

School Practices: Forest Lake State High School

*Pam Hall
Forest Lake State High School
Queensland
Australia*

Forest Lake State High School was opened in temporary facilities with 240 year 8 students in 2001. In 2002 we moved into our purpose built middle school facilities. We now have an enrolment of 800 students from Years 7 to 10. Our organisation, facilities, pedagogy and curriculum are all a 'work in progress' and represent only one approach to middle schooling.

We have an enrolment management plan which identifies that students must be residents of Forest Lake, Carole Park and the wider Inala area. Our students and their families represent the widest possible range of socio-economic backgrounds and include professional families, Defense Force families, migrant and refugee families, and the long-term unemployed. About 35% of our students have English as their second or third language and Vietnamese students currently make up our largest cultural group followed by Polynesians (Samoan, Maori and Tongan). We have approximately two dozen other cultures represented. This diversity is catered for in a variety of ways – from the formation of a very valued Polynesian Dance Group, provision of a prayer room for Muslim boys, to reviewing the curriculum to ensure that students' needs and interests are represented.

A significant number of students have experienced personal or family trauma, some have mental illnesses and many are emotionally and socially 'needy'. As a result we have been active in establishing a Student Welfare Team who represent both school and inter-agency services. This includes an outreach service from the Mater Hospital Child and Youth Mental Health Service where two psychologists work at our school to help us provide services on a request basis. A Youth Support Coordinator from Inala Youth and Family Support Services works across school and home and provides excellent support as do our school-based nurse, chaplain and guidance officer.

While all aspects of our school are informed by the principles of Middle Schooling there are two elements that are vital to our context. Firstly, strong positive relationships are the key to everything we do. This includes teachers modelling positive adult working relationships through a team approach, close relationships between significant adults and each student through our 'Pod system' (explained later), and proactively teaching social skills and 'Responsible Thinking' to students. The other element is rigour particularly in terms of the curriculum program, because our students need the greatest opportunities to get the best possible life chances – to change the family/social patterns that some have experienced.

At our school we have organised a Middle School which covers what is traditionally referred to as Years 7 to 9. At Forest Lake SHS we group the students in these 'year levels' into two stages of schooling, reflecting the QSA outcomes they are demonstrating. These are simply called Stage A and Stage B. Stage A, which is notionally Years 7 and 8 is built around Outcome Levels 4 and 5 and we would allow a child to spend between 1 and 3 years in this first stage. That means in reality we currently have 14 students, who would usually be in Year 7, who are

currently in a multi-age class with equally able 'Year 8' students. We track these students' progress closely and will, in consultation with their parents, consider moving them through Stage A in one year. Alternatively some students are offered extra time to complete outcomes. Stage B then is a minimum of one year and a maximum of two years. No student however would spend five years in the middle school.

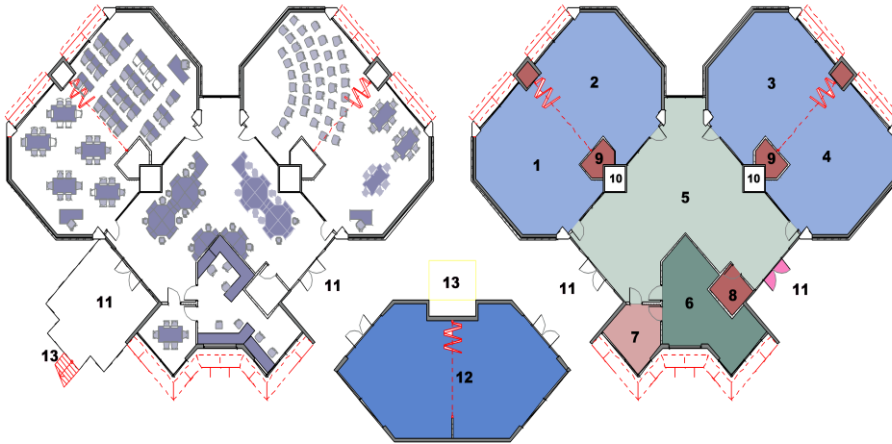
We have built our curriculum around an outcomes based approach and using the eight QSA Syllabi we used five organisers across the middle school curriculum. They are – *Change and Adaptability, Place and Space, Systems and Structures, Culture and Identity, and Resources and Sustainability*. These five organisers allow us to develop units of work that build on prior knowledge. In Stage A, the units are constructed around Outcome Levels 4 and 5. Within a unit the work offered to the students looks at a range of performance and a range of activities for the students to demonstrate the level at which they are performing. In Stage A all units are fully integrated across the 8 KLAs.

In Stage B we look at levels 5 and 6 predominantly. In this Stage students have to do certain subjects that are core, some which are integrated and some are discrete offerings. Each unit has a purpose statement to identify relevance for students and also make clear the integrated nature of the unit. They also all have culminating activities which are a demonstration and/or celebration of the learning. They are not an assessment task. For example under the organiser *Change and Adaptability* we have a Stage A unit titled *Ancient Lives*. The purpose statement is: *Students will collaborate to locate and record information about life in the past.* They will make links between ancient and modern times across a variety of fields, including arts, architecture and social organisation. The Culminating Activity is: *Students will create a living diorama portraying a day in the life of a person in ancient times.* The students dressed in togas, made garlands, etc, and presented their poems, legends, plays to an audience of their parents. They participated in a Medieval Feast based on the work they had done in Home Economics and in the afternoon they played some of the ancient games which they had studied in Health and Physical Education.

Our teachers work in teams. This is particularly important for the Core Team of each class or Pod group. A Core Team involves one teacher responsible for maths and science and one responsible for English and SOSE. Our Core teams work together in multi faculty staffrooms adjacent to the two middle school classes that they teach. The Team also must meet regularly with the other teachers who deal with these students to ensure integration and support is effective. Some teachers are looking at setting assessment tasks across the curriculum as the next stage of curriculum review.

Our students have Home Rooms within a Pod. A Pod houses 120 students and about 8 adults in a facility that has four classrooms (which can open to double spaces), a staff room and meeting room/kitchenette, and a central area housing 16 to 20 computers. The use of glass in Pods creates easy supervision. The Pods are the centre of pastoral care for both students and staff in the school.

Figure 1: Pods housing computers



We attempt to maximise support for our students' academic progress in a variety of ways. Access to technology is very important as a high number of our students do not have either computer access or Internet connection at home. Pods have a booking system to maximise student computer access outside class time. Support for learning is also provided in class by the Learning Support team. Volunteer staff also offer free out of hours tutoring three days a week. We have a Special Education Unit which supports students with physical and/or intellectual impairments. These students are all integrated into classes. The level of integration is dependent on the student's needs and the goals outlined in their Individual Education Plan. Integrated students are 'clustered' into specific classes, allowing an SEU teacher to plan and teach with the class teacher and to take responsibility for a larger group of students rather than only the SEU students.

Forest Lake State High's Middle School is a work in progress. Staff are constantly reviewing and adapting curriculum, pedagogy and organisation. While this is tiring work it is also the challenge of the work and the successes we have experienced so far which encourages us to continue on this journey.

Contact Details

Ms Pam Hall
 Forest Lake State High School

Biographic Details

Pam Hall has an extensive background in Curriculum, particularly in English Curriculum, she was an English Advisor, a lecturer in English Curriculum at the Central Queensland University, and a performance measurement officer in the Gladstone District and Central office in Queensland. Now she is involved in developing new approaches to curriculum for students at Forest Lake.