Some Implications of the Findings

- The schools in our study had strategies in place to cater for transitions 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, deep-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.

- The report’s main emphasis is on students’ primary-school transition, but it also highlights that some of these students are also at risk in secondary school. At least some students are at risk of disengaging from school quite early on and arrive at poor outcomes are those who disengage from school tended to do so before the age of 12 years, with their lack of engagement escalating in adolescence and secondary schooling.

- The findings overall have important implications for policy and practice. The research team made a number of suggestions included ensuring more variety in the teaching and learning (not doing too much ‘copy work’), for instance), in approaches to teaching and learning (not focusing too much on grades or testing), in the ways in which students’ attitudes to subjects and learning in general change over the course of the study. The students’ insights often focused on how they felt about school, and what they linked to everyday life. More generally, their suggestions included ensuring more variety in the teaching and learning (not doing too much ‘copy work’, for instance), the importance of providing a sense of ‘fun’ into learning.

- Students most likely to experience difficulties in their transition to secondary schooling.

- The report first presents overall results, along with a discussion of trends in achievement patterns for all participating students. There is also a brief description of the longitudinal sample of students within the same year levels. Achievements trends for individual students, and for various groupings of students (eg, students achieving in the highest and lowest quartiles), are then discussed. Achievement trends for subgroups of students and for various approaches to teaching and learning are explored some of the issues raised in more depth.

- The study provided important insights from students about what helps to keep students engaged at school and maintain positive attitudes towards learning, signalling a greater need for a student perspective to be taken into account, and at an early stage.

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

- The study 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 about what helps to keep students engaged at school and maintain positive attitudes towards learning, signalling a greater need for a student perspective to be taken into account, and at an early stage.
Background to the Study

Transition from primary to secondary schooling is an important international educational issue, not least because of international research that suggests it is a stressful time for students. Academic achievement following the move to secondary schooling is of interest to many countries, as concerns about the impacts upon students of changing schools are a growing concern in New Zealand.

The research literature provides some valuable insights about the various transition points in a student’s education, including the move into the primary to secondary schooling (Year 8–9) transition. However, prior to the present study, it was apparent that very little New Zealand research evidence on the particular transition points 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 team aimed to conduct an integrated, exploratory, study. Key findings from a literature review commissioned by the Ministry and carried out by McGee et al. at the University of Waikato have guided the scope and the design of the study.

The purpose of the research was to:

- identify the factors that tend 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 
  - academic or extra-curricular school, including school, school-going and achievement well.

The ultimate aim was to contribute to enhanced understanding of these factors for students in the classroom and at school generally.

Students and phase of the study

At the beginning of the study, students took part in a number of interviews and, as explained above, a combination of mathematics, reading and writing.

During interviews, amongst other things, students talked about their concerns about moving on to secondary school. From these, a sample of secondary school year seven students were then drawn. These students, along with students in deciles, 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, and after transition, and how their learning was in relation to their goals and expectations.

At the beginning of the study (Phase 1), just prior to the transition, the students were in their last term in Year 7 or at the end of the primary and intermediate schools that took part in the study. The schools were located in Auckland and Wellington.

In Phase 1, the students had had at least two months at their new school. In Phase 1, some students had had two terms at their new school. In Phase 1, students were asked to identify the factors that seem to facilitate or hinder a smooth transition for students between the two school sectors. For students who had had only one term at their new school, Phase 2 included other students who had had two terms at their new school.

In Phase 2, students had had completed almost a full year of secondary schooling, and in Phase 3, following a further six weeks of a ‘transition’ from Year 8 to Year 9 were receiving the end of their first term in Year 9.

Assessing students’ achievement

To investigate how the transition impacts upon students, students were asked in mathematics, reading and writing. In mathematics, students were asked to recall what they had learned in the classroom and out of the classroom (Homework). In reading, students were asked to recall what they had learned in the classroom and out of the classroom (Homework). This information was used to make sense of changes in students’ achievement over time and to provide a consistent measure of what students had been achieving.

In addition to talking with students, we also consulted parents, principals, teachers, Year 9 and 10 students and staff for their view on important issues concerning the transition and their role in primary–secondary schooling and in effect on students.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall findings regarding the transition:

- Most students quickly adapt to the move to secondary schooling, especially in terms of their possible impacts on student achievement.

- Students’ achievement results over the course of the study:

  - As shown in the graph on page 1, average student achievement in mathematics showed a marked decline over the Year 8–9 transition (Phases 1 and 2 of the study) suggesting the findings of other national and international studies.

  - There was a leveling off in average achievement in mathematics and writing over the same period.

  - By the end of the first year at a secondary school, very few of the Year 8–9 transition students scored at a level similar to that of their Year 7 peers. Students’ scores improved most markedly in Year 10.

  - Early in Year 8, students were a second wind in the average student score in mathematics following the transition, and although this drop was not as great as some students moved from one year to the next, there is a levelling off in average student scores following the transition.

  - The main reasons for the drop in average student scores over the Year 9 transition were in average student scores in reading and writing, and although this drop was not as great as some students moved from one year to the next, there is a levelling off in average student scores following the transition.

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