

Adapting to secondary school: Why the physical environment is important too

February 6 2019, by Brendon Hyndman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

School is back, so students new to secondary school will be beginning to adapt to their new school environments. This adaptation commonly [involves](#) suddenly having multiple classes with different teachers and locations, many more students, different peer groups, becoming the youngest again and even managing a timetable.

For most commencing, their biggest concern is finding new friends and feeling a sense of social belonging. Yet, the majority are emotionally and socially [settled](#) much quicker and better than expected.

Another challenge for students entering [secondary schools](#) is the [physical environment](#). This can [influence](#) students' health behaviours. Students spend more time sitting or standing in secondary [school](#), and less time being active because they have reduced access to spaces that support [physical activity](#).

Primary and secondary school environments

Australian [research](#) found the change from primary into secondary schooling can make students less active and more sedentary, compared to a primary-secondary combined setting.

In Australian secondary schools, there are often [high proportions](#) of seats, lounges, empty spaces and picnic tables. In [comparison](#), primary schools have wide [varieties](#) of facilities for students to use, such as climbing frames and surface markings.

A large [review](#) of multiple types of studies revealed links between providing high quality, well maintained facilities in secondary schools and meeting students' physical [activity](#) needs. For example, it was important to be able to access and play soccer on a field, rather than in a confined space.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

An outdoor audit of Australian secondary schools [found](#) many have low maintenance, litter or graffiti, few coloured markings/murals or vegetable gardens and spaces not suitable for informal games. Other concerns include areas for [smoking](#), [poor facilities](#) to get changed in, little [bike storage](#) and not enough space.

What do secondary school students need?

In primary school, students develop fundamental skills, like catching or kicking a ball. In [secondary school](#), students seek [facilities](#) with more adventure-type focuses (such as climbing walls or rope swings/courses) and advanced opportunities to test their physical skills (such as gymnastics, skating, sporting and fitness facilities).

But funding for these facilities can be limited. Secondary school students have also suggested walking programs and regular community excursions to places such as swimming pools or baseball fields.

Many suggestions from secondary school students for facilities are very different to their existing school [places](#). Some simply hang around canteens and locker bays.

Why is this important?

Students are often presented with more [opportunities](#) to sit and stand around in secondary schools than in [primary schools](#). This can have an impact on students' physical health.



Credit: Julia Larson from Pexels

[International](#) and national [reports](#) point to many increased physical health risks when students enter secondary school. Sedentary behaviour can [increase](#) in secondary school. More students exceed daily sedentary behaviour [screen time](#) guidelines (just two hours for recreation/entertainment) and use more electronic devices.

Secondary school-aged students are also less likely to meet national [physical activity](#) recommendations. It's recommended they complete at least one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day (activity that makes you puff or develop a light sweat). The [recommendations](#) are important to maintain good health, develop movement habits and prevent lifestyle diseases (such as type two diabetes).

Additionally, there are fewer secondary school-aged students participating in [non-organised](#) (such as kicking a soccer ball around with friends) and [organised](#) (such as team sports) physical activity and sport after primary school.

School physical activity participation typically [peaks](#) at the end of primary schooling and declines as people age. The primary to secondary [transition](#) is a crucial period for maintaining physical activity as a lifelong healthy habit.

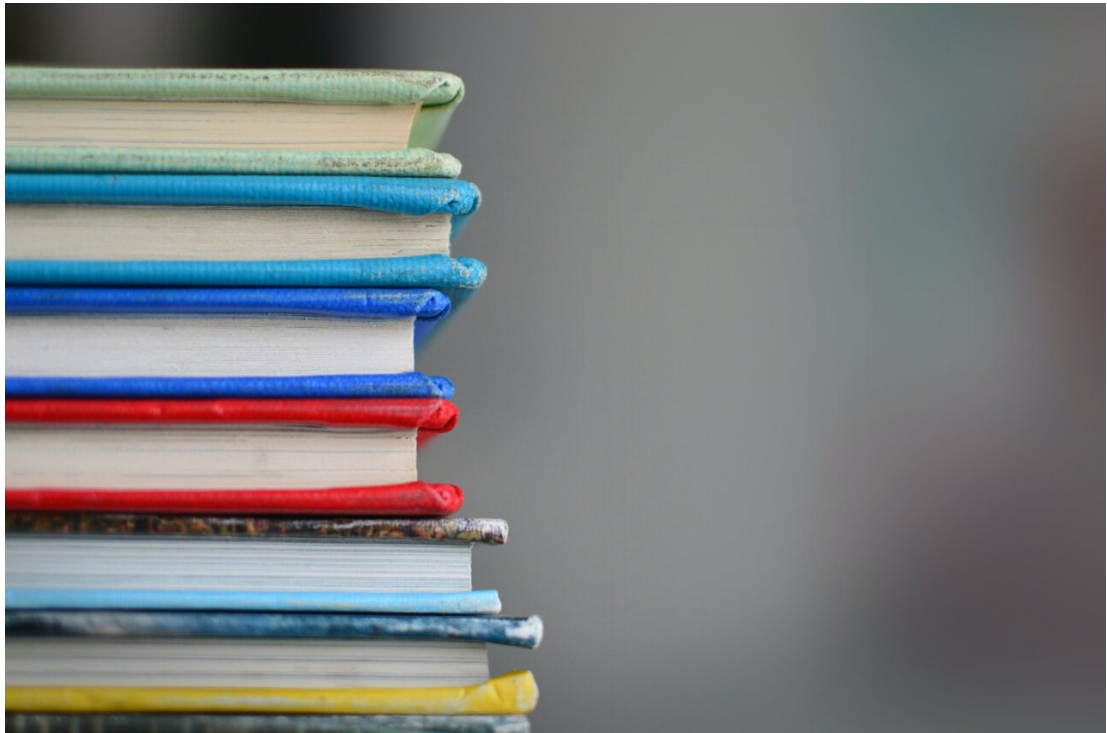
What can we do to support new secondary school students?

- [Consult](#) students on their interests and needs prior to and during

the transition into secondary school. What will engage and challenge them? If facilities or programs are unavailable, various excursions to community recreation facilities can help.

- Make the amount and variety of physical activities, and the maintenance and access to physical activity facilities [a priority](#). Activity programs can be promoted both [within and outside the curriculum](#). For example, schools can encourage [active transport](#) (travelling to/from school by walking or cycling), organised sport, scheduled classes, active lesson breaks or recess periods and before/after school.

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Reduce the amount of [sitting](#) time in secondary schools to prevent sedentary behaviour, including in the classroom. Encouraging social interaction does not have to involve sitting

down.

- During unavoidable and prolonged periods of electronics use, provide short [breaks](#) for a few minutes with movement tasks, such as moving to music.
- Consider multiple [strategies](#) that address mental, social and policy factors within physical environments for students. These could help them connect socially (team/group work, involving [family](#) or role modelling), mentally (solving problems and goal setting for motivation), academically (connecting to subject areas and reframing negative attitudes) and spiritually (giving them time to reflect) that can be replicated in the community.
- Staff need [professional development](#) to learn about, accommodate and deliver holistic health approaches in schools and provide inclusive physical activity and sporting settings.
- Provide physical activity opportunities that strengthen muscles and bone, such as with [resistance](#) bands and providing ideas for bodyweight exercises. This can develop muscles, fitness, prevent injury and meet additional activity [guidelines](#).

Secondary school environments are complex spaces, so we must consider the [physical environment](#) to develop adolescent health during the transition from primary schooling.

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