

## **"Navigating High School Transitions for Students with Complex Communication Needs: Physical, Social and Curriculum Inclusion"**

Noosha Hodgen<sup>1</sup>

Lucinda Panitz<sup>1</sup>, Philippa van Dorsselaer<sup>1</sup>, Pamela Vavra<sup>1</sup> and Mayers Rachael<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Education Queensland

### **Short Abstract**

Transitioning from a small primary school to a large regional high school is a challenging period for students and their families, especially when complex communication needs are involved. The shift introduces a range of new experiences: a new environment, multiple teachers and communication partners and teenage social dynamics, all compounded by the student's communication challenges. Successful transition for these students requires careful planning and collaboration among all stakeholders, including family, primary school teachers, high school educators, communication partners and regional support staff.

In this presentation, we will share our experiences from over two years of collaborative efforts to ensure a smooth transition for a student with complex communication needs. Our approach focused on building capability among teacher aides training as communication partners, high school teachers and integrating inclusive educational practices from the outset. We'll explore how we tailored the student's highly individualised curriculum aligned to the Australian Curriculum, drawing from the General Capabilities, and providing opportunities for participation alongside peers, particularly in Maths.

The session will offer perspectives from various contributors: the student's family, class teachers, communication partners, the school leadership team, and regional support staff. The Maths teacher and maths communication partner will specifically discuss strategies for integrating the student into whole-class Maths lessons which foster an inclusive classroom environment. By sharing these experiences, we aim to highlight successful strategies for supporting transitions and provide practical insights for educators facing similar challenges.

### **Long Abstract**

This presentation outlines the collaborative efforts of a dedicated team over more than two years to facilitate a successful transition and beginning to high schooling for a student with complex communication needs. We will delve into the approach taken to address the unique challenges faced during this transition and illustrate how a well-coordinated, inclusive strategy can make a significant difference.

The transition process began with early planning involving all key stakeholders: the student's family, primary school teachers, high school educators, communication partners and regional support staff. Early and ongoing communication was essential to understand the student's

needs fully and to develop a tailored transition plan. We established a timeline that included pre-transition visits to the high school, meetings with future teachers, and the development of an individualised transition plan. This collaborative approach ensured that everyone involved was well-informed and prepared to support the student effectively.

One of the central components of the transition process was preparing high school teachers and teacher aides to see themselves as communication partners to accommodate and support the student's complex communication needs. This involved providing targeted professional development on the student's communication system. The regional Speech Language Pathologist supported initial and ongoing training to ensure that communication partners and teachers were equipped with knowledge and skills necessary to foster an inclusive educational environment. Training sessions focused on strategies for differentiated instruction, communication supports and creating an accommodating classroom environment. Regular check-ins and feedback sessions were also implemented to address any concerns and to provide additional resources as needed.

A key aspect of beginning Year 7 was developing a highly individualised curriculum plan (HICP) that draws learning focuses from the General Capabilities aligned with the age-equivalent Australian Curriculum to address the student's specific needs and abilities. This involved adapting learning materials and teaching methods to ensure that the student could access and engage in the classroom effectively. The focus was on integrating the General Capabilities into the curriculum, which allowed the student to participate in a meaningful way alongside their peers.

For instance, in subjects like Maths, the curriculum was differentiated to include alternative ways of demonstrating individualised learning focuses. The student's progress was monitored closely, and adjustments were made as necessary to ensure that learning objectives were being met. This approach also supported the student's inclusion in the classroom. Introducing a scientific calculator with positive and negative integers onto the student's eye-gaze device was a monumental turning point for the student to show their understanding of more complex mathematical operations.

Creating an inclusive classroom environment was crucial for the student's successful start to high school. This involved both physical adaptations and fostering a positive social atmosphere. In the classroom, seating arrangements, communication aids, and accessible learning resources were planned to support the student's needs. Socially, efforts were made to promote peer understanding and acceptance through awareness activities and collaborative peer learning opportunities.

Throughout the transition, numerous successes were observed, and valuable insights were gained. The student's family played a vital role in this process, providing feedback and sharing their perspective on the transition experience. Their involvement was instrumental in identifying areas for improvement and ensuring that the transition plan remained aligned with the student's evolving needs.

Class teachers and communication partners also shared their experiences and strategies for effectively supporting the student. For instance, the Maths teacher implemented specific techniques to include the student in whole-class lessons, such as using visual aids, interactive tools, and modified assessments. These strategies not only supported the student's academic participation but also enhanced their social interactions with peers.

The presentation will offer practical recommendations based on our experiences, highlighting effective strategies for other educators and schools facing similar challenges. Key takeaways include the importance of early and thorough planning, the need for ongoing professional development, and the value of continuous collaboration among all stakeholders. Additionally, the presentation will emphasise the role of flexibility and adaptability in responding to the student's needs throughout the transition period.

In conclusion, transitioning a student with complex communication needs to high school requires a comprehensive, collaborative approach that addresses both academic and social challenges. By sharing our experiences and insights, we hope to share our experience to educators and support staff involved in similar transitions. Our goal is to demonstrate that with planning, effective communication, and a commitment to inclusivity, it is possible to create a positive and successful high school experience for students with complex communication needs.

This presentation aims to inspire educators with the tools and knowledge needed to support these students effectively, showing how everyone can thrive in inclusive environments.