

Primary focus

A change to the school starting age that will result in some students being almost 14 and still in primary school, has prompted calls to shift Year 7 into high school, writes **LAUREN NOVAK**.

SOUTH Australia is the only Australian state to continue teaching Year 7 students in primary school. Now, a State Government policy will mean some students will be just months shy of their 14th birthday and still attending classes taught by a primary teacher, prompting renewed calls to fold Year 7 into secondary schooling.

From 2014, children who turn five after May 1 will have to wait until the next year to start Reception - when they could be as old as five years and nine months.

Under the policy, which only applies to Government schools and is set to save \$8.2 million, children who turn five before May 1 will be able to start school the year they turn five.

This change at the start of a child's school life could mean they are as old as 13 years and nine months in their final year of primary school.

"We'll have kids shaving in primary school," Opposition education spokesman David Pisoni said. "Half of students will be quite a bit older under this new system, it will be a lot more common than what it is now but, unlike now, it won't be the parent's choice."

Mr Pisoni joins a growing group who want the State Government to fall in line with other states and include Year 7 in high school.

Tasmania, Victoria, NSW and the ACT have long taught Year 7 in high school, while Queensland and Western Australia will make the move from 2015.

"Clearly other states have made the decision so there must be reasons why it is a good idea," SA Secondary Principals Association president Jan Paterson said.

She said South Australian students are already often older than their interstate counterparts when they start Year 8.

There also were crucial differences in the way primary and secondary teachers taught and this meant South Australian students were a year behind in secondary exposure.

"They're not getting as many years as they should with the more complex subjects (in high school)," Ms Paterson said.

"We're fearful about being able to provide the education outcomes that are required at the end of secondary school in the time we have available. Having one year less than everyone else... makes it much harder."

Ms Paterson warned the task would become increasingly difficult as the national curriculum was implemented.

Education Minister Grace Portolesi has conceded SA does "buck the trend". However, she says it is not an issue that is raised often with her by educators. "Year 7 is



BEHIND: Giorgia, 12, centre, is in Year 7 while cousins Natalie, 14, left, and Veronica, 13, are in high school.

an issue that we may need to deal with down the track," she has said. But others feel we can't afford to wait.

SA Association of State School Organisations director David Knuckey said the issue had caused problems for children moving interstate "for years" and it "will only get worse when we are the only state in Australia with Year 7 still in primary school".

"We will have a national curriculum, a national school certificate and SA will be the only state with Year 7 still in primary school," he said. "A key aim of a national curriculum is to ensure consistency and fairness, particularly for the multitude of children who change states during their schooling."

However, Mr Knuckey believed SA aligning with the rest of the nation was "inevitable".

"Our options therefore, are to look at it now, when we have time to plan and implement it properly and be ready for the national curriculum and assessment, or rush it through in a few years, which will undoubtedly cost more," he said.

Queensland has budgeted \$620 million to make the shift, including \$409 million for capital works at state and private schools.

To accommodate Year 7 students, many schools in SA would

need extra classrooms and facilities as well as more secondary teachers trained in specialist areas, such as maths and science.

PREMIER Jay Weatherill has said previously, as Education Minister, that the introduction of the National Curriculum would "force" the Government to take another look at the place of Year 7 in a student's school career.

However, he also warned against a "big structural solution, especially a very expensive one".

Mr Pisoni believes there are at least 160 Reception to Year 12 schools, which could start teaching Year 7 at a secondary year level "tomorrow".

There also was the possibility of fostering more "middle school" arrangements in R-12 schools.

Mr Knuckey said a middle-school focus would better group children of appropriate ages.

"An argument against moving Year 7 to high school is the cost, which could certainly prove significant," he said.

"However, at 11 and 12 years old, Year 7s are too old to share a school yard with five-year-olds and too young to be in the company of 17 and 18-year-olds.

"A middle school may be the most appropriate setting for these transitional years, where early adolescents have clearly dif-

ferent needs to that of older and younger students."

SA Primary Principals Association president Steve Portlock sees no need to change.

"There's no educational justification for having Year 7s in high school, the research doesn't say they'll do far better," he said.

"In SA you'd see in a class of 30 students probably 15 should be in high school in Year 7 and the other 15 should still be in primary school. It's about school maturity and educational maturity."

Mr Portlock also questioned whether the state could afford the move. "If you're introducing the same first day of school as a budget savings measure, I don't think it would save money to make Year 7 part of high school," he said.

Year 7 like high school

YEAR 7 student Giorgia is keen to start high school but says she is being challenged in her final year at St Joseph's Hectorville.

"At my school they make Year 7 hard so it's like high school," the 12-year-old said. She said friends in Melbourne enjoyed going to high school in Year 7.

Giorgia's mother Natalie would have no problem with moving Year 7 to high school on an academic basis, but the social dimension could cause concerns.

"Would I think she was mature enough to go into the environment of high school associating with 16- or 17-year-old girls?" she said.

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AROUND THE NATION YEAR 7

- Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory have long-taught Year 7 in high school.
- Queensland has budgeted \$620 million to move Year 7 to high school from 2015, including \$490 million for capital works.
- Western Australia is also

planning to shift Year 7 to high school from 2015.

■ South Australian Catholic and Independent schools can offer Year 7 in high school but Government schools must seek an exemption.

■ The SA Government says it may consider moving Year 7 in future.

