levels of organisation and communication that are needed to facilitate this collaboration. Teachers participate in weekly collaborative

stage meetings, open classroom sessions and instructional rounds. All Year 5 and 6 teaching staff are supported by an instructional leader who works directly with teachers to mentor, coach and improve their teaching. The school has also used funding to employ student learning support officers who provide targeted, responsive and flexible learning support for all students.

Student responsibility for learning

The 'middle school' approach focuses on teaching students to be responsible for their own learning. Students are encouraged to set their own learning goals, reflect on their learning and participate in peer and self-assessment, for example, through Google classroom. Year 5 and 6 students are also involved in the structure of their own classrooms and can, at times, following periods of instructional learning, choose their own work space e.g. in groups or individually; on the floor, at a desk or standing. Within this model, the amount of responsibility transferred to the students is heightened by requesting that although students can sit where they like, 'gender equality' must be achieved – each group of students should aim to have equal numbers of boys and girls.

HWPS has a constant focus on high expectations for all students and the students are constantly reminded that they can be whatever they want to be. For instance, the language of growth mindset is used across the school by teachers, students and support staff. Year 5 and 6 students feel that having a growth mindset helps prepare them for moving into high school. That is, it helps them to feel confident and excited about the upcoming changes and opportunities.





Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
GPO Box 33
Sydney NSW 2001
Australia

 02 9561 1211

 cese@det.nsw.edu.au

 www.cese.nsw.gov.au

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