WORK LIKE THE BEST

Review of middle schooling in the Northern Territory

Vic Zbar

September 2014

Final Report
Dear Minister

I am pleased to submit my final report in response to request for quotation Q14-0167, ‘2014 Review of Northern Territory Government Middle Years Schools’ dated 7 April 2014. The report was finalised after a short briefing process for key stakeholders and School Councils in most schools following the release of my draft report.

The report is titled *Work Like The Best* both to indicate the challenge the Territory faces to substantially improve schooling in the middle years and to signal that best practice does exist on which improvement can be built.

There is, as outlined in the report, significant variation in practice and performance between and within schools which, it should be noted, is not unique to the Northern Territory. 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 and work like the best.

The research, visits, teleconferences and consultations conducted demonstrated that this 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 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 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 are developed for schools and teachers to adapt and implement so they can work like the best.

One factor that has detracted from the effective implementation of worthwhile initiatives in the past has been a tendency to move on to the next ‘silver bullet’ before the first one has accurately been fired. Successful implementation of the recommendations for improving schooling in the middle years will depend on consistency of direction and support for at least three to five years to enable the changes to take hold and be consolidated and embedded in schools.

Assuming this can be achieved, there is cause for considerable optimism that middle schooling in the Northern Territory can significantly improve in coming years.

This optimism reflects the keen awareness expressed by all at the system, school and stakeholder level that the status quo is not acceptable and a jump in performance is required. This recognition of the need to change was backed up by a willingness to embrace the core strategies embodied in the report’s recommendations when they were outlined in briefing sessions on the draft review report. In addition, the approach was endorsed as much by key stakeholders who were consulted as it was by Departmental personnel, signalling the potential to garner a broad consensus around a program for sustained improvement in the middle years.

Beyond this, although substantial variability of practice and performance exists between and within schools, there are sufficient examples of quality practices in place to support the development of systemic exemplars and advice to support more consistent practice like the best. There is also a rich vein of policy, research and practice both nationally and internationally the Department can use to ensure that the better practices it promotes accord with what has been demonstrated to work.

The alignment of these factors within and beyond the middle schools, along with the passionate desire to improve that was evident through the review, provides a real opportunity for a cohesive and united effort by all those with an interest in middle schooling in the Northern Territory to realise the promise the original decision to create a middle schooling phase made.

I have very much enjoyed undertaking this review. I was warmly welcomed in schools and the Department and received the utmost cooperation along the way. I was impressed by the commitment all have to successful schooling in the middle years and to making the changes needed to generate better student results.

I want to thank all those who supported the conduct of the review and assure them that the report is better for their input.

Thank you for the opportunity to undertake this review. Its outcomes will contribute to better schooling in Northern Territory middle schools.

Yours sincerely

Vic Zbar
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<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker</td>
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<td>AITSL</td>
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<td>ANTSEL</td>
<td>Association of Northern Territory School Educational Leaders</td>
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<td>ASPIRE</td>
<td>A School Planning, Improvement and Reporting Environment</td>
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<td>Australian Tertiary Admission Rank</td>
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<td>Charles Darwin University</td>
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<td>Council of Government School Organisations</td>
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<td>CMS</td>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
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<td>DAMYTC</td>
<td>Darwin Area Middle Years Training Centre</td>
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<td>DEECD</td>
<td>Department of Education and Early Childhood Development</td>
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<td>EAL/D</td>
<td>English and as Additional Language/Development</td>
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<td>GATES</td>
<td>Gifted and Talented Education program</td>
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<td>HLO</td>
<td>Home Liaison Officer</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communication Technology</td>
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<td>Industry Engagement and Employment Pathways</td>
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<td>IER</td>
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<td>Northern Territory Curriculum Framework</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
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<td>PAT</td>
<td>Progressive Achievement Tests</td>
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<td>Pastoral Care Groups</td>
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<td>RTO</td>
<td>Registered Training Organisation</td>
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<td>SAIS</td>
<td>Student Assessment Information System</td>
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<td>SOSE</td>
<td>Studies of Society and Environment</td>
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<td>SRC</td>
<td>Student Representative Council</td>
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<td>School Wide Positive Behaviour Support</td>
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<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<td>WIAT-II</td>
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Overview

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 schools\(^1\) 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

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\(^1\) 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 project\(^2\) 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.

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\(^2\) 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.
Chapter 1: Introduction

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' (xv).

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 should develop a policy and strategy for the Territory-wide implementation of curriculum and pedagogy for the later middle and senior years and assist learning precincts to determine the mix of school organisation and structures best suited to meet the needs of their students, within the context of the new stages of schooling outlined.

As a result, the Territory prepared for, and commenced to implement middle years approaches to teaching and learning, along with the introduction of Year 7 to 9 middle schools from 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 listed in the bibliography for this review.

Terms of Reference

Seven years later, in May 2014, the Minister for Education, the Hon Peter Chandler MLA, commissioned Vic Zbar, from Zbar Consulting to conduct a review of middle years schooling in the Northern Territory.

The review was commissioned 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 will evaluate the impact on attendance, retention, Year 12 completion rates, student outcomes, student wellbeing and parent and community satisfaction of:

1. current structural framework for the delivery of middle schooling in Northern Territory Government schools (i.e. standalone middle schools versus comprehensive secondary schools);

2. current pedagogical models implemented within each school that provides middle years education and determine the characteristics that have the greatest impact on student outcomes;

3. the extent to which each school has a coherent and sequenced plan for curriculum delivery and the degree to which this is consistent across Northern Territory Government schools;
4. the quality and effectiveness of assessment practices and standards as they align to each school’s curriculum and pedagogical plans and how they inform students, their families and the system on achievement and progress;

5. middle years approaches that are congruent with safe, respectful, accepting and inclusive learning environments; and

6. the extent to which each school is focused on a rigorous learning environment, a culture of high expectations, student leadership, role models and behaviour.

The review will provide a comprehensive report that includes recommendations that target improved middle years education in regard to:

- structural frameworks
- learning environments and behaviour management
- curriculum delivery and subject offerings
- middle years pedagogy
- assessment practices
- influencing school culture.

It should be noted that the review, and hence this report, was limited to 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:

- Middle Schools — Centralian Middle School; Darwin Middle School; Dripstone Middle School; Nightcliff Middle School; Rosebery Middle School; and Sanderson Middle School.
- Comprehensive Schools — Katherine High School; Nhulunbuy High School; Taminmin College; and Tennant Creek High School.

The review’s focus on these ten schools accords with the view adopted by Wilson (2014) 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’ (2014:22).

A further point to note in relation to the scope of this review is that it operated on a relatively short timeline, between the end of May and September 2014, which included the substantial school break between 23 June and 18 July. As a result, school visits were limited to the six middle schools plus Taminmin College and extensive teleconferences were conducted with the principals of the other three schools. In addition, visits were arranged to the Darwin Area Middle Years Training Centre, and Centralian and Palmerston Senior Colleges, and teleconferences with Casuarina Senior College and Darwin High and the Malak Re-engagement Centre.

The visits and teleconferences were supplemented by a rich array of policy documents, support materials and data the Department provided and detailed curriculum, assessment, teaching, wellbeing and broader planning documents provided by the schools where they exist.
Process for the review

The Review comprised the following stages. While they are listed serially, they did significantly overlap and were implemented in an iterative way.

1. Detailed analysis of:
   - Data and documents provided by the Northern Territory Department of Education and/or schools, including student performance data for each school; student enrolment and retention data; student attendance data; and documents on middle schooling (i.e. policy frameworks, advice provided to schools). Despite the existence of staff, parent and student opinion surveys on the Department’s data website, there were no actual opinion survey results to view.
   - Documents provided by each school, including any vision statement they have for middle schooling; behaviour management/student wellbeing policies; range of curriculum offerings from Year 7 to 9; curriculum policies (i.e., the required curriculum at each year level); teaching policies (e.g. models of instruction used, any required pedagogical practices, etc.); assessment policies including any required assessment tools; professional learning policies; parent/community engagement policies; structures for student involvement.

2. Desktop research and analysis of issues associated with middle schooling to inform the final review report. This included a consideration of the characteristics of students in this phase of schooling and the implications this has for schools, curriculum for successful middle schooling, pedagogy for successful middle schooling, structures to ensure success for middle years’ students, etc.

3. Visits to the urban middle and comprehensive schools and some targeted senior schools (i.e. Centralian and Palmerston), supplemented by extended teleconferences with any schools not visited, along with Casuarina Senior College, Darwin High School and the Malak Re-engagement Centre, to ensure both qualitative input to the review to supplement the data and document analysis in Stage 1, and that the views of the schools are fully taken into account in formulating the review report. A schedule for discussions was negotiated with each school in the context of arranging the visit/teleconference at a mutually convenient time. The reviewer also visited the Darwin Middle Years Area Training Centre located at Nightcliff Middle School.

4. Stakeholder consultations conducted with major stakeholders identified in consultation with the Department, including student and parent forums in Darwin and Alice Springs, to ensure their views of middle schooling in the Northern Territory are fully taken into account. The range of stakeholders and experts consulted is included in the list of discussions and consultations provided as Appendix 1.

5. Interviews conducted with relevant Department personnel and ongoing liaison with the Department for the duration of the review.

6. Writing of a draft report for feedback from the Department before briefings for key stakeholders and School Councils in Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs and development of the final review report.
Structure of the report

The report analyses current performance in middle schooling as the basis for discussing 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.

The Overview summarises the review’s argument and includes all of the recommendations that are made. This introduction sets out the background to and scope of the review, outlines the process used in the relatively short time allowed, and provides the criteria that guided the framing of recommendations advanced. The report then comprises two substantial, interlinked parts:

- A discussion of four key contextual elements for the review — i.e. a snapshot of current performance based on the available data and the visits and teleconferences the reviewer conducted; analysis of the nature of the cohort in the secondary middle years of school; an outline of the policy context for middle schooling; and a discussion of the need for a strategic approach.
- A series of chapters outlining the review findings in depth, structured according to the major elements of a program for continuing to improve middle schooling in the Northern Territory — i.e. a vision for middle schooling; leadership for whole-school improvement; middle years structure; curriculum and assessment for the middle years; pedagogy for the middle years; transition into and from the middle years; and systemic leadership and support.

There is also a bibliography and a number of appendices providing additional material relevant to the review report.

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 advanced 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.
Acknowledgments and thanks

Without exception the reviewer was welcomed into each of the middle schools and provided with cooperation, hospitality and access to the materials needed to conduct the review. This was echoed by the Department personnel he interacted with at both the central and regional levels.

There are a number of people in this context who do need to be singled out for thanks.

Ken Davies (Chief Executive) and Susan Bowden (Deputy Chief Executive, School Education) were always available to provide direction and feedback to the review and facilitate briefings of the Minister and the Department’s Executive Board.

Vicki Baylis (Executive Director, School Support Services [Learning and Performance]) provided continual Departmental oversight of the review and ensured that School Support Services met the various demands it occasioned along the way.

Marion Guppy, having taken up the position of Director of Secondary Education during the course of the review, took a substantial interest in its progress and regularly provided input along the way.

Vicky Eastwood (A/Director, School Quality, Improvement and Performance) provided considered feedback to the draft review report.

The logistical support that made the review possible was provided by a team comprising Jill Hazeldine (Director, Curriculum, Assessment and Standards, T-9), Megan McKenzie (Consultant, Assessment and Standards Middle Years), Judith Nicholson (Consultant, Assessment and Standards Middle Years), Deborah Hodgkin (Senior Project Manager, Middle Years), Madelaine Evans (Policy Officer, Stakeholder Management) and Jade Tiedeman (Senior Administration Officer).

Special thanks are due to Shelley Worthington (A/Directory, eLearning and Development), the project lead for the review, for coordinating all of the arrangements for the review, and ensuring it proceeded efficiently, smoothly, hassle-free and on time.
Chapter 2: A snapshot of performance

It is important to emphasise that this review is of middle schooling in the Northern Territory, and not a formal review of middle schools, for which a separate Departmental process exists. That said, it is necessary to underpin the review with some consideration and analysis of school performance in the middle years. In addition, some detailed descriptions of specific practices in schools that are relevant to the terms of reference are included throughout the report to provide the context for the review findings and the recommendations arising from them.

With this in mind, the reviewer analysed a range of performance data provided by both the Department and schools, along with comparative data accessed from the MySchool website that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) maintains. 3

To demonstrate the fact it is only a truncated analysis rather than a full set of school reviews, however, it is referred to as a ‘snapshot’ in this chapter, and needs to be considered in these terms.

The nature of the schools

Any consideration of performance needs to recognise that the context in which the schools operate is always unique to some extent. Given this, it is worth starting with a brief outline of the nature of each of the schools, drawn from school profiles the Department provided to the review.

Centralian Middle School

The school enrols 358 students, 68% of whom are Indigenous and 22% are English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D). Located in the western suburbs of Alice Springs, it was created in 2010 from the amalgamation of Anzac Hill High School and Alice Springs High. The school has a Special Education Centre and Positive Learning Centre and the Alice Springs Language Centre is also located on site.

While student management and suspension rates are high, significant progress is being made to reduce this through a combination of establishing the Positive Learning Centre in 2012, adopting School Wide Positive Behaviour Support 4 and implementing Visible Learning to improve the teaching and learning in class. This has also seen a noticeable improvement in student achievement compared with like schools, as indicated in the discussion of the broad performance picture below.

The school has adopted an ICT strategy aimed at rolling out take home laptops/devices for all students, initially on a trial basis, going whole school in 2015. A program has been introduced to improve transition from local feeder schools with the aim of attracting a broader cohort of students over time.

3 http://www.myschool.edu.au/
4 The School Wide Positive Behaviour Support model, referred to in a number of these vignettes of schools, is a framework the Department promotes to help schools plan and implement practices across the whole school to improve educational and behaviour outcomes for all students. The model is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8. Further information on the framework, including links to support materials for schools, can be found at http://www.education.nt.gov.au/teachers-educators/students-learning/safe-schools-nt/swpbs
**Darwin Middle School**

Opened in 2008 as the first purpose-built middle school in the Territory, the school enrols 637 students, 9% of whom are Indigenous and 6% from Defence Force families.

The wide range of curriculum opportunities on offer includes a strong emphasis on English, Mathematics, Science and ICTs, and the school is piloting the Australian Curriculum in History, Mathematics and Science. The school has a ‘Good Standing’ policy that rewards students and builds citizenship, and helps to ensure a whole-school behaviour management approach. This is supplemented by a resident psychologist and trained counsellors who support the work of a strong Welfare Inclusion Support Team.

The school has a range of interesting curriculum and wellbeing-related programs such as the Driftwood Café that involves students in food preparation and customer service, a number of pathways related programs including student use of the Middle Years Area Training Centre, and a Students of High Performance program.

**Dripstone Middle School**

Under the banner ‘A Community of Achievers’, the school enrols 621 students, 18% of whom are Indigenous. The school has a large number of students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and a growing proportion from defence force families.

Dripstone describes itself as a Positive Behaviour School that values partnerships with its community and is working to further improve its student attendance rate. The school Welfare Team endeavours to case manage students struggling with their attendance and the school’s ‘Good Standing’ policy includes rewards for achieving attendance of 100%.

The school has a strong culture of music and drama, including an annual school production, and its diverse subject offerings include such programs as technical studies, cooking and Judo, as well as drama and music.

The school was the first in the Territory to have a school app to improve communication between the school and home, and has established relations with schools in Japan that enable international exchanges to occur. The school, like other Territory middle schools, operates a Clontarf program to promote attendance of Indigenous students at school.

**Katherine High School**

This comprehensive school of 538 provides education for students from Years 7 to 12 over a vast geographic area with a diverse socio-economic clientele, including 39% of Indigenous students and 45% EAL/D.

Curriculum offerings in this context are limited by both staff availability and the relatively low student numbers and the school has a significant number of students with special needs. In addition, defence posting cycles means there is significant student turnover each year.

In 2010 the school added both a Sports Science and Clontarf Academy facilities which supplement a Stronger Smarter Sisters program to encourage attendance of Indigenous girls. The School Ready and Senior Intensive Programs help provide a flexible pathway for students who have high support literacy and numeracy needs and a history of poor attendance. The school also caters for students from Callistemon House and Fordimail Hostel. By virtue of location, the school does experience difficulty in recruiting and retaining some expertise that is required and work placements for VET can be difficult to find.
Nhulunbuy High School

This small comprehensive school of 249 (17% Indigenous), which is structured in terms of a Year 7-9 middle school and a 10-12 senior school, is experiencing significant change as a result of Rio Tinto’s announcement that it will cease refinery activity from this year.

The school has a strong VET program and operates as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) that can deliver full certificates and modules in engineering, information technology, hospitality and business.

The expected fall in enrolments arising from the loss of town population due to Rio Tinto’s withdrawal is expected to be counterbalanced somewhat by an increase in Indigenous student enrolments arising from a decision by the Gumatj Association to connect its students to the school and potentially by the Indigenous Education Review’s recommendations for boarding school facilities as well.

The school recognises that such a change in demographic profile would mean a need to review its structure, staffing profile, programs and potentially its pedagogical approach.

Nightcliff Middle School

This relatively small urban middle school of 270 (22% Indigenous and 24% EAL/D) opened as a middle school in 2008, having previously been Nightcliff High School, and added a VET facility in 2013.

The school’s attendance rate is hampered by what it describes as ‘a few chronic non-attenders’ which it is seeking to tackle with the support of an Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker and Home Liaison Officer who work with families, along with a School Attendance Officer to ensure an acceptable level of attendance for all.

The school has identified three focus areas for 2014 — implementation of the Australian Curriculum, adoption of the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support Model, and improving literacy with a particular focus on reading. The school also offers support for students through both the Clontarf Academy program and support staff, working alongside other external agencies engaged to run such programs as Counterpunch.\(^5\)

Rosebery Middle School

The school opened in the Palmerston region in 2011 and enrols 560 students of whom 35% identify as Indigenous, 16% and growing are EAL/D and 8% are from Defence Force families. The school has experienced some small-scale recent enrolment decline, in part perhaps related to the opening of a neighbouring private school, which clearly creates a challenge to maintain numbers over time. The school’s cohort is very diverse, ranging from students from families with intergenerational dependence on welfare to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, with plenty in between.

The school endeavours to provide a rigorous, ICT-enriched curriculum that includes a strong focus on performing arts and VET. The school has established a Pathways Unit that includes the Autism Spectrum Disorder Unit and alternate pathways for students requiring additional support.

A range of strategies are in place to improve student attendance including the Clontarf Academy, the Palmerston Girls Academy and Smith Family incentives for regular attendance at school.

The school implements Restorative Practice and School Wide Behaviour approaches as part of a whole school wellbeing program and offers both a Year 8 accelerated learning program for gifted students and a gifted and talented education program (GATES) for students in Year 6. It is seeking to tackle low literacy and numeracy levels of a significant proportion of its students while seeking to engage children and families dealing with dysfunction and even justice and child welfare issues at home.

**Sanderson Middle School**

This diverse multicultural school of 477, including 27% Indigenous students, represents around 60 different cultural groups, and has established an Intensive English Unit to cater for students who have recently arrived in Australia.

The school community also has a partnership with the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to provide a range of educational programs to school age asylum seekers during the day with a night program for 16 and 17 year olds.

Originally established as a junior high school in 1985, Sanderson become a secondary school in 1993 before becoming a middle school in 2008. School attendance averages around 85% and the school has self-admitted ‘problematic NAPLAN results’. The school has in this context, embarked on a ‘large scale change management process’ as a result of a comprehensive review in 2013.

The plan specifically addresses the eight areas of high expectations for student achievement, curriculum and assessment, teacher directed learning based on analysis of hard data, explicit instruction, pastoral care, establishing a feedback culture, high quality transition programs, and teacher performance and development.

**Taminmin College**

This large comprehensive school of 1005, comprising 15% Indigenous students and 13% students from an EAL/D background, serves a growing rural community 40 kilometres south of Darwin and has a large geographic footprint for both its students and staff.

The college has access to a mixed produce farm, a 150 hectare natural resource area and an automotive, construction and engineering skills centre. It is an RTO in its own right, delivering VET courses in a variety of pathways, and it operates a Leading Learner program for students in Years 7-10, a Sports Academy, a Special Education Centre for students with high needs, and is a centre for excellence in business and enterprise.

Attendance is a shade above 86%, though less in Year 9, and the college has targeted interventions for students at risk. Students in Year 10 choose either an academic or vocational pathway, which clearly impacts on students completing their middle years.

The college has strong international relationships and provides opportunities for students to engage in travel overseas for various purposes. It also has a strong performing arts program that presents an annual musical production.
It should be noted that Taminmin only really became fully comprehensive in 2014, having previously operated as separate middle and senior schools, albeit with a single overarching principal.

**Tennant Creek High School**

The school, which was officially opened in 1986, enrolls 212 students, 85% of whom are Indigenous and 70% from an EAL/D background.

Overall attendance is relatively low with the result it constitutes a major focus of school activity, along with literacy and numeracy which also are weak. A range of programs underpin this, which all seek to encourage students to explore valued opportunities for the future. The school is, in this context, revisiting the School Wide Positive Behaviour framework with ‘renewed focus’ and a team has been formed to ‘drive the development and implementation of a commonly agreed structure in the area of student management and student wellbeing’.

This is supplemented by a range of special programs, activities and events designed to improve student participation and engagement in school, and is consistent with the need discussed in Chapter 8 of this review for an orderly learning environment where students are well known as a precondition for whole school improvement to occur.

The school is also seeking to group students more strategically to maximise their learning opportunities, and it operates a middle years homework club three afternoons a week for an hour where students can catch up on work they have missed and/or seek advice from teachers on assessments they need to complete. A partnership operates with the University of Western Sydney that sees undergraduate students visiting for a month in term 4 for their practical teaching block, and this provides what is described as ‘an energy boost to the school as well as mentoring opportunities for individual teachers in their role as teacher supervisor’.

In 2013, the school was one of 15 national winners of the Safe Schools are Smart Schools competition in the third annual National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence.

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Aside from the ten schools listed, there is also the Darwin Area Middle Years Training Centre (DAMYTC). The Centre is located in the old technical studies building at Nightcliff Middle School.

The Centre offers Certificate I courses in Resources and Infrastructure operations to 109 Year 9 students who attend one day a week from local middle schools. The Centre employs three full time staff to train the students who work closely with Charles Darwin University as their RTO.

Eighty-seven students completed the course in 2013 from Rosebery, Darwin, Nightcliff, Dripstone and Sanderson Middle Schools, which suggests it is an important additional source of curriculum options for some students in the middle years.

The Centre is reported as having received strong support from parents and the broader community, along with positive feedback from the students engaged in its programs. It is currently in the process of upgrading its facilities to cater for an increased number of students and courses.
The Malak Re-engagement Centre provides an alternative engagement model for young people from 12-17 years of age, who have been disenfranchised and disengaged from education. Students attending may be long-term absentees, those within the Youth Justice system or in the care of the Department of Children and Families not suited to traditional mainstream schooling.

The Centre aims to reconnect them to a wide range of education and training opportunities by providing support and building honest and authentic relationships with the student, their family and the community. Around 80 young people are currently on the Centre’s list, 30 of whom are students in the middle years who the Centre is seeking to either set up for re-entry to Year 10 or embark on a pathway of their choice.

While the Centre has been the subject of a separate review in 2014, it is noted that it potentially does have the level of expertise that could enable it to provide important advice to schools on engaging some disengaged young people in schooling as discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

The broad performance picture

In the course of visiting and talking to school leaders and teachers, the reviewer saw many examples of outstanding practice that is contributing markedly to improved student outcomes in the middle years. This included: some high class curriculum documentation, including scope and sequence and associated student tasks; some comprehensive whole-school assessment plans and the collection and analysis of data to inform teaching to meet student needs; some really effective whole-school student wellbeing and behaviour management policies, processes and programs that help to ensure an orderly learning environment where students are well known; some focused planning of teaching practices using evidence-based teaching models that are known to work; some all-embracing professional learning structures and processes designed to help teachers improve their teaching capacity, including through feedback along the way; and some targeted transition programs, in particular with feeder primary schools both to attract students to the school and ensure they are comfortable when they arrive in middle school.

It should be noted that the word ‘some’ has been used throughout the preceding paragraph. This is designed to signify that practice is variable between and within the schools. Just as there are some outstanding examples of the various elements of middle schooling discussed in the report, so too are there examples of not so good, and in a limited number of cases, arguably bad practices. The challenge is to create the conditions where more middle schools and more middle school teachers can work like the best, since that is the greatest source of improvement across the Territory’s middle schools.

A prelude on enrolments, retention and attendance

Enrolments

Table 1 sets out the enrolment levels for students in the middle and comprehensive schools between 2009 and 2013, with the inclusion of Alice Springs and Anzac Hill High Schools for 2009 as the two schools amalgamated to form Centralian Middle School.
Table 1: Enrolments by school, year level and calendar year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Year Level</th>
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<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<td><strong>494</strong></td>
<td><strong>525</strong></td>
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<td>Year 9</td>
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<td><strong>Total (middle yrs)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>148</strong></td>
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<td><strong>125</strong></td>
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</table>

Source: NT Department of Education, Enrolment and Attendance Collection

Note: The methodology for data collection changed in 2013 and as such cannot be directly compared to previous years.
It can be seen that, despite the view some respondents expressed that the establishment of middle schools in the Territory was so disruptive that students were turned off attending them, enrolments have been generally either stable or have increased over time, other than Sanderson Middle School where other factors may have been at play as the school itself now attests given its substantial change of direction under a new leadership team. This in turn contrasts to the middle years enrolments in the comprehensive schools which, with the exception of Katherine High which experienced a marked decline that was completely redressed in 2013, have generally declined, albeit sometimes for economic reasons (e.g. Nhulunbuy) beyond the control of the school.

On the flip side of the ledger, if the creation of middle schools was designed to significantly increase enrolments by drawing students back from the private sector, this cannot be said to have occurred across the board, though there are schools such as Darwin and Dripstone Middle Schools where numbers are increasing in part, of course, driven by demographic changes in the area as well.

The real point is that, although the creation of middle schools was almost of necessity disruptive at the start, with all the structural and physical changes that occurred, it does not appear to have had a significant long-term impact on enrolments in the schools. To the extent that an increase in enrolments is sought in Years 7 to 9 in government schools, this arguably has more to do with the quality of school performance in each case, than any structural solution that might be applied.

Put simply, parents who have a choice about schooling will send their children to government middle schools if they perceive them as improving in terms of delivery of such desired outcomes as a well-led school that communicates with them, improved academic achievement, an orderly learning environment where each student feels there is an adult who knows and cares about them, and quality teaching driven by teams of teachers working together to continually improve. Hence, this is the focus of this review rather than any structural options for changing the delivery of schooling for students in Years 7 to 9.

Retention

Any consideration of middle school performance must take account of real retention since that affects the extent to which the data examined is comparing consistent cohorts of students and hence, like with like.

There are varying levels of real retention of students\(^7\) in middle schools in the Northern Territory as evident from Table 2. It should be noted that the percentages cited are an average for the four years, 2010-2013, and the review was advised that a degree of volatility exists from year to year in a number of schools, in part due to mobility of students in the schools, and especially Indigenous students in some areas.

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\(^7\) The Real Retention Rate in the northern Territory looks at students enrolled in Week 4 Term 1 who are still enrolled in Week 8 Term 4 of the same year.
Table 2: Real Within Year Retention % of all students and Indigenous students, average from 2010-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Enrolment, 2013</th>
<th>Average RR, 2010-2013</th>
<th>Average RR, Indigenous students, 2010-2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
<td>972</td>
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<td>68</td>
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<td>Darwin Middle School</td>
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<td>Katherine High School</td>
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<td>Nhulunbuy High School</td>
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<td>Sanderson Middle School</td>
<td>560</td>
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<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>608</td>
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<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek High School</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NT Department of Education, Enrolment and Attendance Data

While mobility is clearly an issue, it does not remove the challenge that exists to raise real retention levels in middle schools, by retaining those students who may well be dropping out of school. This in turn depends on progressively improving schooling in the middle years as outlined in the remainder of this review report, and in concert with the implementation of the Wilson report (2014) arising from the Indigenous Education Review.

Attendance
In addition, in relation to the issue of stand-alone middle schools versus comprehensive schools, it appears as if the difference in real retention (given the figures for Centralian Middle School are more aligned to the comprehensive school outcomes than those of the other, Darwin/Palmerston-based middle schools) relates more to proximity or distance to Greater Darwin than it does to the structural arrangement that applies. Beyond this, the issue of structure is arguably more a question of how the school organises itself to ensure its students are well known than which year levels it serves, as discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

Table 3 provides the annual attendance data for the middle schools and Years 7 to 9 in the comprehensive schools for 2010 to 2013.

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8 The percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.
9 In the case of Katherine High School, Nhulunbuy High School, Taminmin College and Tennant Creek High School the data included in the table applies to schools that span Years 7 to 12.
10 The methodology for data collection changed in 2013 and as such is indicative only.

Real retention rate is based on the proportion of students enrolled in Term 1 week 4 still enrolled in Term 4, Week 8.
Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.
Enrolment 2013 is the number of students enrolled in Term 1, Week 4 2013.
The comprehensive schools (Katherine, Nhulunbuy, and Tennant Creek High Schools and Taminmin College) include Year levels 7 to 12.
Table 3: Average annual attendance by school and year level 2010-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
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<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
<td>82.9%</td>
<td>89.9%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
<td>81.2%</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>77.0%</td>
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<td>72.0%</td>
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<td>87.1%</td>
<td>85.5%</td>
<td>89.9%</td>
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<td>86.4%</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
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<td>70.7%</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle School</td>
<td>84.4%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>84.4%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
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<td>78.6%</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>87.7%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>89.0%</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
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<td>80.0%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson Middle School</td>
<td>89.1%</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
<td>87.1%</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>86.5%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>84.8%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>85.1%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek High School</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NT Department of Education, Enrolment and Attendance Collection

Although attendance bounces around from year to year, it is generally in a relatively small range for each of the schools, with significant variation from a low of 47.2% attendance for Year 8 students at Tennant Creek High in 2011 to a high of 91.1% attendance for Year 7 students at Darwin Middle in 2012. Despite the ongoing efforts of middle and comprehensive schools to improve attendance as a threshold requirement for learning at

11 The methodology for data collection changed in 2013 and as such is indicative only.
school, average attendance levels have not substantially increased in most schools, with the notable exception of Nightcliff Middle School particularly at Year 9. In part, this reflects the fact that turning attendance around is a process not an event, and hence requires consistent implementation of strategies over time on the understanding it effectively is work that is never done. It also reflects the fact that student engagement tends to decline in the middle years, as outlined in the later discussion of data for informed decision making, which contributes to poorer attendance levels that can only be turned around through a mix of strategies to better engage students at school and ensure they are well known. That is both the objective and the substance of much of the remainder of this review report.

Beyond this, an analysis of attendance data suggests that, similar to the retention levels outlined in Table 2, there is no evident pattern to suggest a difference between middle and comprehensive schools as structures in their own right, and that differences appear to have more relationship to the proximity to a major centre, socio-economic status and proportion of Indigenous students in the school.

**NAPLAN results**

Aside from the real retention context noted above, any analysis of performance across the schools on consistently applied tests such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) must also acknowledge the extent to which the Northern Territory is more disadvantaged than other Australian jurisdictions. For example, the school age population in the most disadvantaged socio-economic group (i.e. the lowest decile) in the Territory is 19.5%. 37.2% of the Territory’s school age population come from a language background other than English, compared with 23.2% for Australia as a whole. Almost twenty times the Australian proportion of school age young people live in remote or very remote areas in the Territory (44.8% compared with 2.3%) and almost twice as large a proportion are developmentally vulnerable on two or more Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) domains which are known to be good predictors of adult health, education and social outcomes (20.9% compared with 10.8% nationally).

With this significant caveat in mind, the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel (2014) using data and analysis the Department of Education provided, concludes that:

> The Northern Territory shows generally stable performance with significant increases in some mean scale score measures. When comparing 2012 to 2013, Year 5 reading improved significantly. When comparing 2008 to 2013, significant increases were seen in Years 3 and 5 reading, Year 3 spelling, grammar and punctuation ...

> Overall the Northern Territory’s performance in Mean Scale Score (MSS) between 2008 and 2013 has been strongest in the Year 3 cohort. For the percentage of students At or Above National Minimum Standard (AANMS), the Northern Territory has made good gains for Years 3 and 5 results. For Year 7 and 9, the percentage of students At or Above National Minimum Standard has declined compared to both 2008 and 2012 levels across the majority of tested areas. The statistical significance of these changes is generally consistent with other jurisdictions.

> The Northern Territory performs better than other jurisdictions when comparing the same student cohorts over time, that is students tested in 2009, 2011 and 2013

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32 ABS 2011 Census (Basic Community Profile).
33 Ibid.
progressing through Years 3, 5 and 7. The Northern Territory has made strong gains in reading and spelling across all cohorts, ranking either first or second for improvement when compared to other jurisdictions. Gains in other test domains however have not been as strong, indicating a need for our system to focus more strongly on numeracy and writing skills in 2014 and beyond. (6)

This generally positive picture tends to suggest a greater level of improvement in the primary sector than in the middle years, which is confirmed to some extent by the inconsistencies noted below. However, this does augur well for future intakes to the middle years, provided the schools are structured to capitalise on the gains in the primary years.

There is a range of data available about performance on the MySchool website, the most interesting of which is arguably the student gain charts for matched cohorts of students between Years 7 and 9 compared with the gains achieved by a group of schools with similar students, commonly referred to as ‘like’ schools.

The reviewer examined these charts for each of the schools related to reading and numeracy performance between 2010 and 2012 and between 2011 and 2013 — i.e. enough time for most of the schools to have firmly established their middle years approach following the change in structure arising from the Ramsey review. The results of the reviewer’s judgments are summarised in Figure 1. It should be noted that the Year 7 cells in the Figure record the mean entry point of students to Year 7 in the school compared with a group of similar schools, while the Year 9 cells show the mean performance of students compared with like school students in Year 9.

In addition, the reviewer had access to Departmental data for 2013 on performance compared with similar schools in relation to the NAPLAN bands that is included as Table 4.

Figure 1: Comparative performance Year 7 and Year 9 in Reading and Numeracy, compared to schools with similar students; 2010 to 2012 and 2011 to 2013

Interpretation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
<td>Y7</td>
<td>Y9</td>
<td>Y7</td>
<td>Y9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dripstone Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine High School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Middle School</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek High School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16 Collected and packaged on a different basis to Figure 1 because of the way year level results were consolidated.
Table 4: NAPLAN Student Achievement Data, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ICSEA</th>
<th>Like school comparisons</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Numeracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparative Index</td>
<td>% Below</td>
<td>% Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Middle School</td>
<td>1039</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High School</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dripstone Middle School</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle School</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Middle School</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson Middle School</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine High School</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek High School</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NT Department of Education

The data embodied in Figure 1 and Table 4 do need to be read with some caution, since in some cases the schools are relatively small, which means there are small Year 7 and Year 9 groups, with the result the outcomes of relatively few students can skew the mean performance for the cohort as a whole. That applies, for instance, to Tennant Creek High School which has only 212 students from Year 7 through to Year 12. In addition, the matched cohort (i.e. the percentage of students who sat the relevant tests in both years) in all cases is significantly less than the enrolment of students in Year 9 and hence is not entirely indicative of the performance of the Year 9 group as a whole. That said, by focusing on those students who have moved through the school and taken the tests in both years, it can give us a clue to the value the school adds, to reading and numeracy NAPLAN results at least, compared with schools that have a similar student intake.

Perhaps the clearest sense to emerge from a consideration of Figure 1, which spans two cohorts of students moving from Year 7 to Year 9, is the degree of bouncing around that occurs from one year to the next in a number of the schools. Darwin Middle School provides a good example whereby students on average in the cohort that moved from Year 7 to Year 9 between 2010 and 2012 achieved slightly above similar students in other schools, whereas the following group of students (Year 7 moving to Year 9 between 2011 and 2013) tended to slightly underperform in comparative terms. Similarly, there is some variation between literacy and numeracy, with seemingly better comparative performance in literacy between 2010 and 2012 than between 2011 and 2013, and to a lesser extent numeracy as well.

In addition, both the figure and the table tend to confirm the observation that no discernible difference can be identified between the middle schools as a group and the comprehensive schools which include the middle years. This suggests that other factors determine the outcomes the schools achieve than their configuration of year levels, and there is little value in going down a path of viewing one group as ‘versus’ the other. Rather, the focus needs to be on what the research suggests can make a substantial positive difference to student learning outcomes in the middle years, as discussed through the remainder of this report.

There is evidence in the data outlined to support the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel’s observations that there has been some relative improvement in performance in the Territory,

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17 Index of Community Socio-Educational Disadvantage, which has an average value of 1000.
18 Listed in descending ICSEA order — i.e. growing levels of disadvantage.
though it is less evident at Year 9 than in earlier years, and is patchy between schools and between cohorts, especially in the smaller schools. This illustrates a need for the sort of progress that has been achieved to date to be consolidated and further built. That in turn requires a strategic approach to whole school improvement in the middle years, aligned to the evidence of what actually works, as outlined in the remainder of this report.

In all of the schools a significant proportion of students exists who are achieving relatively low level results. An analysis of the 2013 NAPLAN test results conducted by the reviewer shows significant proportions of students assessed as low in relation to the expected NAPLAN bands at Year 7 and 9 in all of the schools, and a consequent smaller proportion of students judged as high, with the exception of Darwin Middle School in Reading, as evident in Table 5, and which basically confirms the data in Table 2 above. Yet again, there is no discernible pattern to suggest a difference in outcomes between middle and comprehensive schools.

Table 5: Proportion of students (%) assessed as low or high in relation to NAPLAN Bands, reading and numeracy, 2013 tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Reading Year 7</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Numeracy Year 7</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Middle School</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dripstone Middle School</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine High School</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High School</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle School</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Middle School</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson Middle School</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek High School</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suffice to say, there are large groups of students in each of the schools who are performing below expectations on the NAPLAN tests for reading and numeracy at least, which has implications for the pedagogy in particular that teachers in all middle schools adopt.

**Data for informed decision making**

It is noted that the preceding discussion of performance relates exclusively to NAPLAN test results, which were also the data source that informed the deliberations of the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel which was established in 2013 specifically to ‘oversee a renewed focus on teaching, and assessing the core competences of reading, writing and mathematics, including a review of current literacy and numeracy practice’ (2014:2).

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19 It should be noted that the proportion of Indigenous students assessed as low is even higher where this disaggregated data exists. For example, at Centralian which is the first listed school and which has a significant Indigenous population, the respective percentages of students assessed as low in Year 7 and 9 reading and Year 7 and 9 numeracy are 80%, 71% 74% and 87%.

20 Note that the percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. It should also be noted that the cohorts in Years 7 and 9 are relatively small at both Nhulunbuy and Tennant Creek.
As has been demonstrated, this data is useful for comparing the average performance of students in the middle schools to those in schools with similar student intakes. It also provides useful trend data that can help the schools to analyse their students’ performance and then adopt an appropriate strategic response. However, NAPLAN is simply one quite restricted source of school performance data and even then only a point in time snapshot through the tests. It is also the only consistent assessment that applies in Northern Territory middle schools. The NAPLAN data needs to be supplemented by a rich array of other 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.

The consultant’s experience in working with the Department to conduct the review is that a great deal of data exists, but 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 to devise the appropriate strategic response either at the school level or across the Territory as a whole. There are also some significant data 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 the NAPLAN, while extensive in some cases, is not consistent, comparable or shared to provide a systemic picture of student performance in the middle years. The Department does have an online ASPIRE system that notionally provides NAPLAN, wellbeing and transition and pathways information that can be aggregated by schools and for the system as a whole, but it is far from embraced by schools. The common view of middle school leaders is that it is more about compliance than a support to planning, is not user-friendly, and locks people out if they do not go through the right hoops. It’s a system that its intended users see as good in theory but not in practice, whereas it needs to be good in both.

More recently, the Department established a Student Assessment Information System (SAIS) to provide ‘a one stop shop for teachers, principals and schools to create, record and report on student assessments’. The SAIS is designed to provide ‘a flexible framework to manage assessment and reporting for class, school and system wide assessments’ along with a range of user guides and videos to support its use. That said, the SAIS, which can provide fast fact reports on schools, is limited to student assessments and is not mandatory and hence subject to inconsistent use. Anecdotal reports suggest the SAIS has been embraced by primary schools, but has not particularly been taken up by middle schools, with most not really contracting in to date.

Beyond this, the Department itself has acknowledged that the SAIS shows there is no clear line of sight across the Territory for data relevant to students in the middle years and hence a pressing need exists for systemic data collection at the very least about student achievement, A to E, in the Australian Curriculum English and Mathematics using SAIS. This is important since the view within the Department which the discussions for this review confirmed, is that the A to E outcomes tend to be skewed to the lower end, in part perhaps reflecting some low expectations of students by some teachers in the schools.

Put simply, the Department needs to have a better and more comprehensive data set to know what its middle schools are doing and how they are performing, and the schools

21 More specifically, the reviewer was advised that only Sanderson, Rosebery and Centralian Middle Schools and Tennant Creek High School used the SAIS and SharePoint for reporting in Semester One, 2014.
themselves need better, more user-friendly data sets to inform their planning consistent with a view of what they are trying to achieve in the middle years.

It is possible in this context to envisage a consolidated set of strategic data the Department could systematise and collect in consistent form across schools, which could also be contained on school-specific, password-protected web pages in a form that is always up to date and malleable to support decision making systemically and at the school level. Where the school lacks sufficient bandwidth to effectively use an online tool of this sort, the school could be provided with regular, point in time school level reports containing all of the relevant data to inform their own performance evaluation and hence planning for the following year. By way of illustration, the strategic data set could include: enrolment trends and relevant socio-economic data; teacher judgments against common whole school assessments; NAPLAN data including on student gain relative to other similar schools; data on VET courses being undertaken and completed; student attendance and absence data; student retention levels; any opinion survey (i.e., staff, student, parent) data; and data on staff retention and sick leave.

These all have relevance to strategic planning within the Department and schools, and to improving schooling in the middle years. The approach could also reasonably apply to schools on either side of the middle years (i.e., primary and senior schools) which would contribute to economies of scale in setting it up, as well as better transition of students between the stages of school.

Opinion surveys of staff, students and parents have a particularly important role to play in the middle years of school. Staff opinion surveys can provide valuable insight to staff views on such critical issues as students’ motivation to learn, the effectiveness and consistency of implementation of discipline and wellbeing policies and protocols in the school, how challenging and engaging the curriculum is, the impact of different pedagogical approaches, the quality of professional learning environment that exists in the school, and more. The current staff opinion survey in the Northern Territory largely conforms to this outline, since it gathers information about staff/student wellbeing; relationships; quality of teaching; curriculum relevance and student outcomes; information (from the school to its staff); learning and work environment; overall satisfaction; overall work experience; and leadership. As such it basically fits the bill for gaining an understanding of staff views systemically and at the school level. If it were to change at all, it could benefit from the inclusion of an additional variable related to staff views about students’ motivation to learn, since this is a surrogate for their expectations of students which are known to significantly influence the outcomes the students achieve. In addition, it may need to be adjusted to ensure that it conforms to any nationally-agreed survey items to be included as a result of the National Education Agreement and Schools Assistance Act 2008, which required reports on parent, student and staff satisfaction in annual reports.

The reviewer was advised that staff opinion surveys in the Northern Territory are only administered every four years and was unable to access any survey results. Every four years would seem to be too infrequent to effectively support the ongoing systemic monitoring of middle schools and strategic planning at the school and system level. The survey should be administered annually in all middle schools which will also help to identify trends over time.

22 The sort of statements that could be included in such a variable, based on ones that have been used in surveys in Victoria in the past, are: Students at this school are really motivated to learn; Students are always keen to do well at this school; Students at this school spend most of their time on task; Doing well is important to the students at this school; and Students at this school put a lot of effort into their work.
Student opinion provides a kind of reality check to help schools and teachers, as well as the system as a whole, ensure that the experience they believe they provide to students conforms closely to the experiences the students actually have. That there is a mismatch between the two which increases in the middle years is well known from research. Put simply, student engagement, and in particular their connectedness to their teachers and to school, tends to decline after primary school, between Years 7 and 9, before stabilising in Year 10 and then trending upwards in the senior years. This is readily evident in Figure 2 from Victoria which replicates experiences in other jurisdictions and overseas.

Figure 2: Student motivation, connectedness to school and teacher effectiveness, Victoria, 2006-7

Thus, the extent to which student opinion is important for informing decision making in the school, in particular about such issues as curriculum provision, pedagogy and structures to ensure students are well-known by the staff, is only strengthened for young adolescents in the middle years of school. A student opinion survey should be developed and used annually in Northern Territory middle schools. The Department does not need to start from scratch in this regard and could, for example, source a survey to either use or amend as required, from another jurisdiction, such as the Victorian Attitudes to School student opinion survey that has been in use in Government schools for a number of years and has proven successful in gaining a lens on students’ views. Once again, the survey developed will need to encompass any national items that Ministers have agreed.

Parents too can provide valuable insight to the strengths and shortcomings of the school since they are the ones with the greatest interest in their children’s experience and success at school, and a further conduit to the student experience to the extent it is talked about at home. The Department of Education website provides a parent opinion survey that fits the bill provided it is amended as needed to meet agreed national requirements and regularly used with at least a sample of parents in the schools. It is acknowledged in this context that the Department may also need to provide translated versions so a broader range of parents can be included in the samples that schools approach.

23 Further information on the survey can be found at http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/performsurveyat.aspx
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.

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24 It should be noted that the use of the term middle schools should be taken to also refer to Years 7 to 9 in the comprehensive schools in recommendations throughout this report in order to reduce their length.
Chapter 3: The nature of the cohort and its implications

The establishment of middle schools as a result of the Ramsey Review (2003) was in part a response to intellectual, social, emotional and physical changes young people experience through adolescence, and the implications this has for how they are engaged and taught at school.

While young adolescents move through this growth cycle at varying rates, they do as a group reflect important developmental characteristics that schools and teachers need to take into account.

The physical changes adolescents undergo are relatively well-known. They experience changes in height, weight and body chemistry, along with rapid sexual development. One thing that is often neglected in this regard is the fact that heightened physical growth can cause frequent fatigue in early adolescence, especially when students are physically active as well. While adolescents do need good nutrition in these years, they tend to have a preference for junk food and some may adopt poor health habits and even engage in risky experimentation with drugs. These are all factors that schools and teachers need to consider.

Less well-known perhaps than the physical changes which can readily be observed, are some intellectual and emotional changes that are also underway.

This chapter summarises some important recent research findings about the development of the adolescent brain, and discusses the implications they have for middle schooling which have influenced the remaining chapters of the review report.

Brain development and learning

According to Giedd (2009), who has worked extensively in the field, the brain’s ability to change is particularly pronounced in the adolescent years, however different rates of development can lead to poor decision making and substantial taking of risks.

Magnetic imaging resonance (MRI) research has demonstrated that the millions of neuronal connections (dendrites) that children are born with, and which spike between the ages of 9 and 11, start to shut down during adolescence as they are not used to speed the transmission of the used portions of an individual’s brain. In other words, as Wilson and Horch (September 2002:58) have explained, after a growth spurt in early adolescence just before puberty, the brain then goes through a period of ‘pruning’ when heavily used connections between parts of the brain are strengthened and unused connections deteriorate. This process of ‘hardwiring’ continues throughout adolescence and means that ‘the intellectual activities given the most time, the most opportunity to strengthen the connections in the brain, will influence learning for the rest of the student’s life’ (Salyers and McKee, undated:1).

As a consequence Giedd and colleagues (1999), who arguably identified this wave of neural overproduction, suggest a ‘use it or lose it’ principle whereby the cells and connections used are those that survive and flourish, and those that are not used, die. As he simply put it in an interview in 2005, ‘If a teen is doing music, sports, or academics, those are the cells and connections that will be hard-wired. If they are lying on the couch or playing video games or

25 It should be noted that some research cited in this chapter is from online sources and hence the citing of page numbers does not apply.
MTV, those are the cells and connections that are going (to) survive’. To the extent that this is the case, it means that adolescent brain development can be influenced by the nature of activities undertaken during this phase, and the ways in which they are taught.

Taking account of the physical and intellectual changes at play, Salyers and McKee suggest a need to design lessons for adolescents that include ‘a full range of sensory motor experiences’, since engaging the senses and emotions ‘will increase students’ attention span and heighten memory’ (2). Another strategy they suggest in this context is ‘to build lessons using inquiry or problem-based learning in which students are encouraged to ask questions that interest them after the lesson is framed in terms of essential questions or problems to resolve’.

Beyond this, they advocate asking students to write reflectively each day since this ‘strengthens connections in the brain ... (and) gives time for students to consolidate learning and seek meaning between various activities’ (2).

The physical changes referred to can also not be ignored and, at the very least, suggest that adolescents should also have the opportunity to move regularly since they are often unable to sit still for long periods of time.

Looked at more broadly than just specific strategies that teachers might adopt, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in the United States as far back as 1995 argued that middle schooling program components should be built around:

- curriculum that is challenging, integrative and exploratory;
- varied teaching and learning approaches;
- assessment and evaluation that promote learning;
- flexible organisational structures;
- programs and policies that foster health, wellness and safety; and
- comprehensive guidance and support services.

All of this has, at its heart, the need to engage young people in learning in the middle years. Adolescents, Bellhouse, et. al. (2004) argue in this regard, ‘increasingly differentiate themselves in terms of their peers, physical attributes and competence’ (13). They begin to associate achievement more with skill and cognitive ability than the effort they need to invest: ‘While they may give the appearance of being engaged by novelty, to hold their interest through to achievement, young people will increasingly require content that is perceived as valuable, is consistent with personal goals, and/or will lead to an important outcome’ (13-14). This particularly suggests a need for clarity about the purpose of learning in which they are being urged to engage, and hence puts a premium on teacher planning and the extent to which their learning intentions are clear.

School, according to Bellhouse, ‘is more likely to become a means to an end’ and hence learning ‘will be enhanced by opportunities for students to participate in projects they believe to be relevant and important to their lifestyle or career goals, that occur over extended periods and are learner directed. These projects encourage deep thinking, a process that gives students an opportunity to apply knowledge and skills flexibly and to develop a meaningful sense of their application and purpose’ (19-20).

Aside from the basic literacy, numeracy and technology skills that all students need to succeed in the middle years of school, the development of self-efficacy emerges as increasingly important for effective middle years learning to occur. With the brain still maturing in these years, students can be supported to build what Bellhouse refers to as ‘positive habitual behaviours that encourage them to employ a range of strategies such as
predicting outcomes, planning ahead, noting difficulties and failure to comprehend, and activating relevant knowledge’ (17).

He goes on to explain that ‘(t)hese gradually increase in complexity, manifesting in cognitive skills like the use of deliberate memory and concentration techniques, and the adaptable use of graphic representations for ideas, thinking processes and frameworks’ (21-2). Teachers can support the development of these skills through explicit teaching of a range of study skills (e.g., goal and target setting, prioritising, scheduling, etc.) which Hattie (2012) has shown to have a high positive effect.

Despite the discussion of adolescent brain development so far, it also needs to be acknowledged, as Salyers and McKee have observed, that the ‘only consistent point about the development of young adolescents is that it is inconsistent’(2). By way of example, they explain how in eighth-grade classrooms ‘there is a six to eight-year span in physical development among the students; and in seventh grade classrooms, there is a six to eight-year span in academic achievement’(2). Thus, although adolescent student bodies and brains are developing in the ways that are described, they are doing so variably and are at different stages of development at essentially the same age.

By way of response they suggest that students ought be encouraged to ‘use peer collaboration and cooperative learning at this age to take advantage of the great range of academic and social maturities while developing group problem solving skills’(2). This also recognises the fact that peer group acceptance is especially important to students in this phase, which in turn impacts on learning and engagement in the group. ‘Students who belong to a highly engaged group’, a Victorian Department of Education & Training Research Paper (April 2006) explains, ‘tend to have positive behavioural engagement at the individual level’ while ‘students belonging to a peer group that have negative feelings towards learning tend to exhibit similar behaviour’ (14). As a result, Reeve and Ainley (2004) suggest, teachers need to work to establish the mode of classroom peer interaction that will ensure students make appropriate decisions about learning and their work.

**Adolescent behaviour and its implications**

The process of neural pruning means that adolescents develop faster reaction times, better memory and increased speed in learning. It is also the case, however, that a dynamic relationship exists between the earlier developing limbic system networks, which Giedd (2009) describes as ‘the seat of emotion’ and the later-maturing frontal lobe networks that help regulate that emotion.

Frontal lobe circuitry, he explains, ‘mediates “executive functioning”, a term encompassing a broad array of abilities, including attention, response inhibition, regulation of emotion, organisation and long-range planning’. And MRI studies suggest that this matures particularly late, perhaps not reaching adult levels until the mid 20s.

This disparity between the maturation of the cortex and limbic systems explains what Wisconsin’s Horicon Library research papers (citing Sylwester, 2007) refer to as ‘“How could you be so smart and do something that dumb?” moments that teens suffer through, even as the teens themselves think that they are way smarter than adults’.

Neuroscientist Ronald Dahl (quoted by the Horicon library from a private interview with Shirtcliff in 2009) uses the analogy of driving a car to suggest that the teenage brain is like ‘all drive and no brakes’. The drive, he explains, comes from the limbic system that is highly activated by hormones during early childhood that then skyrocket to adult levels during
early adolescence. The brakes, which are operated by the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC), are not fully mature until the early 20s at least, and sometimes later in young men, which means they are not entirely present for most teenagers. Hence they often lack what might be described as the good judgment to weigh the consequences of the decisions they make.

That said, Dahl does suggest that the calming effect a mature brain has can be encouraged in several ways: ‘[p]roblem solving, thinking critically and judging the relative merits of action, and learning from one’s mistakes are all ways in which teens can “flex their PFC” to become wiser, faster’. Beyond this, ‘actually allowing teens to deal with some real-world consequences may enable the PFC to mature more quickly … (and) Self-monitoring and impulse control on the part of the teens themselves is of more value than external controls’.

Bellhouse takes it a stage further still to suggest we should support students to ‘communicate, participate and work cooperatively, to have self-control and to resolve conflicts thoughtfully without resorting to avoidance or aggression’ since this helps them to achieve success in the middle years of school. ‘Learning to manage emotions, predict consequences, develop optimistic thinking habits, and set goals are all skills that will improve student achievement and wellbeing’ (14).

One thing this does all suggest is the need for clear boundaries to exist for students in the middle years of school so they are not continually searching for where the limits lie. This in turn requires the school to have clear and agreed behavioural expectations for students, with clear, known consequences, that teachers commit to and consistently implement. This is not just a matter of rules to regulate behaviour, but rather rules that apply in a context where students are well-known by the staff. One consistent message to emerge through substantial middle years experience of schools and teachers in the late 1990s in Victoria (the Middle Years Research and Development Project, MYRAD), for instance, was the positive link that appears to exist between student achievement and the degree to which students feel there is a teacher in the school who knows and cares about them.

The need for an orderly learning environment where students are known well by the staff also accords with broader school improvement research which demonstrates that it constitutes a fundamental precondition for whole school improvement and a key means for developing greater consistency amongst the staff. (See Zbar, et. al. 2009).

The mismatch noted between different parts of the adolescent brain and how it develops also helps to explain why adolescents, more than students at other ages, tend to exhibit what the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2006) refers to as ‘a disproportionate amount of reckless behaviour, sensation seeking and risk taking’(6). Interestingly enough, there is evidence the Horicon Library cites to suggest this is not so much a lack of awareness of risk, as the fact, as Reyna (2007) notes, that ‘teens tend to weight benefits more heavily than risks when making decisions. So, after carefully considering the risks and benefits of a situation, the teenage brain all too often comes down on the side of the benefits … and chooses the risky action’.

This in turn means it is difficult to motivate teenagers negatively, through threats, and a rewards-based approach is likely to generate better results. Beyond this, the role modelling that responsible adults, such as teachers provide, ought not be ignored. Significant new research on mirror neurons, which Daniel Goleman (2007) describes as a kind of ‘neural wi-fi’ that monitors what is happening in other people, has demonstrated that our brains can tend to reflect what happens in those of others around us, especially significant others such as those in a position of authority in the room. Emotions are contagious from the most powerful person present out. So, just as leaders in organisations ‘have to take more responsibility for the impact they have on the people that they lead and the people around
them’, so too must teachers take responsibility for the effect they have on the students they teach.

Finally, as is well-known by any adults who regularly work with adolescents, this developmental phase is often marked by an increase in conflict between the adolescent and the adults with whom they interact, including their parents at home. While this partly reflects the growing importance of peer interaction and affiliation with peers, it also relates to miscommunication arising from how the adolescent brain responds to the outside world. Yurgelen-Todd (1998 and cited by the Victorian DET, 2006), for example, explains how adolescents have been found to be unable to correctly read all the feelings in the adult face. They may, for instance, see anger or sadness when it simply doesn’t exist. Thus, as the Department paper explains, ‘when adolescents are relating to their parents, teachers or other adults, they may be misperceiving or misunderstanding some of the feelings that adults take as the norm’ (7). This again suggests a need for middle school structures that ensure that students are connected to at least one adult in the school who can get to know them well, as discussed in detail later in this report.
Chapter 4: 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.

Chief among these is the Department’s Framework for the Principles and Policies for the Middle Years in the Northern Territory. This sets out the five key principles that apply to the middle years, and provides high level advice related to each. More specifically, the five principles are:

- Principle 1: The Teaching and Learning Environment — The curriculum is based upon Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) outcomes and is rigorous, rich, real and relevant to students’ current and future lives.
- Principle 2: Literacy and Numeracy — Students are offered learning opportunities that allow them to reach and in most cases exceed literacy and numeracy national benchmarks.
- Principle 3: Student-Teacher Relationships — Strong teacher-student relationships are fundamental to improving individual outcomes for most students in the middle years.
- Principle 4: Transition into and out of the middle years — Transition into and out of the middle years is a formal part of the program of all schools.
- Principle 5: Systemic support — The school system provides support to students, parents and teachers in the middle years.

The advice for each principle relates to the specific areas of: teaching, learning, assessing and reporting; student support; teachers; school leadership; school organisation; and evaluation. Some of the flavour of the document can be gained from the advice related to teaching, learning, assessing and reporting provided as Figure 3, and the full document is provided as Appendix 2 to the report.

Figure 3: Extract from the Framework for Principles and Policies for the Middle Years

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<td>The curriculum is based upon Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) outcomes and is rigorous, rich, real and relevant to students’ current and future lives.</td>
<td>Students are offered learning opportunities that allow them to reach and in most cases exceed literacy and numeracy national benchmarks.</td>
<td>Strong teacher-student relationships are fundamental to improving individual outcomes for most students in the middle years.</td>
<td>Transition into and out of the middle years is a formal part of the program of all schools.</td>
<td>The school system provides support to students, parents and teachers in the middle years.</td>
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Teaching, Learning, and Reporting:
- Teachers, students and parents are clear about the NTCF outcomes; students need to learn these outcomes; and they are challenged to be successful. Students have a range of learning opportunities that include special and integrated approaches to the curriculum. Students are challenged intellectually and focus on developing higher order thinking skills.
- Teachers who teach the same group of students collaborate to identify learning that is relevant to students’ current and future life.

Through explicit teaching and learning, students are able to take an active part in negotiating, diagnosing and assessing their learning.
- Students have learning experiences to make links between learning across the curriculum.
- Students are offered a range of assessment opportunities to demonstrate their learning.
- The information gained from assessment is used to teach and students are encouraged to improve and gain from the teaching and learning process.

Assessment is used to monitor student learning and provide information for reporting to students, teachers, parents and others.

Literacy and Numeracy:
- Programs are a consistent part of the curriculum, whether they are taught in separate specialist classes or as part of the core curriculum.
- Literacy and Numeracy: programs are a consistent part of the curriculum. Students are offered a range of assessment opportunities to monitor their learning.

The Framework is effectively supplemented by the Northern Territory Board of Studies Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Policy and Guidelines for Transition to Year 9 effective from August 2013. This too provides high level advice on: curriculum and its implementation with reference to the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework and the Australian Curriculum; assessment including principles of assessment and an expectation that schools develop a whole school curriculum and assessment plan; and reporting including reporting requirements of schools. Links are provided to digital online resources to help schools, and the whole approach is encapsulated in Figure 4 from the guide.
While this diagram does provide useful planning advice to schools, an argument can be made that it needs to at least be supplemented, or underpinned by:

- leadership that ensures whole school planning of the approach aligned to a vision for schooling in the middle years, and consistent implementation by the staff;
- an orderly learning environment where students are well known by staff;
- an instructional model to guide teacher planning of the curriculum, how it is delivered and assessed; and
- a structure for professional learning that supports collaborative planning and enables more teachers to work like the best teachers in the school.

These are all issues which are pursued in more depth through the remainder of this report. In addition the diagram, which applies to the whole transition to Year 9 span, plus these supplementary factors, need to be implemented in a way that reflects what is known about the cohort in middle schools as outlined in Chapter 3. Again, this is taken up in more detail in the later discussion of curriculum and assessment, and pedagogy for the middle years.
Aside from these two overarching policy documents, the Department did in 2006 issue a number of papers designed to support schools, principals and teachers in catering for students in the middle years. More specifically:

- *A Guide to Planning, Teaching, Assessing and Reporting Learning*, which makes the case for change in the context of the (then) shift to middle schools for students in Years 7 to 9, provides high level planning advice to schools, outlines some useful pedagogical strategies (i.e., direct instruction; inquiry-based instruction; metacognition and critical thinking; literacy, numeracy and ICT; authentic assessment and standards; and collaborative learning and cooperative behaviour), and provides advice on assessment planning and recording and reporting for learning. An appendix to the guide also includes some suggested curriculum themes based on ‘an intersection of social and early adolescent concerns’, along with some sample integrated units of work.

- Four separate, but interrelated supportive guides to reflecting on teaching practices in the middle years of schooling respectively covering different modes of learning, different modes of instruction, assessment, and recording and reporting.

- A school self-reflection tool aligned to a planning model developed by Hill and Crevola (1997) that was implemented in the Middle Years Research and Development Project in a group of Victorian Government schools.

There are at least two interesting things about these 2006 documents in particular.

The first is the fact that these documents are not readily available for the use of staff working with students in the middle years of school. For example, they do not appear to be contained in the register of policies included on the Department of Education’s website and do not show up from a targeted search of the site. While the documents may be dated to some extent, they do contain useful information and advice that could inform the deliberations of schools. At the very least, they are material on which the Department and its personnel can build as they consider and implement recommendations arising from this review.

The second point of note, which these Territory documents share with much of the advice other jurisdictions around Australia provide, is that aside from the sample themes and units included as an appendix to the first-listed guide, they are all pitched at a high level, contain substantial information that is not exemplified in ways that schools can readily use, and hence can be quite hard to implement. The matrix comprising the Framework for Principles and Policies for the Middle Years (Appendix 2) provides a good example of this point. Taken together, this cross-referencing of five principles to six elements of school-based practices produces 30 ostensibly discrete cells around which schools should plan. This presumes a high level of planning expertise, not to mention time in which the elements can be integrated into a coherent, whole-school plan.

**Important recent initiatives**

One welcome initiative in this regard is the recent establishment of an ‘Assessment and Standards Middle Years’ project in the Department scheduled to run between term one 2014 and term four 2016. The project sees two consultants working with and supporting each of the schools covered by this review, along with Katherine School of the Air and Batchelor, Jabiru and Alyangula Area Schools to:

- efficiently and effectively develop and implement quality assessment initiatives and professional learning in middle years schools;
• provide expert assessment practice information and advice in the context of middle years to critical stakeholders;
• design, develop and evaluate middle years assessment resources and professional learning with and for educators;
• lead the development and implementation of assessment policy initiatives including data literacy, assessment design, clarifying and confirming to ensure consistency of standards;
• work with middle years educators, including personnel from Curriculum Assessment and Standards (CAS), Senior Years teams, regions and schools to enact assessment components of the Northern Territory Board of Studies Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Policy and Guidelines T-9 and departmental policies; and
• develop and maintain comprehensive and effective professional networks and collaborative partnerships with school staff, regional staff, CAS and Senior Years colleagues, to identify and access school-based expertise and build capacity.

It is intended that the project will result in:

• professional learning courses and resources on Moodle and Learning Links\textsuperscript{26} to support middle years teachers in assessment and standards;
• recommendations for, and examples of, whole school assessment plans, summative and formative assessments, peer and self-assessment for middle years;
• vignettes of quality assessment practices in middle years housed in Learning Links; and
• log modes of delivery and support for building facilitator capacity.

As such, it will in time constitute a good example of the sort of exemplars advocated in the discussion above, to 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.

The initiative also has particular importance in light of the need for more systemic data collection about middle years achievement, as noted in Chapter 2, which was one of the reasons the initiative was introduced. Better data of this sort not only contributes to better system oversight of performance in the middle years of school, but can also help the transition of students from primary feeder schools to the middle years and then from the middle years to the senior secondary phase of their schooling.

This initiative is discussed further in Chapter 9 on curriculum and assessment for the middle years, though it is acknowledged it is only in a relatively early phase of working with four pilot schools.

Just as valuable is the work of the Department’s Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel cited earlier, as outlined in its 2014 Report and Recommendations. This sets out seven fundamental expectations for teaching literacy and numeracy and discusses strategies for growing teacher capacity, leadership and school improvement, data analysis and interrogation, and partnerships, and these are referenced in the remaining chapters of the report since they relate to proposals arising from this review.

The Assessment and Standards Middle Years project 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.

\textsuperscript{26} A password protected website containing curriculum support materials for teachers in Northern Territory schools.
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.
Chapter 5: Adopting a strategic approach

In the course of conducting this review, the reviewer has read a number of major reports which impact significantly on the Northern Territory education system and schools, and in some cases directly on the provision of schooling in the middle years.

In particular:

- Ramsey’s report on future directions for secondary education in the Northern Territory (2003) which, as cited earlier in this report, effectively led to the establishment of Year 7 to 9 middle schools and the designation of these years as a specific middle years stage;
- O’Sullivan’s reports on community consultations related to the middle years of schooling (2005 and 2006);
- Ladwig and Sarra’s structural review of the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (2009);
- Masters’ report on improving educational outcomes in the Northern Territory (2011);
- The Department’s own Strategic Plan for the period 2013 to 2015; and
- Wilson’s review of Indigenous education in the Territory (2014) which includes specific recommendations on the middle years.

All of this is aside from the range of middle years policy statements and supports referenced in Chapter 4.

One is struck in this context by the fact that a lot seems to have been tried, not only concerning the middle years of school, with variable implementation success and arguably no substantial improvement in student results. It is not really too far removed from Wilson’s observation in relation to Indigenous education that, ‘[d]espite substantial investment and dedicated effort … in some areas the position for many Indigenous children is worse that it was at the time of the last review’ (11).

This may in part reflect the fact there have been so many investigations and reviews of aspects of education in the Territory, that nothing is ever really bedded down — an apparent search for the ‘silver bullet’ that is never found. As one school leader somewhat typically explained, ‘when the middle years was thought of in 2006 there was support, but then it all went when the system moved on’. The result was a kind of ‘choose your own adventure’ (a phrase that more than one school leader in different schools used) in relation to data collection and shared professional practices, with no systemic expectations at all. In a somewhat similar vein, the AEU noted in a briefing session on the draft review report that so many policy shifts have occurred that it leads to uncertainty amongst teachers and a desire for no more structural change.

Also of relevance may be the sort of situation noted in the preceding chapter, whereby projects that ought be related in order to capitalise on sharing expertise, reducing the potential for unnecessary duplication, taking advantage of economies of scale, and providing more manageable outcomes for schools are in fact conducted separately with minimal evident connection between them.

It is well-known from a range of research and experience that organisations, including schools, commonly experience an implementation dip as they seek to implement change. This dip, illustrated in Figure 5, as Fullan (undated) explains, reflects a ‘dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings’ (6). Leaders who understand the dip, he advises, ‘know that people are
experiencing two kinds of problems’ when they are in it — ‘the social-psychological fear of change, and the lack of technical know how or skills to make the change work’ (ibid).

When schools or systems continually review direction or seek further change, and/or set too many hares running not in unison but in different (disconnected) fields, they effectively set off another dip as the same anxieties and skill shortfalls emerge, and nothing gets properly implemented as a result. In contrast, what Fullan, drawing on a range of organisational research, recommends is that leaders maintain ‘an urgent sense of moral purpose’ for consistency of vision and approach, and ‘still measure success in terms of results’, but that they also ‘do things that are more likely to get the organisation going and keep it going’ (ibid).

Figure 5: The Implementation Dip

THE IMPLEMENTATION DIP

Source: McLeod, 2007

Put simply, this tends to suggest that schools, principals, teachers and the system as a whole need time to consolidate and successfully implement change that is sought. Just as Wilson calls for ‘a consistent approach for an extended period’ (13) if significant improvements for Indigenous young people are to be achieved, so too is consistency required to improve students’ learning outcomes in the middle years of school. Apart from anything else, time to consolidate the implementation of targeted change, is also time to develop and provide the support that those responsible for implementation require to overcome the ‘social-psychological’ anxieties they feel and develop the skills to make it work.

It is instructive to note that in 2003, Ramsey’s review pointed to some ‘essential features’ (2003:91) of middle schooling programs that arguably still hold. More specifically:

- smaller groups of students, arranged within learning communities or sub-schools;
- a smaller number of teachers for each student;
- interdisciplinary teaching teams;
- strong pastoral care programs;
- integrated curriculum for core subjects;
- self-directed, problem-based learning;

Review of Middle Schooling in the Northern Territory
• higher order, critical thinking’
• individual needs catered for, particularly those of ‘at risk’ students;
• flexible use of time and space;
• seamless transition;
• a firmly stated commitment by the school, staff and the community to the principles and practices of middle schooling.

The variability of performance noted in Chapter 2, along with even the commissioning of this review, suggest that these not only are inconsistently applied, but that the challenge is not so much knowing what is needed, as to simply do it well.

Thus, rather than seeking to point to major systemic changes required to middle schooling, the remainder of this report focuses on identifying the few big things in middle schooling that can have a significant positive impact, and then planning to do them well, building on approaches already in place that are working well in schools. This is especially important in the wake of the Wilson review, which proposes substantial change the Department will need to manage if the outcomes for Indigenous students, including those in the middle years, are to substantially improve. Hence the argument and recommendations advanced are designed to dovetail with Wilson’s approach, and be manageable at scale across the ten affected schools.

It is also consistent with Barber’s observation (in Barber, et. al, 2009) that the focus now is ‘no longer talking of “if”, but rather “how”; and the consequent realisation that, in terms of meeting the shared agenda to raise the bar and narrow the gap, “it’s all about implementation and delivery”’ (2009:20).

The point is that acting strategically to ensure successful implementation of middle years approaches that work, may mean slowing continual change down, identifying relatively few things that are known to make a substantial difference to student outcomes, and then doing them well across the system as a whole. This in turn requires focused support from the Department to principals, teachers and schools that can build on some good policies and materials already in place and using them to develop more concrete exemplars that practitioners can readily adapt to their own circumstances and then successfully use.

This, it should be noted, is consistent with how successful large scale reform has occurred in school systems in the past, such as the Northern Metropolitan Region in Victoria where, as Hopkins, et. al. (2011) explain, the implementation of precise programs and associated systemic support, saw a relatively high disadvantage region, comprising 195 schools for more than 75,000 students, generate a substantial reversal in academic trends.
Chapter 6: A vision for middle schooling

Setting up a structure for schooling that covers Years 7 to 9, as the implementation of Ramsey has done, begs the question of what the system, including its schools, actually wants to do with the approach. This goes to the question of vision at the systemic level, in turn reflected in schools, to provide the motivating moral purpose for schooling in the middle years. It also provides a de facto statement of commitment by the system to the schools catering for students in this phase.

Gabriel and Farmer (2009) used the following analogy of a shared excursion to demonstrate the importance of having a shared vision for achieving the purpose of, in this case, a school:

‘Imagine that you have a rare weekend without any professional responsibilities, no papers to grade, no lessons to plan, no activities to cover. To take advantage of this unexpected free time, you and three friends decide to go on a fishing excursion to a lake known as one of the best largemouth bass habitats in the eastern United States. Through email messages, telephone conversations, and brief get-togethers, the four of you coordinate transportation, lodging, the time of departure and other details.

It would seem reasonable to assume that you were all going with ambitions to catch largemouth bass. However, what would happen to the trip’s camaraderie and outcome if each person’s vision of the weekend differed from that assumption? What if one person plans to spot eagles, another is looking for lakefront property, and a third hopes to catch anything that will pull in the line, while you are there for sun and leisure?

You could have avoided any confusion and better harnessed efforts by explicitly asking your companions during the planning stages,

- What is the actual purpose of the trip?
- What are the goals of the attendees?
- What does everyone envision for the weekend?
- Has everyone shared these things with one another?

Whatever the context, the point is the same: if a group wants to move forward, it needs to develop an understood, agreed-on purpose. With a couple of word substitutions, you could ask those bulleted questions of any leadership team or department in your school …’

The same holds true for middle schooling as a stage.

It is noteworthy in this regard that, despite the existence of The Framework for the Principles and Policies for the Middle Years in the Northern Territory, and associated policy statements and guides, there appears to be no statement of vision for middle schooling in the Northern Territory. The closest that exists is the ostensible ‘vision’ included in the document Middle Years Strategic Framework for Cultural Change (10 December 2006) — which interestingly, like some of the support materials listed in Chapter 4, is no longer available on the Department’s website — which states that ‘By 2010, middle schooling will have seamlessly and effectively merged into the education landscape in the Northern Territory. Learning will be the central pillar of all areas of school life, and there will be continuous consolidation and refinement of teaching, learning and assessment in the Middle Years’. This, it is noted, is as much a vision for the implementation of middle schools as it is for schooling in the middle years.

In contrast to the Department, a search of middle school websites and discussions with principals reveals that they all do have a vision and/or mission statement which is often shared online with their school community and, for that matter, anyone who cares to visit the site. For the most part, these are quite brief, as they should be, and in some cases very broad brush. In other cases, they are expanded by the principal in their message to the community, and in yet others have to be inferred from either the principal’s message or other statements such as why parents should choose this school.
The espoused vision statements of each of the schools are:

- **Centralian Middle School** — CMS challenges every learner to achieve success in a safe and supportive community where diversity is valued.
- **Darwin Middle School** — Darwin Middle School is committed to leading the way in middle years education by creating a vibrant learning environment that inspires all students to reach their full potential and become lifelong learners.
- **Dripstone Middle School** — Dripstone Middle School strives to provide a stimulating, innovative, quality learning environment where all students and staff are respected and valued, and where all students and staff are encouraged and supported to achieve their potential in a safe, supportive and caring environment.
- **Katherine High School** — Our vision for Katherine High School is that we grow and develop as a valued and responsive learning organisation, promote access, participation and lifelong learning, and provide the customers, partners and the wider social, cultural and business communities with relevant, effective and innovative learning experiences.
- **Nhulunbuy High School** — Empowerment through opportunity, partnership and achievement. To engage students in a dynamic curriculum and safe learning environment with a 21st Century focus.
- **Nightcliff Middle School** — Nightcliff Middle School provides a stimulating learning environment, where 21st century learning is integrated across the whole curriculum to personalise the learning for each student. Academic excellence is valued at all stages and classroom programs focus on challenge, engagement and achievement. Learning is celebrated across all aspects of school life with a range of specialist programs to complement the formal curriculum and extend the creative interests of students. Our school staff work collaboratively to plan, teach and assess innovative student learning plans, they are committed to inspiring every student to do their best.
- **Rosebery Middle School** — Our school community creates confident, connected global citizens.
- **Sanderson Middle School** — The school’s vision is embodied in it motto, Building the future and its associated commitment to the provision of quality education so that all students are challenged to realise their maximum potential within a safe, supportive environment.
- **Taminmin College** — The mission of Taminmin College is ‘promoting high achievement in a safe, disciplined and caring environment’ which is underpinned by the four pillars of: high achievement; caring environment; safe environment; disciplined and orderly learning environment.
- **Tennant Creek High School** — The school’s vision is summed up in its motto, Learn today, lead tomorrow.

Rosebery Middle School is one good example of where a very high level vision statement is then fleshed out in the Principal’s message to the community which explains that the school ‘has a strong focus on academic achievement, building a safe and supportive learning environment and developing young people who are engaged, connected and ready for the Twenty First Century’. Similarly, Centralian Middle School provides more substance to its vision statement in a discussion of why parents should enrol their children in the school, which indicates that the school ‘provides students with access to meaningful and appropriate teaching and learning programs including transition into and out of the Middle Years of Schooling; opportunities to become engaged through educational experiences that will lay the foundations of their future growth, development and participation in the Australian community; achievement that is moderated and validated against the standards described in the Australian Curriculum’.
While significant commonality can be identified from these examples, the point of crafting a compelling, shared vision for middle schooling for the Territory as a whole, is to provide the moral purpose that, as Fullan (undated) suggests, can help the implementation of change and to manage the inevitable implementation dip, since it provides an inspiring and unifying story of what we are all collectively seeking to achieve.

As Gabriel and Farmer have observed, ‘Without a vision, your school (or system – VZ) lacks direction … A common understanding of the destination allows all stakeholders to align their improvement efforts’. In addition, an effective vision they argue, ‘announces to parents and students where you are heading and why they should take the trip with you’.

Put simply, a compelling, shared vision provides the context for specifying more concrete goals for middle schooling the Department and schools are seeking to achieve, and the strategies that will bring this about in ways that carry stakeholder support. It also serves as a public statement of the importance the Department attaches to the stage, and provides a whole-of-Territory context for the separate vision and mission statements of the schools themselves.

Just as important as crafting the vision for middle schooling, however, is the process by which it occurs. Too many vision statements are not really shared because they have been drafted and imposed from above. The extent to which the vision is shared is the extent to which consistent implementation of strategies to realise it will be adopted in schools. Hence the process ought be designed to ensure buy-in from all those with a stake in its outcome and a role in its implementation, which in turn builds further buy-in as a result.

There is a range of ways in which stakeholder involvement both centrally and locally can be assured, and the Department needs to ensure that the process takes this into account; especially since involving people along the way helps to alleviate the sort of fears about change that lead to an implementation dip.

**A sample vision to consider**

While it is necessary that the Department and key educational stakeholders develop the vision for middle schooling themselves, it seems appropriate for the review to at least suggest a sample vision for the process that is initiated to take into account.

Any worthwhile vision statement for the middle years needs to be built on a core set of educational beliefs that reflect the evidence of how young people learn and the nature of adolescence and hence the student needs to be met.

Central to these, according to Cole (2004), are the beliefs that:

- all students can learn, although they are unlikely to do so at the same pace and in the same way;
- schools can make a difference to students’ learning outcomes, regardless of who the students are and what their social circumstances; and
- student effort and desire to learn will produce learning improvement and success.

To this important list, we can reasonably add the beliefs that:

- high expectations lead to better learning outcomes and higher results;
- an orderly learning environment contributes to more effective teaching and learning in the school; and
students are more likely to succeed when they feel there is an adult in the school who knows them well and cares about them.

Taking these core beliefs into account, a motivating vision statement for middle schooling in the Northern Territory could take something like the following form:

*Middle schooling in the Northern Territory provides a positive and supportive, yet challenging learning environment for young adolescents in Years 7 to 9, characterised by high expectations for achievement and personal conduct at school. NT middle schools unite educators, parents and members of the wider community in efforts to ensure that all students succeed at school, and become lifelong learners and productive members of the community. Our schools continually improve, to lift their performance and provide an optimal learning experience for every student.*

A statement along these lines creates the basis for exploring the key elements of leadership, middle years structure, curriculum and assessment, pedagogy and transitions on which its achievement depends, along with the systemic leadership and support to ensure it is consistently achieved across the Territory as a whole. These elements are the subject of the remainder of the review report.

In addition, a vision statement for the middle years of school could help to inform the development of a statement of what it means to be a leader and a teacher in the middle years, to then inform the training of such teachers at CDU and other tertiary institutions. Apart from anything else, it would help answer the question a number of school interviewees posed along the lines as one put it that, ‘we have primary teachers who teach through themes, we have senior secondary teachers who are prescriptive because of the expectations of Years 11 and 12, and middle school teachers need to be a merger of both, but in what form?’ As another middle school leader observed, ‘Teachers in our schools say that I’m primary-trained, or I’m secondary trained, or I’m a particular subject teacher, but no-one describes themselves as a middle school teacher’.

**Recommendations**

5. That the Department develop, consult on and adopt a set of core guiding beliefs for schooling in the middle years based on the set advanced in this middle years review report.

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.
Chapter 7: Leadership for whole-school improvement

In a major study of eight socio-economically disadvantaged schools that had significantly improved over time and then consistently maintained higher levels of performance than other schools with which they legitimately could be compared, Zbar, et. al. (2008) identified four preconditions needed for whole-school improvement to occur, the first of which is ‘strong leadership that is shared’.

Giving more substance to this statement, they explained in an article summarising the research (2009) the sort of leadership evident in these schools:

   Each of the study schools is characterised by having strong leadership with a clear vision and direction for the school and a high degree of leadership stability over time ...

   What is more, each of the principals focused their efforts from the start of their time in the school on building the leadership team and ensuring they all acted according to a common vision and shared views.

   While Hattie and others have shown that the prime factor influencing student achievement in schools is the teaching they receive, the reality in each of the eight schools studied is that leadership has been the key determinant of the success of the school. This, it should be noted, does not necessarily contradict the finding that teaching is the major source of variation in student learning outcomes within the control of the school, but rather that leaders establish the conditions in which teachers can either deliver high quality teaching to students or not.

   Instances of good teaching inevitably exist in schools where the quality of leadership is weak. This study, however, shows that high quality leadership is a prerequisite for this to be spread throughout the school ... The other defining characteristic of the principals in each of the study schools is the fact they willingly share the leadership load, encourage others to take and exercise leadership responsibilities and support the development of leadership skills amongst the staff. (3-4)

More recently (2010), after continuing to work with these and other schools, the authors took it further to suggest that ‘leadership is so central to school performance and improvement, that it almost amounts to a precondition for the preconditions, and hence constitutes the place where schools must start if significant advances are to be achieved’.

Put simply, the existence of a cohesive leadership team, with a clear sense of what needs doing, why and how, is the difference between whole school improvement and pockets of improvement in the school. In any school there will be areas that are performing particularly well, and better than other parts of the school. In the absence of leadership, however, their achievements rarely if ever spread across the school, since there is no-one to drive it through, with the requisite authority to bring others with them on the way.

Implementing any vision for middle schooling in the Northern Territory, therefore, depends on the nature and quality of leadership at the school-level and systemic support for it to continually improve.

Leadership practices to foster in schools

It is important to recognise in this context that we do know, from more than a decade of Wallace Institute research (Leithwood, et. al, 2004), which practices leaders need to adopt to successfully lead improvement in their schools.
The three core leadership practices the research highlights involve:

- **Setting directions** — This set of practices, Leithwood and colleagues explain, ‘is aimed at helping one’s colleagues develop shared understandings about the organisation and its activities and goals that can under-gird a sense of purpose or vision ... Often cited as helping set directions are such specific leadership practices as identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals and creating high performance expectations. Monitoring organisational performance and promoting effective communication throughout the organisation also assist in the development of shared organisational purposes’ (8).

- **Developing people** — Setting directions will only bear fruit if people are challenged and supported to develop the capacities they need to enable the direction to be collectively pursued. The sort of leadership practices that ‘significantly and positively’ influence teachers and others in the school include ‘offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualised support and providing appropriate models of best practice and beliefs considered fundamental to the organisation’ (8).

- **Redesigning the organisation** — Despite the vision and directions set and the motivations and capacities of staff, ‘organisational conditions sometimes blunt or wear down educators’ good intentions and actually prevent the use of effective practices’. Successful educators therefore work to develop their schools as ‘effective organisations that support and sustain the performance of administrators and teachers, as well as students’. This really amounts to ensuring the school is structured to support learning, to facilitate the work that teachers do, and that barriers to this are eliminated or at least their negative impact is reduced (9).

These are not the only roles that leaders in middle schools perform, however they do help guide an understanding of the major sort of capacities these leaders need to develop and demonstrate to continually improve the school and its staff. They also dovetail neatly with the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel’s (2014) argument that ‘the success of any improvement initiative is to a large degree dependent on the quality of leadership of the initiative’ (12) and hence support is needed to help school leadership teams to grow their capacity in: using data to inform planning and setting of targets; implementing intervention strategies and strategies to extend the top twenty percent of the student cohort; consolidating links between literacy, numeracy, curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment; and supporting whole-school planning for improved outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

As such, Leithwood’s practices have significant implications for how middle school leaders are selected, trained, supported and networked to do an effective job. This is something Wilson’s review of Indigenous education discussed in ways that have relevance for this middle schooling review, as outlined below.

**Leadership in the middle years**

All middle schools are trying to build the cohesion and effectiveness of their leadership teams, and are at different stages of development in this regard.

In some schools, the leadership team has been developing for a number of years and a stable team is in place that works well together, and where team members complement each other’s skills. Rosebery Middle School is a case in point, where aside from the principal, the team comprises three assistant principals, each focused on one year level, but with specific whole-school roles aligned to their interests and capacities under the headings,
‘leader for learning’, ‘innovation for improvement’ and ‘capability for diversity’. The team cohesion is reflected in some comprehensive whole school policies and plans developed with the involvement of staff.

Darwin Middle School is in much the same position, with a team that has been so stable that a bit of movement recently is seen as a good thing, not because of any concern about the departing personnel, but because it enables the injection of some new, needed expertise around curriculum development in the school. The leadership team meets fortnightly, but even more importantly, the principal meets with each senior manager once a week to discuss their portfolios, with the result that communication across the school is described as ‘so good that GSMs (i.e., general staff meetings) are falling out of favour so we can use the time for professional learning instead’.

In other schools, the leadership teams have been established relatively recently, such as Sanderson Middle School where a new principal has worked to establish a cohesive leadership team that can oversee a major program of improvement that has led some to talk as if a new school was established in 2014, with a whole new, and arguably more successful, middle years approach. Similarly, the principal at Katherine High School has only just reached the stage where a more stable and effective leadership team is beginning to coalesce and thereby develop its overall influence in the school; albeit in a context where some team members are still at an early stage of really learning their craft. Tennant Creek High School finds itself in the same position as these two schools, with one of its five members only just joining the leadership team and in this case, an historical team structure that makes it difficult to define broader roles for some members of the team. In addition, there is an extent to which the real leadership roles are being exercised by the principal and assistant principal, with the result they are not distributed as even the school itself would like, in part reflecting a need to build the leadership capacity of the team.

Not only is the principal at Nhulunbuy High School relatively new with less than two years at the school, but significant turnover of leaders in recent years has seen a number of inexperienced new leaders arrive who need time to adapt to their new roles. This inevitably impacts the effectiveness of the team, though a strong culture of collaboration in both the school and the community is helping to mitigate this effect. The team, as the school itself acknowledges, is a work in progress with significant potential to really develop over time.

By virtue of its size, Taminmin College has a very large leadership team of 19 (comprising six principal class members and 13 senior teachers who are all either year level, faculty or special program leaders) which complements the smaller Executive Group. As a result, its effectiveness varies, especially at the team level, with the result a significant focus of the principal’s time is on mentoring and/or coaching members of this group to strengthen leadership across the college as a whole.

The team at Centralian, in contrast to those already described, sees itself as ‘evolving’ as it works to broaden the responsibility for communicating information in both directions. More specifically, it is seeking to ensure that each team member acts as a conduit for the views of their team so these are all taken into account, but when a decision is made, they act as the corporate messenger selling it back to the team. This evolution, it was explained, is in response to a strong feeling amongst the staff that, although necessary at the time, leadership could now become less top down. The result is that decisions are described as widely embraced, though it is acknowledged that there is still considerable variability in leaders’ capacity to work with their teams in implementing the decisions that are made. This is something the school is seeking to tackle through having more consistent processes that all can follow.
The experience of all these teams is that where they are working best, is when middle leaders are also included in the team and it then works to ensure a focus both on what they intend to pursue, and also how it will be done with the teams that they lead. This not only builds trust and corporate responsibility in the team, but also supports more rigorous implementation of the agreed strategies and helps develop the leadership capacity of the team.

Other teams have been somewhat less stable than these, at times due to staff changes, such as at Nightcliff Middle School, where a reduction in senior positions impacted the structure and operations of the team. In a different way, but with a similar result, Dripstone Middle School has a relatively new and inexperienced team, after a degree of team membership churn. The team suffered a ‘disruptive’ period of time with critical personnel on unavoidable leave and some major distractions such as a death in the school; but is starting to work well together now as the principal and assistant principal focus on building the capacity of the team as a whole. Each of these teams needs more time to develop as an aligned and cohesive group that can really impact the whole of the school.

Implications of the Indigenous Education Review

Wilson, in the course of his Indigenous Education Review, observes that workforce planning in the Territory is arguably weak, not just for Indigenous education, but across the board. There is, he argued, ‘no overall plan for achievement of the Department’s strategic goals and it seems that no area of the agency has overall responsibility for the workforce’ (2014:192). This leads him to specifically call for a whole of department workforce plan, which this review would endorse.

Beyond this, he identified a number of areas in which action could strengthen principal quality in remote settings, which in most cases could equally, with some minor adjustment, apply to principals in middle schools. More specifically he pointed to:

- **Initial training** — ‘The initial training of new principals is weakly developed and inadequate to the critical role principals play’ (2014:201). The suggestion to provide a significant training program for remote principals, comprising at least a full day of training in dealing effectively with and being culturally responsive to Indigenous communities, could readily be adapted to help prepare newly-appointed principals to schools catering for students in the middle years to undertake their role. It could, for example, include an initial orientation to the nature of the adolescent cohort and its implications for schooling, as discussed in Chapter 3 along with the ‘substantial and extended training program for all new principals, including refresher experiences, aiming to develop the skills of principalship and covering the wide range of responsibilities of principals and the forms of support that are available’ (Ibid:201) that Wilson recommends.

- **The need for a clear statement to be developed of the responsibilities of remote principals** applies just as much to principals in middle schools, particularly if the effective implementation of schooling in this phase is to be included in principal performance management processes as well as school Annual Operating Plans and school reviews.

- **The potential value of experienced external support for new and continuing principals**, which is reflected in the discussion of principal coaches and a constituency for middle school leaders which follows.

- **An expectation that ‘applicants for senior roles should have to demonstrate that they have established a pattern of relevant professional learning including specific required hurdle programs, without which candidates should not be appointed’ (ibid).**
The discussion about principals in the context of the Indigenous Education Review’s Chapter 12 on Workforce Planning leads Wilson to propose (Recommendation 44) that efforts should be made, amongst other things, to:

*Raise the quality of remote principals by:*
  a. strengthening initial training ...
  b. developing a clear statement of the responsibilities of leadership in remote schools ...
  e. requiring applicants for senior positions to demonstrate a pattern of relevant professional learning, including specific required programs without which candidates should not be appointed ...
  g. arranging early appointment and release of new remote appointees to ensure effective handover.

Implementation of this recommendation inevitably will involve developing leadership capacities and practices for whole-school improvement that apply to principals regardless of the context of their school. Such practices could then readily be contextualised to specific school appointments such as remote Indigenous schools (as discussed in Wilson’s review) or leadership for schooling in the Middle Years (this review).

Certainly the degree of overlap is such that any work to implement the recommendations of one ought be linked to the implementation of recommendations in the other. This will enable a pooling of research, experience and expertise amongst those involved, and help ensure a consistent approach to principal selection, training and development that can then be contextualised to the school in which the principal works, with appropriate guidance and advice relevant to that context.

**A leadership coach for each principal**

As the preceding discussion makes clear, both principals and their leadership teams are at different stages of development, with the result their effectiveness varies across the schools. The principal is key in this regard and the leadership team’s effectiveness arguably depends on their ability to weld together a cohesive team with a clear sense of direction and agreed set of strategies to pursue. This is commonly difficult to do on one’s own and, regardless of how good relationships are, there is always an extent to which the primary leader in the school will feel and even be isolated at key moments and when critical decisions need to be made.

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, which includes both challenging leaders to strive for higher levels of leadership performance and the provision of frank and honest feedback on performance, can help strengthen the quality of leadership in schools which, as outlined earlier in the discussion, is the precondition for all of the preconditions for substantially improving any school.

Macklin (2012) has defined leadership coaching in a school context as ‘a strategy to support leaders in their efforts to become more effective leaders, to develop colleagues and to improve student learning. It builds leadership and staff capacity and uses research, theory, practice and feedback for improvement’ (6). It is, she explains, a process for building on the individual strengths of the leader in their own context, rather than providing a template of leadership capacities as a guide from which to work to address some perceived deficit. ‘This is not to say that the focus on areas of improvement in recognised leadership capabilities is
ignored, but that the important starting point is the individual leader and her/his context’ (4).

By virtue of being highly targeted and personalised to where the leader is at, where they need to go and how and when they would get there given the context they work in, coaching involves a level of challenge and support, often including questions the leader being coached would prefer were not asked. It is a process of focused, deep and purposeful leadership development that no generic leadership course can provide.

While clearly the more coaching sessions the leader can have the better, advice provided to the reviewer suggests that there needs to be a minimum of ten significant coaching sessions in a year to have any lasting impact on the leader being coached. It is recognised in this context that there may be a paucity of trained leadership coaches within the Northern Territory, necessitating a need to source coaches from outside. Should this be the case, then some sessions may need to be conducted by tele- or video-conference, but at least four of the ten sessions, including both the first two and final two in the relationship will need to be conducted face-to-face. This not only helps to ensure the necessary coaching relationship can be formed, but also provides the potential to extend some element of the coaching to the school’s leadership team.

It is suggested in this context that the Department should provide seed funding for one year to help establish coaching for principals, and where appropriate school leadership teams, on the understanding that any costs associated with maintaining the coaching relationship beyond the first year are carried by the school. Experience in some other jurisdictions suggests this is a cost the school will willingly bear because of the benefits the coaching arrangement provides.

Building a constituency for middle schooling

As will become evident in the discussion of systemic leadership and support (Chapter 12), there does not appear until recently at least to have been any sort of constituency for middle schooling in the Department. This is evident in the comment a number of school-based personnel made that, as one typically put it, ‘we feel as though we’re not valued in the system’. The lack of a clear vision for the middle years discussed earlier only contributes to that view. In addition, despite the fact the principals of schools providing education in these years see themselves as a group requiring a voice and have made some attempts to establish this in Darwin at least, this has not come to pass since no-one is systemically supported to make it happen, with the result the efforts have been sporadic and ad hoc.

In the course of developing the more strategic and coherent approaches to improving schooling in the middle years that this review seeks, there would seem to be significant value to be gained from fostering a leadership constituency of this sort. For example, a middle years principals group could speak with some authority on the delivery of education in their schools and plans designed to improve it. They would bring direct, day-to-day experience to the table, along with a sense of what is possible in terms of change, thereby helping to craft whole-system approaches that can genuinely work to improve outcomes for students in the phase.

It is recognised that developing such a constituency does ultimately depend on someone taking responsibility for the group, and exercising a leadership role. This in turn depends on time to undertake the task, which inevitably is difficult when combined with the challenges of leading an effective school.
In order to foster a group that potentially can contribute significantly to improving schooling in the middle years, the Department could consider providing one principal selected by their peers with additional personnel support to enable them to oversee the development of a middle years principals network to promote greater sharing of successful practices and expertise between the schools (so more can work like the best and variability between them is reduced), support each other in the implementation of change, and ensure an informed voice on middle years issues to the Department as a whole.

Beyond this, the group could be supported to organise and run a significant annual middle years leadership conference for school leadership teams which not only supports the ongoing networking that is envisaged, but also provides a forum for high level input relevant to these schools and an opportunity to review performance and plan for its further improvement over time.

**Recommendations**

7. The review notes recommendation 44 of the Indigenous Education Review (IER) aimed at implementing 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 as part of 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.
Chapter 8: Structuring provision in the middle years

The issue of structure in relation to middle years schooling is, as the COGSO submission to the review noted, not so much one of middle versus comprehensive schools, as it is a question of how well each school that caters for students in Years 7 to 9 is structured to ensure the students are known well and supported to succeed\(^2\). This especially is the case in light of the observation in Chapter 5 that continual change that is not bedded down has impeded the Territory from achieving the sorts of improvements that various reviews and policy changes have sought. A period of structural stability in terms of schooling for the middle years can, in this context, serve to focus attention more on the strategies the schools can adopt to work more successfully with the adolescent cohort they serve. Beyond this, as argued in the snapshot of middle school performance in Chapter 2, there is no discernable difference between middle schools in aggregate and schools providing Years 7 to 9 in a comprehensive setting, and the differences in performance that do exist relate to factors other than whether they are comprehensive or middle schools.

The fundamental point is that an effective middle school program is designed around the specific developmental needs of adolescents as outlined in Chapter 3. Since the intellectual, social, physical and emotional needs of students in this age group are different from either primary or senior school students, a customised educational program is required. The middle school should be seen in this context as a bridge between primary and senior school, with its own evidence-based approach. It is, in these terms, not so much an extended primary or miniature senior school, as a judicious blend of the two.

What we do know of adolescence suggests that teaching and learning in this phase needs to be personalised as much as possible so the students are well known. This, as Cole (2004) has observed, commonly is achieved by reducing the number of teachers with whom students interact on a regular basis, and having a stable team of teachers working with a consistent group of students with the result that higher levels of teacher-student rapport, trust and learning can be achieved. Just as important as fewer teachers for fewer students is the need for each student to have a single teacher who can act as both a mentor and role model, and the student’s main point of reference in the school. This is consistent with the findings of the National Middle Schools Association in the US (2006) that successful middle schools provide organisational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning, and is the subject of further discussion in the section on structuring to ensure students are well known, below.

An orderly learning environment

One of the key reasons for ensuring structures that ensure students are well known is that it contributes to ensuring an orderly learning environment in the school. The existence of an orderly learning environment established through positive rather than negative means, whereby there are high levels of teacher consistency about how it is ‘enforced’ and structures in place to ensure that all students are known well by at least one adult in the school emerged as a fundamental precondition for improved teaching and learning in Zbar, et. al’s (2008, 2009) research on high disadvantage, high performing Government schools.

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\(^2\) The COGSO submission suggests that ‘the Middle Years of Schooling are a discrete educational block, that should be underpinned by Middle Years theory, pedagogy and resources, and that the provision of Middle School premises is not a necessary requirement for the delivery of a successful Middle Years of school program’. (2)
It is interesting to note in this context, as they did in 2010, that the absence of an orderly learning environment is usually the first thing noticed in an under-performing school, and the major impediment to improvement and change. That is why the establishment of such an environment, and just as importantly the consistency of staff behaviour on which it depends, is commonly the key initial strategy for the leadership team in turning the school around. Aside from the fact you cannot have effective teaching and learning in a disorderly classroom or school, developing an orderly learning environment also provides a mechanism for getting teachers working more consistently and towards a common end. That in turn creates the basis for further united action within the school, particularly to the extent it is linked to knowing the students well, and hence developing a more personalised teaching and learning approach to ensure their needs are met.

Ensuring an orderly learning environment is especially important in middle schools given the research findings cited in Chapter 3 on the nature of young adolescents which point to the need for clear boundaries to help students manage their emotions and exercise self-control.

An examination of available discipline-related data for middle schools in the Territory suggests that significant levels of disruption do occur in most, though not all of the schools as evident from Table 6.

Table 6: Number of Years 7 to 9 students suspended and negative behaviour incidents, 2013 onwards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Students suspended</th>
<th>Negative behaviour incidents, total notional number of days$^{28}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
<td>86 for 185 incidents</td>
<td>517.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Middle School</td>
<td>11 for 20 incidents</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dripstone Middle School</td>
<td>55 for 88 incidents</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine High School</td>
<td>122 for 258 incidents</td>
<td>1230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High School</td>
<td>7 for 9 incidents</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle School</td>
<td>47 for 119 incidents</td>
<td>321.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Middle School</td>
<td>89 for 183 incidents</td>
<td>545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson Middle School</td>
<td>47 for 78 incidents</td>
<td>151.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>129 for 389 incidents</td>
<td>981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek High School</td>
<td>28 for 53 incidents</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are, of course, caveats to this data that need to be applied. For example, it is likely that some of the incidents and hence notional number of days affected reflect the same students infringing more than once, thereby reducing the number of students involved in recorded negative behaviours in the school. In addition, it is known that individual school policies and approaches apply across the schools which reflect different expectations and tolerances between them. Nonetheless, the message is clear that significant levels of disruption to student learning exist in middle schools, which the interviews with middle school students confirmed. This not only impacts negatively on the students involved, but also inevitably disrupts the learning of other students in the same class, deflects the teacher from their primary teaching role and hence reinforces the importance of a consistently implemented orderly learning environment in middle schools.

A key means that a number of Territory middle schools are adopting to ensure an orderly learning environment where students are well known is the use of the School Wide Positive

$^{28}$ Negative behaviour incidents include assault, bullying, dangerous acts, inappropriate use of technology, indecent behaviour, substance use/possession, verbal abuse, violation of agreement, and weapons/property offence.
Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework that derives from the United States and is outlined in detail with links to resources on the Department of Education website.

School Wide Positive Behaviour Support is a framework designed to help schools plan and implement practices across the whole school to improve educational and behaviour outcomes for all students. The framework is founded on a positive approach to whole school wellbeing, with targeted approaches for students with higher levels of need. As such, it resonates with the research about risk and reward in adolescence, outlined earlier in Chapter 3. The framework specifically seeks to improve educational outcomes for students by:

- preventing behaviour problems and managing existing issues in positive and consistent ways;
- developing knowledge and skills in schools for better teaching and learning; and
- creating and maintaining a better school environment for students, teachers and the whole school community.

With this in mind it provides a decision-making framework for schools that uses data to guide the selection and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioural practices across the whole of the school. The framework is structured around four integrated elements of: data for decision making; measurable outcomes supported and evaluated by data; practices that are evidence based and support student behaviour and learning; and systems that efficiently and effectively support staff to implement practices (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: The Four Elements of the SWPBS Framework

The framework is provided free to schools and directly links to the Safe Schools Northern Territory Strategy and Code of Behaviour. The Department’s website also includes links to such support materials as a team implementation checklist, an effective behaviour support self-assessment survey, a school-wide evaluation tool, and a behaviour report form.
The framework focuses in particular on schools identifying three to five behavioural expectations that suit the needs of the school and teachers in their classrooms and which can be positively stated in a memorable form. This, it is noted, is not always easy for schools to achieve, and requires processes that involve not only the teachers, but parents and students as well.

**Some variability of approach**

An analysis of school profiles and policies provided to the reviewer, along with information gained from visits and teleconferences, suggests that a range of strategies have been adopted to improve the orderly learning environment, with a particular focus on improving attendance which, in a number of cases has been quite low and hence a trigger point for action in the schools.

The major strategies adopted include:

- the SWPBS framework outlined above;
- a ‘Good Standing’ program which doesn’t so much replace as supplement a school’s behaviour management policy by specifying what students need to do to maintain good standing in the school;
- support for Clontarf and equivalent Girls’ Academies to improve the attendance of Indigenous students;
- the use of such attendance specific measures as school wide attendance plans and drawing on the support of Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) and Home Liaison Officers;
- structured follow up to absences after a defined number of days, underpinned by the use of data to monitor this; and
- the use of pastoral care groups.

These are often supplemented by a range of curriculum-related initiatives to improve student engagement at school that centre around VET programs, and the use of Visible Learning in some schools to improve students’ chances of achieving learning success, and which commonly translates into better behaviour at school.

What strikes one most on examining the strategies used is the lack of consistency across the schools and the variability in approach between them, albeit with a growing trend towards using the SWPBS framework, which arguably should be further consolidated. A lack of consistency in itself does not mean that there are no comprehensive approaches in schools. There certainly are, with a school such as Rosebery for instance adopting both the SWPBS framework along with a resiliency and social skills program based on Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teams*. Equally comprehensive is the Taminmin College approach which involves: the use of the recently adopted SWPBS framework to set the ground rules for behaviour; a Responsible Thinking Centre the school has established which is staffed by senior teachers to ensure constant supervision to deal with small-scale disruptive behaviour in class through a mix of getting students to reflect on their actions and the impact and then mediation between the student and their teacher to ensure better relations and behaviour in future; and a duty desk, also staffed by senior teachers on a roster, to deal with high level student misbehaviour arising from referrals teachers make. All incidents are logged and data analysed to enable positive interventions where needed from the school’s wellbeing team.

The variability is such, however, that the more strategic approaches designed to improve behaviour management and hence engagement and attendance at school, are
counterbalanced by approaches that appear more reactive to unsatisfactory situations that exist than strategically thought through. That they vary in their impact is evident in the contrasting views students gave to the online survey for the review which ranged from the observation that an orderly learning environment exists ‘because teachers are very strict’, to the view that other students are ‘extremely distracting’ because ‘bad behaviour is tolerated by most teachers’.

It is interesting to note in this context that despite the Department’s support for the SWPBS framework, and the US Department of Education’s expansive range of research and materials to support the approach, not all of the schools covered by this review have adopted it; though the number is growing. The advantage of schools coming on board with the SWPBS is that it derives from substantial research, and comes with systemic support including materials and tools that can help effective implementation at the school level; albeit more in the past, since the associated training for it has ceased.

This is all aside from the fact that the Wilson review has examined and recommended the ‘mandating’ of School Wide Positive Behaviour Support for Priority 1 schools with the advice that other schools should also adopt it (Recommendation 38) and that all schools be required to have ‘a school-wide approach to behaviour management and wellbeing’ (Recommendation 39). These recommendations reflect some positive anecdotal evidence cited by schools that are implementing the approach, including through this review, and Wilson’s observation that the ‘SWPBS program is a sound behaviour management model and has the advantage of being well-supported in a number of schools already’ (180).

This was only confirmed by the responses of middle schools using the approach, as well as parents who participated in consultations for the review. Rosebery Middle School, for example, reported a 50% reduction in suspensions between 2012 and 2013 as a result of introducing SWPBS and associated programs. The experience of Centralian Middle School was the same where, having experienced significant disorderly behaviour including violence after the school merger, the implementation of the SWPBS approach saw discipline issues and suspensions markedly decline to the point where they are described as having ‘faded’ in the school. Similarly, a concerted focus on improved student behaviour and consistent implementation of an orderly learning environment at Katherine and Tennant Creek High Schools and Sanderson and Nightcliff Middle Schools, where relatively new principals identified a particular challenge and need, has yielded positive results that can be seen in the observations in teleconference of the high school principals and in walking around the two middle schools.

At Sanderson and others, this has meant a shift from behaviour management being the responsibility of some, to it being the job of all, as has been the long-standing practice in such schools as Darwin Middle School where behaviour is generally very good, though it was reported that this was not always the case.

Nhulunbuy High School is arguably having a different experience to the others because of the economic changes that are underway. While the adoption of the SWPBS framework has helped to ensure a more consistent approach to the orderly learning environment, the fact that many families are struggling with the closure of Rio Tinto negatively impacts their children’s wellbeing and manifests in some poor behaviour at school. In response, the school has introduced a MindMatters wellbeing unit for five periods a week as a semester-length

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29 ‘Priority 1’ are defined as those schools in which students experience the greatest disadvantage on a number of scales. The report proposes that these schools should be allocated resources and support based on the areas of need identified and should also be required to adopt specific evidence-based approaches in key areas.
subject for all Year 7 students that supports the establishment of quality relationships with one of their teachers in the school. In addition, the school has a very active and effective wellbeing team that is helping to tackle the family-based strains being reflected by some of the students at school.

It is the contention of this middle schooling review that schools could be substantially supported in their efforts to ensure an orderly learning environment where students are well known, as a precondition for further improvement of schooling in the middle years, by the adoption of a common planning framework across the Territory as a whole. The SWPBS framework is the obvious candidate for this approach not only because of the Departmental support, including materials that already exist, but also because a database of its implementation and impact already exists in a number of schools. This would allow for the coordinated provision of support to schools from the Department, consistent with Wilson’s argument about the need to restore some support for the approach\(^{30}\), and enable more systematic data collection about the impact the SWPBS approach has, to supplement the positive initial anecdotal evidence that exists. This would help consolidate and accelerate the positive gains that appear to have been made in most middle schools in reducing the incidence of bad and disruptive behaviour at school, merely by virtue of having a whole-school approach and progressively getting more consistent implementation of it by the staff.

This, it should be stated, does not mean that schools not using the SWPBS at present will be starting from scratch or even need change much. It is, for example, easy to envisage schools that use the ‘Good Standing’ program, adapting it to align to the SWPBS framework since it starts from a philosophically similar base. By way of example, Darwin Middle School, which pioneered and then shared its ‘Good Standing’ approach with other schools, uses a ‘Good Standing’ Behaviour Expectations Matrix that sets out the expectations of students across different settings, such as the classroom and the oval, matched to the four elements of respect for self, respect for others, respect for the environment and respect for learning. A flavour of the matrix can be gained from the cells for the classroom in Figure 7.

![Figure 7: Extract from Darwin Middle Schools Behaviour Expectations Matrix](image-url)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Respect for self</th>
<th>Respect for others</th>
<th>Respect for environment</th>
<th>Respect for learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>Attend all classes and be on time. Enter classroom in an orderly manner. Remain positive and put forth your best effort.</td>
<td>Listen carefully to your teacher and follow their instructions. Be courteous and respectful of others. Use appropriate language and volume. Be helpful and supportive of others. Be respectful of other people’s property.</td>
<td>Keep classroom clean and organised. Respect others’ belongings by not touching anything that does not belong to you. Respect the facility by not defacing desks, walls, etc. Finish food and drinks before entering the hallways and classroom.</td>
<td>Attend all classes. Be on time. Put forth your best effort in class. Bring all necessary equipment/resources. Do your homework. Ask questions when you are unsure. Be responsible for the time you miss from class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{30}\)In recommending the adoption of this program, the key criteria are the adoption of a common approach in all Priority 1 schools (and by preference in all schools) and the provision of effective support through both professional learning and access to coaching. Other programs with a similar focus should not be supported. The review recommends that the conduct of this work may require putting resources back into the delivery of initiatives that have recently been disbanded.’ (2014:180)
This, it is noted, is supplemented by clear structures and processes to ensure that students are ‘caught’ doing good things rather than bad, and acknowledged and ultimately rewarded for this. This includes a well-supported Office of ‘Good Standing’ where students take their citations for positive behaviour from teachers to be logged and which awards bronze, silver or gold certificates after a defined number have been attained. The awarding of a gold certificate comes with a key-ring for the student’s parent to notify them of what has been achieved. While the office also logs negative behaviours which can lead to time for the student in an adjacent reflection room, the reviewer was advised that it is rarely used, and positive affirmations outrun negative notices at least four to one.

It’s an approach that dovetails closely to the SWPBS framework and suggests that it is not so much a matter of adopting something new in the schools not currently using it, as tweaking their current approach to ensure consistency with the Department-supported SWPBS framework, which in turn makes it easier to use the supports the Department provides. This is readily evident at Dripstone Middle School where its approach to SWPBS combines with a ‘Good Standing’ Approach, and even more expansively still at Rosebery Middle School where the SWPBS effectively sets the ground rules for behaviour management in the school. ‘Good Standing’ is then where all students start, with it being lost if the SWPBS is regularly infringed, and Restorative Practices are invoked if bad behaviour persists. All of this is underpinned by analysis of Student Administration Management System (SAMS) behavioural data that is available to all staff, and the school’s own scoped and sequenced wellbeing program delivered to classes each week. It’s an approach that did require training the Department initially provided and to which Wilson, cited earlier, referred in his report.

Somewhat similarly at Nightcliff Middle School, SWPBS is supplemented by a timetabled wellbeing program for all year levels once a week that comprises: ‘raising resilience’ units for each year level in term one; ‘bullying – no way’ for Year 7, ‘life choices’ for Year 8 and ‘healthy minds, bodies and lives’ for Year 9 in term two; and ‘relationships and change’ for Year 7, ‘it’s all in the mind’ for Year 8, and ‘embracing senior school’ in Year 9 in term three.

It is interesting to note in this context that there was some call from some schools for the SWPBS to be supplemented by some advice around understanding and effectively responding to students with mental health issues, or who have experienced severe trauma in their lives. This could readily be integrated as additional links and advice on the SWPBS web page, including potentially to such broader resources in use in some schools as MindMatters, especially if the SWPBS approach applies across all middle schools. The Malak Re-engagement Centre could also potentially serve as a source of advice to schools in this regard, working through the SWPBS team.

**Structuring to ensure students are well known**

Regardless of the behaviour management policy and processes the Territory elects to adopt, 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. Adults who, as a number of the students who were interviewed tended to put it, ‘ask about me’.

As outlined in Chapter 3, the development of relationships whereby teachers know their students well in the middle years can play an important role in helping young adolescents to make more sensible choices at school and interact with others in more productive ways so their learning can be enhanced.
There is also a strong base of research to show that when adolescents believe that their teachers care about them, and expect them to learn at high levels, they work harder to meet those expectations. (See, for example, Scales 1999 cited by the National Middle Schools Association, 2006.) Disadvantaged students are the ones most likely to benefit from strong teacher-student relationships and, on the other side of the coin, are also the ones who disengage first when such relationships do not exist. In addition, the role of the school and its teachers in knowing students well is only enhanced by the knowledge acquired from 30 years of research in The Australian Temperament Project that ‘close relationships with others’ is a key experience shown to promote positive development of teenage children, along with school engagement which closer relations between students and teachers helps to promote.

As Scales’s meta-analysis of over 800 studies showed, ‘Schools that nurture positive relationships among students and teachers are more likely to realise the payoff of more engaged students achieving at higher levels’; though he does caution that it’s not enough to just nurture the students involved, and they need to be challenged as well. It’s a matter of simultaneously being ‘warm and demanding’ in the way that good parents are.

Research of this kind leads the NMSA to conclude that ‘certain organisational structures are most conducive to providing positive relationships’ for students in the middle years. The primary example they cite is the use of interdisciplinary teams that work together over a sustained period of time both to get to know the students well and to collaboratively plan and thereby build their own team skills. In settings where teachers deal with fewer students for more of the learning day teachers are enabled to ‘establish a culture of trust, respect, and high expectations, which encourages young adolescents to take intellectual risks and accept responsibility for learning’. Small teams and what the NMSA refers to as schools-within-a-school have also ‘been shown to make students feel safe, reducing the emotional stress that can cause them to disengage from school or exhibit aggressive behaviour’ (21).

In addition to the sort of strong relationships required, the NMSA argues for every young adolescent to have an ‘adult advocate who will champion his or her success in school’ (ibid). This reflects the findings from Zbar, et. al’s high performing schools research that a positive approach to student order and behaviour depends for its effectiveness on each student having a teacher in the school to whom they feel a bond. This can be a challenge for middle schools where commonly students experience several teachers for shorter periods of time than primary schools where they generally have one teacher for most of their week. However, the research cited is clear, and puts a premium on the structures the schools adopt to systematically connect students to teachers and thereby ensure that the students are well known; which in turn generally results in better learning outcomes for the students involved.

The most common approach that schools have adopted around the country in this regard is to use teacher-student teams that connect some teachers to students for longer periods of time. Often this involves a teacher taking the same class group for more than one subject, so they work for longer together each week, and in some cases this is extended so the teacher and class stay together for more than one year. Sometimes this is supplemented by the use of home groups which have had mixed success in schools, usually because there has been insufficient time for their operation (taking the place of a form assembly on one or more days in the week) and/or because teachers are unsure about how to use the time together with students to good effect.

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[i] Cited by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, June 2014.
Territory middle schools have generally adopted various approaches along these lines. Table 7 seeks to give a flavour of the approaches in use and signals some issues that could emerge in each case.

Table 7: Structures to help ensure students are well known

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>The approach in use</th>
<th>Issues to consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Centralian MS     | • The students do not move and the teachers come to them.  
|                   | • A limited number of teachers work with smaller numbers of students to the extent this is possible in the timetable.  
|                   | • Teams move with the students from year to year.  
|                   | • This is all supported by having class seating plans to reduce the stress some students feel on entering a classroom about where to sit.  
|                   | • The specialist teachers are not as clearly part of the process of ensuring students are well known.                                                                                                         |                                                                                                         |
| Darwin MS         | • The school tries to limit the number of teachers working with classes of students.  
|                   | • Year level coordinators meet regularly with students and year level teams of teachers to analyse ‘Good Standing’ data and institute case management where required.  
|                   | • Home groups operate for 15 minutes a day.  
|                   | • The onus of students being known well seems to fall more on coordinators than other teachers, despite the belief that pastoral care is everyone’s business.                                                                 |
| Dripstone MS      | • No home groups.  
|                   | • One period on a Tuesday which ensures a teacher for each cohort of students as their ‘go to’ for pastoral care — eg, the Year 7 1B History teacher is also the PBS group teacher. In their timetabled History session on Tuesday, the teacher may need to address PBS issues with the pre-arranged support of the school counsellor.  
|                   | • The school attempts to have teachers take more than one subject with the same group where possible.                                                                                                      | • The ‘go to’ teacher does not necessarily know or meet the students any more than other core subject teachers. It relies on the teacher knowing the student well by virtue of being nominated as the ‘go to’ teacher.  
|                   |                                                                                                                                           | • It could pit the teaching of the subject against the need to address wellbeing needs and vice-versa.                                               |
| Katherine HS      | • Year level coordinator positions have been established to focus on students’ wellbeing and really getting to know the students.  
|                   | • The school’s timetable has been restructured to establish a School Readiness program for Indigenous students, in the context of significant turnover that occurs, which has its own building and an                                          | • The school is only at an early stage of spreading the capacity and responsibility to all teachers to know their students well, and there is still a heavy reliance on leaders to take on the role.  
|                   |                                                                                                                                           | • It is work in progress at this stage.                                                                                                                     |

32 It should be noted that these structures are underpinned by a growing focus in the middle schools on transition (discussed in Chapter 11) to help ensure the students arrive at middle school better known than may have been the case in the past.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>The approach in use</th>
<th>Issues to consider</th>
</tr>
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</table>
|                 | emphasis on literacy, numeracy and ICT. It includes a reengagement class for some students requiring reconnection to school and a ‘top end’ transition class to shift students into mainstream classes in the school.  
• A significant group of more than 70 students has been identified as ‘at risk’, who are connected to a teacher buddy to support them.  
• The school introduced significant extra-curricular activities led by teachers in recess and lunch breaks that have contributed to a more positive atmosphere in the school.  
• Year coordinators and faculty seniors have been paired to work together to support English/SOSE and Maths/Science teachers in particular to get to know the students well. |                                                                                                        |
| Nhulunbuy HS    | The school believes that its smallness makes the job of knowing students easier, which is only strengthened by the well-connected nature of the community as a whole. In addition, being comprehensive means the teachers interact with the relatively small cohort for six rather than three years.  
• The use of the MindMatters program cited earlier at Year 7 helps to strengthen the potential for students to be well known by staff. | The school’s size means it is unable to rotate staff and have teachers follow their students from one year to the next to get to know them even more deeply still; though it feels that this is somewhat compensated for by their teachers knowing students from Year 7 to Year 12. |
| Nightcliff MS   | There is some degree of reliance on being a small school to know the students well. There are no home groups.  
• The timetable is structured so most teachers have two subjects with the same class and core teachers have common release time when they can discuss behaviours.  
• Teachers are encouraged to contact families for positive as well as negative reasons, which mobiles facilitate through SMS. | There is acknowledged variability in the extent to which teacher contact with the home occurs.  
• There is reliance on just timetable structures to ensure that students are well known with the result it does not embrace all teachers in the school. |
<p>| Rosebery MS     | The school has physical Hub arrangements whereby there is a defined area for each year level. Four core teachers (2 x Maths/Science and 2 x English/SOSE) teach the students, which limits movement and increases time together. | The specialist teachers are not involved in any structure to ensure students are well known. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>The approach in use</th>
<th>Issues to consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson MS</td>
<td>• Core teachers are also the students’ wellbeing teachers.</td>
<td>• It is acknowledged that the guidance for PCGs is not sufficiently explicit and the school would value some systemic guidance and support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The school is looking at Maths/English/Humanities/Science teachers following students from Year 7 to Year 9.</td>
<td>• The teachers’ connection to students’ families is variable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pairs of teachers spend 20 minutes Tuesday to Friday and an hour and 20 minutes on Monday with well-established Pastoral Care (home) Groups that receive some guidance on how to effectively use the time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>• The school has a team-based ‘pod’ structure for Year 7 that is a bit looser in Year 8 and not really present at Year 9.</td>
<td>• The arrangement is much stronger in Year 7 than in Years 8 and 9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Year 7 Maths/Science and English/Humanities classes are taught by the same teachers. The school endeavours to do the same in Years 8 and 9, but this is not always possible.</td>
<td>• Continuity of teachers and students is variable according to other timetabling demands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• One or both of these core teachers is also the class pastoral care teacher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• There are two pastoral care lessons a week in Years 7 and 8, and one a week in Year 9 which use a ‘rigorous’ pastoral care curriculum the year level coordinators develop that covers such material as habits of mind, setting goals, working around the school values, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek HS</td>
<td>• There is no formal process in place because the smallness of the school means that ‘everyone knows everyone’ in the school.</td>
<td>• There is acknowledged patchiness in part because people are not necessarily ‘right’ in a context where some staff see student wellbeing as part of the leaders’ role rather than their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• As behaviour improves the school is focusing more on students participating actively in class, underpinned by an effort to match the right teacher to the right group to cater for their learning needs.</td>
<td>• This reflects a need to ensure that knowing the students well is the responsibility of every adult in the school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear from this table that substantial variability in approach exists across the schools and that some are arguably better structured to ensure that students are well known. This can also be seen in the contrasting views that parents expressed to the online survey for the review which ranged from ‘yes my child is cared for’ to the belief ‘it is totally dependent on which teacher they have’, to the more negative sense that the teachers did not appear ‘to have taken the time ... to get to know my child’. In all cases, it is possible that there are still too many students for an individual teacher to get to know really well, and there may be value in considering how the number can be reduced. That is the basis for the following sample approach for consideration by schools as they continue to work on ensuring their students are better known.
A sample approach that schools could consider

There is no doubt, as the schools themselves recognise as evidenced by the efforts recorded in Table 7, that reducing the number of teachers with whom students interact on a regular basis, and having a stable team of teachers working with a consistent group of students can prove successful in the middle years. It has even greater effect when each student also has an ‘advocate’ as their main point of reference in the school. One option to consider to potentially achieve this in a manageable way is to involve all teachers in the task. More specifically, all staff with a teaching qualification (whether timetabled for teaching or not) could be expected to serve as a ‘champion’ for a consistent group of students for the whole year.

The teacher-student ratio for schools in the Northern Territory in 2013 was just under 1:12\(^{33}\). Allowing for slippages, such as the fact there may be no point in including the principal who cannot guarantee continuity of involvement because of competing systemic and other demands, this means that the sort of arrangement outlined would see each trained teacher in the school responsible for a group of no more than 15 students; which is much less than some of the ‘pastoral’ groups currently in use in schools. While the groups can be structured in any way determined by the school, it may be best to start by basing them on year levels, in part to support the development of strong year level teams. This would also have the advantage of enabling year level coordinators to become real leaders of teams, who strategically determine how best to meet the needs of students at that year level, rather than people who are swamped with individual behavioural issues and concerns as commonly occurs when structures of responsibility for students do not exist.

Each teacher would be expected to establish a strong ‘pastoral’ relationship with their group and, most importantly, would be the first port of call for any issues that arise either from the students themselves, their teachers and/or their parents. The teacher would be responsible for the wellbeing and academic success of the students in their group and work with their students to develop appropriate individual learning and engagement plans. Such plans not only provide a means of catering for each student’s individual learning needs, but also create a mechanism for ensuring that each student is appropriately challenged and thereby progressively raising expectations in the school.

The school would need to identify blocks of time in each week for these small groups to meet and where relationships can be forged. While arrangements of this sort in schools have generally involved much larger groups, which can hamper their potential success, they also have sometimes foundered on the rock of teachers feeling ill-prepared to effectively use the time. The Department could support schools in this regard by providing materials and links to proven resources for supporting students’ own social and emotional development, such as the emerging range of positive psychology resources for teachers and students\(^{34}\), as well as resources to develop students’ study skills which have been demonstrated to positively influence their learning outcomes and success. There are also, as indicated, some materials in middle schools like Rosebery and Nightcliff on which to draw. Regardless, the materials developed will enable school leaders and their wellbeing teams to support teachers in adopting what ultimately is a more effective pastoral approach that can be implemented across the school.

It is important to emphasise that there is no suggestion that the sample approach outlined should be required of middle schools. It is purely advanced as an example to consider of how middle schools can be structured to ensure their students are well known. However, it is


\(^{34}\) See, for example, resources available through Dr Martin Seligman’s Penn Positive Psychology Centre, [http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/bio.htm](http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/bio.htm)
incumbent on all middle schools to at least examine their structures in order to ensure that all students are connected to at least one adult in the school who they feel cares about them. The Department can assist by providing models, such as the one cited above, for schools to consider and then adapt as appropriate and adopt.

The importance of doing so is only enhanced by the recommendations of the Indigenous Education Review that relate to how middle schooling is provided for some Indigenous students and, in particular, the proposal ‘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). As Wilson observes in his report, schools will ‘need to ensure that their pastoral care arrangements are adequate to the task of supporting an increased enrolment of students who have undertaken primary, and in some cases middle, schooling in remote communities and are now living and attending school away from their home communities’ (2014:144). Aside from the piloting and relations to community the report proposes, this also puts a premium on middle schools all having the sort of structures discussed in this chapter that mean students are well known and have someone in the school who cares about them.

**Student leadership in middle schools**

One thing that a number of middle schools have begun to develop in more effective ways is the range of opportunities they provide for students to exercise leadership in the school and thereby develop as role models for others. This takes a variety of forms, as illustrated in Table 8, and always includes a Student Representative Council (SRC). It also occurs, as several of the school leaders consulted observed, in the context of the use of both the SWPBS and ‘Good Standing’ programs which are designed to promote student leadership and individual responsibility.

Table 8: Opportunities for students to develop and exercise leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Summary of opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Centralian Middle  | • A large SRC of up to 40 comprised of students who apply to become involved to ensure participation by those who are genuinely interested.  
• The SRC meets fortnightly at lunch, supplemented by some workshops after hours for students who are able to attend.  
• The school has elected school captains but feels it needs a clearer sense of their role in the school. |
| Darwin Middle      | • An elected SRC.  
• House and sporting captains.  
• A range of extracurricular opportunities that engage a significant number of students in developing a range of capabilities including leadership skills — popular ones cited include the school’s Shakespearean plays, debating and tournament of the minds.  
• Use of a student opinion survey to gain student feedback on the school and teaching which school leaders analyse and treat seriously. |
| Dripstone Middle   | • SRC which runs the school’s assemblies.  
• House captains who run sports activities.  
• A ‘Tech Crew’ group that provides the technical support for assemblies and school productions. |
| Katherine High     | • Having initially pushed a Student Leadership Council, it was allowed to lapse because there was no clear view of its purpose in the school.  
• This year separate middle years and senior years SLCs have been re-established which connect to the overall plans of the school. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Features</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High</td>
<td>- The school has an extensive camps program to engage students and provide opportunities to experience leadership.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The school has a relatively large and effective SRC which reflects a community-minded town.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The SRC focuses on a mix of community activities and fund raising and there is some desire among school leaders to progressively involve it in learning-related issues as well.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Year 9 peer leaders play an active role in the Year 6 to 7 transition process.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The school provides opportunities for individual students to exercise and/or learn about leadership such as CDU scholarships and participating in youth round tables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle</td>
<td>- SRC that has grown in significance as it shifted from just volunteers to successful applicants for the role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Middle</td>
<td>- SRC of self-nominated members who gain the approval of a staff member. The SRC organises and runs the fortnightly assembly and a range of recess and lunchtime activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Leadership training for SRC members.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- A range of groups to involve students in community or whole school activities — eg, the International Deforestation Action Project, Rosebery Peace Keepers Peer Support Group which tackles bullying and supports the implementation of SWPBS, and Reading Buddies whereby trained Year 7 students read with primary students once a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson Middle</td>
<td>- SRC comprising one elected member from each Pastoral Care Group to ensure representation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Sporting captains.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The school has borrowed and used Darwin Middle’s student opinion survey.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Student leadership is seen as somewhat thin and the school believes there’s ‘a long way to go’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>- The school has a Student Leadership Team comprising two leaders from each year level, which meets fortnightly with the principal.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Students commonly host school assemblies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The school provides and looks for opportunities for students to represent it, such as the large number of students involved in activities at the local agricultural show.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- A Year 9 Taminmin Cares program (linked to building financial literacy skills) operates whereby students raise money for a cause they have identified in their pastoral care groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek High</td>
<td>- The school has a SRC.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- A staff member is responsible for providing opportunities for students to experience and exercise leadership, such as the recent participation of some students in the youth parliament.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The same teacher looks after a Stronger Sisters program with both a community involvement and fund-raising focus to better engage some girls in the school.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Overall, 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 development of positive role models who can influence other students in the school. As such, it arguably constitutes a fruitful topic for discussion and sharing that middle school leaders and teachers could have, and is something the sort of networks recommended in Chapters 7 and 10 could facilitate.
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 web page 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.
Chapter 9: Curriculum and assessment for the middle years

The nature of the middle school cohort has implications for the curriculum program and associated assessments for students in Years 7 to 9 as discussed in Chapter 3.

Cole (2004), for instance, has argued that curriculum programs ‘must be developed to enable all students to master essential areas of knowledge and develop necessary personal competences and values’ (6). This reflects what he describes as a ‘broad consensus that to function effectively in the information society, schooling should provide young people with the capacity and motivation to be:

- a community-builder, with strong social competencies and resilience, a positive valuing of self, and a conscious personal and social values base;
- a team worker with skills in co-operation, communication and negotiation;
- able to find, select, structure and evaluate information, to be intellectually curious and able to find problems;
- a problem-solver, complex thinker, original/creative thinker, critical thinker, intellectual risk-taker, and decision-maker;
- independent of mind, responsible, persevering, self-regulating, reflective, self-evaluating and self-correcting;
- flexible and able to adapt to change, through knowing how to learn and wanting to continue to learn throughout life.’ (4)

In this context, he argues the curriculum should ‘enable students to investigate issues that are meaningful to them, in ways that require them to use and build on existing knowledge and skills. An essential part of the formal and informal curriculum will be instruction in thinking, learning and problem-solving strategies and exposure to ways of working that build personal and group competencies.’ (ibid)

In other words, the curriculum in the middle years needs to address not only the knowledge and skills students are expected to gain, but also the processes by which this is to occur, the dispositions (or what Fadel, 2011, calls ‘character’) they need to develop and the learning habits to be attained.

This in turn, as will be seen later in this chapter, implies a greater use of substantial interdisciplinary projects that match closer to the issues young people face and care about in their everyday world. As far as the NMSA (2006) is concerned, the distinguishing feature of a challenging middle level curriculum is that it develops the students’ analytical and problem-solving skills: ‘[s]uch a curriculum blurs the artificial boundaries among subjects by tapping into young adolescents’ emerging ability to understand complex concepts and make multidisciplinary connections, while respecting their desire to see the world in terms of their personal experience.’ (9) This also has the pay-off for schools and teachers that students who experience integrated courses tend to ‘enjoy school more and have fewer disciplinary problems’. (ibid)

Clearly assessment needs to be aligned to the curriculum for the middle years and with the educational focus it adopts. As far as the NMSA is concerned, this requires a ‘comprehensive and balanced’ approach comprising assessments that ‘both diagnose students’ learning needs and evaluate their progress’. More specifically, an approach to assessment that would be familiar to most middle school professionals, in concept at least, which comprises:

- **Assessment for learning** — i.e., formative assessment to help teachers determine what students know and how to plan for further instruction;
• **Assessment of learning** — i.e., summative assessment after the learning process to provide evidence of students’ progress; and
• **Assessment as learning** — i.e., where students are encouraged and supported to monitor their own learning, ask questions and use a range of strategies to decide what they know and can do, and how to use assessment for new learning.

**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. Despite the focus on developing what are commonly referred to as ‘21st Century skills’ (which are important as outlined in more detail below), it’s instructive to note that a workforce requirements study conducted in the United States still identified as its top four knowledge requirements English language (spoken), Reading comprehension (in English), Writing in English (grammar, spelling, etc.), and Mathematics.  

What is more, literacy and numeracy has just as much relevance in the middle years as they do in primary schools, especially given the relatively high proportion of students who present as low on the NAPLAN reading and numeracy bands. (See Chapter 2.)

Of concern in this regard is that, although a Departmental Expert Literacy and Numeracy Task Force did develop a strategy to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for the period 2010 to 2012, Wilson still concluded in his 2014 report that there are ‘no common approaches to literacy across the Northern Territory, despite well-established research about what works’ (2014:20). While the comment was specific to the primary years, and gave rise to a set of recommendations about the form that literacy teaching in particular should take, it seems from this review’s investigations that it is just as true of literacy and numeracy in the middle years.

On the flip side of the ledger, what is encouraging is the work of the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel (referenced earlier) in its 2014 report. Of particular importance, in terms of working to ensure that evidence-based approaches are more consistently used is the panel’s recommended set of seven ‘fundamental expectations’ to inform planning, teaching and assessment at the school level. The Fundamental Expectations for Teaching Literacy and Numeracy are quoted in full because they reflect prevailing research on literacy and numeracy practices that work and go a long way towards addressing Wilson’s concern.

**The Fundamental Expectations for Teaching Literacy and Numeracy**

1. **Know what you intend students to learn and follow through on the learning intentions.**

   Use the Australian Curriculum documents to identify required content and achievement standards before you begin planning. Analyse and record the important ideas that underpin the literacy and numeracy you intend your students to learn. Communicate your learning intentions clearly to students and explain to them the processes they will use as they engage in this learning:
   - the main benefit of articulating learning intentions is the clarity and focus they provide for your teaching. A focus on the intention of your teaching allows you to examine student learning processes and evaluate learning outcomes more fully.

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• intentions must be learner-focused and promote engagement with year-level appropriate content and concepts
• successful and engaging teachers provide multiple opportunities for students to meet year level achievement standards
• explain the language and purpose of the learning intentions and ensure that there is opportunity for students to reflect on the achievement of those intentions.

2. **Plan for teaching and learning that builds on existing knowledge, skills and experience.**

   High quality, real time assessment information about what students know and can do is the starting point of your planning and teaching. By knowing students well you can plan the next steps for student learning and can both contextualise and establish a rationale for the learning:

   • to fully inform teaching and learning in your classroom, gather and interrogate a range of quality sources of information about student learning. A planned assessment cycle should be established and revisited progressively throughout the year to provide information for evidence-based judgments about teaching
   • approaches to teaching the content of the Australian Curriculum should be appropriate to the learner, culturally responsive, linguistically sensitive and inclusive
   • evidence-based differentiation should be common practice in your classroom. This includes planning for students who are still working towards current targets and planning further challenges for those students who are ready to move beyond them
   • identify the language and the embedded and implicit cultural knowledge students bring to the learning and identify which aspects of the language need to be taught.

3. **Maximise opportunities for all students to learn in a collaborative culturally responsive classroom community.**

   Students come to the classroom with a range of experiences and expectations about learning and schooling:

   • establish a classroom culture in which all students expect to be included and which promotes culturally and contextually responsive pedagogies
   • promote engagement of students of all backgrounds and respect cultural learning and language and communication preferences
   • emphasise variety in student decision making processes and promote a culture of respectful and rigorous communication.

4. **Communicate the high expectations you hold to all students.**

   Hold high expectations for students and communicate those through the choice of appropriately challenging learning experiences, by modelling persistence and effort and by clearly stating your expectations for their effort and learning:

   • expectations include aspirations for performance, behaviour, attendance, participation, and effort
   • plan learning activities that have scope for students to excel
   • model persistence, affirm persistence, and acknowledge that failure is a step on the path to powerful learning
   • ensure there is explicit and ongoing feedback for students on their learning and progress so they know how well they are doing, what is missing and what you will do together to move forward
   • communicate throughout teaching and learning interactions that all students can reach their potential.

5. **Develop the literacy and numeracy aspects of all domains.**
Plan to provide opportunities for teaching literacy and numeracy in all domains. Fluency in literacy and numeracy enhances study in those domains:

- identify the specific literacy and numeracy demands of all curriculum areas. You need to provide focused and purposeful teaching about these demands of literacy and numeracy so that the students are able to learn these in meaningful contexts
- presenting students with applications of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum supports students’ learning in English and mathematics
- identify and explicitly teach the associated English language needed to interpret the learning experience and context.

6. **Plan learning experiences that engage, challenge and extend students to plan and evaluate their approach to finding solutions to problems.**

Promote active and engaged learning in your classroom by providing opportunities for students to connect ideas, to explore their own strategies for solving problems and to conduct investigations, and to communicate their solution strategies to others:

- provide learning experiences that require students to plan and evaluate their approaches to finding solutions to problems
- encourage students to set their own learning goals, come to see concepts in new ways and learn to select and monitor their own strategies
- engaged and motivated students take risks in solving problems and can justify their thinking to the teacher and other students
- provide intensive scaffolding and model the reasoning process so that students can organise their thinking to reinforce concepts.

7. **Provide opportunities for students to become fluent with their literacy and numeracy.**

Planned, systematic review and practice enhances fluency in literacy and numeracy, which in turn contributes to learning in other domains:

- ensure that each student’s potential is maximised by gradually transferring responsibility for learning from teacher directed to independent performance
- plan learning sequences that develop from teacher modelling (show me), through scaffolding and support (help me), to independent practice (let me)
- emphasise the importance of fluency and provide opportunities for independent learning of key ideas and practice to fluency.

The outline of fundamental expectations is accompanied in the panel’s report by advice and recommendations on growing teacher capacity, leadership and school improvement, data analysis and interrogation, and partnerships with both communities and families and universities and professional associations. As such, it provides an important starting point for guiding and supporting middle schools to improve their literacy and numeracy approaches, and thereby raising achievement as a result. It also aligns well to the efforts already underway in some schools to use such programs as Tactical Teaching Reading and First Steps Numeracy to build the literacy and numeracy teaching capacity of their staff.

The reviewer endorses the work of the panel and in particular its recommendations to adopt the fundamental expectations and, as a priority, develop resources to elaborate and exemplify them in digital and print form drawing where appropriate on quality resources already in place, such as the Multi Year Level materials to implement the Australian Curriculum that are included on Learning Links. This dovetails neatly with a view that will emerge as this chapter unfolds that schools and teachers need more exemplars on which to draw that give life to the broader policy frameworks that exist.
It is important in this context to ensure that the fundamental expectations and associated supports do not just become another example of the implementation churn discussed in Chapter 5, whereby good ideas and intent translate into little change or impact on practice in schools. Achieving this requires the Department to commit to implementation not only on a Territory-wide basis, but to stick with it for at least three years so the approach can be embedded in schools. Beyond this, as discussed in the later section on assessment, the implementation work also needs to link to the work of the Assessment and Standards Middle Years project to ensure alignment between the efforts to improve literacy and numeracy teaching on the one hand, and their assessment on the other.

This is something that Taminmin College has sought to tackle by engaging Griffith University, at considerable expense to the school, to deliver an Accelerating Literacy program to its Year 7-10 English, science and SOSE staff. Amongst other things, the program has seen the introduction of PAT Reading tests for the first time in the school, which were analysed and used to create a data wall with photos of students aligned to the results, with a view to determining what is needed for each student to improve and then charting the progress they make after they are tested again. In addition, ten teachers are being trained through the project to ensure the program is sustainable once the university’s participation ends.

There was some significant concern 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. The Taminmin effort aside whereby the school is spending substantial funds to craft a solution itself, the concern expressed by schools may suggest a need for some targeted systemic coaching, consistent with the efforts some schools are making (and which the following chapter on pedagogy suggests should be generalised) to implement an explicit teaching approach to literacy and numeracy so it can be used to good effect.

More specifically, schools could be supported to identify one or more literacy and numeracy leaders in each middle school 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. To be effective and enable such literacy and numeracy leaders to have an impact in their schools, the approach would need to be maintained for a minimum of three years.

While the Department could charge its Assessment and Standards Middle Years project consultants with the task of identifying the appropriate literacy and numeracy programs to adopt to underpin training of school-based literacy and numeracy leaders, the reviewer can advise on two to consider that align to the research on what works and, in the case of the literacy program in particular, has already succeeded in turning around literacy results to scale.

- Literacy — The Northern Metropolitan Region in Victoria saw NAPLAN literacy outcomes markedly improve as a result of adopting Munro’s High Reliability Literacy Teaching Procedures\(^\text{36}\), and training leaders in schools to support teachers in ensuring they are consistently used. More recently the approach, which aligns closely to the seven expectations cited above, has been used to inform the development of programs in reading and writing by the ACER Institute which have been piloted prior to broader delivery through the Institute which has registration as a higher education provider. The courses, developed with Munro’s involvement, can be taken online as well as face-to-face and are suitable for the purpose of training leaders in schools to then work with others.

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on implementation across the school. In addition, ACER will be seeking to have them accredited so they can result in a Graduate Certificate being awarded for completion.

- Numeracy — Similarly, the ACER Institute has drawn on Munro’s work in the numeracy domain to develop a companion ‘Teaching of Mathematics’ program that has similar characteristics and potentially will result in a Graduate Certificate as well.

The other program that could be considered, particularly as an intervention for students ‘at risk’, is Direct Instruction as recommended by the Indigenous Education Review for primary schools.

**Interdisciplinary projects in the middle years**

An examination of curriculum offerings across the middle schools reveals substantial consistency about the core subjects that all students in Years 7 to 9 should undertake. English, Mathematics, Science and Humanities (sometimes in the form of Studies of Society and the Environment, sometimes as Humanities and sometimes as History/ Geography) are compulsory in all the schools, while some also require their students to undertake Health and Physical Education. This not only reflects the basics of middle school programs around the country, but also accords with the core program that Year 6 students who were interviewed for the review wish to pursue, with science a particular interest they have since it doesn’t feature prominently in their primary schools. How enjoyable the students find this curriculum appears from the responses a number made to the online survey for the review to depend as much on what they think of their teachers as the content itself, with an almost even split between those who enjoy learning at school and those who do not, commonly describing it as ‘boring’.

The compulsory subjects are supplemented by electives from which students can choose, which differ a little between the schools but, in general, cover one or more of the arts (music, dance, drama), languages, technologies of various sorts (from wood work to digital technology, to multimedia, robotics and more), home economics and in the case of Taminmin, agriculture which makes use of its farm.

Some schools also have accelerated programs for gifted students such as Dripstone Middle School’s classes for students of high potential and Taminmin College’s ‘Leading Learner’ program for students from Year 7 through to Year 10.

There is also substantial documentation related to curriculum offerings within some middle schools. Rosebery Middle School provides a case in point where a whole school curriculum and assessment plan sets out contextual school information and data, the strategies being pursued to improve teaching and learning in the school, curriculum unit overviews by learning area and year level that enact content descriptions presented in the Northern Territory Scope and Sequence and where appropriate cross referenced to the Australian Curriculum and National Standards, and an assessment unit overview by learning area. This plan is then supplemented by a useful programming rubric to guide whole school curriculum planning, and an outline of separate Year 7, 8 and 9 integrated activities embracing the various subjects and electives, though arguably less well-developed than the sort of interdisciplinary projects for engaging adolescents in deeper learning that are suggested below.

It has to be acknowledged in this context that substantial curriculum support does exist for middle years teachers in the Northern Territory, though the extent to which it is used is unknown.
An examination of the three updates on Implementing Australian Curriculum that are included on the Department website, for instance, advises principals and teachers that they can access:

- dedicated science and history pages on Learning Links that include ‘a comprehensive range of resources, advice, teaching materials and professional learning courses to support implementation’;
- Northern Territory Multiple Year Level Scope and Sequences which describe the intended curriculum using content descriptions (scope) for English, Mathematics, Science and History organised by year level, across school terms and by units of work (the sequence) that schools are expected to use to inform their whole school, year level and classroom plans;
- planning support such as a Whole School Curriculum and Assessment Plan Template that reflects the Multiple Year Level teaching materials; and
- a relatively newer page that was added to Learning Links for Geography.

These resources are all found on Learning Links which is described as ‘our “one stop” shop’, providing regularly updated information, advice, teaching materials and resources for teachers and principals to use. In addition, schools have access to Scootle which supports the implementation of the Australian Curriculum by providing an array of digital resources online.

Learning Links provides schools and teachers with planning advice for whole school curriculum and assessment plans, and year level plans aligned to Multiple Year Level (MYL) or Curriculum into the Classroom (C2C) materials to be developed collaboratively by teaching teams, along with unit and lesson plans that teachers can use in class. The advice recommends backward planning from achievement standards to identify a learning goal and how students will demonstrate their learning. From this, assessment plans and then the teaching and learning sequence can be developed. The site also includes some professional learning packages that schools can use.

Schools and teachers are advised to look for connections between learning areas and the integration of strands within learning areas to provide rich, authentic learning experiences. Whether sufficient capacity exists in schools for this to effectively occur, not to mention time, is a moot point and suggests, as will be seen as the discussion unfolds, a need for richly-illustrated exemplars on which schools and teachers can draw.

The reviewer was advised that there are more than 2,500 separate documents on Learning Links which does present a challenge about how teachers navigate the site to find what they want. This is illustrated by a search the reviewer undertook to find either a Year 7, Year 8 or Year 9 interdisciplinary unit of any sort. In each case, the only response from the search engine for Learning Links was ‘Big Ideas: A Close Look at the Australian History Curriculum from a Primary Teacher’s Perspective’. Similarly searches for integrated units elicited a range of subject-specific MYL Unit Plans.

It is acknowledged that there is a vast repository of useful material on Learning Links but putting it together into a coherent program, especially one that includes interdisciplinary projects of any sort, is a difficult task and requires substantial input and time. This arguably is why the schools visited indicated the use of Learning Links by teachers was patchy at best, despite the quality of what it contains. It’s an excellent support for a highly engaged and capable teacher, but probably less helpful for someone who is not, but who is also more of

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38 [http://www.scootle.edu.au](http://www.scootle.edu.au)
the target for its use. There remains a sense that the site requires teachers who aren’t necessarily the best, but are still eager to improve, to develop high quality approaches themselves, rather than showing them explicitly curriculum (and associated teaching and learning and assessment approaches) they can use to better effect, which in turn helps equip them to improve.

Beyond this, while the rich vein of subject-based and literacy and numeracy support available is necessary to ensure effective curriculum design and delivery in the middle years of school, it is not necessarily sufficient for ensuring that young adolescents are effectively engaged at school and developing outcomes that prepare them for success in a pathway of their choice; especially since the sort of curriculum on offer across the schools as outlined earlier is the type of curriculum that has only achieved moderate success in Years 7 to 9 both in the Territory and other states and territories.

As already indicated in Chapter 3, substantial research examined by the NMSA in particular suggests that a challenging middle level curriculum ‘blurs the artificial boundaries among subjects by tapping into young adolescents’ emerging ability to understand complex concepts and make multidisciplinary connections’ (9). Effective middle level teachers the Association argues on the basis of these remarks, ‘design classroom activities around essential questions that address both the goals of instruction and students’ interests’ (ibid).

This in turn enables the construction of a curriculum to address each of the dimensions of what Fadel (2011), who is a co-founder of the internationally influential Center for Curriculum Redesign, refers to as ‘21st century needs’ — i.e.:

- **Knowledge** — there is, he suggests, a ‘profound need to rethink the significance and applicability of what is taught, and in concert to strike a far better balance between the conceptual and the practical’ (1) both to make the content relevant and hence more engaging for students and meet broader economic and societal needs.
- **Skills** — including the higher order skills of creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration, that often are neglected because they are squeezed out by the sheer amount of content the curriculum contains.
- **‘Character’** — the sort of behaviours, attitudes and values that enable young people to ‘face an increasingly challenging world’ (2). These, he suggests, include both performance (e.g., adaptability, persistence and resilience) and moral (e.g., integrity, justice, empathy, ethics) related traits.
- **Meta-Layer** — the learning related capacities that enable young people to apply and transfer what they learn, build expertise, develop their creativity and establish the habits of lifelong learning.

This challenges schools to devise a curriculum that not only ensures the essential knowledge is addressed, but in ways that enable the students to develop the sought after character dispositions, learning capacities and skills. Interestingly, this also accords with the desire a number of students who were interviewed expressed for more ‘real world’ learning where they are academically challenged, but can also work on something that interests them. Amongst other things this provides a means of making learning at school more interesting so students are not bored as a number of respondents to the online survey seem to be.

For Fadel (2010, 2014) at least, what is needed is to rebalance the current curriculum structure and delivery away from the heavy emphasis on direct teaching, at the expense of inquiry towards a greater focus on inquiry-based projects where direct instruction still plays an important role. The curriculum, he suggests (2010), should focus more on interdisciplinary projects and the opportunities for projects that can be devised, consistent with the NMSA argument above, as illustrated in Figure 8.
Apart from the fact that an interdisciplinary approach is more like ‘real life’, it provides a means of complementing subject-specificity with a focus on character, learning processes and skills. It also aligns to the advice of Salyers and McKee cited in Chapter 3 that students in this phase of schooling can benefit from an approach that poses more essential questions and/or problems to solve.

This is not to suggest that single subjects ought disappear from the curriculum in middle schools, but rather to signal that opportunities should be sought for an interdisciplinary approach to be used where it contributes to meeting the knowledge and skills requirements young adolescents have. Nor does it mean neglecting the requirements of the Australian Curriculum, but rather the need to look for linkages in the curriculum around significant ‘big ideas’ leading to a substantial product from the students that can meet a range of outcomes in different domains. It could also mean examining the range of electives on offer in schools to determine if they are the best fit for meeting the learning requirements today’s students have. It’s an approach that the Griffith University personnel working at Taminmin were reported as advocating, and that also fits neatly with the emphasis some of the schools have had on ensuring what Rosebery Middle School, channelling some others as well, refers to as an ‘ICT enabled and enriched curriculum ... (using) a range of tools to support 21st Century teaching and learning ... in an ever-changing technological world’.

Ensuring there are more such projects in the mix requires some quality exemplars on which schools and teachers can draw. There is, as Fadel (2011) notes, ‘little in terms of teacher expertise in combining knowledge and skills in a coherent ensemble, guiding materials and assessments’ (2). Hence it is unrealistic to expect that teachers will inevitably get there on their own and, in particular, that they will do so at scale. Developing quality exemplars, or what the AEU referred to in a briefing session as ‘templates’ for teachers to start, is ultimately 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. The extent to which teachers use the exemplars that are developed then only contributes to building capacity across the system as a whole.
Once again, this is not work that need start from scratch, in that a range of quality curriculum materials already exist to inform the work, primarily on Learning Links and Scootle as outlined above. However it does require a dedicated project and dedicated resourcing for appropriately qualified staff.

Such exemplars would go beyond the specification of the interdisciplinary project itself (i.e., its focus, the disciplines addressed and how they are integrated, the product to be developed, etc.) to also encompass:

- pedagogical advice to support the use of more evidence-based approaches and, where appropriate, innovative practices in class;
- suggested assessments and rubrics aligned to the Australian Curriculum, clear success criteria for the project and its outcomes and samples of work that meet and exceed the criteria;
- suggested extensions for students capable of higher levels of achievement; and
- recommended follow-up interdisciplinary projects that teachers and students could undertake.

While not in any way mandatory for teachers to use, it is expected that the richness of such comprehensive and integrated interdisciplinary project advice could help transform the curriculum in middle schools in ways that reflect the needs of young adolescents in the stage, and help lift teacher performance by supporting more effective pedagogical practices in classrooms, with the result that student learning outcomes can be expected to improve.

**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 the VET courses that middle schools offer, supplemented by the important program offered by the Darwin Area Middle Years Training Centre (DAMYTC).

The DAMYTC, co-located with Nightcliff Middle School, comprises three classrooms that accommodate up to 14 students each, and provides metals-based VET courses for students related to employment opportunities in mining and the major new INPEX gas project in Darwin. The programs include a heavy emphasis on Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and the acquisition of certificates through the Centre’s Registered Training Organisation, Charles Darwin University. The Centre can cater for 120-140 students each attending one day a week from all of the Darwin-based middle schools — currently three groups from Darwin Middle School, two groups each from Dripstone, Rosebery and Sanderson Middle Schools, and one group from Nightcliff Middle School. The Centre sees itself as providing both options for students, including some whose literacy and numeracy is weak, to work towards a certificate and an employment-related outcome, and a taster for some higher achievers who are deciding on the pathway they want to take. As such, it’s an educational VET option that students in middle schools could not otherwise get, which has an important role that ought be recognised and valued in curriculum provision for a significant number of Year 9 students in middle schools.

Another program of particular importance in this regard is the development of the Employment Pathways model, since the Indigenous Education Review recommends it should be trialled and evaluated in Tennant Creek and Katherine High Schools along with two remote schools, and considered as potentially applicable to all urban middle and senior schools (Recommendation 30).
The Employment Pathways model has been developed by the Department to assist schools to provide an alternative, employment-focused pathway as an option for students who are not seeking to gain an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). It is designed to engage them in hands-on learning and provide them with the skills they need to get jobs. The model, as Wilson observes, ‘could be the primary model for many students’ and, he suggests, is ‘particularly applicable to remote Indigenous students entering secondary education because it addresses the demonstrated critical gaps in their education to that point and provides students with a clear reason to attend school and a line of sight from school to employment … (and also) to non-Indigenous students interested in going straight to employment or further training’ (149).

The model, which is in the process of being fully developed and implemented by the Department’s Industry, Engagement and Employment Pathways Team (which is why Wilson recommends trialling it first) includes: a vocationally focused program preparing students from employment pathways supported by online resources from the Pre-VET™ package in the middle years; an employment-focused VET program following a clear and staged model; a VET-based leadership program associated with an engagement program such as Clontarf, Girls Academies or Cadets; an industry engagement plan incorporating an industry placement program; online resources for Stage One and Two subjects; and middle years subjects focusing on mathematics, English, science and civics and citizenship from the Australian Curriculum framework. The stages of the model aligned to different year levels is provided as Appendix 3 to the report.

The Employment Pathways model effectively constitutes something of a blended mixture of the academic and vocational pathways for students, between the ATAR-driven academic pathway and the vocational pathway combining compulsory NTCET Stage One subjects and NTCET-credit gaining VET programs already familiar to schools.

By offering a clear pathway through school to a job, the model helps answer the question some students have of ‘why bother to come’, and hence potentially contributes to improved attendance at school and engagement once there. As such, it is just as applicable to middle as to senior schools, and ought be considered within the context of the regular review of curriculum provision that schools conduct once the Katherine and Tennant Creek High School trials have been evaluated and their outcomes disseminated by the Department to schools.

Assessment for improved learning in the middle years

In his advice for improving educational outcomes in the Territory, Masters (2011) highlighted the importance of ‘establishing where students are up to in their learning’ as the basis for ‘implementing effective, evidence-based interventions and learning strategies tailored to students’ current levels of progress and learning needs’ (4). This, he suggested, requires access to tools for this purpose, such as standardised literacy and numeracy tests and more fine-grained diagnostic instruments to better understand why students are performing as they are.

This, as foreshadowed in the discussion of some important recent initiatives in Chapter 4, is part of the remit of the Assessment and Standards Middle Years project that will operate until the end of 2016. The project is pursuing a range of outcomes and outputs detailed in the earlier chapter which, if successful, will help to ensure a more coherent assessment regime exists in Territory middle schools that reflects high expectations for all students,
makes valid and reliable judgments particularly in relation to A-E gradings in the school, and is used to inform teaching to enable the full range of student learning needs to be met.

One early activity the project consultants undertook, with a group of four pilot schools, was to survey them about current assessment practices to gain an understanding of the extent to which a consistent approach exists. The survey asked the 18 questions which are provided as Appendix 4 to this report.

While the detailed data arising from the survey is confidential to the consultants themselves, in accordance with guarantees provided to the schools involved, the clear message from it to which the consultants point is the lack of consistency across the four schools. Put simply, a variety of assessment modes and strategies are employed and there is no consistency to how assessment is used to ensure that teachers do, in Masters’ terms, really know where students are up to so they can support them to reach the next learning stage.

This is not to suggest that there is insufficient assessment occurring in all middle schools. There is certainly lots of it going on. As indicated earlier, for instance, Rosebery Middle School’s whole school curriculum and assessment plan sets out both the systemic and school-based assessments used, including school wide ACER online testing and has a colour coded matrix of assessments conducted in different subject areas as evident from the sample for English and Mathematics provided as Figure 9.

Figure 9: Overview of timing of school assessments by year level and learning area – Extract for English and Maths; Rosebery Middle School

The issue however is, as the consultants have observed the lack of consistency between the schools and the consequent variability in the quality and effectiveness of the approach, as evident from Table 9.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Assessments — Major features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle</td>
<td>• All students undertake On Demand testing to establish a performance benchmark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• They then undertake PAT Maths testing in paper form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do On Demand testing again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do Probe Reading to test for comprehension.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The data is triangulated to provide a deeper understanding of where each student is at, and hence needs to go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Middle</td>
<td>• All students undertake ACER testing supplemented by class cohort tests and the school has convinced its primary feeder schools to now do the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Having used these for four years, the school feels it needs to get more rigorous about analysing the data to identify where students are at and how they can be supported to move to the next stage in their learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
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<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Dripstone Middle | **Teams of teachers build assessment pieces to supplement ACER testing and then moderate the outcomes.**  
**The school is adopting On Demand testing.**  
**It has identified common assessment tasks for each year level in each subject to get greater clarity about the criteria for making judgments, and teachers moderate around these.** |
| Katherine High   | **Probe Reading, PM Benchmarking for Reading and a New Zealand Maths Assessment are all used for the (Indigenous) School Readiness Group, and there is an intention to spread these through the school.**  
**As the first phase of realising this intention, all students undertake testing around literacy, numeracy and problem solving to identify students who need the sort of testing undertaken by the School Readiness Program group.** |
| Nhulunbuy High   | **The Australian Curriculum was used as a catalyst to establish a comprehensive assessment plan across the school from Year 7 to Year 12.**  
**A range of tests including PAT tests are used to assess literacy and numeracy, though this doesn’t necessarily apply to all students and the school is seeking to bring this about.** |
| Nightcliff Middle| **The school has been using WIAT-II tests for sight reading, spelling and number but is concerned that sight reading does not address comprehension and number is too limited.**  
**Some time ago it bought the licence for ACER PAT tests, which are used in its feeder primary schools, but at the time the reviewer visited, were yet to be administered.** |
| Rosebery Middle  | **The school has a whole school curriculum and assessment plan that is under further review and development.**  
**It uses ACER testing in science, general ability, comprehension and maths for all students in terms one and three.**  
**Reframing Mathematical Thinking pre-tests are used to identify students’ zone for instruction and then post-tests for progress.**  
**Specialised testing is used as needed.** |
| Sanderson Middle | **The school recently commenced ACER testing.**  
**It is implementing Probe Reading this year.**  
**The school believes it has ‘lots of data but not much analysis of it’.”** |
| Taminmin College | **The school introduced PAT Reading testing as part of its project with Griffith University.**  
**In 2014 it has introduced On Demand testing and is at the stage of administering it for the first time.**  
**The school is now at the stage of ‘making sense of’ the assessment data it has collected.** |
| Tennant Creek High| **The school administers PAT tests and PM Benchmarking for Reading.**  
**It was also selected for the trial of the NAPLAN online.**  
**The school gathered the PM Benchmarking data from its feeder primary schools which also use it, as the basis for tracking student progress and informing support to both the high and low achieving students it enrolls.”** |

It is clear from this table that, although a number of objective testing programs are in use, there is no common and consistent test to supplement NAPLAN to inform school and system level monitoring of performance and hence planning to improve. This is something that ought to be addressed, and there would seem to be two prime candidates for filling the gap —ACER tests or On Demand, or preferably a combination of the two to enable triangulation of the results for gaining an even better understanding at the school and system level of what students achieve in the middle years.
ACER provides fee-for-service Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) in comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and grammar, written spelling, mathematics and science all up to Year 10 that can be completed on paper or online. The advantage of using ACER tests is that a number of schools already use these, along with their feeder primary schools in some cases, and hence are familiar with the approach. The PAT tests also are supplemented by resources to support teachers in responding to the results identified by the tests.

On Demand testing is an online resource for teachers to use when, where and how they choose that can be used pre-and post-teaching a topic of work, primarily in English and Maths. The advantage of On Demand testing is that the Northern Territory already has the licence for it so it is free to use by schools. In addition, it’s an adaptive testing regime that delivers sets of questions to students that vary according to their ability and depend on their responses to previous questions, which means the students undertaking it move forward after experiencing some success. It is also aligned to the Australian Curriculum.

The decision about which if not both of these sets of tests to adopt on a systemic basis is really a judgment call, but the decision to have a common and consistent approach is not if middle schooling is to move forward in a planned, systematic way, with clear oversight of performance from the system as a whole. There may be value in this context in giving the Assessment and Standards Middle Years project the task, in consultation with middle school principals, of identifying the recommended approach with a view to whole of Territory implementation in 2015. As part of this work, the project team could also be asked to investigate and recommend on the potential to extend the assessment regime adopted to Years 5 and 6 in primary schools, and Year 10 in the senior secondary schools to facilitate better monitoring of student performance across the two divides, and an information flow that can help ensure more seamless transitions between Years 6 and 7 and then Years 9 and 10.

Beyond this, the Department, as noted earlier, has established the SAIS to provide ‘a one stop shop for teachers, principals and schools to create, record and report on student assessments’, and it should be expected that the agreed ACER and/or On Demand data from schools be included on it, along with school-based A to E assessments to ensure a comprehensive data base of student performance in Territory middle years schools.

Aside from this issue of consistency, other common messages to emerge from the Assessment and Standards Middle Years consultants’ analysis of the survey results were that: significant variations exist within the schools in terms of teacher knowledge about the existence of school assessment policies/plan/ coordinators; it does not appear as if teachers are confident or experienced in differentiating assessment tasks; student/self/peer monitoring or assessment is not particularly common; some schools clarify their assessment criteria for students while others do not; a tendency exists to limit data to NAPLAN or other external data to the detriment of school-based measures; there is limited evidence of assessment data being analysed to inform teaching and learning in class; the quality of feedback to students is variable; there is no standard means of recording student progress within or across schools; and teachers themselves are confident that they make consistent and comparable judgments though this view is not necessarily shared by those beyond the schools.

There is also arguably no real knowledge within the system as a whole about the assessment practice and levels of achievement in middle schools, which this project is seeking to redress, and although schools do produce assessment tasks themselves, it appears as if they often are not particularly rich with the result that the evidence for the A-E rankings that are made
is somewhat thin. In a number of cases, it was suggested through a range of discussions conducted for the review, the students are not even able to achieve an A or B ranking because the low expectations of teachers for the students limits their judgments to the C to E range. This in turn reflects the view again expressed in interviews and focus groups that although some schools have written assessment policies in their handbooks, they are not necessarily explicitly shared throughout the school and then used. Beyond this, there was some suggestion as leaders in one school visited put it, that ‘we have no shared sense of what a “C” means in this school or across schools ... We need more information about what different grade levels mean’.

The other concerning suggestion to emerge from discussions around the review was the view of some that there are times when students are treated for assessment purposes more like senior students in Years 10-12 than middle school students in Years 7-9. This comment derived from a view which some of the schools visited confirmed that sometimes schools and teachers are setting very high stakes assessments accounting for a very large proportion of the student’s assessment in the subject for the year — with percentages as high as 40-60% cited for a single assessment task — often without the opportunity to redress a failure to perform with the result the student is set back at an early stage for the whole of the year, and arguably their time at middle school.

Suffice to say that these anecdotal observations, together with the lack of consistency surfaced by the survey cited above, only highlights the importance of the Assessment and Standards Middle Years project that is underway. The observations also highlight the importance of adopting a common assessment regime along the lines recommended to improve the quality of assessments, strengthen the consistency of good assessment practice across the middle schools, and contribute to systemic monitoring of middle school student performance as a result.

While a wide range of key performance indicators for the Assessment and Standards Middle Years project exist, including professional development to improve assessment and data literacy, sample assessment plans, vignettes of quality practice and so on, perhaps the key to developing school and teacher capacity in this regard is to produce rich exemplars of quality assessment strategies that teachers can use, aligned to both the literacy and numeracy standards to be achieved by students in Years 7 to 9 and the interdisciplinary projects recommended above. Such exemplars should extend beyond just an outline of the assessment tasks themselves, to include success criteria to be shared with students that make clear the standard of performance to be achieved, along with work samples illustrating work that meets the standard so teachers and students know what it looks like. By showing teachers what more effective assessments look like in practice, and providing the professional development the project envisages, the Department can help to raise the level of data and assessment literacy across the middle schools and hence the validity and reliability of the judgments that teachers make.

Finally, in endorsing the Assessment and Standards Middle Schools project work, the review would reiterate the importance already noted in Chapter 4 and its consequent recommendation aimed at ensuring the work of this project and the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel are appropriately aligned. Already a degree of overlap exists with recommendations from the Expert Literacy and Numeracy Panel that relate to developing whole school assessment plans, leaders working with staff to analyse whole school data and student performance including for example the On Demand tests, teachers using identified student assessment tools and a data recording system to track the growth in student achievement, and the use of data as a basis for feedback to students and determining the next stage of teaching and learning. To the extent these two worthwhile endeavours are
brought together, it will help dispel any potential confusion about directions and strategy advice at the school level, and ensure that greater systemic consistency prevails.

**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 Years 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 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.
Chapter 10: Pedagogy for the middle years

At its simplest level, the NMSA (2006) suggests that successful middle schools need to be able to provide ‘multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to students’ diversity’ (4). Masters (2011) takes this a stage further by arguing that improved literacy and numeracy performance in particular requires the implementation of ‘effective, evidence-based teaching strategies tailored to the students’ current levels of progress and learning needs’ (6).

Central to this, according to Cole (2004), is the need for the student to be ‘identified as an active agent in their own learning and be provided with all necessary coaching and peer support to see the purpose of specific learning activities and achieve agreed essential learning outcomes’ (7). It is important in this context that teachers adopt ‘a variety of teaching methods to avoid the predictable and routine’ (ibid).

Hattie (2003) has demonstrated that teachers and, even more particularly their 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. Figure 10 illustrates the difference in student learning outcomes generated by the highest and lowest-performing teachers in the US state of Tennessee (Sanders and Rivers, 1996). The greatest source of improvement in schools comes from narrowing this gap by supporting more teachers to work like the best teachers in the school, with the result that consistently better teaching occurs in each and every class.

Figure 10: The Difference Teachers Make (Source: Sanders and Rivers, 1996)

Good planning, and especially collaborative planning, is arguably the key means to support more teachers to work like the best. More specifically, teachers need to plan lessons/units that will effectively achieve their purposes and ensure that student learning occurs. Using an instructional model can help to improve teacher planning in schools.

A number of middle schools have begun to go down this path, as evident in Table 10, though as has been the story throughout this report, it is a path that has been inconsistently trod, sometimes with a clear instructional model to adopt, sometimes with something more rudimentary and sometimes not at all.
### Table 10: Consistent pedagogical planning structures adopted by schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key features of the approach in use</th>
<th>Issues to consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian MS</td>
<td>• Visible Learning is used by schools in the Central Region. (Note: There is consideration within the Department for it to be extended to other regions, and the Wilson review recommends it should be more widely used.)&lt;br&gt;• The school has an instructional model through Visible Learning that is referenced below.</td>
<td>• The instructional model in use could be made more useful still with the inclusion of planning questions for teams to consider, as outlined below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin MS</td>
<td>• The school promotes a focus on ‘what we’re learning, why we’re learning’ what will be the outcome’.&lt;br&gt;• It is also looking at Visible Learning.</td>
<td>• It was acknowledged that learning intentions, which really frame effective planning of lessons/units by teachers, can be limited in the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dripstone MS</td>
<td>• The Australian Curriculum is being used to promote more explicit and rigorous teaching approaches.&lt;br&gt;• Teachers do plan curriculum delivery collaboratively.</td>
<td>• There is no common instructional model in use to give more substance to teacher planning.&lt;br&gt;• The planning is variable though, it was suggested, improving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine MS</td>
<td>• The school uses Marzano’s instructional strategies for effective teaching and learning to develop consistent teaching approaches and classroom routines, with a particular focus on differentiating instruction to meet diverse learning needs.&lt;br&gt;• This is underpinned by the development of better documented teaching programs and assessments for all core subjects to inform the development of lesson plans. These are developed as multi-level programs with a variety of embedded support and linked to student workbooks that form part of their assessment for the year.</td>
<td>• The approach was described as a very slow process in terms of take-up by teachers, reflecting variations in capacity in the school and a lack of understanding in some cases of evidence-based pedagogical strategies to use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy HS</td>
<td>• The school is looking at both Visible Learning and Marzano’s approach and has constituencies that support each. The approaches are beginning to be used by teachers to inform planning, teaching and assessment and the school intends to commit to one of them by the end of 2014.</td>
<td>• It is very early days in teachers using an instructional model in the school. Exploring two models has the advantage of testing out the best approach to adopt, but could generate some confusion amongst those working with the model that goes by the board, with the result they may need more targeted support when a decision is made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff MS</td>
<td>• Teachers are learning to use an explicit model for teaching literacy and numeracy for an hour a week.&lt;br&gt;• Beyond this, there are variable instructional models in use.</td>
<td>• There is no real consistency and a clear strategy for driving better instruction through the school is yet to be developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery MS</td>
<td>• The school is using an instructional model based around inquiry learning.</td>
<td>• It was suggested that the instructional model is being variably implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Key features of the approach in use</td>
<td>Issues to consider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Sanderson MS    | • The school is introducing an explicit teaching model along the lines of the one outlined later in this report, to address significant variability in teacher planning and performance. | • This is not commencing until 2015.  
• Observations suggest that learning intentions are not clear across teachers in the school. |
| Taminmin College| • The staff handbook includes an instructional model aligned to the one discussed later in the report.  
• It has had a strong focus on learning intentions to frame teacher planning and walk throughs specifically examine this. | • The approach is being introduced and has yet to really be embedded in the school.  
• The school is on the edge of launching into more rigorous walk throughs where more robust and useful feedback can be given to staff. |
| Tennant Creek HS| • The school is using the Visible Learning approach with a focus on learning intentions, success criteria and feedback in particular.  
• It considers itself ‘lucky’ to have some staff who are driving the approach by modelling and talking about it in the school, including at staff meetings. | • The implementation is acknowledged as patchy and very much a work in progress at this stage.  
• A number of teachers were described as going really well and generating better student results, but the larger group of staff is still struggling and need more support. |

As part of visits conducted to schools in the course of the review, the reviewer did have the opportunity to briefly visit some classrooms and speak with some students in them. It is acknowledged that this was only in some schools, since excursions/camps/school productions precluded some classroom visits, and in at least one case, the reviewer could not speak with students as tests were occurring through the school. Nonetheless, the brief visits and discussions that did occur, along with the range of work on white boards that was observed during tours of the schools, did suggest some weakness in pedagogical planning, especially around learning intentions that specify what students should know, understand and be able to do. In addition, a significant number of students interviewed indicated that, although teachers often wrote learning intentions on the board, in many cases it was purely to have the students copy them into their books, without any further reference in class, which the students then saw as a waste of valuable learning time.

It is worth noting that learning intentions are commonly the entry point for leaders seeking to support more teachers to work like the best, since the specification of what students will be learning provides the logical starting point for then determining:

• the teaching and learning activities to help students learn the knowledge and/or skills and achieve the understanding described; and
• an assessment task which will allow the students to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning intention that can be bolstered by providing students with success criteria so they will know what they need to do.

While questioning the students, the teacher keeps the learning intention in mind and this provides a focus for the lesson, and they make certain that feedback to students about their performance focuses on the learning intention and success criteria and any work samples they also can provide.

In the admittedly limited number of cases observed, many of the learning intentions teachers used were more like activities than a specification of what students will know, understand and be able to do, which reflects a lack of understanding about what a learning...
intention really is. This was only confirmed by discussions with leaders following each school tour. In addition, almost all of the students briefly spoken to during classroom visits were able to say what they were doing, when asked, but could not articulate why they were doing it and what they would learn as a result. This too was confirmed in the discussions with leaders that were held and some consistent comments from students through the online survey.

This should not be taken as criticism of the teachers involved, who were all striving to do a better job in class. Rather it serves to highlight the need for schools to have an agreed and common instructional model to inform planning which the evidence shows has previously yielded success.

Visible Learning and an instructional model to consider

Central Region in the Northern Territory has adopted the Hattie program, Visible Learning, as the means to support more teachers in its schools to work like the best, and hence increase the extent to which evidence-based teaching practices are consistently used. Wilson (2014) reports that ‘for many teachers the Hattie approach has been welcome and effective’ and his review found ‘strong support for this program among teachers and principals involved’ (194). This was only confirmed by the reviewer’s visits to Centralian Middle School and Centralian Senior College where school leaders in particular spoke of how Visible Learning has helped to provide what one described as ‘a meta-language which contributes to better professional learning conversations in the school’. It is from their perspective a program that is underpinned by data and which promotes feedback on the basis of what the data says.

The Learning Links website describes Visible Learning as being about ‘enhancing the role of teachers as they become evaluators of their own teaching ... (and) occurs when teachers see learning through the eyes of students and help them become their own teachers’. It involves:

- teachers setting clear learning intentions, providing challenging success criteria, supporting a range of learning strategies, knowing when students are not progressing, providing feedback and visibly learning themselves; and, on the flip side
- students understanding learning intentions, being challenged by success criteria, developing a range of learning strategies, knowing when they are not progressing, seeking feedback and visibly teaching themselves.

At Centralian Middle School, it was explained, the Visible Learning project delivers professional development for teachers and a Visible Learning coach for the school. The school uses an instructional model (called Lesson Framework) that is provided as Appendix 5, with a particular focus on learning intentions and success criteria, though it acknowledges there is still significant variation in the school in its use.

By virtue of the fact it contributes to more intentional and explicit teaching in schools, Wilson recommended that Visible Learning should be progressively extended to all schools over time, though not until an initial review of progress is undertaken to determine whether the extension ought be conducted on the same basis as has been undertaken in Central Australia (IER Recommendation 46).

This is a view that the middle years of schooling review would endorse. At the same time, however, this does not preclude taking action more immediately to develop more consistent good teaching practice throughout Territory middle schools. In particular, consistent use of an instructional model can guide teachers’ planning so more teachers can be supported to
work like the best. This can have particular impact when combined with the sort of curriculum exemplars advocated in this report.

A common instructional model contributes to better planning across the school. Good planning, as foreshadowed earlier, is needed to ensure that teachers’ units and lessons achieve their purposes and ensure that student learning occurs.

One instructional model that teachers around Australia have used with considerable success as a planning tool to ensure better teaching and learning in class is provided as Figure 11.

Figure 11: Sample Instructional Model to inform teachers’ planning in teams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of Lesson</th>
<th>Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beginning of the Lesson</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Hook</strong> — Grab students’ attention and put them in a receptive frame of mind (1-5 minutes)  How will you “Hook” students into the lesson?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Learning Intentions</strong> — Make the learning intentions and success criteria clear to the students (2-5 minutes)  What are your learning intentions and success criteria, in a student-friendly language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Activate/Review</strong> — Activate prior knowledge and review relevant prior learning (5-10 minutes)  How will you activate prior knowledge and review relevant prior learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teacher Input</strong> — Explicitly teach the CONCEPT  How will you teach the concept?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Teacher Input</strong> — Explicitly teach the SKILL  How will you teach the skill? What are the steps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Check for Understanding</strong> — Monitor whether students have ‘got it’ before proceeding. If students have not understood the concept or skill should be re-taught before guided practice begins  How will you check for understanding?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guided Practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Development and Engagement</strong> — Develop student understanding of the concept or skill through activities or exercises  What activities or tasks will you get students to undertake?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Feedback and Individual Support</strong> — Determine the level of mastery and to provide feedback and individual support as needed  Which students do you anticipate will need additional support and how will you provide this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Application</strong> — Get students to apply the concept or skill in different contexts.  What independent practice will students undertake?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Review</strong></td>
<td><strong>Review</strong> — Bring the lesson presentation to an appropriate conclusion by reviewing and clarifying the key points and tying them together into a coherent whole  How will you review the lesson?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The model is based on the explicit teaching approach that Visible Learning adopts, as evident from its clear overlap with Centralian Middle School’s lesson framework (Appendix 5), but has the advantage of posing clear planning questions for teaching teams to address, which also arguably makes it easier to use. It is also a model that at least two middle schools have started to use as the mechanism for supporting more teachers to work like the best.

The impact of such an approach can further be strengthened by the adoption of routines in class, such as the seating arrangements used by Centralian Middle School. While these were

39 The model has been adapted from one initially developed by Hume Central Secondary College where it is used not only to inform teaching in classes, but also supports a process of classroom observation by leaders and coaches in the school.
designed to reduce stress for students entering the room, they also help to increase students’ time on task. As Lemov (2010) has explained, ‘Students should know where to sit. Milling around looking for a seat or deciding where to sit or talking about deciding where to sit ... are all examples of wasted time and energy’ (151). The goal according to Lemov is ‘speed and orderliness’ (155) to ensure a smooth running class. The point is that routines can be taught so that students know, for example, not only where to sit, but how to form groups for particular purposes (discussion, joint problem solving, etc.), without an explanation from the teacher each time that grouping is required. What is more, this is something that ought be done right from the start of the year so the routines are firmly set in place. Lemov likens it to making an investment that will save many hours in the course of the year, thereby increasing students’ engaged learning time. Such routines also contribute positively to the orderly learning environment in the school and can readily be designed to complement the use of the SWPBS approach. Once again, this is a potentially fruitful source of Departmental advice and exemplars for schools, drawing on relevant research and some successful practices in place in middle schools.

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.

This is not to suggest any problem with the manifestations of the primary teaching tradition in middle schools. It is arguably more student-centred and focused on knowing the students well which, as has been demonstrated, is needed for students to experience academic success. However, it is designed to signal the need in some cases for teachers’ pedagogy to be bolstered with some targeted content support and expertise, so the pedagogy delivers what it’s intended to produce.

As one school leader cogently observed, ‘the secondary knowledge of differentiation is limited and they find it harder than the primaries, but you also need a Year 9 maths teacher to teach Year 9 maths’. The importance of this comment is given added weight by the experience one middle school maths teacher and leader described, ‘when the Year 10 kids moved to the senior schools and a meeting of Maths teachers was held’. What she discovered was that ‘the Year 10 teachers all moved as well, which left a vacuum of knowledge to help prepare students in Maths in middle schools’. In response to this, her middle school established a professional learning team specifically designed to help teachers of mathematics to develop the required content expertise.

The actual mix of primary and secondary trained leaders and teachers in middle schools is quite varied as evident in Table 11.
Table 11 does not show the breakdown of subject training and expertise within the proportions of primary and secondary trained teachers, but does suggest that content knowledge in key domains may be limited in some schools.

Given it is likely that the mix of primary and secondary trained teachers will not substantially change in schools for some time, the key issue is really how to support teachers who need it to gain the requisite content expertise. In part, it is suggested, the answer lies in the sort of professional learning team for mathematics teachers that one school established as referenced above. In part it also resides in using a common instructional model in teaching teams so the task of ensuring sufficient content knowledge to achieve identified learning intentions is both explicit and shared. And it also partly lies in the rich curriculum exemplars that are recommended in Chapter 9, where the content can be specified along with the pedagogy and assessment to accompany it, and the training for literacy and numeracy learning leaders in schools to support the adoption of proven models for improving student learning outcomes in these core skills.

In other words, a suite of strategies designed to improve the content knowledge and associated teaching skills of the staff in each school, regardless of the basis of teacher training they received.

In the longer term it may also require specific training for undergraduate teachers and possibly incoming teachers from outside of the Northern Territory, in teaching in the middle years. More specifically, the development of the vision statement for middle schooling recommended earlier could be used to inform discussions between the Department and Charles Darwin University about appropriate preparation for teachers interested in teaching in the middle years and the inclusion of middle years pedagogy in teacher training programs. It could also inform the development of training modules for teachers from other jurisdictions to enable them to work successfully in Northern Territory middle schools.

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40 Based on the estimates of school leaders in each case.
41 Each of Darwin, Nightcliff and Sanderson Middle Schools has one leader who is both primary and secondary trained, and one primary trained leader at Rosebery Middle School also has a qualification in adult education.
Professional learning to underpin improved teaching

Professional learning is arguably the key means that schools have to build the collective capacity and effectiveness of their staff. That said, not all professional learning that schools provide has a positive effect. Cole (2005) for example, who had once described professional development as a great way to avoid change, argues that schools ‘waste thousands of dollars on professional development, as many of the activities typically undertaken to develop teachers produce very little return in terms of improved teacher competency and increased learning’ (189). Ensuring more productive professional learning in schools, he suggests, requires a greater focus on workplace based learning rather than external workshops, staff sharing experience and expertise, integration of teacher work and learning, professional learning as a routine practice and group pursuit of professional learning.

The best way to achieve this is for more professional learning to occur in school-based teams, focused on what happens in the classroom and the student learning outcomes that result; so that learning, as Hawley and Valli (2000) put it, ‘is considered to be part of the work’.

All middle schools already have developed whole-school approaches to professional learning, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness and impact, as evident in Table 12.

Table 12: Whole school professional learning approaches in middle schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key features of the approach in use</th>
<th>Issues to consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Centralian MS| • The school has mandated collaborative planning between teachers as the cornerstone of its professional learning approach.  
• Teachers meet together, analyse data together and plan together.  
• The school has a collaborative planning coordinator to ensure it is a rigorous process and there is consistency of focus.  
• The process operates on the basis of year level subject teams. | • Some teams are more effective than others and a mechanism may be required to ensure consistency of good planning in the school.  
• The process could be strengthened by including the observation of teachers by teachers to introduce feedback on teaching practice as part of professional learning. |
| Darwin MS    | • The school focuses on peers collaboratively learning from peers, where possible in joint planning time.  
• Student surveys about teaching are used to help determine the professional learning issues to be pursued by study groups of teachers and a teacher survey informs the allocation of teachers to the study groups which meet once a week and present to the whole staff at the end of their work.  
• Any PowerPoints produced by teams are uploaded to the | • The school has a very comprehensive professional learning process that could be given even further focus with an instructional model to plan around, rather than just the planning questions it currently uses. (See Table 10).  
• Teachers’ right to request an observation could progressively develop into an expectation that mutual classroom observation occurs to ensure there is some objective feedback on teaching to supplement the information from student |
### School Key features of the approach in use Issues to consider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key features of the approach in use</th>
<th>Issues to consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dripstone MS</td>
<td>- Collaborative planning occurs in subject/year level groups, usually of three teachers.</td>
<td>- The process was described as being a work in progress with an effort now in place to shift the focus from planning to the quality of what is planned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Leaders observe teachers along with a colleague nominated by the teacher being observed, as part of the school’s Performance and Development framework, using an observation template to inform subsequent feedback to the teacher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine HS</td>
<td>- The school has year level teams and a subject coordinator in each faculty to ensure that effective planning occurs.</td>
<td>- The school is only at a very early level of discussion in this regard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The school has only begun to embark on this path and it is being supported by an injection of some deep knowledge from a number of external sources of expertise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy HS</td>
<td>- Professional learning often starts with whole school workshops after school in teams.</td>
<td>- The school perceives a need for more whole school professional learning to ensure it does not splinter into middle and senior school approaches without sufficient cross-fertilisation of expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The school then has some small learning teams that are very focused such as a science team that is working particularly well.</td>
<td>- Its smallness means there are some areas where the teacher is on their own and needs to be connected to others within or beyond the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- There is a desire to restructure the timetable to ensure more time for collaborative planning as opposed to relying on the very high degree of goodwill that exists, though this is difficult in such a small school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff MS</td>
<td>- Staff in the school identify a lot of professional learning they need and opportunities to pursue.</td>
<td>- The professional learning strategy is relatively weak at this stage and there is only limited collaborative planning for teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The school has started to implement classroom</td>
<td>- The take-up of classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School’s professional learning library folder which is also populated with relevant professional readings.

- Teachers can request and/or include observation/learning walks to demonstrate they are delivering improved learning as a result of their professional learning.

Surveys.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key features of the approach in use</th>
<th>Issues to consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Rosebery MS       | - There is some degree of choice of professional learning depending on need.  
- Some professional learning sessions are undertaken online.  
- Fortnightly staff meetings in the school have a professional learning focus.  
- Performance management and development is based around I-Smart goals\(^\text{42}\) and the AITSL standards.  
- People can voluntarily engage in cognitive coaching with another member of staff they select. |
|                   | observation was described as patchy.                                                                                                                                                                                                 | - The strong focus on professional learning in both school documentation and processes does not necessarily translate into collaborative planning of better lessons and units. |
| Sanderson MS      | - Fortnightly faculty meetings are the prime vehicle for professional learning amongst the staff.  
- The alternating whole staff meeting once a fortnight also has a professional learning focus.  
- Leaders observe teachers in class. |
|                   | - People in more than one faculty cannot manage the competing demands.  
- Groups are arguably too large to enable the detailed collaborative planning of teaching that is required. |
| Taminmin College  | - Literacy and the Griffith University project are the primary focus of professional learning for the whole school.  
- The school tries to showcase teachers who have good practice aligned to school goals. It conducts a periodic walk around where teachers view five or six 20 minute snapshots that other teachers present.  
- Every meeting has a professional learning component to it.  
- Classroom observation is strong in English/SOSE and HPE where the leaders have built it over time. |
|                   | - There is a need to extend classroom observation to all learning areas. |
| Tennant Creek HS  | - The school has conducted lots                                                                                                                                                                                                     | - Like most processes in the |

\(^{42}\) One professional goal, one operational goal and one personal goal based on a discussion of the teachers' classes and students.
### Key features of the approach in use

- of Visible Learning sessions where staff have been encouraged to voice their fears and concerns as well as successes, so they can be collaboratively addressed.
- Approaches are shared on a whole school basis.

### Issues to consider

- school, this was described as a work in progress.
- While the school is possibly too small to support significant team planning, it acknowledges a need for more moderation in particular, since a definite disparity exists between the judgments that are made.

Developing a strong professional learning culture within middle schools to underpin more effective teacher performance, and hence better student learning outcomes, depends on both the process to support quality collaborative planning between teachers, and the guidance to ensure that the planning focuses on the right things. An examination of Table 12 suggests that most middle 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 provision of curriculum exemplars with associated pedagogical and assessment advice, together with an instructional model as outlined above, are designed to provide the substance to help ensure that collaborative teacher planning is soundly based. This is only strengthened to the extent the teams also use the data gained from common assessments proposed in Chapter 9 to link planning directly to student achievement in their classes and how it can be improved for each student they teach.

The professional learning strategy that seems weakest in Table 12 is classroom observation aimed at providing teachers with targeted feedback to help them improve.

Just as feedback to students is a key mechanism that supports their learning, so too does feedback to colleagues provide a key means of supporting their teaching. It is not possible to give and receive objective, constructive feedback without observing each other teach. Classroom observation is central to helping each other improve, since it informs feedback and broader collaborative work. When teachers open the classroom door, they invite feedback on their teaching that can enable them to improve. They also gain the opportunity to see others teach, provide them with feedback as well, and learn from their approach. Thus, it also provides the means by which good teaching practice can be spread through the school as a whole.

A range of research and successful experience in schools\(^\text{43}\) suggests that to be effective and embraced by teachers, any process of classroom observation must be:

- supportive and developmental with no judgment involved;
- an opportunity for teachers to receive constructive feedback from colleagues on their strengths and ways in which they can improve;
- the basis for further professional reflection, professional development and other support;
- planned and agreed in advance, so there are no surprises involved, with a clear focus linked to improving teaching, and hence student learning outcomes;
- based on clear, simple, sustainable processes that are known, understood and agreed by the staff; and

\(^{43}\) Examined by the reviewer acting as a consultant to AITSL on the development of the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework (2012).
• a means of collaboratively developing and sharing good practice throughout school classrooms.

These principles are then enacted through a set of protocols for classroom observation which require that:

• the observation conform to an agreed process that is known in advance;
• the focus of any observation is agreed in advance;
• feedback discussions occur in a timely manner and are confidential to those involved;
• pro forma documents are kept by the teacher who is observed; and
• initial support is provided for observations to occur, until they become an intrinsic part of the way in which professional learning occurs at the school.

The success of the approach then depends on good processes for each step along the way, and pro formas that help implement these processes effectively and consistently across schools. As has been suggested regularly throughout this review report, the Department can play an important role in this regard, providing sample pro formas to support classroom observation in schools.

A constituency for middle years teaching

Just as there is no obvious constituency for middle years leaders as outlined in Chapter 7, so too there is no group that appears to provide middle years teachers with both targeted professional development appropriate to the phase, and a coherent and consistent voice. While the organisation Adolescent Success does notionally exist as ‘a professional association dedicated to the education, development and growth of young adolescents’, membership of it by Northern Territory teachers would be purely incidental and it has no status as a voice for middle years teachers in the Northern Territory.

Thus, just as the Department could support the formation of a middle years leaders’ network that conducts an annual, high-level conference for its members, so too could it 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.
Chapter 11: Transition into and from the middle years

As the phase between primary schooling and senior secondary schooling, the middle schools have to focus on transition into and out of the school; and 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 arguably are improving, as evident in the comprehensive range of transition strategies identified in Table 13.

Table 13: Current transition strategies for incoming Year 7 students (Note: Although not listed, all schools conduct information sessions for parents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Centralian Middle | • The school has a staff member with a time allowance who manages transition with the result there is, what was described as ‘a pretty thorough approach’.  
• All primary schools are visited and in 2014 the school will commence running a sports carnival for all its feeder school Year 6 students.  
• The middle school does get student data on its incoming students and supplements this with information gathered during visits to know where to place students and their learning needs.  
• Towards the end of this year, the school for the first time will do a full timetabled day with Year 6 students at the Centralian campus. |
| Darwin Middle     | • The school principal meets with the Year 6 feeder schools once a term.  
• The school has asked its feeder schools to adopt the same ACER testing regime as it uses to ensure better data on students entering Year 7.  
• The Year 7 coordinator works with teachers in feeder schools to get a deeper understanding of the incoming students.  
• Year 6 students visit the school for various experiences and Year 7 students are supported to visit their former primary schools to talk with their Year 6 teachers and their students. |
| Dripstone Middle  | • The school arranges visits to primary schools led by the Year 7 coordinator which include visits to classes to talk with Year 6 students.  
• It offers taster opportunities including attendance at the school by all Year 6 students at the end of semester one for a ‘day in the life of a middle school student’.  
• The school also provides other opportunities for primary and secondary students to be on-site, such as a mentoring reading program it runs.  
• When whole school performances occur, the students host a matinee for their feeder schools.  
• The school does get what it describes as ‘reasonable data transfer’ from primary feeders to help ensure it knows about the students who come.  
• In future the school will seek to arrange for interested teachers to spend some days in primary schools to experience and know the students, and so the students also know a teacher when they arrive at middle school. |

45 It should be noted that Darwin Middle School draws around 35% of its students in year 7 from outside of its group of feeder schools.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katherine High</td>
<td>• The school manages transition as a year-long process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Students from a range of school programs, such as Clontarf, visit the feeder primary schools to undertake a variety of activities with students in Year 6. This reflects an effort to get its students into primary schools, paralleled by inviting Year 6 students to its own school-based activities such as the musicals in which students perform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The Year 7 coordinator and teachers speak to students in Year 6 and the schools all share data to facilitate transition and help ensure that students can be well known.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parents visit the school for tours and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High</td>
<td>• The school struggles to get comprehensive information on the whole incoming cohort in a context of some uncertainty about Year 6 parents’ choices of secondary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• In contrast, this is done very well for students with learning needs who are part of a comprehensive program comprising structured days in the secondary school over a term and lots of meetings with their parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transition meetings for Year 6 parents are led by Year 9 peer leaders who outline their experience of the school, which is proving more powerful with parents than just what teachers say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle</td>
<td>• The school has ‘ramped up’ its approach to transition in the last couple of years which has led to an increase in enrolments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It brings primary students to its campus to experience middle schooling with a positive purpose so it’s more than ‘just having fun’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Year 6 students spend a whole day at middle school on a pupil free day and experience classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The school gets some information about incoming students from its primary schools by having conversations with teachers and is looking at common data bases to support a more seamless transfer of relevant information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It is also looking at Year 6 and 7 teachers working together to build stronger relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Middle</td>
<td>• The school endeavours to get to know the students before they enter Year 7 and to enable the students to get to know the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Students’ Year 6 files are viewed by teachers in their Hub groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The school has an internal ‘speed dating’ transition process whereby Year 8 teachers discuss the incoming Year 7 students with their teachers at a whole staff meeting, and the same occurs between teachers of Year 8 and Year 9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The school runs a gifted and talented program for two to three students per feeder school (around 15 in total) one morning a week which, at the time of visiting, was focused on design technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson Middle</td>
<td>• The school describes itself as ‘always having worked hard to attract students’, though the missing bit has been attracting higher performing students whose parents have tended to choose the private option, with the result the school is now looking at enrichment classes to tackle this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Primary students attend the school campus to try classes and as a means of helping them to know the place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• As part of its humanities program, the school takes its SRC members to talk to Year 6 students about the school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taminmin College
- The feeder primary school principals meet with the College principal twice a term in a cluster arrangement that includes, but is not limited to discussion of transition.
- The school visits its feeder schools to make presentations and meet with Year 6 teachers.
- Students spend a day in the school along similar lines to other middle schools.
- The Year 6 students were described as ‘transitioning well to Year 7’ in part due to intensive time that is spent at the start of the year with their pastoral care teachers.

Tennant Creek High
- There is some sharing of assessment data between the primary and secondary schools.
- The school runs a Friendly Faces program that sees Year 6 students visit the high school for two to three days to follow a middle school timetable and undertake activities towards the end of the year. Parents are also invited to a meeting at the high school during this same week.
- Year 6 students are invited to school performances and Year 7 students visit the primary schools to talk to the students as they take some leadership of the transition approach.

An analysis of the range of strategies listed suggests they are largely being driven by the middle schools, both to ensure enrolments in a number of cases, and to maximise the information about incoming students in all. There is substantial commonality of approach evident in the table, 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. This is something the recommendation to mandate a common assessment regime across middle schools, and to consider extending it to Years 5-6 in primary schools and into Year 10 in the senior colleges will help to overcome.

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 to by the middle school and its feeder primary schools (including their respective school councils) to help ensure not only a smooth entry to Year 7, but that the incoming students are also known to some extent by their middle school teachers for the coming year. An important element of any such plans as far as the students interviewed are concerned should be a tour to show them around since Year 6 students are fearful of how ‘gigantic’ the middle school seems to be.

The transition arrangements from Year 9 to Year 10 are less comprehensive than into Year 7, as evident in Table 14, though arguably improving on most counts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle (with Centralian Senior College)</td>
<td>Year 9 students attend the senior college for a day in term two for orientation around the expectations of senior students. During term three there is a day when middle school teachers teach their subjects to Year 9 students at the senior campus, observed by senior college teachers, and then on one day in term four it is reversed and the middle school teachers observe their students taught by their senior college teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Current transition strategies for outgoing Year 9 students

46 senior colleges and comprehensive schools conduct information sessions for parents.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Darwin Middle (with Darwin High School)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• The co-location of the middle school and senior college means, as leaders put it, that the school ‘just walks across the road and takes the students’ portfolios and work’.  
• The senior school runs orientation days and does some student testing as well.  
• Some faculties, such as maths, have communicated with each other to facilitate placing students in appropriate Year 10 groups. |
| **Dripstone Middle (with Casuarina Senior College)** |  
• The school has begun to develop what it describes as a ‘better working relationship’ with its major senior college which has now adopted a year-long program that mirrors the middle school’s own approach for students in year 6. |
| **Katherine High** |  
• The school hasn’t really considered or worked on this as it has not been a priority. That said, it conceded it may emerge, as evidenced by the fact it was raised at a School Council meeting in terms of work around students knowing what it means to move to the NTCET pattern required in Years 10-12. |
| **Nhulunbuy High** |  
• The number one element of transition is the fact that most teachers work across Years 7 to 12 and hence know the students they will teach in Year 10.  
• This particularly informs subject selection which includes one to one interviews with the students and their parents.  
• The school feels it could focus more on supporting parents to understand the formal academic requirements in senior school and has started to run information sessions along these lines. |
| **Nightcliff Middle (with Casuarina Senior College and Darwin High School)** |  
• The school indicated that Casuarina Senior College had conducted visits to the middle school, had open days and had hosted students for targeted visits.  
• It feels that Darwin High School has not really done as much. |
| **Rosebery Middle (with Palmerston Senior College)** |  
• The school acknowledges that transition is not as good from Year 9 to 10 as it is into Year 7.  
• Senior college personnel visit the school to speak with Year 9 students and to distribute enrolment packs.  
• Faculty heads talk about their subjects on a rotating basis, and the schools do share results.  
• The school has invited senior college colleagues to sit with Year 9 teachers in Hubs to get a better understanding of the students.  
• The transition arrangements were described as ‘a work in progress’ by both middle and senior school leaders. |
| **Sanderson Middle (with Casuarina Senior College)** |  
• The school feels that the senior college is becoming ‘more professional and strategic’ about transition, as evident in the views of Dripstone and Nightcliff Middle Schools above, and generally has a well-planned approach. |
| **Taminmin College** |  
• The school is working hard to align curriculum between the middle and senior years as they did develop separately before really coming together structurally this year.  
• While there were no teachers who crossed the Year 9/10 divide before 2014, this is now starting to occur, supplemented by the existence of whole school policies spanning Years 7 to 12.  
• The school feels the key has been developing more of a whole school approach. |
| **Tennant Creek High** |  
• This is not really seen as a concern because the students have the same teachers in the middle years as will teach them in Years 10 to 12.  
• Last year the school spoke to its Year 9 students about the change of approach in the senior part of the school and the expectations of them as students in Year 10. |
Transition between Years 9 and 10 is one area of school operations where there is a difference between the comprehensive and middle schools. Put simply, the task of transition is easier when students are on the same site, interacting albeit to differing degrees with teachers they will have in Year 10, mixing with students who will be part of the senior end of the school with them, participating in some whole school activities with senior students and teachers, and being subject to policies and processes that span Years 7 to 12. This also means that the comprehensive schools are less reliant on developing relationships based around transitions than their colleagues in middle schools.

It is clear from Tables 12 and 13, and the discussions with middle and senior school personnel, that the relationships between the schools and their teachers are weaker than those between the middle schools and their feeder primaries. It is also clear, however, that for the most part, those transition relationships are improving and better processes are being developed to support student movement between the middle and senior years.

In some cases, they are being supplemented by some faculty-specific relations that are being formed, such as the growing connection between the arts faculties at Palmerston Senior College and Rosebery Middle School based around a shared effort to develop scope and sequence for students in Years 9 and 10, which has seen students coming to the senior college ‘more skilled for the arts’. While time was cited as an impediment to achieving this task, it also was described as depending on relationships forged by people ‘going out of their way to make it happen’. A dependence on relationships, important as they are, does however mean that the outcomes are patchy, and in many subject areas non-existent since, as one senior college leader put it, ‘it depends on who you are dealing with’. Rather, processes are needed to ensure that students can enter Year 10 being known to some extent by the teachers they will have, especially in terms of their current levels of learning and consequent learning needs. Beyond this, better curriculum-based relations are needed to overcome the situation a number of Year 10 interviewees outlined whereby much of what they are studying in Year 10 simply replicates what they already did in middle school.

This suggests a need for more formal Year 9 to 10 transition plans between middle and senior schools, including their respective school councils, along the same lines as suggested earlier for Year 6 to 7 transition. In this case, however, there could be the added expectation that the plans be designed to help ensure that the incoming students are appropriately prepared to succeed in senior school. This again points to the importance of the flow of objective assessment data, which the recommended common assessment regime is designed to address. It also suggests a need for some better coordination of curriculum planning and sequencing even, as acknowledged, in the comprehensive schools, so the sort of positive faculty-based arrangements for improved communication can begin to take whole-school form.

**Engaging parents in the school**

While not strictly part of transition in a direct sense, engaging parents has a key role to play in any school. It has been said, as Cole (2004) observed, ‘that parents make powerful allies and dangerous enemies’ (7), and the challenge is to engage them in supporting the work of the school. This depends on a mix of information about what the school is doing and why, and advice on how they can support their children’s learning at school. This is consistent with COGSO’s call in its submission to the review to ‘facilitate parent engagement in their child/ren’s learning … (and) participation in school decision making’ (3).

For most parents, the entry point to engaging with their school, apart from the periodic direct contact as part of their children’s enrolment at school (i.e., parent/teacher nights,
student performances, being called to school for student disciplinary reasons, etc.), is the school’s website and the detailed information it contains.

An analysis of middle school websites suggests there is lots of information for the engaged parent who is prepared to search the site in depth as evident in Table 15. Some schools supplement their website with a downloadable parents’ handbook which has the advantage of consolidating key policies and processes in a single resource that is arguably easier for parents to use.

Table 15: School website support for parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Key strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle</td>
<td>• The school has a dedicated parents’ section on its website&lt;br&gt;• The section includes a downloadable handbook for parents designed to answer ‘all of your questions concerning the education of your child’. The booklet is structured around a focus on learning (i.e., curriculum, data collection, reporting, homework, teaching staff and staff learning); a focus on wellbeing (i.e., pastoral care, wellbeing team and behaviour); a focus on leadership (i.e., school leadership, school council, student leadership and SRC); and general information (i.e., attendance, school hours, term dates, uniforms, back to school requirements, travel to and from school, and school communications).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Middle</td>
<td>• The school has a dedicated parents’ section on its website&lt;br&gt;• The section contains information on parent/teacher interviews; policies; assessment information; subject selection; uniforms; bus routes; annual performance reports; useful links; and 2014 Homework Centre.&lt;br&gt;• The information contained is very detailed for the parent who wishes to search it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dripstone Middle</td>
<td>• The school’s dedicated parents’ page contains information on assessment information for parents; parent/teacher interviews; communications with teachers; the wellbeing team; parent e-forms; bus routes; a canteen price list; term dates; and useful links.&lt;br&gt;• A parent handbook referred to on the page is not currently available, and is ‘under construction’.&lt;br&gt;• The school has developed an innovative and comprehensive app that parents can access for detailed information they seek.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine High School</td>
<td>• The website contains a range of information relevant to parents, though there is no dedicated parents’ section on the site.&lt;br&gt;• The school, like Dripstone, has developed an app as a means of connecting stakeholders more closely to the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightcliff Middle</td>
<td>• The website contains substantial information that parents can access, though there is no specific section directed at them in the same way as exists on other schools’ sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High School</td>
<td>• The website has a parents’ section that provides information on enrolments, uniform, reporting student absences, term dates, class times and competitions.&lt;br&gt;• A range of policies can be accessed on the site, though there is no middle years equivalent of the Year 10 and senior handbooks that parents can download.&lt;br&gt;• Parents can access electronic student profiles through the website to gain an appreciation of the progress of their child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Middle</td>
<td>• A parents’ section on the website includes performance reports; policies; curriculum; uniforms; bus routes; enrolling; Café – Hungry Hangout; and useful links.&lt;br&gt;• As is the case for Darwin Middle School, the information contained is very detailed for the parent who wishes to search it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A parents’ section of the website contains a range of policy documents for downloading that cover the school’s behavioural expectations; its homework policy; voluntary parent contributions; a general information sheet; and advice on where to go for help.

- As is the case for Darwin Middle School, the information contained is very detailed for the parent who wishes to search it.

Taminmin College

- The website has a dedicated parents’ section on its website that covers information evenings; enrolment; parent/teacher online; reporting and assessment; orientation; school times; uniform; bus runs; canteen; lockers; attendance information; student wellbeing and support; special education; computers and iPads; resource scheme; school excursion policy; and useful links.

- The site also contains a downloadable quick reference A-Z of the college handbook that is easier for parents to navigate and use.

Tenant Creek High School

- The school does not currently have its own website.

As Table 15 suggests, nearly all of the schools provide good, comprehensive information to parents about the operations of the school and key policies relevant to the education their children receive. The handbooks provided by Centralian Middle School and Taminmin College constitute a sort of ready reckoner for frequently asked questions that are arguably easier for parents to use since they don’t require the parent to search through substantial information on the website themselves. In addition, the Dripstone Middle and Katherine High School apps are arguably pioneering a modern approach to communication appropriate to the spread of tablets and smart phones in the community which other schools might choose to emulate.

The one key aspect that does appear to be missing from all of the sites and handbooks, however, is clear advice for parents on how they can really support their children’s learning at home by, for example, promoting the importance of effort for achievement at school and helping them to develop important study and organisational skills.

This, it is acknowledged, is beyond the knowledge and capacities of many parents, and hence requires detailed advice on strategies they can use. Just as likely is the fact that preparing such advice is beyond the time and capacity of schools and, given the need to relate it to relevant research, is a role the Department could fulfil. More specifically, the School Support Services Division could be asked to 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 then be rebadged by schools to distribute to parents with an introduction from the principal of each school. This suggestion was enthusiastically embraced by School Councils in the course of the briefings conducted on the draft review report. In addition, a number of parents recommended that in today’s digital environment, it is information that ought to be distributed online or through an app as well as in print.

**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.
Chapter 12: Systemic leadership and support

In the midst of the considerable inconsistency that has been described throughout this review report, the one consistent factor to emerge across all of the middle schools was a feeling that they are not valued and less understood than either primary or senior secondary schools. As one leader simply put it, ‘the perception is that we’re just preparing students for senior schools and not valued in our own right’.

For many this was symbolised by the fact that, until the recent appointment of a Director of Secondary Education they had, as one leader typically put it, ‘no go to person in the Department’. Or to use the words of another, ‘there was no champion for middle schools’.

Taking this a stage further, another leader described a common feeling that exists within the middle schools that ‘there is lots for primary and senior schools, but not for the middle’. By way of example, this leader pointed to the fact that ‘there’s no formal mechanism for us to share and work together … Nothing is done purely for middle schools’.

This is something that the earlier discussions of both the need for a vision for middle schooling and the need to build and support constituencies for middle school leaders and teachers, with their own defined annual conferences, are designed to address.

Aside from a feeling of being left out — the proverbial bit in the middle — most middle school leaders also talked of being left on their own. To cite one leader who echoed the rest, ‘when the schools were set up, nothing was really mandated so we felt left on our own to work it out’.

This too is something that the recommendations for common assessments, instructional planning tools, behaviour management approaches and exemplars specific to the phase are designed to address.

The excitement that seems to exist about the appointment of a new Director to whom the schools can relate highlights the neglect that has been felt, and the opportunity the Department now has to act to align and support this group of schools. By implementing the range of recommendations to improve middle schooling in the Territory, the system can go a long way towards overcoming the sort of frustration that exists when schools feel squeezed between the support for the foundational years of primary school and the clarity the senior certificate brings at the end, with a consequent void of direction and support.

It is central to ensuring there are not just winners and losers in middle schools, but consistently better middle schooling occurs throughout the Northern Territory as a whole, as all schools and teachers are both challenged and supported to work like the best.

The last piece of the puzzle in this regard is to systemically ensure that the recommendations are implemented in a coherent, consistent and sustained way by the Department and schools. This suggests a need for the implementation of relevant recommendations to be included in each of the schools’ Annual Operational Plans and the Department’s Strategic Plan. The progress of implementation can then be included in school annual reports to their communities and be evaluated as part of the cyclical process of school review. As the quid pro quo for this, the Department should be expected to report annually to schools and the community as a whole on their implementation progress and the associated support they provide to schools.
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.
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Appendix 1: Stakeholders consulted for the review

Structured consultations were conducted with a wide range of relevant Department personnel from both the central and regional offices, to supplement the visits/teleconferences involving each of the relevant schools and centres listed in Chapter 1. Beyond this, formal discussions and/or consultations were conducted with:

- Association of Northern Territory School Educational Leaders — Pam Erfurt (President), Sue Healy (Vice President), Caroline Edwards (Secretary) and Raymon Dixon (Chapter for Darwin).

- Australian Education Union — Jarvis Ryan (President) and Peter Hardcastle (Acting Secretary).

- Pamela Macklin, Managing Director of Zbar Consulting and an Accredited Leadership Coach, for advice on coaching for school leaders.

- Professor Geoff Masters, Chief Executive Officer, the Australian Council for Educational Research, and author of *Improving Educational Outcomes in the Northern Territory*, 2011.

- Northern Territory Board of Studies — Anne Donnelly, Hugh Roberts and Pauline Schober (Board Members).

- Principals Australia Institute — Vanna Garrick (Northern Territory Coordinator, KidsMatter and MindMatters) and Peter O’Beirne (Queensland and Northern Territory Manager).

- Bruce Wilson from The Education Business, who conducted the Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory.

A number of structured consultation sessions were also conducted with Year 6, Year 7 to 9 and Year 10 students in Darwin and Alice Springs, and parents from across these levels had the opportunity to attend forums in these same two locations. In addition, the Department opened a consultation website to enable parents and students who were unable to participate in the forums along with other interested members of the community to contribute their views.

Competing commitments meant that a face-to-face consultation session could not be arranged with the Council of Government School Organisations (COGSO Northern Territory) with the result the organisation made a written submission to the review instead. In addition, the consultations with parents included discussion with at least two COGSO Northern Territory parent members.

Briefings were provided on a draft of the report to the AEU and ANTSEL, along with all middle School Councils in Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs before the report was finalised.
### Appendix 2: Framework for Principles and Policies for the Middle Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The curriculum is based on Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) outcomes and is rigorous, rich, real and relevant to students' current and future lives.</td>
<td>Students are offered multiple learning opportunities in English language and across numeracy, literacy, and social learning domains.</td>
<td>Strong teacher-student relationships are fundamental to improving individual outcomes for most students in the middle years.</td>
<td>Transition into and out of the middle years is a formal part of the program at all schools.</td>
<td>The school system provides support to students, parents, and schools in the middle years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, students, and parents are clear about the NTCF and students need to achieve in their learning.</td>
<td>Students are offered multiple learning opportunities for English language and across numeracy, literacy, and social learning domains.</td>
<td>Teachers have explicit strategies for building trust and relationship in the classroom.</td>
<td>Students are supported in the transition from primary to secondary school.</td>
<td>Support various programs and initiatives that provide opportunities for students and their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers work in teams and collaborative planning is essential.</td>
<td>Teachers are responsible for delivering the curriculum and are accountable for student outcomes.</td>
<td>Transition and support programs are a core part of the curriculum in the middle years.</td>
<td>Middle years students have learning opportunities throughout the years.</td>
<td>Support various programs and initiatives that provide opportunities for students and their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school provides regular feedback to students, teachers, and parents.</td>
<td>Students are engaged in a range of learning opportunities across different learning areas.</td>
<td>Teachers and support staff work closely with the curriculum team to ensure that the curriculum is responsive to students' needs.</td>
<td>Students are supported in the transition from primary to secondary school.</td>
<td>Support various programs and initiatives that provide opportunities for students and their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are supported in the transition from primary to secondary school.</td>
<td>Students have access to a range of learning opportunities across different learning areas.</td>
<td>Teachers and support staff work closely with the curriculum team to ensure that the curriculum is responsive to students' needs.</td>
<td>Transition and support programs are a core part of the curriculum.</td>
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<td>Transition and support programs are a core part of the curriculum.</td>
<td>Support various programs and initiatives that provide opportunities for students and their families.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 3: Structure of the Employment Pathways Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>Students engage in a pre-VET program, introducing them to the world of work. This can be supported by online resources and should include engagement with role models who are in jobs. It requires students to undertake excursions to workplaces and interact with employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Introduce the first formal VET Certificate programs in a broad-based course relevant to local employment circumstance (e.g., Resources and Infrastructure in a mining area). Introduce job work placement and simulated placement. To ensure that students gain the additional skills required by employers that are not attainable under Certificate programs, JobSkills funding is used to boost student achievement and skills acquisition. This grants-based funding provides support for short-term one-off courses such as white card and first aid skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>Introduce the Certificate II level programs with the Stage One compulsory subjects, also Stage One and Stage Two VET focused subjects to complete the student’s pattern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 4: Assessment Practices in Middle Years Survey

Questions

1. Our school has:
   a. a whole school assessment plan;
   b. an assessment policy; an assessment coordinator;
   c. assessment prioritised in its Annual Operation Plan;
   d. none of the above;
   e. I don’t know.

2. Does your school use the Australian Curriculum achievement standards as the starting point for assessment plans and for assessment design? — Yes or No with the option to add a comment.

3. Do you work with others to review the implications of school-wide assessment data for teaching and learning programs? — Yes or No, and if yes, with a request to provide an example.

4. Do you design classroom assessment tasks that use a variety of strategies to monitor students’ learning progress? — Yes or No and a request to share if Yes.

5. How often do you use the following forms of assessment? (on a five point scale spanning Never, Sometimes, Regularly, Often, Always):
   a. Diagnostic;
   b. Formative;
   c. Summative;
   d. Student self-assessment;
   e. Student peer-assessment;
   f. Observation;
   g. Anecdotal;
   h. Performance or practical;
   i. Exam;
   j. Oral;
   k. Open-ended questions;
   l. Checklists;
   m. Role plays;
   n. Other.

6. Which of the following assessment models do you use to offer students choice or variety?:
   a. Multimedia;
   b. Project reports;
   c. Posters;
   d. Student presentations;
   e. End of unit test;
   f. Reports of investigations;
   g. Responses to set problems;
   h. Oral presentations;

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47 The questions, completed online, were set out in a more user-friendly form than this listing provides.

48 Those with a non-teaching role were asked to indicate how often other teachers in their school use these forms of assessment.
i. Not applicable as I have a non-teaching role;
j. If other, please specify.

7. How do you or your teaching team devise assessment criteria?

8. Do your students participate in discussions to clarify levels of performance? — Yes or No, with a request to elaborate if Yes.

9. How do you or your colleagues evaluate or refine assessment tasks before or after students have completed them?

10. How are assessment tasks differentiated to cater for the different abilities, learning styles and needs of your students?

11. Do you provide structured opportunities for student self and peer monitoring? — Yes or No with the request to share an example if Yes.

12. How do you use data (evidence of learning) to modify learning content and programs for a range of student needs either during or at the end of a teaching program?

13. How do you ensure that your assessments of student learning are consistent and comparable?

14. How do you rate your confidence that you make consistent judgments of student learning based on a range of evidence? — On a four point rating scale spanning Not at all confident, Somewhat confident, Confident, Very confident.

15. Please describe the nature of feedback you give students.

16. Which of the following do you use to record student progress?:
   a. SAIS;
   b. Anecdotal notes/entries;
   c. Accelerus;
   d. Electronic Markbook;
   e. Teacher Markbook.

17. Our school has formal exchanges of student profiles (achievement standards, A-E grading, NAPLAN data, summative data):
   a. with feeder primary schools;
   b. with senior secondary school;
   c. with neither feeder primary nor senior secondary schools.

18. Have you established, or do you participate in, professional networks to support continuous knowledge building and effective practice in assessment and standards? — Yes or No.
### Appendix 5: Centralian Middle School Instructional Model

#### CMS LESSON FRAMEWORK

**Expectations for learning:**
1. Be respectful to others and yourself
2. Listen when others are speaking
3. Follow reasonable requests
4. Be prepared with your equipment and to work in class
5. Have a go!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Beginning of the lesson</strong></th>
<th><strong>Whole class lesson introduction</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- displays, articulates and demonstrates the explicit learning intention</td>
<td>- can articulate the learning intention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- or students record a success criteria that states the skills and content knowledge the students will investigate, practice and/or learn in the lesson</td>
<td>- observe, listen, question and respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- makes teacher talk explicit and connections with prior learning as well as showing on prior knowledge of focus area</td>
<td>- may ‘practice’ the skills modeled by the teacher before they commence their independent or group task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- models the skills to be learnt and uses think aloud as a scaffold</td>
<td>- identifies and explores new vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- identifies and explores new vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Middle of the lesson</strong></th>
<th><strong>Independent and/or group learning time</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modelling</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong></td>
<td>- clearly understand the learning task they are completing and its purpose in the learning sequence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provide clear and accurate explanations to introduce new material</td>
<td>- identify key concept being introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- choose appropriate ways of delivering information including:</td>
<td>- create memory or processing aids with the assistance from the teacher and/or peers to help to organize information in their heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- lecture, demonstration, use a tree, simulation, exploration of the Internet, excursion or guest speaker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- model skills using visual cues, vocal cues, signal phrases and body language to highlight key concepts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- engage students in the learning including checking for understanding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guided Practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong></td>
<td>- clearly understand the learning task they are completing and its purpose in the learning sequence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- purposely select differentiated and engaging tasks matched to students needs as identified in the data</td>
<td>- explore new learning and begin to internalize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provides multiple opportunities for students to elaborate on their new knowledge through discussion and questioning</td>
<td>- successfully practice learning at the level required by the success criteria in multiple ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- identity purpose of activities and make clear the link to the learning objective</td>
<td>- seek specific assistance and feedback related to their learning task from the teacher and/or peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- use strategies to check for understanding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provide timely and explicit feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong></td>
<td>- clearly understand the learning task they are completing and its purpose in the learning sequence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- purposely select differentiated and engaging tasks matched to students needs as identified in the data</td>
<td>- refine their skills and demonstrate their understanding of the learning intention independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provides multiple opportunities for students to elaborate on their new knowledge through discussion and questioning</td>
<td>- seek specific assistance and feedback related to their learning task from the teacher and/or peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provide timely and explicit feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>End of the lesson</strong></th>
<th><strong>Whole class reflection and feedback time</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning in a variety of ways</td>
<td>- articulate what they are learning and make connections to the explicit learning intention articulated at the beginning of the lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- provide opportunities for student to teacher feedback</td>
<td>- refer to and discuss the success criteria in relation to the learning that has occurred and products of learning is evident</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Available on the Portal: Staff site > Curriculum Resources > Learning Framework