

Smoothing the pathway from primary to high school

Kristin Holmes – Te Aro School

Central Wellington's Te Aro School is working with local high schools to ease the transition to secondary school, particularly for its special needs and ESL students.

While most schools have good processes in place for the transition from ECE, the move to high school can be more difficult and problems can take longer to pick up.

Te Aro Year 7/8 teacher Kristin Holmes said Wellington High School recently set up an initiative whereby they invite teachers and principals from their contributing schools to come in and have a "bit of a chat", which the teachers found really helpful.

Nearby high schools also visit the school and bring students to give the Year 8s a kids' view of what secondary school is like.

"All the things that are bugging them or worrying them, they can ask the students," said Kristin.

"Some of the secondary schools offer an open afternoon in school time. Sometimes the kids go off to that without a teacher. This year for the first time, Wellington High invited us and I was invited as well, which was really great."

Particularly for kids who don't already have family or friend connections at high school, going on the visits seems to be very beneficial.

After students have enrolled for the following year, the secondary school deans will meet with their teachers to discuss each child and find out about their strengths and any needs they might have, particularly for special needs children.

In their last couple of terms, kids who have an IEP (Individual Education Plan) will usually have some goals included in their plan related to preparing for secondary school. That could include preparing them for knowing how to ask questions, ask for help and what to do in a range of different situations, such as reading a timetable or locating a classroom.

"They need a greater level of independence at secondary school, so we'll help them with things like that. For some kids we liaise with the school and set up for them to have some visits in the last term or two. I had a student last year who went in with her teacher aide for six or eight visits every couple of weeks so she was able to become familiar with the school and where the classrooms were. She got to meet the receptionist and a couple of her class teachers, so she became familiar with them.

"For the English language learners, there might be some specific vocabulary work, for example words like 'timetable' or 'period.' Quite a high percentage of our school students are immigrants and refugees," said Kristin.

Kristin says that for students from refugee backgrounds, it is important that primary schools have the opportunity to share information to ensure secondary schools are aware of the students' family situation, what they may have been through and any resettlement issues. This information needs to be shared sensitively and through a planned and supported process - which requires appropriate resourcing.

Transitions can be particularly tricky for children from a non-English speaking background.

“If there is any kind of problem, the parents often aren’t in any position to know how to approach a secondary school.

“When you’re in a primary school, difficulties of that kind can be managed much more easily because the school is smaller and we’ll often know the parents for eight years before they move on. In a secondary school they sometimes seem to get lost in the system. If there was more money to maybe enable meetings before the kids leave - with the secondary school and maybe our ELL teacher and an interpreter and the parents - so we could have a really good conversation about the child’s needs and how best to support them and for the parents to really understand how secondary school works and who to contact, all that sort of thing.”

Kristin would also like to have the ability to follow up with the kids further down the track so transition issues can be averted or identified early.

“We’ve had a couple of instances where we’ve discovered later on that our second language learners are having some problems at secondary school but they’re not necessarily identified until well into the year when the difficulties become apparent.”

Kristin would also love to see some kind of forum to connect the contributing primary schools and the secondary school so that the secondary schools could find out what the Year 8 students are learning and the skills they’re coming through with. Likewise it would be useful for Year 8 teachers to know about the school’s expectations of incoming Year 9s.

“At the moment I feel that’s a real gap. I can look at the curriculum but that can be very different from what happens in the classroom and the nitty gritty of what the year 9 teachers would like the kids to be able to know or do when they arrive. That kind of thing could be really useful.”