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New South Wales Public Schools

BUILDING ON STRONG FOUNDATIONS
Society puts the hardest jobs in the public sector. In the private sector, we handle important but easier jobs - where there are reasonably clear signals about the value of the things we make. But when we are not satisfied with the outcomes created by the private sector - when something has not been attended to, or has created ancillary negative consequences, and so on - then we ask the public sector to intervene. When there are ambiguities about value, or conflicts about priorities and values, we ask the government to step in. So we shouldn't be surprised to discover that the problems the public sector is handling are the most difficult, most confusing, and most conflict-ridden - and, therefore, the hardest to guarantee high performance.

Professor Herman Leonard
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

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1 Professor Herman ‘Dutch’ Leonard, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, has expressed this view in lectures over a number of years and reiterated it in communications with the Public Education Council in January 2005.
FOREWORD

New South Wales has a proud tradition of over 150 years of public investment in public schools, providing free, secular education to students from all backgrounds and communities. The NSW public school system has developed from its initial role of providing a basic primary level education to providing comprehensive education from Kindergarten to Year 12, leading to employment or further education and training, for approximately two thirds of the state’s children. Public schools are constantly evolving to meet increasing expectations and the needs of changing populations through a blend of continuity and change.

In recent decades, however, there has been a dramatic change in the context in which public schools are operating in New South Wales, which has no parallel in times past. The Public Education Council has given priority to action that it believes the NSW Government must take to avoid damage to school education in New South Wales generally.

Australia’s falling birthrate is about to affect a school system which has developed almost entirely in line with a growing student population. This downturn will bring new challenges as well as new opportunities.

This demographic change is one of a combination of factors that is now changing radically the previous relationships between public and non-government schools.

The public school system has always had to deal with population shift and areas of decline, with the need to contract services and close schools in some areas with a declining school-age population and to expand services and open new schools in high growth areas. The public school system, likewise, has always co-existed with a non-government system as well as independent schools. Growing affluence and smaller families mean that more parents than in previous generations are able to pay fees for their children to attend non-government schools and are free to exercise that choice. Those non-government schools are now publicly funded by both the state and Commonwealth governments.

In a time of overall growth in the school age population, the competition for students is masked by the fact that both the public and the non-government sectors can expand. But enrolment decline in many areas of the state will place existing schools in competition with each other, within and between the public and non-government sectors, to capture a sufficient share of a dwindling pool of students to maintain their own viability. What were pockets of school age population decline and intense competition among schools will now grow to form a far more pervasive front, according to projected underlying demographic trends.

Increasing public grants to non-government schools since the 1970s have been accompanied by a growth in that sector, with a shift of around ten percentage points of the population from the public to the non-government sector. This shift in the balance of enrolments has not resulted from students being drawn randomly from across the school population. Non-government schools are drawing their students disproportionately from higher income families, with the effect of changing the previous socio-economic composition of the sectors. There is now a need to recognise the consequences of taking funding policies for non-government schools that were developed when the school age
The population was expanding rapidly and applying them in times of slowing and contracting student numbers.

The fact that many experienced school leaders and teachers in both public and non-government schools are moving towards retirement has the potential to intensify competition among schools for the best teachers, leaving schools that are vulnerable in the market with a disproportionate share of the less experienced.

Market forces are intrinsic to education. But there is a need to recognise that current policy settings and population changes are making many NSW public schools vulnerable to market forces in a way not previously experienced and on terms increasingly working against them. These forces are operating within the public system itself as well as between the public system and an expanding non-government school sector.

Public schools are now being placed in a competition for students, teachers and public funding. They are faced with policies for the funding and planning of schools that are contributing to a maldistribution between the sectors of the total workload of schooling. The effects are exacerbated by a growing misallocation of the total resources available from public and private sources in relation to the share of work that each sector accepts.

The combined effect of these changes is profound. What is the role and responsibility of government in education, in the light of these market forces and the changed conditions which now confront the public schools that are their principal responsibility? The Council has taken the view that a key responsibility of governments in education is to protect the status of education as a ‘public good’ where the benefits to the whole community are greater than the sum of the benefits to the individual learners; and where schools provide a framework of universal opportunity so that benefits to some are not achieved at the cost of others. The Council recognises that schooling is a partnership and that school communities and the broader community as well as governments have responsibility for the health and sustainability of public schools. This report deals specifically with action that lies within the power of the NSW Government.

As well as making explicit the underlying values that it believes should underpin the policies of the NSW Government, the Council has identified the practical reasons why the priority for public investment in schooling in New South Wales must be the provision of high quality public schools. Any weakening of the long-held commitment to a strong and socially representative system of public schools in New South Wales will reduce the capacity for the state to deliver quality schooling in all areas, to achieve the most economic use of public resources, and to achieve the spread and depth of educational achievement necessary for personal, social and economic well-being in today’s world.

The priorities identified in this report are those that the Council considers most urgent, if the community is to sustain its confidence in the commitment of government to sustaining and advancing the public school system that has contributed so much to quality of life in New South Wales.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Positioning public schools for the future

In today’s knowledge economy, education is essential for ensuring both economic prosperity and social advancement, for individuals and the community as a whole. This concept of education as both a public good and an individual entitlement is embedded in the NSW Education Act (1990) and in the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century; and is central to the NSW public school system.

New South Wales has in place key elements of a sound public education system, including a comprehensive and rigorous curriculum, statewide systems for assessing student achievement, qualified and committed teachers and strong student welfare and support programs.

Despite the many strengths of the public school system, demographic and social changes, economic pressures and policy decisions of state and Commonwealth governments have combined to produce a climate of insecurity in New South Wales for public education.

The NSW public education system now more than ever needs strong leadership and clear direction to meet these challenges; and to overcome the unintended effects of a series of restructures which have weakened the capacity for public advocacy. Work is needed to establish a climate where school and system leaders are encouraged to take a proactive role in advocating publicly the benefits and achievements, as well as the challenges, of public education.

The Council is aware of a range of competing views about possible future directions for public schooling, which involve different approaches to governance and financing. The Council does not accept that governance and delivery structures are ends in themselves and notes that many proponents of change are unable to provide evidence of the educational, social or economic benefits that would result. There are real risks in trying to simply transplant models of schooling developed overseas to New South Wales.

A strong and socially representative system of public schools continues to provide the best means for the NSW Government to provide quality education in all schools, combined with the economic use of public resources. Investment in public education is now a key to bridging the growing divide between families and communities that are reaping the benefits of economic change and those being forced to the margins of social and economic life.

The Public Education Council welcomes the fact that the NSW Government has implemented a number of recent initiatives to strengthen public education. But a more concerted effort is needed by the government, through its Department of Education and Training, to strengthen public confidence in public schools and to provide the conditions for teachers to work most effectively.

There is a need to ensure that all government policies and priorities in education give explicit and practical effect to the principle set out in the NSW Education Act (1990) that ‘the principal responsibility of the State in the education of children is the provision of public education’.
Resourcing public education

Adequate resourcing is necessary for all schools to be able to ‘develop fully the talents and capacities of all students’ (*National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*).

The funds invested in public schools have not kept pace with the entitlement of all children and young people to the education they need to engage successfully in today’s world. Resource levels do not reflect the unique responsibilities of public schools, leaving many schools without the capacity they need to carry out the work expected of them. The public sector’s share of total public funding does not take adequate account of the complexities of a mixed system of public and non-government schools, where relative as well as absolute resourcing levels are significant. There is now a growing gap between the resources generally available in public schools and the aspirations of many parents for their children’s education.

The Public Education Council proposes the setting of transparent resource standards by the NSW Government as the basis for public investment in schools. Such standards should be based on research into actual costs of achieving outcome standards in actual school contexts. This is a means of establishing the total resources needed to enable all schools to achieve what is expected of them, as well as a means of distributing resources among schools according to the distribution of the total workload of schools. Those schools required to do more than their share of the ‘heavy lifting’ should have this recognised in the share of resources provided to them. Resource standards have the benefit of providing a defensible basis for schools funding, and for recognising the additional costs relating to those students with various forms of learning difficulties or disadvantages.

As well as providing advice on the need for determining an appropriate level of resources for the public school system, the Council believes there is a need to allocate resources to schools according to principles of effectiveness, efficiency and equity in the light of the intended educational outcomes. The Council’s advice is that there is a need for new criteria and processes for allocating teaching staff and funds among schools in order to recognise that schools are serving very different communities and that these differences need to be reflected in their operating budgets to the greatest extent possible. If we expect schools to achieve comparable outcomes for their students, then these differences in their circumstances cannot be left to the uncertainties of competition for funds from short-term programs, particularly where these programs are often inadequate to meet the purposes for which they have been established. There is also a strong case for more active leadership to support schools in gaining greater value from their resources by collaborating with other schools or with TAFE colleges.

Public schools in NSW are not operating in a vacuum. It is necessary to consider their resource entitlements in the context of the mixed system of schooling supported by public funding in Australia. The asymmetrical nature of the relationship between the roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth and NSW governments in the funding of public and non-government schools exacerbates the difficulties of achieving equitable and efficient resourcing of schools.

The public school system in New South Wales caters for between 80 and 90 per cent of the most educationally disadvantaged students, requiring the most intensive and costly
interventions. Non-government schools, by contrast, can exercise discretion over the size and composition of their student intake.

Under current policy settings, both state and Commonwealth governments are contributing increased public funding to non-government schools with the combined effect of increasing the gap between the resources available in public schools and those in an increasing proportion of non-government schools. The point has now been reached where the NSW Government’s 25 per cent funding link for the non-government sector is compromising its principal responsibility, namely to provide public education of the highest standard. This has the potential to destroy public confidence about the adequacy of resources available in public schools.

In the light of the downturn in the total school population and the changing socio-economic composition of the public and the non-government school sectors, there is now an urgent need for the NSW Government to develop new policies for the planning and funding of schools. In particular, the Council believes that the NSW Government could put its funds to better use in raising educational outcomes across the board. There are better uses for public education funding within the public sector than allocating them to non-government schools that already have vastly superior resources, with no educational justification.

**Ensuring equality of access to quality teaching**

A key function of the NSW public education system is to ensure that all students in all public schools across the state have equal access to quality teaching. A significant body of research has confirmed that, of all the resources that a school can provide to support learning, the quality of teaching is the key influence on students’ progress.

A range of strategies has been implemented in recent years to enhance and promote quality teaching in public schools, including establishing professional standards for teachers, support for professional development programs and initiatives to recruit and retain quality teachers.

One of the most persisting challenges that face school systems, including in New South Wales, is that of ensuring that all schools are able to attract and retain experienced and skilled teachers. This challenge is the more significant at a time when many teachers are moving towards retirement.

There is a need for the NSW Government to seize the opportunity that now exists to reap the maximum educational benefit from the opportunity for renewal of the teaching force and to minimise risks from loss of experienced teachers.

Teaching is a complex task. Like other professionals, teachers require on-going professional learning to ensure that they are able to keep up with developments such as curriculum changes and relevant research findings. Beginning teachers in particular need the chance to gain experience and professional support to further develop and refine their skills.

In 2004, some three per cent of schools were responsible for providing support for around 30 per cent of all the system’s beginning teachers. These schools, where a significant proportion of the system’s teachers begin their careers year after year, tend to be in areas
that have significant numbers of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The Public Education Council has identified the need to deal with those ‘hard-to-staff’ schools that have a continuing history of receiving disproportionate numbers of beginning and early career teachers as well as large numbers of inexperienced executive teachers. The proposal to designate some schools as ‘professional practice’ schools would be an investment in beginning teachers for the benefit of these teachers, the schools and the system as a whole.

In addition to ‘professional practice’ schools, the Public Education Council is proposing a range of complementary strategies, including: a reduced teaching load for beginning teachers; incentives to attract late career teachers to hard-to-staff schools; a more effective recruitment process to attract new graduates; and an annual program of high-profile professional development programs to give NSW teachers access to the best of professional theory and practice.

As the pressures of an expanding school population begin to ease, the Council believes that the time is ripe to put greater effort into increasing the quality of schooling. There is the scope to apply the financial ‘dividend’ that will result from the retirement of experienced teachers to the range of strategies the Council has proposed for improving equity of access to quality teaching.

**Strategic planning for demographic change**

The Public Education Council has identified the need for strategic planning to gain educational advantage from the downturn in the overall school population. The decline in the school age population should be made to work to the substantial benefit of public education by providing the opportunity to increase the quality and range of human and physical resources provided for students in public schools without increasing expenditure longer term.

Quality school buildings and other facilities are critical to effective teaching and learning, to public perceptions of the standing of public schooling and, in turn, to recruiting and supporting teachers and students. The current condition of many public schools in New South Wales falls below what would be expected by many parents and communities. The level of investment per student in public schools nationally, including in this state, falls far short of the funding being invested in non-government schools. This is contributing to the erosion of public confidence in public schools.

There is now a need for urgent action to avoid adding to these difficulties and putting the quality of public education at risk by spreading its resources too thinly among too many schools, so that resources are diverted away from teaching and learning and into the maintenance of growing numbers of under-used buildings and facilities. Population projections for the next two decades indicate that the total school age population in New South Wales is likely to fall by some 45,000-85,000 by 2020 – a decrease of 4-7 per cent. It is likely that a disproportionately large impact will be borne by the public sector. This projected enrolment decline will produce excess capacity in many areas of the public system. Asset management will be complicated by the fact that enrolments will vary across the state, with decline in some areas and increases in others. Maintenance of existing assets will also become more difficult for schools experiencing a sharp decline in student
numbers since this will lead to a reduction in those recurrent funding streams determined on the basis of enrolments.

The challenge for New South Wales will be to manage this enrolment decline in ways that maintain and, ideally, enhance the quality of education service delivery for students across all areas of the state. This will entail the need to avoid driving up costs in affected areas in ways that threaten the overall quality of provision. At the same time, there is a need to ensure that any unavoidable costs and disruption associated with enrolment decline are not simply borne by students in affected areas.

The Public Education Council believes that priority should be given to preparing a paper to educate the public education community of the need for strategic planning to cope with demographic change and to involve communities in shaping constructive options.

**Information systems and organisational intelligence**

Public schools and the public education system as a whole need high quality information systems to support individual student learning, to ensure that they are operating effectively and efficiently, to identify where new directions are needed and to evaluate key programs.

New South Wales has led other jurisdictions in Australia in collecting and analysing data in the area of standardised assessment of educational outcomes, particularly for the basic skills. The Public Education Council has, however, found significant gaps in the information systems of the Department of Education and Training. New South Wales now lags other jurisdictions in information systems necessary to assist education and training policy and planning.

The Council understands that the potential for concerns and risks relating to the use of information limit progress on information system development. There are real risks to public schools where information concerning their operations and performance is accessed by external interests and used inappropriately or unfairly. To avoid gathering important data, however, due to fear of access or misuse, does not serve the interests of public schools. There is an obvious tension between these two concerns. This tension is heightened in a competitive schooling environment, especially one with a less than even playing field. In such an environment, for example, there is a concern to protect what might be reasonably seen as ‘commercial-in-confidence’ information about the operations and performance of public schools. In addition to public schools having to do the ‘heavier lifting’ with fewer resources, they also have statutory reporting and information access requirements which do not apply to non-government schools.

The Council’s view is that policies need to be developed for managing access to and use of information, rather than avoiding the collection of information required for planning and decision-making. An external review by a respected individual or team with substantial experience in education and training information systems would be the best means of identifying gaps and development needs. The Council believes that priority should be given to the development of comprehensive information systems by the Department to support student learning, school and system management and improvement, and to provide the essential foundation for evidence based strategic policy and planning.
Early childhood education – building blocks for life and learning

The foundations for lifelong health and well-being are laid down in the first years of life. Children who have good early childhood experiences have better school grades, better self esteem, fewer social and health problems, and are less likely to be teen parents, use drugs or be involved in crime.

Prior-to-school education and care plays an important part in providing many young children with the developmentally supportive environment that is a sound basis for learning at school. Early childhood education is a whole-of-government responsibility and requires effective collaboration among government agencies. In this, the public school system has a central role to play, since public schools are the government’s primary commitment to the educational health and wellbeing of all children. They also provide a ready means of contact with most children and parents.

Transition to school programs are one of the most effective strategies to support the learning of young children and ensure they have a positive experience at school. The Public Education Council proposes that all NSW primary schools should provide transition to school programs building on successful programs established in a number of schools across the state. The Council also believes that expertise in early childhood learning is of critical importance to teachers of children in Kindergarten to Year 2 and proposes that professional development programs be provided in this area, in order to maximise the benefits of the reduced class sizes in the early years.

The Council recommends a renewed focus on local public schools as assets for whole communities and for community-building. This entails supporting schools to develop an outward-looking approach to education provision rather than an increase in school responsibilities. There are strong educational reasons for strengthening relationships between schools and their communities. Chief among these is evidence that parental involvement in a child’s education is a strong indicator for academic success.

Recognising that early childhood education is a sound public investment, the Public Education Council recommends that, in the context of future budgetary options, the NSW Government consider establishing multi-purpose centres for early learning and child development in new public schools and those undergoing major refurbishment. Such centres would build community networks, foreground the leadership role of public schools within their local communities, and familiarise children and families with their local public school and the benefits of public education.

Future directions for primary education

Primary schooling is the foundation for ongoing educational progress. Children who complete primary school with a solid core of basic skills and knowledge, confident in their identity as learners and of the value placed on learning by their families and communities are more likely to remain engaged and achieve well in later years.

The Public Education Council believes that high quality and equitable outcomes are best achieved by educating children within their communities at local public schools. Local public primary schools have contributed significantly to building the social as well as the human capital that supports economic and broader community wellbeing. These schools,
operating within a systemic framework, have also been a fiscally efficient and responsible means of meeting the state’s obligation to ‘ensure that every child receives an education of the highest quality’ (NSW Education Act 1990), regardless of a family’s capacity to pay.

Research shows that parental engagement with schools raises student achievement. Schools that identify strongly with their local communities are likely to have the knowledge and skills to engage their parent communities in productive partnerships and to forge the shared culture of high expectations for students that is an important contributor to student success. Strong school–family partnerships will also assist schools and teachers to personalise learning to meet individual student needs. Local public schools provide particularly good opportunities to link education, public health and other social priorities.

Demographic shifts and increased competition within the education sector have affected the role of local public schools in some communities. Families should never be discouraged from sending their children to their local public school because of its offering an inadequate education or substandard facilities. Families will only enrol their children at the local public school if they feel it is the best available option for their child.

The Public Education Council recommends a number of strategies to strengthen the links between schools and their communities, including improved collection and analysis of data on student outcomes and better communication with parents. The NSW Government should also consider coordinating the provision of activities for children out of school hours (OOSH) on public school sites. This approach could build on and complement existing OOSH centres, in collaboration with other agencies.

Another means of addressing this issue would be to draw on the resources of the public system as a large community of schools. Schools should be encouraged to construct networks with one another to share available expertise and facilities. The Council is aware of existing examples of such practice, but proposes that more be done to promote networks of schools within the local area.

**Future directions for secondary education**

A high quality secondary education provides the keys for entry to career pathways and further education and training. It not only benefits the individual students but provides future dividends for the community as a whole. The task of public high schools is to ensure that all young people have options for future education, training and employment, as well as for engaging with significant issues and ideas.

Almost all students now complete junior secondary schooling to the end of Year 10 and almost 80 per cent of public school students enter Year 11. Secondary schooling must cater for the diversity of abilities and interests in order to prepare all students for their further education, employment and life after school.

Public high schools are increasingly under pressure from changing demographic patterns and increasing choice and competition in the education market place, fuelled by changing economic and social conditions and increased funding by the Commonwealth Government of non-government schools. Public high schools currently have an enrolment share of 62.9 per cent (2004). This is likely to decline further with the increased pressure of the projected decline in the secondary school-age population in coming decades.
These forces intensify the challenge facing public high schools of balancing the competing demands for rigour (providing courses that are academically demanding) and inclusiveness (providing for the full range of students served by the school).

Comprehensive high schools are at the leading edge in confronting these challenges and are most vulnerable to their adverse impacts. Public comprehensive high schools in some areas are losing enrolments to the point where they can no longer offer sufficient curriculum choice to attract students with higher academic interests and abilities and so go into decline and eventually amalgamate or close.

In the face of these challenges, the NSW Government has in recent years provided a greater range of schooling structures in order to cater for the diversity of interests and abilities of high school students. These have included specialist high schools, an increased number of selective high schools and selective streams in comprehensive high schools, senior high schools, multi-campus colleges, cooperative ventures with TAFE and universities and flexible pathways in senior schooling. These initiatives have provided greater diversity of high school structures but in many areas they have put increased pressure on the local comprehensive high school, leading to further enrolment loss.

Public comprehensive high schools, if they are to remain comprehensive, must be able to provide a wide curriculum choice and cater for both academic students and those who are aiming for vocational pathways. If comprehensive schools are not able to balance the competing demands for rigour and inclusiveness they risk losing one or the other group.

The HSC examination is a critical element in students’ achievement and in gaining a publicly valued credential. Public schools must be equally well placed to support their students to meet this challenge. If they are not, then far from being a means of advancement for students regardless of their background or personal circumstances, the HSC can become a tool for maintaining and consolidating privilege.

The Public Education Council believes that more information is needed in relation to system-wide effectiveness of the structures and curriculum frameworks for high schools. The Council is proposing that a study be conducted of both secondary school structures and secondary curriculum frameworks. The study should be developed to ‘test’ these frameworks in the context of local realities; to assess the improved educational outcomes and any strengthened aspects of public education provision arising from the range of initiatives already in train and to identify what further action may be necessary.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The NSW Education Act (1990) states that ‘the principal responsibility of the State in the education of children is the provision of public education’.

The NSW Public Education Council believes that there is a need for the NSW Government to give more explicit and tangible recognition to this central principle of the Act. Such recognition would strengthen public confidence in government commitment to building on the achievements of the past and to securing the future of public education in this state.

Implementation of the following recommendations will strengthen public confidence that all schools in the NSW public education system can provide a high quality education for the students they serve across diverse communities.

Strengthening public confidence in public schools

The Public Education Council believes that the NSW Government, through its Education and Training portfolio, needs to provide strong leadership and clear direction to sustain and advance the NSW public education system for the future. In the context of an increasingly competitive system of public and non-government schooling, the benefits, achievements and the interests of a strong and socially representative system of public schools need to be articulated by system and school leaders with the backing of government.

Recommendation 1:

To strengthen public confidence in the future of public schooling, the Public Education Council recommends:

1. that the NSW Government affirm its commitment to the principle set out in the NSW Education Act (1990) ‘that the principal responsibility of the State in the education of children is the provision of public education’, by:
   • ensuring that all government policies and priorities in education and training are consistent with this principle;
   • establishing a climate in which school and system leaders are encouraged to take a proactive role in advocating publicly the benefits, achievements and challenges of public education.

Resourcing public schools to be able to achieve expected outcomes

The Public Education Council believes that the current funding regime for the mixed system of schooling operating in Australia is dysfunctional and unsustainable if the National Goals for Schooling are to be achievable for the majority of students. At the same time, there is broad community agreement about, and concern with, the growing inadequacy of resources available to public schools to perform the tasks expected of them. Schools funding needs to be provided according to transparent resource standards, based on the relative needs of schools serving vastly different student communities, in order to ensure that all schools have adequate and appropriate resources to enable their students to achieve their personal best. The Council also recommends strategies to more effectively manage the resources available to public schools in New South Wales and align public funding priorities to the principles set out in the NSW Education Act.
Recommendation 2:

To resource public schools to be able to achieve expected outcomes, the Public Education Council recommends:

2.1 that the NSW Government endorse the development of explicit evidence-based recurrent and capital resource standards for NSW public schools that provide a transparent link between expected outcomes and the costs of providing the services needed to achieve those outcomes.

This would strengthen public confidence in the government’s commitment to public education in New South Wales and in the capacity of all public schools to provide a high quality education for their students. New South Wales is well placed to undertake this development given its leading role in the work undertaken recently to develop national school resource standards through the MCEETYA Schools Resourcing Task Force.

2.2 that the Department of Education and Training develop new school recurrent resource allocation criteria for determining the allocation of teaching staff and global budgets for public schools to address the differing resource needs among school communities by providing:

- a base allocation to meet the common entitlement to teaching staff and other resources for all schools; and
- a variable supplementary allocation to meet sustained and predictable additional school-based needs.

These criteria and processes should be developed with the benefit of a coherent schools resources standard and clarification of the broad resourcing needs of schools in various contexts, as proposed in recommendation 2.1 above.

2.3 that the Department identify and promote examples of successful professional collaboration and coordinated delivery among schools.

In order to promote collaborative initiatives, skills and experience in achieving professional collaboration and coordinated delivery amongst schools should be highly valued criteria for leadership positions in NSW public schools.

2.4 that the Department support greater collaboration between schools and TAFE NSW Institutes by removing disincentives that currently act as barriers to such collaboration.

Regional senior executive officers should be responsible for facilitating collaborative arrangements between public schools and TAFE Institutes in the delivery of appropriate vocational and other programs.

2.5 that the NSW Government, in allocating public funds between public and non-government schools, ensure that its principal obligation under the Education Act, to provide public schools of the highest quality, is not compromised; and that public funds are not allocated to non-government schools with superior resources (either from private sources alone or in combination with Commonwealth grants).

These measures would improve the integrity, complementarity and fairness of funding policies for public and non-government schools. They also recognise the fact that providing public resources through public schools is the only way for the NSW Government to secure any child’s or young person’s entitlement to access these resources without discrimination on the ground of sex, race or religion or parental capacity to pay fees.
2.6 that the NSW Government continue to work with other states and territories to achieve national agreement with the Commonwealth for a coherent national framework for school funding, recognising the need for complementary and shared responsibilities across the levels of government for resourcing public schools.

This national framework should include the development of a resource standard for recurrent and capital funding that will provide a transparent and rational basis for allocating Commonwealth funding for schools.

Ensuring equality of access to quality teaching

Quality teaching is the single most important factor that makes a difference to student learning of all the factors that governments can readily affect. The NSW Government is to be commended for initiating the key components of a sound policy framework for quality teaching. There is more that needs to be done to meet the persisting challenge of ensuring equitable access to quality teaching to students across the state. A number of new policy directions are proposed which the Council considers as worthwhile and practical steps to improve access by students in regional areas and harder to staff localities to the quality teaching to which they are entitled.

Recommendation 3:

To ensure equality of access to quality teaching, the Public Education Council recommends:

3.1 that the Department designate a number of schools as ‘professional practice’ schools to nurture the development of beginning and early career teachers.

The professional practice schools initiative would be an investment in beginning teachers for the benefit of the teachers, the schools and the system as a whole. Professional practice schools would be professional training grounds for committed, enthusiastic young teachers, supported by high quality professional development programs focussed on quality teaching. The initiative has the potential to turn hard-to-staff schools into attractive appointments and to reinvigorate teaching in those schools.

3.2 that the Department give beginning teachers a reduced teaching load in their first year of teaching, to allow time for professional development to improve teaching practice.

This additional professional development time would be used for planning lessons, team teaching with experienced colleagues, taking part in professional development programs and professional networks within and across schools.

3.3 that the Department trial a program to attract late career teachers to harder to staff schools with significant numbers of less experienced teachers.

Late career teachers would assist in strengthening the quality of teaching in areas of greatest need by applying their teaching skills and experience and sharing their wisdom with less experienced teachers. Financial incentives would assist in attracting late career teachers to these positions, as would options for part time or shorter term appointments.
3.4 that the Department institute a Targeted Positions Strategy to replace the Graduate Recruitment Program to set aside a number of forthcoming positions for new graduates.

This strategy would set aside a number of forthcoming positions for new graduates and would be consistent with the Staffing Agreement.

3.5 that the Department implement an annual program of high-profile professional development activities, focused on Key Learning Areas or pedagogical issues of priority.

These activities would supplement and reinforce school-based professional learning planning and programs.

3.6 that the Department adopt the Institute of Teachers Professional Teaching Standards as an essential element in assuring teacher quality, including through the application of these explicit standards to teacher efficiency procedures.

A working party, including representatives of the Department, the NSW Teachers Federation, the NSW Institute of Teachers and the Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Associations of NSW, should be established to: develop options to address teacher underperformance based on the professional teaching standards; ensure that processes are transparent; and to take such other steps as appropriate for strengthening public understanding of and confidence in the quality of teaching in public schools.

3.7 that the NSW Government reinvest the ‘dividend’ generated by teacher turnover in the public education system, with a view to resourcing strategies such as those outlined in this advice.

The salary savings accruing from the retirement of significant numbers of teachers and their replacement by beginning teachers should be used to fund strategies to support teacher professional learning and enhance teacher quality.

Strategic planning for demographic change

The primary and secondary school age populations in New South Wales are projected to decline substantially over coming decades. While this aggregate trend will play out differently across the state, competition for students in many areas will intensify and has the potential to create increasing problems for many public schools. Unless action is taken, effects will include the creation of excess capacity in school buildings and difficulties in maintaining curriculum range in some areas and mounting per student costs. Strategies are recommended in the Council’s advice to transform these threats into opportunities for public education.

Recommendation 4:

To ensure strategic planning for demographic change, the Public Education Council recommends:

4.1 that the Minister commission a detailed study of the projected demographic outlook and the implications for public schooling in New South Wales.

The study would form an essential part of regional planning and consultation processes. The timing for such a study is opportune as updated small area population projections are due for release by the NSW Population Group early in 2005.
4.2 that the Minister commission a consultation paper, designed for use within the public education community, to develop an understanding of the issues relating to the options for dealing with projected demographic change.

The paper should usefully include suggested ‘trip-wire’ considerations which would set in train regional and community educational evaluation, consultation and planning processes. This paper could then provide a guide to regions and communities having to deal with declining demographics and enrolments.

4.3 that the NSW Government recognise and make financial provision for increasing real per capita costs to maintain quality educational opportunities for public education students in future decades of demographic decline.

The projected demographic decline, combined with current social and public policy trends, is likely to accelerate the social and educational stratification of schooling and to drive up per student costs in the public sector. Recognising that there are competing priorities confronting government, the projected decline in total student numbers provides some opportunity within current real budget levels of meeting the challenges of providing public schools with the resources they need to do the tasks expected of them.

Improving information systems and organisational intelligence

The Council is concerned that the information systems on the operations and performance of public education as well as systems to capture the views of its parents and broader school communities are inadequate to support student learning, school and system management and improvement, and provide the essential foundation for evidenced based strategic policy and planning.

Recommendation 5:

To improve information systems and organisational intelligence, the Public Education Council recommends:

5.1 that the NSW Government institute a project to benchmark NSW education and training information systems against other comparable jurisdictions and determine strategic priorities for information systems development.

An external review by a respected individual/team with substantial experience in education and training information systems is recommended as the best means of identifying gaps and development needs.

5.2 that the NSW Government give favourable consideration to a budget enhancement to fund priority system developments.

Given that major information system development will likely continue to receive lesser priority than the many competing service delivery demands on the Department, budget supplementation will be essential if substantial progress is to be made.

5.3 that the Department develop a strategic capacity to gather and consolidate the views, experiences and expectations of parents and the broader community concerning their public school or the system more generally.
Supporting early childhood years as building blocks for learning

There is compelling evidence that early childhood education is a sound public investment. Children’s experiences in the early years shape their physical, emotional, social and cognitive development for years to come. Governments can have a profound influence on the conditions of early childhood. The Public Education Council’s advice sets out actions to improve children’s early education experiences and transition to school so that they will be well prepared for the learning that takes place in primary school.

Recommendation 6:

To support early childhood education as the foundation for future learning, the Public Education Council recommends:

6.1 that the NSW Government develop strategic population measures of prior-to-school participation as a basis for assessing need for prior-to-school education services across the state and for setting future priorities.

Information on the prior-to-school educational participation of children enrolling in Kindergarten should be collected by NSW public schools in a form that can also support local dialogue between prior-to-school and school teachers (recommendation 6.2).

6.2 that the Department undertake research to improve the effectiveness of transition and early learning programs by developing the facility to link data and information on prior-to-school experience (recommendation 6.1) to later schooling outcomes data.

6.3 that the NSW Government provide transition-to-school programs in all NSW primary schools.

The Department should lead a project, within the Families First framework, to develop guidelines for effective transition-to-school programs and describe examples of programs that are working in a wide range of communities.

6.4 that the Department, in shaping its professional development program, recognise the critical importance of early learning and of maximising the benefits of government investment in reduced class sizes.

The Department should develop and trial the mechanism of the critical friend to stimulate professional dialogue and improve practice among K-2 teachers.

6.5 that the NSW Government accept the need for collaborative planning and consultation between Kindergarten teachers and prior-to-school educators.

The Departments of Education and Training and Community Services would need to identify and cost the most practical approaches to such planning and consultation.

6.6 that the Department make information about transition and enrolment, in particular for children with special learning needs, widely available.

Information should be readily accessible to parents via the Department Internet site and in other appropriate places, such as early childhood education and care settings, early childhood and community health centres and general practitioners’ rooms.
6.7 that the NSW Government renew and strengthen its focus on public primary schools in their local neighbourhoods as foundations for community.

To strengthen support for the local public primary school, the Department should identify and promote principles of successful community engagement together with a wide range of good examples and continue to implement the Schools as Community Centres program in school communities facing marked challenges.

6.8 that the NSW Government disseminate information to parents, starting at the birth of their children, to support their involvement in their children’s learning and their knowledge of child development.

Initiatives to assist in providing information to parents should include an inter-agency project led by the Department, under the aegis of Families First, to develop a strategy for disseminating information on early literacy, learning and transition to school.

6.9 that the NSW Government trial and evaluate the establishment of multi-purpose centres for early learning and child development in selected public school sites.

Subject to the evaluation of the trial, the government should make provision for such centres in new public schools, and in public schools undergoing major refurbishment. Any future review or expansion of prior-to-school education by the Department should also consider the model of the multi-purpose centre.

Supporting the local primary school as a community focus

Primary schooling provides the foundation for ongoing education and success in high school. Local public primary schools have long been a focus of New South Wales communities – the place where children and their families forged connections. As such, they have contributed significantly to building the social as well as the human capital that supports economic and broader community wellbeing. The Public Education Council recommends strategies to recognise and build on the educational, health and social benefits of children attending their local public schools.

Recommendation 7:

To support the local primary school as a community focus, the Public Education Council recommends:

7.1 that the Department collect the data necessary to understand enrolment patterns and trends within schools and across the public education system.

7.2 that the Department identify and promote principles of successful community engagement together with a wide range of good examples.

7.3 that the NSW Government convene an interagency team, under the leadership of the Department, to develop options for a broader, strategic approach to the coordination and provision of out-of-school-hours (OOSH) activities on public school sites, building on existing OOSH activities.

7.4 that the NSW Government review the eligibility criteria of primary-aged students for the School Student Transport Scheme with a view to re-directing resources specifically to improving the buildings and facilities in public primary schools.
7.5 that the Department explore options for enhancing the facility of statewide tests to diagnose the needs and understand the skills of students at the higher end of the ability spectrum.

7.6 that the Department conduct research into the uses of data to improve student outcomes at school and classroom levels and disseminate examples of good practice and support materials as indicated.

7.7 that the NSW Institute of Teachers, in consultation with teacher training institutions, consider the inclusion of mandatory data analysis and assessment processes components, to enhance teacher practice.

7.8 that the Department develop effective protocols to enable sharing of the data between schools for constructive purposes, for example, to enable the sharing of data between public feeder primary schools and high schools (in both directions).

7.9 that the Department create a system of unique student identifiers to facilitate longitudinal and cross-dataset research.

7.10 that the Department develop options for fostering public school and community networks to improve student access to a broader curriculum and range of teachers with specialist skills.

Supporting public high schools - balancing rigour and inclusion

The challenge of ensuring rigour and inclusiveness is the predominant, though not exclusive, concern of public comprehensive high schools, particularly those serving high concentrations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds or schools experiencing increasing residualisation within their localities. Developing and resourcing effective delivery structures which ensure access to quality teaching for academically interested and able students whilst also providing for the more diverse senior school body is a key challenge. The Public Education Council notes the many, often competing, policy options which have been pursued in New South Wales, other states and overseas and the lack of clear evidence of success for many of them which would guide future directions. A comprehensive study of the existing public secondary school structures and curriculum frameworks is recommended to guide further developments.

Recommendation 8:

To support public high schools in balancing rigour and inclusion, the Public Education Council recommends:

8. that the NSW Government undertake a study of the existing structures and curriculum frameworks for public secondary education to determine whether they are leading to acceptable outcomes for the full range of students and whether any improvements need to be made.

In the Council’s view there is a need for such a study to gather comprehensive evidence of the effects of the existing patterns of provision. The study should precede any further changes to the structures of secondary schooling.
Chapter 1:

Positioning public schools for the future

INTRODUCTION

Education for the ‘clever country’

*Australia’s future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision.*

MCEETYA, National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century, 1999

In today’s knowledge economy, education is essential for ensuring both economic prosperity and social advancement, for individuals and the community as a whole. An educated community, composed of individuals who are literate and numerate, technologically skilled, able to reason, to make informed choices and participate actively as citizens in society and the economy, is the best guarantee of a secure and prosperous society.

The benefits to society of investment in higher levels of education include having a population with higher incomes, better standards of health and housing, greater capacity for social engagement and lower rates of crime. Economic growth and productivity depend on a skilled and flexible workforce, able to continue learning and adapt to change. Industry has increasingly seen the benefits of investing in training in order to maintain competitiveness and meet changing conditions, including harnessing new technologies.

Australia, with other OECD countries, has made a commitment to lifelong learning for all. This commitment reflects the understanding that the breadth and pace of economic and social changes associated with new technologies would require higher levels of education across populations. Schooling provides the foundation for this lifelong learning.

New South Wales, as Australia’s largest and most sophisticated economy, aiming to strengthen its links to regional and global markets, needs to ensure that its historic commitment to supporting high quality school education for all is maintained. School education must prepare all students for their participation in the knowledge economy, not just those students from the most advantaged backgrounds. The Public Education Council believes that the provision of public funding through public schools, where it can be used in the most efficient and effective way for the benefit of all, represents the most strategic investment in education for the NSW Government.
Why public education?

Public good and individual entitlement

Public education is a core institution of our democracy. In a society where education and the benefits it brings are key determinants of successful participation in economic and social life, governments have an important role to play: to guarantee equal access to education for all children and young people and to protect the quality and standards of the education being offered, both in the interests of the students and of the wider community.

The concept of education as both a public good and an individual entitlement is embedded in both the NSW Education Act (1990) and in the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (1999).

The NSW Education Act is based on the following four principles:

a) every child has the right to receive an education;
b) the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child’s parents;
c) it is the duty of the State to ensure that every child receives an education of the highest quality;
d) the principal responsibility of the State in the education of children is the provision of public education.

The Education Act thus provides two forms of educational entitlement to the children of New South Wales:

- a legally backed entitlement to education, irrespective of the child’s personal or family circumstances
- an entitlement to a high quality education that meets students’ needs, including quality teaching and a decent standard of resources, in the school they attend, whether public or non-government.

While the Education Act applies to all schools, both public and non-government, it places particular responsibilities on public schools that do not apply in the non-government sector. Most importantly, public schools must be open to all: the Act states that one of the objects of education is the ‘promotion of a high standard of education in government schools which is provided free of charge for instruction and without discrimination on the ground of sex, race or religion.’ This is the critical distinction between public schools and the large and growing range of non-government schools, owned and operated by private providers. Even when parents decide to send their children to non-government schools, they do not relinquish their children’s rights to take up a place in a public school at any future time.

School education in Australia, whether in public or non-government schools, is now mainly financed publicly but it is only through public schools that governments guarantee students’ access to these public resources. The conditions for access to the public resources invested in non-government schools are set by those schools through their enrolment criteria. Families are not equally able to meet these enrolment conditions, financial and other.
Public schools, unlike non-government schools, have an obligation to the whole community – to provide the underlying guarantee of standards and to be open to all. Under the Act the NSW Government is responsible for mitigating educational disadvantages arising from gender differences or from geographic, economic, social, cultural, linguistic or other causes; and for meeting the needs of specific groups including Aboriginal children, children from non-English speaking backgrounds and children with disabilities. It is only through public schools that the government can be assured that these issues are being addressed. Being open to all means that public schools face a very complex set of challenges and pressures, to build the understandings, knowledge and skills that are critical to a future characterised by growing religious, cultural and ethnic diversity arising from a changing international environment.

At a national level, the role of governments in supporting both the societal and the individual benefits of education is outlined in the *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*, agreed to by Commonwealth, state and territory governments:

> Governments set the public policies that foster the pursuit of excellence, enable a diverse range of educational choices and aspirations, safeguard the entitlement of all young people to high quality schooling, promote the economic use of public resources, and uphold the contribution of schooling to a socially cohesive and culturally rich society.

*MCEETYA, 1999*

Public schools provide the best opportunity for governments to achieve both the economic use of public resources and to contribute to a socially cohesive society.

The Public Education Council believes that it is an enduring role of democratic governments in education to protect the interests of all children and young people equally in gaining access to the education they will need to enable them, as adults, to construct decent and rewarding lives for themselves. In achieving this, the needs of those children and young people whose families and communities are least able to assist them must be protected. Governments should avoid setting policies and priorities in the funding and planning of schools that provide assistance to families that are already advantaged through parental education and privilege to secure that privilege for their own children at the expense of others.

There is an argument that this obligation of governments, to secure the educational opportunities of children and young people, has become even more pressing in today’s society, characterised as it is by unheralded prosperity for many and, in particular, for well-educated professionals and the so-called ‘knowledge elites’. But prosperity is accompanied by risk and uncertainty, arising from the unpredictable effects of such factors as international competition, corporate re-structures and government de-regulation. Public education is now a more important policy lever than ever for governments to deal with the divide between those families and communities best placed to reap the benefits of economic change and those at greatest risk of being forced to the margins of social and economic life.

The Council does not accept that there are any economic or social benefits to be gained for our society from policies that create a stratified and inequitable school system, where the unequal circumstances of children’s lives outside of their school are simply reinforced and magnified inside their schools, so that some enjoy opportunities and resources for learning...
denied to others. Nor has the Council found that those who advocate such policies are able to provide evidence of countries where policies that produce such effects have proven beneficial.

**Economic benefits of public education**

There are significant economic benefits to government in having a large and socially representative public school system. They include:

- *School education as a 'public good':* A major reason for government intervention in education is to achieve a more efficient and optimal development of human capital than would otherwise result were the market left to its own devices.

- *Economies of scale:* With approximately 2,200 schools, the NSW public school system can ensure economies of scale in the provision of infrastructure and resources, including building construction and maintenance, equipment and technology, systems for managing finances, properties and human resources as well as teaching resources and professional development.

- *Offsetting costs:* The size of the public education system allows for the differential costs of educating students in different circumstances and with different needs to be spread across the whole cohort.

- *Quality control:* The Department of Education and Training must ensure that public schools provide an agreed and consistent standard of educational services. Being directly responsible for the education of a significant percentage of the state’s children means that the government can exercise quality control, through a range of accountability and reporting measures, over the teaching and learning that takes place.

- *Body of experience and expertise:* The public education system represents a vast body of educational expertise. A large number of public school teachers have a wide range of experience in different schools with diverse socio-economic profiles across the state. Many of these teachers contribute their expertise to other schools and the system as a whole, as leaders, curriculum developers and policy advisers.

- *Planning for future investment:* Having a system of public schools makes it possible to plan for future investment in infrastructure and personnel to meet changing demographic, social and educational trends.

- *Efficient use of public resources:* The public education system provides the opportunity for sharing of public resources with other sections of the community and for making strategic links with other providers, such as pre-schools and community centres.

Governments have the responsibility to act in ways that spread the costs and benefits of education fairly across the population and to ensure that our system of education contributes to greater social equality, cohesion and advancement, as well as to the formation of a highly educated and skilled workforce that promotes economic development. A socially representative public school system is important to achieving these ends. Allowing the public school system to become less representative so that it caters only for the less advantaged will have both social and economic consequences, as the per capita costs of educating students to achieve the National Goals increase.

New South Wales has a proud history of over 150 years of public investment in education and has enjoyed the significant advantages of the delivery of mass education at an affordable price. The strong tradition of public school education in this state began in the
1850s, developed with the inception of mass primary schooling in the 1870s and in the early 20th century expanded to include a statewide system of public secondary schooling. Since the introduction of the Wyndham reforms of the early 1960s, New South Wales has had a universal system of public comprehensive education open to and catering for students of all abilities and backgrounds, from Kindergarten to Year 10 and increasingly to Year 12.

In recent years however, public policy governing the balance between education as a public and a private good has been moving in a radical direction by international standards, as increasing amounts of public funds are directed to the non-government sector. The Public Education Council is concerned that as a result, the value of the public investment in public schools is being eroded and the public education system is in danger of being fractured and devalued. The Council believes that there are significant benefits to be gained from a representative public school system within which the educational benefits available to the whole community are greater than the sum of the benefits to the individual learners; and where schools can provide a framework of universal opportunity where the benefits to some are not achieved at the cost of others. The Council believes that more effort should be made to tap the full potential of such a system to deliver high quality education.

**Strengths of the NSW public school system**

Children growing up today will need to be able to deal with the deluge of information that confronts them daily. The education they receive at school must equip them with the intellectual curiosity and the capacity they will need for independent thought and reasoning and for engaging in critical inquiry and public discourse.

New South Wales has the key elements of a sound public education system, with a comprehensive and rigorous curriculum, statewide systems for assessing student achievement, qualified and committed teachers, strong student welfare and support programs, support for disadvantaged students and an ethos that welcomes all students and values each as an individual.

- **Common curriculum and explicit standards:** New South Wales schools benefit from a common curriculum framework applying to both public and non-government schools, with syllabuses from Kindergarten to Year 12 underpinned by explicit outcomes and standards. Examination of students for the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate (HSC) is undertaken by the NSW Board of Studies. In addition, the public education system develops and implements statewide assessments of students’ skills in the key areas of literacy, numeracy and computing skills at key stages. These assessments provide clear information on student achievement and inform the evaluation of existing programs and the development of new initiatives. While not mandatory for non-government schools, many independent and Catholic systemic schools also use the tests.

- **Quality teaching:** The NSW public school system has always had strict criteria in relation to qualifications required to enter teaching and in recent years strategies to enhance quality teaching include increased funding for professional development and a focus on pedagogy. These will be supported by the establishment of professional standards for teachers through the NSW Institute of Teachers from 2005.
• Values and student well-being: While all schools are expected to teach accepted values and support students’ welfare, public schools have a particular responsibility to develop shared values and ensure a supportive school environment as they accept students from all backgrounds and communities. Concern for student well-being is a core element of the role of public schools. Student welfare programs encompass everything the school community does to meet the personal, social and learning needs of students and to create a safe and secure learning environment, including supporting good attendance, developing social and leadership skills, dealing with conflict and anti-social behaviour and supporting individuals at particular risk.

• Overcoming disadvantage: One of the roles of the public system is to ensure that all schools are equally well placed to provide a high quality education for the students they enrol across vastly different communities. It is through public schools that the NSW Government can meet its obligations under the Education Act to mitigate educational disadvantage and meet the needs of specific groups of students, including Aboriginal students, students with disabilities or learning difficulties, English as a Second Language (ESL) students and students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. This obligation upon public schools has the effect of minimising resource disparities between those public schools serving the most and the least socio-economically privileged student communities. This is in contrast with the non-government sector, where the differences in parental fees among non-systemic schools produce gross disparities.

• Public accountability: Accountability to parents is one powerful form of accountability for both public and non-government schools. In addition to this, NSW public schools are held directly accountable for their overall operations by the government through a range of public reporting frameworks. Where public schools have selective enrolment criteria, these must be set publicly in an equitable way and not based upon ability to pay. Similarly, public schools are subject to requirements for transparent procedures for suspension and exclusion of their students.

• System of support for schools: The NSW public education system also has the benefit of efficient, centralised management of personnel, properties and finances. The size of the system allows for economies of scale in the provision of facilities and resources and provides opportunities for sharing of ideas and resources between schools. Within such a large system there is also necessarily a diversity of provision as different schools reflect their diverse communities. Many of the strengths of the public education system outlined above cannot be provided by individual independent schools or even by small systems.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Despite these strengths, NSW public schools are coming under increasing pressure as a result of the convergence of both global trends and local factors. Demographic and social changes, combined with economic pressures and policy decisions of state and Commonwealth governments have combined to produce a climate of insecurity in New South Wales for public education.

As a result, public education in New South Wales is now facing falling enrolments, poorly maintained infrastructure, and a decline in public confidence and teacher morale together with a perceived ambivalence towards public schools at both levels of government. The Public Education Council believes that it is essential that both the NSW Government and
the Department of Education and Training take action to ensure that the considerable public investment in public education of the last 150 years is protected and that the public school system is capable of meeting the challenge of delivering quality education into the future.

The global context – impact of political, social and economic factors

A number of global trends - political, social and economic - are impacting on the provision of public education not only in New South Wales but in all comparable countries. Major factors include:

- **Increased role of private providers and market competition**: A commitment to small government and greater reliance on markets increasingly influence social and economic priorities, with market-based competition and individual choice driving the delivery of services. There has been a trend to privatisation and use of private providers for public services, including education.

- **Increased importance of education**: Governments are giving priority to improving educational outcomes in order to raise national performance in a competitive, knowledge based economy. There are increased demands for, and rewards for, more highly educated workers in the labour market. More students are completing secondary and post-secondary education while those with low levels of education experience increased instability in employment. As a result, governments are under pressure to provide ever-increasing funding for education to meet the raised expectations.

- **Emphasis on public spending restraint and achievement of outcomes**: At the same time, there is a climate of public spending restraint, with an emphasis on accounting for investment in terms of outcomes achieved. Public service providers are under pressure to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness in securing value for money, as well as greater responsiveness to the needs of those using their services.

- **Impact of ICT on education**: The nature of education and the ways in which it can be delivered have also undergone changes as new information and communications technologies create new ways to support and organise teaching and learning. At the same time, they have expanded the need for knowledge and skills development in ICT through the curriculum.

- **Increasing social diversity**: Globalisation, market forces and technological advances have produced both winners and losers, resulting in growing affluence in some sections of the community and an increasing gap and geographical stratification between the haves and have nots. Growing cultural and linguistic diversity resulting from international migration has brought with it the benefits of greater cross-cultural awareness and understanding, diverse skills and more flexibility and openness in some communities. It has also brought with it tensions and pressures for homogeneity where individuals and communities feel threatened by change.

In considering the challenges facing schools internationally in the context of these pressures, the OECD has developed a number of scenarios describing possible outcomes for school education in the future. These scenarios emphasise the importance of strategic decisions by governments to ensure the future viability of school education (OECD, 2004).
Three possible directions for schooling are envisaged:

- **Maintaining the status quo**: One set of scenarios sees school systems continuing to be strong, with gradual evolution rather than radical change. One scenario sees the possibility of acute teacher shortages, if not addressed, leading to a major crisis.
- **Re-schooling**: Another set of scenarios envisage the reinvigoration of schooling resulting from major investment and widespread recognition for schools and their achievements, with a high priority accorded to both quality and equity.
- **De-schooling**: In these scenarios, rather than high status and generous resourcing for schools, a lack of investment and a reliance on market forces lead to the dismantling of existing school systems. These scenarios see a diverse range of learning organisations develop, with greater choice, leading to diseconomies of scale, a reduction in public accountability and greater inequalities.

The Public Education Council believes that the OECD’s work in this area is relevant for considering the future of school education in Australia. Research based on data from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 shows that while Australia’s schools produce high quality results, educational performance is less equitable than the other high performing countries of Canada, Finland, Ireland, Japan, South Korea and Sweden. Current school funding policies, which favour non-government schools and encourage diversification of school providers, will do nothing to address this inequity. ‘There is a real risk that the present funding arrangements for the private and public sectors are driving down the relative position of the public sector’ (Doherty, McGaw & O’Loghlin, 2004).

**Challenges facing NSW public schools**

In New South Wales and Australia generally, the responsibility for extending educational achievement to a more socially diverse student population, while still maintaining a high overall standard of educational achievement, falls disproportionately to the public school system. This system is expected to deliver high quality education to 70 per cent of the student population, catering for high achievers in its selective and its comprehensive schools as well as for those growing up in the most disadvantaged communities and experiencing related learning difficulties. The Council is concerned that this is expected in a climate of increasing budget restraint, but where funding policies increasingly favour non-government schools. These policies have created an uneven playing field and uncertainty in the community about the level of commitment by governments to public education for the future.

At the same time, there is considerable public concern and interest in the future of public education. The establishment of the Public Education Council itself, ‘to advise the Minister for Education and Training to ensure that the public education system retains its high standards, and to promote the public education system throughout New South Wales’, is a demonstration of that concern. The Council believes that the NSW Government, with public support, needs to position public education to meet the challenges of this new context.
The following discussion focuses on the key challenges facing NSW public schools:

1. Uneven playing field in relation to workload and resources between public and non-government schools
2. Declining enrolment share of public schools
3. Projected demographic decline in the school population
4. Changing socio-economic profile of public schools
5. Perceived lack of commitment by governments to public education
6. Low morale and loss of public confidence in public schooling

1. Uneven playing field in relation to workload and resources between public and non-government schools

Current schools funding policies promote ever-increasing choice of school by individual parents, supported through increasing government funding for non-government schools. This greater public investment in the non-government sector is occurring at the expense of public schools as it serves to widen rather than reduce the resource gap between what governments provide for students in the public schools for which they are directly responsible and what students in non-government schools are able to access through fees as well as government funding.

As a result, there is a growing gap between parental and community expectations of education and the level of resources available to public schools, especially given the responsibilities for public schools to accept all comers. Public schools, in their obligation to provide access to education for all, are increasingly doing the ‘heavy lifting’ – educating an increasing proportion of the most disadvantaged students who are most difficult and expensive to teach. The Public Education Council is concerned that this trend is not sustainable and threatens the continuing economic and social health of the public school system in this state.

While the Commonwealth is not directly responsible for schools, current Commonwealth Government policy provides greatly enhanced funding for non-government schools. This is set to continue over the quadrennium 2005-2008, so that approximately 74 per cent of Commonwealth funding for schools will go to the 32 per cent of students in non-government schools. This is in contrast to previous Commonwealth policy under which, until the early 1980s, the majority of direct Commonwealth funding went to public schools. The Commonwealth’s rationale for this imbalance in funding is that as state and territory governments are responsible for public schools, the Commonwealth must support other schools in order to promote parental choice and competition and that as all parents pay taxes, they are entitled to a share of education funding. As a result, Commonwealth subsidies to non-government schools increased steadily in real terms from 1974 to the late 1990s. Since 2000, this increase in Commonwealth funding of non-government schools has accelerated, with no account being taken of the relative resources available, through fees or other subsidies, to non-government or public schools.

The linkage of public subsidies for non-government schools to the Average Government School Recurrent Cost (AGSRC) was originally adopted when the vast majority of non-government schools operated below the resource standards in public schools. This is no longer the case, with research showing that 55 per cent of non-government school students attend schools with higher resource levels than public schools and 27 per cent attend...
schools where the income from fees alone exceeds the average resources per student in a public school (Watson, 2003).

By 2004, the Commonwealth’s funding role in education had increased to some $6.6 billion annually, of which over $4 billion was allocated to non-government schools and $2 billion to public schools (Productivity Commission 2004, cited in Ryan & Watson, 2004). Total spending by the Commonwealth on the 68 per cent of students in public schools is now exceeded by its spending on the 12 per cent of children and young people in independent, non-government schools alone.

At the state level, the NSW Government inherited and has maintained a system of funding for non-government schools that compounds the problem of inequitable Commonwealth funding. The mechanism of the 25 per cent funding link to the AGSRC takes no account of the fact that public schools bear a greater per capita cost burden in the greater proportion of educationally disadvantaged students they enrol. The 25 per cent link has been maintained since 1992, despite the fact that the Commonwealth has significantly increased its contributions to non-government schools over the same period. Maintaining the AGSRC link means that any social justice initiatives to address needs in the public sector automatically result in increases to all students in the non-government sector.

The 2002 Independent Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW (Vinson Inquiry) highlighted the fact that Commonwealth Government support to non-government schools provides up to 70 per cent of the cost of educating a student in a public school. When the New South Wales component of 25 per cent of recurrent funding is added, Catholic schools receive on average at least 80 per cent of the average recurrent cost in public schools and several of the comparatively wealthy independent schools receive between 50 and 60 per cent of the recurrent average cost. This does not include the income the non-government schools receive from fees which when added to the previous sum can mean that these schools operate at levels of recurrent expenditure that are more than double that of many public schools (Vinson, Third Report, 2002).

The most visible sign of increased Commonwealth recurrent funding is the superior investment by non-government schools in their buildings and facilities. In New South Wales per capita expenditure on capital by independent schools in the non-government sector in some years has been as much as seven times that in the public sector. It is clear that increased recurrent grants have enabled many schools to invest their private resources in buildings and facilities. This disparity in standards of facilities is advantaging non-government school authorities in marketing their schools to parents. This was supported in submissions to the Vinson Inquiry which found that the issues of inadequate teaching and learning resources, poor maintenance and sub-standard buildings and facilities in public schools compared to non-government schools were a major concern.

The effect of current school funding priorities is to exacerbate the social stratification of schooling in Australia and erode fair educational opportunity. Research in Australia and overseas on the effects of choice policies in education indicates that they essentially result in greater segmentation and sorting of students by socio-economic status and educational achievement. As cited earlier, the results of the OECD’s PISA in 2000 showed Australia’s schools to be high performing but low on equity compared to other high performing countries. The results from the 2003 PISA also show that while the relationship between socioeconomic background and performance in mathematical literacy is slightly less than
the OECD average, there still exists a distinct advantage for students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, most of whom were performing at the lower end of the proficiency levels (ACER, 2004).

It should be noted that Australian funding systems for public and non-government schools stand in contrast to most other western countries. While there is considerable diversity between countries in funding and governance of non-government schools, there are generally two categories of non-government schools – those that receive public funding and those that do not. In most cases, non-government schools which receive public funding, whether denominational or secular, are considered to be part of the state-managed system. They generally operate under the same conditions and regulations as state schools although they may be differentiated by educational philosophy, religious or ethnic affiliation or pedagogy. In general, they are funded at the same levels as public schools and cannot charge fees. In most countries true ‘independent’ schools are those that do not receive government funding and represent between five to seven per cent of total school enrolments (Nesdale, 2003, Eurydice European Unit, 2004).

Australia is unique in the extent to which non-government schools have been able to combine private resources with government funding and low regulation to achieve advantage over public schools in the inherently competitive environment in which education occurs.

The Public Education Council is concerned that non-government schools, in addition to the fees they charge, are able to access comparatively high levels of public funding, without any public scrutiny or any evidence of the standard of resources required by schools to allow their students to achieve acceptable outcomes under the National Goals for Schooling. In the absence of any transparent basis for the funding of schools that takes into account their different circumstances, the issue of inequitable resourcing for public and non-government schools will continue to be a matter of concern to those who see the future of public education being put at risk by current policy settings.

2. Declining enrolment share of public schools

New South Wales has always had a mixed system of schooling, with the state supporting both public and non-government schools. While the proportion of students in each sector remained relatively steady through the 1990s, more recently the enrolment share of public schools has declined markedly. Between 1990 and 1999 the percentage of students in public schools in New South Wales dropped from 72 to 70 per cent. Over the last five years to 2004, the public school enrolment share has fallen by 2.8 per cent – over double the rate of decline per annum recorded over the previous decade. A similar trend can be seen in all states and while the relative percentages vary, the Australian average is similar to the New South Wales figure.

This decline in enrolment may be attributed to a number of factors. The reasons given by parents for choosing private education vary and include the desire for a school with a particular religious or philosophical affiliation or pedagogical approach, or in order to advantage their children by enrolling in a school that is seen to be more successful or better resourced, or in order to have their children mixing with peers of a desired social group. The right of parents to choose their child’s school is not disputed. However, this form of
school choice is only available to those families with the means to pay school fees and the ability to satisfy other enrolment criteria.

The Public Education Council is concerned that while publicly subsidised non-government schools have provided greater choice for some, this choice comes at the expense of providing more equitable educational strategies for all. Non-government schools are being unfairly advantaged by being able to use the additional government funding to improve their facilities and services in a variety of ways so that they can better compete in the schooling market. This trend can only serve to further undermine public schools.

Partly as a response to this decline in enrolment share, the public education system has undergone a number of structural changes over the past fifteen years. Changes have included dezonning, an increase in the number of selective schools and selective streams in comprehensive schools and the creation of specialist schools, senior schools and multi-campus colleges. Many of these changes were made with the stated aim of increasing parental choice in schooling. One effect has been to transform public education in many parts of New South Wales from a neighbourhood-based system of comprehensive schools to a marketplace, in which public schools compete with one another and with non-government schools.

Research indicates that many parents still send their children to the local public primary school but for secondary schooling the situation is more complex. A national study found that for many parents, the choice depended on a combination of academic, social and extra-curricula programs combined with school policies that matched parental expectations (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000). The result is that in areas of the state where there is a density of schools and a supply of school places in excess of demographic demand, there is considerable choice, which can adversely affect the enrolments at some schools.

While this competitive environment has disadvantaged public schools in general, as they compete on an uneven basis with non-government schools, all public schools are not equally affected. Research has shown that public comprehensive high schools in lower SES communities are most affected, as they must compete with public selective, specialist and senior high schools as well as the non-government sector (Campbell & Sherington, 2004 a).

3. Projected demographic decline in the school population

Projected demographic changes over the next two decades will only serve to highlight the difficulties inherent in current policy settings. The school age population was growing overall for much of the last half of the twentieth century when policies for public funding of non-government schools were introduced. The fact that both sectors could experience growth masked to a significant extent the tensions inherent in creating two systems in competition for a share of public funding and for students. These tensions will become apparent as schools are put into competition for a dwindling pool of students in particular areas affected by enrolment decline, both within and between the public and the non-government school sectors.

The NSW Government has no policy in relation to schools planning to meet its principal obligation under the Act for the provision of public schools. Nor has it any mechanism for mediating the disputes that might occur among non-government schools in competition
with each other for students and for public funding. These circumstances are likely to compound the problems faced by public schools. Estimates by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the NSW Population Projections Group indicate that the total school age population in New South Wales is likely to fall by some 45,000-85,000 over the period 2003-2020 – a decrease of four to seven per cent.

On current trends and under current policy settings, it is likely that a disproportionately large impact of the population decline will be borne by public schools. If the decline were wholly absorbed by public schools, the public school share of primary enrolments would decline from 70.6 per cent in 2004 to about 60-64 per cent in 2020. In high schools in the same period the public school enrolment share would decline from 62.9 per cent to 57-62 per cent.

4. Changing socio-economic profile of public schools

The declining enrolment share of public schools is having a significant impact on the public system in relation to both size and composition.

A study by the ANU Centre for Economic Policy Research has shown that non-government schools have used government subsidies to increase the quality of their services, in particular to reduce student/staff ratios rather than to reduce fees. This has meant that the ten per cent increase in the enrolment share of non-government schools since 1975 has not substantially altered the socio-economic composition of their student body. A consequence is that a higher proportion of public school students now come from low SES backgrounds than 30 years ago (Ryan & Watson, 2004).

Loss of enrolments to non-government schools affects the scope of the public system to maintain economies of scale in provision and so tends to result in a less efficient system. This is compounded by the fact that the students who move to non-government schools tend to be from higher and middle SES communities, with all of the advantages that entails – higher levels of employment, education and income. These students require lower resourcing levels to attain acceptable levels of education than students from poorer and less well-educated communities, who remain in public schools.

The enrolment drift to non-government schools is having a differential impact on the cultural mix of student populations in different schools and areas of the state. Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse communities will choose public or non-government schooling for similar reasons as English speaking parents. However, recently arrived migrant students who require more intensive English language support and those from low SES migrant communities are predominantly enrolled in the public system.

The concept of a multicultural school community which allows students from many backgrounds to mix together is also changing, with the proliferation of non-government schools with an ethnic or religious affiliation. Some public schools are also becoming less culturally diverse than they were, with some parents choosing to send their children to schools with other children of similar background to themselves.

These factors have the potential to have a significant effect on the extent to which the public system and the schools of which it consists are socially representative.
5. **Perceived lack of commitment by governments to public education**

The significant increases in government funding for non-government schools, leading to the increased enrolment in the non-government sector, have created a growing perception in the Australian community that there is a lack of commitment by governments to public education.

A joint report of the Australian Council for Educational Administration and the Australian College of Education *A National Declaration for Education 2001*, stated that a disturbing consequence of the imbalance in intergovernmental funding roles and responsibilities for public and non-government schools has been a growing perception in the Australian community that public schools were being down-valued.

In particular, the directions of the Commonwealth Government’s funding policies over the past decade, and the need by the Commonwealth to justify its preferential funding treatment of non-government schools, have weakened the links between the national government and public schools. The Commonwealth Government has increasingly become an advocate for non-government schools and for the students and families they serve, at the expense of advocacy for the nation’s public schools. The Public Education Council is concerned that the NSW Government does not compound this problem.

The Vinson Inquiry highlighted concerns by teachers, parents and community members in relation to a perceived lack of leadership and advocacy by the Department of Education and Training for public schools. It was felt that the Department had failed to publicise the successes of public schools and had not fought hard enough for public education in the face of the increased funding for non-government schools.

‘... in relation to advocacy on behalf of public education, advertisements on television notwithstanding, there has been a clear view expressed to the Inquiry that more needs to be done. This is not an issue that can only be solved with more money. It is rather a matter for the extent to which senior management in the DET believes in public education, believes in their teachers, and is willing to fight for public education both behind closed doors and in public. A commitment to retaining a strong public education system in New South Wales – on the part of the government or the DET - is not something that the public currently takes for granted. In fact, there is cynicism, some despair and real anger about the way in which the public education system has been run down in recent years, and at the impact this is having on teachers, students and learning.’


In addition, a series of system and school restructures and reviews of education since the late 1980s has contributed to a sense of a lack of a clear direction for public education. The organisational restructures have generally been coupled with government requirements for greater financial efficiency. They have consumed the energies of system leaders and have had a debilitating and de-stabilising effect on the support system for NSW public schools. This is producing ambiguities around the leadership of the public school system and responsibilities for articulating its core purposes.

Changes to administrative structures over the past decade, with the progressive transformation of the original Department of Education, responsible for public schools, into a larger Department of Education and Training, have contributed to greater
efficiencies in the alignment of core functions. These changes have meant that the responsibilities of the Director-General of Education are now merged with responsibilities for TAFE NSW and aspects of other education and training provision. The strength of the connection between the office of the Director-General and public schools has as a result been diluted, compared with earlier times. The effect has been to weaken the links between the NSW Government itself and the public school system and to create a sense of greater distance between the leadership of the Department and public schools. It appears that one unintended outcome of structural change has been to give a stronger emphasis to the bureaucratic identities and responsibilities of system leaders and a lesser emphasis to their identities and responsibilities as educational leaders and advocates for the system they head. By contrast, the leaders of Catholic systemic and independent schools in the non-government sector speak for these schools alone and engage in strong public advocacy for them.

The last two decades have also seen a large number of reviews of education – of curricula, assessment, pedagogy, support services and school structures. While these reviews have been important for generating reflection and change, they can also tend to weaken public confidence in the education system, especially when combined with the regular system restructures, encouraging the public to wonder ‘What’s wrong with public schools?’

The Public Education Council is strongly of the view that the NSW Government needs to take action to give a strong public voice to public education and to remove the ambiguities in the public administration. If they are allowed to persist, the effect will be to weaken the capacity for maintaining public understanding of and confidence in public schools and the government’s commitment to them; and for open debate about policy options and directions.

6. Low teacher morale and loss of public confidence in public schooling

The issue of the relative quality of public and non-government schooling has been frequently debated in the media in recent times (for example, ‘The great schools debate’, Sydney Morning Herald, August, 2004). It is apparent that growing numbers of parents have come to believe that securing their children’s futures will best be achieved by enrolling them in a non-government school, in the belief that that will ensure they receive a high quality education and achieve good outcomes from schooling.

Parents are particularly concerned that schools provide their children with an orderly and caring environment for learning. In some areas, public schools are disadvantaged compared to non-government schools as they must accept all eligible students, including those who are more difficult and costly to teach. Schools where there is a concentration of students from troubled families and communities find it harder than schools serving more advantaged communities to establish the calm and orderly environment for learning which advantages schools in the competition for students.

The realities of market forces mean that public schools in many areas, in particular comprehensive high schools in low SES areas, are at a distinct disadvantage in attracting students. The publication of comparisons of school results that do not take into account the relative advantages of the student populations reaffirms public perceptions.
The cumulative effect of increased government support for the non-government sector and the decline in enrolments and public support has been to sap the morale of teachers in public schools. Industrial disputes related to salary cases have also had a damaging effect on both the morale and standing of public school teachers. The Vinson Inquiry identified a strongly perceived mutual lack of trust between teachers and their employers exacerbated by the 2001 teachers’ salary case. ‘Teachers express great anger over what they consider to have been the public denigration of their competence and professionalism. They see this lack of respect by their employers as having contributed to a similar attitude by the media, and by parents and students.’ In effect, public school teachers carry the burden of pursuing cases for wage increases and other industrial improvements, which, if successful, are then passed on to teachers in the private sector.

The combination of these factors – the enrolment drift to non-government schools and the growing loss of public confidence in face of the perceived lack of support for public schools by governments – has resulted in increasing divisions in the community. The Review of Non-Government Schools in NSW noted that a number of submissions referred to the ‘climate of animosity which is emerging in relationships between teachers across the sectors, between education authorities and even within some communities, and the extent to which this is working against the best interests of students in all schools’ (Grimshaw 2002, p. 15).

A demonstrated commitment by governments to public education is necessary to ensuring that the status of public schooling as the first choice of most New South Wales families is maintained. The Public Education Council’s advice sets out action that is consistent with the principle underpinning the Education Act that providing high quality schooling for students in public schools across the state should be the primary responsibility of the NSW Government.

**Current NSW responses to challenges faced by public schools**

In the face of these challenges to public education, the Public Education Council recognises that the NSW Government has implemented a number of recent initiatives with the aim of strengthening the quality of public education, addressing some resource issues and promoting public confidence in public schools.

Initiatives to strengthen the quality of public education include:

- Class size reduction program in the first three years of primary schooling, with class sizes being progressively reduced so that by 2007 classes will be reduced to a statewide average of 20 in Kindergarten, 22 in Year 1 and 24 in Year 2.
- Establishment of the NSW Institute of Teachers which will articulate professional standards of accreditation for teachers at four levels, endorse courses of initial teacher education and endorse teacher professional development courses and providers.
- Establishment of 21 additional pre-schools attached to primary schools in western and south-western Sydney and regional areas of New South Wales.
- Reforms to the employment of principals to come into effect in 2005, under which principals will have greater authority and will be more accountable for the operation and performance of their schools and will undergo annual performance assessments.
• Improved school reporting and accountability processes, with a Framework for School Development and Accountability available for schools electronically, including a model to assist in school planning and self-evaluation and clearer reporting to parents.

• A heightened emphasis on teacher professional learning with increased funding and devolution of funds to schools for professional development and the Teaching and Learning Exchange (TaLE) providing professional support and teaching resources.

• Initiatives aimed at maintaining a safe and secure environment for learning including new guidelines on suspension and expulsion of students which give principals more authority to take swift action against severely disruptive students and a number of new behavioural schools, tutorial centres and suspension centres to be built over the next three years.

• A significant investment in ICT for schools with 100,000 new computers to be delivered to schools.

Initiatives to address resource issues include:

• Work with the Commonwealth and other states and territories through the MCEETYA Schools Resourcing Taskforce to develop agreed resource standards for school education.

• Changes to regulations resulting from the Review of Non-Government Schools (Grimshaw Review) to provide enhanced accountability of non-government schools.

• Some revision to funding of non-government schools to limit the Interest Subsidy Scheme for non-government schools.

Initiatives to improve communication and promote public confidence include:

• An emphasis on improving communications, both between the Department and schools and between schools and their communities, with central coordination of promotional opportunities and advice for school staff on how to promote their schools effectively with the community.

• Values in NSW Public Schools, outlining the values that lie at the heart of public schools, was released in order to counter some of the negative publicity arising from political claims that public schools were ‘values neutral’.

• A number of awards for service to public education made each year to recognise the work and achievements of outstanding students, teachers, schools, parents and community members in supporting public schools.

• Promotion of achievements of public schools and their students through programs such as the Schools Spectacular, debates and public speaking competitions and other student performances.

• Public discussion based on the consultation document, Excellence and Innovation, which will help to set the directions and priorities for NSW public education and training over the next five to ten years.

• The establishment of the Public Education Council is itself an acknowledgement of the commitment by the government to the importance of ensuring that the public education system retains its high standards and to promoting public confidence in public schools.

The public education system has also benefited from several major reports in recent years which have focussed on curriculum renewal, teacher quality and student outcomes. These
include: *Shaping Their Future* (1997), Professor Barry McGaw’s recommendations for reform of the Higher School Certificate; *Quality Matters: Revitalising teaching: Critical times, critical choices* (2000), Dr Gregor Ramsey’s review of teacher education in New South Wales; and *Time to Teach, Time to Learn* (2003), Professor Ken Eltis’ report on the evaluation of outcomes assessment and reporting in public schools.

The Public Education Council is supportive of these initiatives by the NSW Government to enhance and promote public education in New South Wales. However, they are not enough. The Council believes that a greater and more concerted effort is now needed, particularly in the face of the onset of enrolment downturn. Effort is needed to ensure adequate and transparent funding and to raise the profile of public schools in the eyes of the public. There is also an urgent need to change policy settings that have the potential to undermine the operation of the public school system as a strong and socially representative system, and to give stronger expression to the priorities set out in the Act.

**Competing policy options for public education**

In response to the mounting challenges facing public education, both in Australia and internationally, a number of different approaches to the governance and financing of public schools have been proposed or tried. These include devolving the management of schools, bringing non-government schools more into line with or part of public education systems and proposals for the use of public/private partnerships in the management or financing of public schools. In Australia, these proposals are often responses to the need for governments to achieve a more constructive and sustainable relationship between public schools and the growing number of non-government schools, the majority of which are highly reliant on public funding.

Within Australia, the comparative advantages of more centralised or more devolved systems of management have been debated in a number of jurisdictions. Victoria, for example, has favoured a more devolved model, with self-managing schools, where greater responsibility is given to principals for local decision making. There have also been experiments to change the governance of schooling, including the ACT Schools Authority, established to place the governance of the public school system at arm’s length from the government and the creation of ‘self-governing’ schools in Victoria, with devolved financial authority. Both of these were discontinued in favour of more traditional structures, however, and the Council is not aware of any demand for such arrangements in New South Wales.

Proposals to break down the current rigid distinctions between public and non-government schools and to develop new arrangements for schools funding have been argued in two recent Australian reports. One report for the Victorian Government proposes bringing most schools into a new integrated school education system, with public funding only available to those schools within the new system (Allen Consulting Group, 2004). It is argued that these reforms would ensure fair and consistent funding across students and schools. It seems doubtful, however, that Catholic education systems or independent schools in Australia would see advantages to themselves in joining such a system in the light of the funding levels and conditions they receive under current arrangements.

A report for the Menzies Research Centre argues for parental choice of school, self-management of public schools and a minimum level of public funding for students in non-
government schools equal to the AGSRC (Caldwell & Roskam, 2002). These proposals take no account of the existing resource disparities between public and non-government schools and in fact seek to further advantage non-government schools by recommending that parental contributions to tuition fees and educational expenses should be tax-deductible. The effect would be to make school education funding even less equitable than it is now, while greatly increasing the cost to government.

The use of public/private partnerships in the provision of school education has been enthusiastically promoted in some quarters, but exactly what is meant by the partnership is very different in different jurisdictions.

A paper for the Australian Council of Deans of Education describes a number of public/private partnerships in the United Kingdom and the United States. It is argued that private providers can deliver services more efficiently and effectively, that partnerships will secure higher levels of funding, help to build social capital and promote innovation (Caldwell & Keating, 2004). However, the examples provided are largely limited to the involvement of private entities in the management of public schools, with very little evidence of scope for securing funding from private sources. Most of the initiatives described are publicly funded. The Public Education Council raises the question of why, if there were large amounts of private funding available to support schools, non-government school authorities would not have identified this as a source of funding. Instead, they have put their effort into gaining access to public funds from governments.

Charter schools, publicly funded independent schools, are another example of public/private partnerships. Charter schools are seen as a way to provide greater educational choice and innovation within the public school system but research shows that the results are mixed, with charter schools shown to be vulnerable to financial problems and mismanagement, resulting in the closure of a number of schools. In terms of academic results, some charter schools have shown improved performance and others have produced lower results than public schools. The first national comparison of test scores of students in charter and public schools has found that public school students outperform their charter school counterparts (National Education Association, 2004).

School vouchers are used in some American states to provide funding directly to families to spend on education in a school of their choice. Proponents argue that parental choice and competition between public and private schools will improve education for all. Evaluations of the program are also mixed, with some studies showing no academic improvements for students on the voucher program, while others show considerable improvements.

A recent United Kingdom government initiative will encourage public/private partnerships by helping Local Education Authorities to set up independent academies. Academies will be independent, but will forge strong partnerships, including for funding, with the community. However, the real significance of this initiative is that it is dependent on substantial government funding for rebuilding and refurbishing schools in return for the reforms.

The Public Education Council has concluded that the NSW Government should keep a watching brief on such developments in other jurisdictions. Arrangements for the governance of public education and structures for its delivery are not, however, ends in themselves. They exist only to serve the core purposes of education.
On the available evidence, it would be naive to assume that private funding is a realistic alternative to government funding for public schools. It would be ironic if the public school system were to be forced to seek private funding while the private schools gain ever-increasing proportions of public funding. It is also risky to think that the government could delegate its responsibilities to ensure high quality education for the population as a whole to a range of private providers under current policy arrangements. These lack requirements for governance, for public accountability and for setting out contractual obligations that meet the accepted standards that apply in most other sectors, other than school education, to private providers in receipt of public funding.

Significant changes to the current systemic arrangements for public schools in New South Wales could not be achieved without risk of uncertainty and disruption. Any changes should only be attempted where there is overwhelming evidence that the risks would be outweighed by significant improvements in learning outcomes for young people. Proposals for change would also need to demonstrate that they could provide greater equity in terms of student achievement, improve the public standing of public education and deliver results more efficiently and effectively than at present.

On balance, the systemic arrangements that exist in New South Wales for public schooling provide as good a foundation for future reforms as any of the approaches being taken in overseas countries. We would expect to find this, since our system of education has evolved over years within the context of our own particular system of government. In Australia, public schools are owned and operated by state and territory governments. These governments pay teacher salaries and own school buildings. There are limitations to the extent to which models developed overseas in the context of different systems of government can be simply adapted to our system of state government.

The Public Education Council believes that it is possible, through strong leadership at system and school level, for the NSW public school system to have the benefits of systemic action to achieve consistency and reliability across all schools as well as the benefits of flexibility and innovation at the local level. It will prove more beneficial, in terms of educational outcomes, for the NSW Government to give priority to enhancing teacher professionalism and to improving equality of access to quality teaching in public schools across all areas of the state and to examine proposals for change against these criteria than to embark on changes to the structures for the governance and organisation of the public school system for the sake of such change, since there is no clear evidence either inside Australia or beyond that improved student outcomes will necessarily result.

**ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The NSW public education system now more than ever needs strong leadership and clear direction. Most importantly, it needs to be clear about its core purposes, its commitment to high quality education and continuity in the provision of its programs and services.

The Public Education Council believes public schools need to be able to match the strong public advocacy of non-government schools by system leaders and principals in that sector. The NSW Government needs to take action to remove ambiguities in the public administration of education and training and ensure that the Director-General of Education and Training and other senior officers of the Department are recognised as leaders for public schools in this state.
In addition, the Council believes that all persons aspiring to leadership positions in the NSW public education system should have the ability to articulate the benefits and achievements of public schools to teachers and the general public and an ability to engage in informed debate about the work of the public school system.

The Council is concerned to avoid a situation where public schooling in New South Wales is damaged by default, through a failure by the NSW Government to develop policies that take proper account of the impact of Commonwealth funding policies on public schools in New South Wales and the implications of enrolment drift to non-government schools. The result is that its own policies are now having the effect of compounding those of the Commonwealth. There is similarly a need for the government to face the demographic and other challenges outlined in this report, to protect the public school system against potential threats.

The Council believes that there is an urgent need for the NSW Government to affirm its commitment to supporting a high quality public education system for the almost 70 per cent of students which it currently serves. The Council calls on the NSW Government to give effect in practice to the principle set out in Part 2 of the *NSW Education Act (1990)* that ‘the principal responsibility of the State in the education of children is the provision of public education’.

In this context, the Council also urges the NSW Government to ensure that the NSW Board of Studies and the NSW Institute of Teachers, in undertaking their responsibilities, recognise the primary responsibility of the government to the provision of high quality public education by advising the Minister on the implications for public schools and the public school system of any initiatives they may be proposing.

**Recommendation 1:**

*that the NSW Government affirm its commitment to the principle set out in the NSW Education Act (1990) ‘that the principal responsibility of the State in the education of children is the provision of public education’, by:*

- ensuring that all government policies and priorities in education and training are consistent with this principle;
- establishing a climate in which school and system leaders are encouraged to take a proactive role in advocating publicly the benefits, achievements and challenges of public education.*
Chapter 2:

Resourcing public education

INTRODUCTION

‘The hard jobs are left to the public sector’

Professor Herman Leonard
Kennedy School, Harvard University

All schools must be able to ‘develop fully the talents and capacities of all students’ (Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century). Adequate and appropriate resources are necessary to achieving this goal for all students; and to positioning the public system to meet its unique responsibility for ensuring universal access to the opportunities provided by high quality education to individuals and society.

Public schools are not operating in a vacuum. It is necessary to address these issues in the context of the mixed system of schooling supported by public funding in Australia.

Schools funding – a complex issue

Schools funding is notoriously complex.

Economic theorists use the concept of a ‘production function’ to describe the mathematical relationship between the input of factors of production (labour, equipment and raw materials) and output of product.

The concept of a production function is, however, difficult to apply to education. This is partly because teachers vary greatly in their attributes as does the quality of the environments in which they work and the students with whom they work. But it is also because the outputs/outcomes of education are intended to serve a wide range of purposes, and quantitative measurement of many of the desired outcomes is either difficult or conceptually impossible.

Professor Peter Karmel, 2000, pp. 4-5

While a direct quantifiable link between inputs and outputs is not available, there is a need to maintain a realistic relationship between the resources invested in schooling and the outcomes expected. The shared responsibility for schools funding across state and Commonwealth levels of government creates complexity, particularly because of the asymmetrical nature of the relationship between the roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth Government and of state and territory governments in the funding of public and non-government schools. These factors exacerbate the difficulties of achieving equitable and efficient resourcing of schools.

2 See footnote 1.
In the view of the NSW Public Education Council, there is now a growing gap between the resources generally available in public schools and the aspirations of educated and informed parents for their children’s education. Government funding for public schools does not adequately reflect the unique responsibilities of public schools in realising the entitlement of all children and young people to education. Nor does it reflect the complexities of a mixed system in which relative as well as absolute resourcing levels and quality are significant. The ongoing drift of enrolments to the non-government sector is an implicit expression of the popular belief that some public schools do not have the same capacity as their non-government counterparts to offer a quality education to all their students.

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council’s advice directs itself to three key issues:

1. Resourcing public schools to have a realistic prospect of meeting the agreed National Goals for Schooling
2. Effective management of public school resources
3. Public funding priorities in a mixed system of schooling.

Resourcing public schools to meet the National Goals for Schooling

National policy debate about the funding of schooling has become increasingly concentrated on, indeed hijacked by, the funding needs of non-government schools and continuing controversy about public funding of ‘parental choice’. The Public Education Council sees these as second order issues. The principal responsibility of the NSW Government in the education of children, as set out in the NSW Education Act 1990, is the provision of public education. To ensure that every child receives an education of the highest quality, the NSW Public Education Council believes it is essential to get the first order question resolved first, namely the adequate resourcing of public schools.

Many distracting propositions have been advanced by the Commonwealth and various other interests which have dominated public attention, including:

- Non-government schooling saves public money.
- Publicly funded ‘choice’ and competition benefits all students.
- Payment of tax entitles parents to equal amounts of public funding regardless of which school their children attend.
- The financial sacrifice by parents choosing non-government schools deserves public funding support.
- Public schools are for the needy. It is inappropriate for those with some means to sponge off the public purse by attending these schools.
- Public schools are a state responsibility. It is the role of the Commonwealth to support non-government schools.
These propositions emphasise education as a private and a positional good, where public spending is seen as a cost rather than an investment. They have the potential to position public education not as a primary means for shared social advancement or nation-building, but as a form of welfare for those excluded from private schooling.

They also reduce the priority being accorded nationally in public funding to public schools. No evidence can be produced to back successive claims by the Commonwealth Government since 1996 that its preferencing non-government over public schools in recurrent funding results from either constitutional arrangements or formal agreements with states and territories. The current imbalance is attributable entirely to political decisions by successive governments.

Missing from these debates is any reference to the underpinning value of education as a public good and to the role and responsibilities of governments in maintaining a balance between education as a public good and as a private benefit to individuals. There is now a need to give priority to the question of an adequate and reasonable level of resourcing of public schooling in the various contexts in which public schools must operate. The NSW Public Education Council believes it is essential to re-establish the appropriate ordering of public resource considerations in school education. The first order issue must be the adequate resourcing of public schools. This would then appropriately set the benchmark and put into perspective the question of public funding for other providers.

**School cost structures**

To attain the National Goals for Schooling, schools will need adequate and appropriate resources that take account of a range of factors, pressures and challenges, including:

- *stage of schooling*: curriculum offerings and class-size are important cost factors
- *school enrolment size and capital utilisation*: producing economies of scale
- *school location*: producing degrees of distance disadvantage in delivery
- *student characteristics*: socio economic status, proficiency in English, disability, cultural factors
- *teaching service characteristics*: levels of teacher experience, professional development
- *school community characteristics*: support, encouragement, expectations and resources.

The variation in occurrence and concentration of these characteristics means that the cost of delivering quality educational opportunities for all students varies greatly across different contexts and communities. Conceptually the student and community related factors can be presented as a pyramid as in Figure 1 (p. 25).
A school or system that draws most of its students from the bottom tier of the pyramid will face least expense. As the number of students drawn from the second and third tier of the pyramid grows then the provision of education to meet a given standard becomes more expensive.

**Public schools – bearing a heavier load**

Consistent with the view put by Professor Leonard, public schools bear a substantially and disproportionately heavier load of students from higher cost categories than non-government schools. Schools with greater concentrations of students with disabilities, learning difficulties, from low SES backgrounds, or Indigenous students face greater per student costs. In the case of the most educationally disadvantaged students, requiring the most intensive and costly interventions, the public system in New South Wales caters for over nine in ten students. In the other major student categories with higher cost requirements the public system caters for eight in ten such students.

Table 1 (p. 26) summarises the position for the most recent years for which information is available.
Table 1. Distribution of selected student categories in public and non-government schools in NSW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public schools (%)</th>
<th>Non-government schools (%)</th>
<th>All schools (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students from low socio-economic communities, 2001 (a)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous students, 2003 (b)</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students at remote schools, 2003 (c)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities, 2002 (d)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth funded ESL New Arrivals support 2002 (e)</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Percentage of students from lowest quartile Population Census Collectors Districts. ABS, CDATA and SEIFA 2001.
(b) ABS, Schools Australia, 2003, catalogue no.4221.0.
(c) DEST, MCEETYA Schools Geographic Location Classification 2003.
(d) Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, 2004 Table 3A.16.
(e) DEST Green Report 2002, no. 6568RESD03A. Data relates to Commonwealth funded ESL New Arrivals students across Australia. This measure is indicative only as the true percentage of students receiving support in the public system is substantially understated. New South Wales supports a large number of students requiring on-arrival ESL support in public schools who do not meet the limited provision criteria set by the Commonwealth.

The question of adequacy of funding in absolute terms also needs to be set in a dynamic context, for it is the public system which is required to carry the overwhelming load of the high resource shifts in migration, social and economic circumstance.

In addition to student and community factors the costs and effectiveness of schools and systems are affected in different ways and to substantially different degrees by other, operational factors. School size, capacity utilization and teacher supply and quality are key cost drivers which particularly affect public schools.

The responsibility of the public school system to ensure access for all students means that public schools generally must be the first to arrive and the last to leave as the population and its distribution changes. The nature of this task, in regional and remote communities as well as urban areas, means that the public system is required to bear a disproportionately heavier delivery load in areas which can not support an optimal economic size of school compared to non-government schools.
The public system also bears a disproportionate load in ensuring the adequate supply of a competent teaching service for all schools in New South Wales, public and non-government. While early career teachers earn salaries below those of more experienced teachers, their recruitment, inexperience, support needs and turnover involve cost overheads which are less obvious. It is the public system that serves as the entry point for the predominant share of new teachers, where professional competence is honed and where teething issues are resolved.

In today’s economic and policy context, non-government schools are able to operate in many ways like free-riders, above and beyond responsibility for meeting the challenges which are normal to the domain of public schooling. They can exercise discretion over the size and composition of their student intake to attract the students they want and leave to the public system the ones they do not. They have the capacity to attract teachers after their development by the public system and to access curriculum, operational policy and professional development resources developed by the public system.

**The need for greater investment in public schooling**

There is little dispute regarding these cost dimensions. There is also little dispute that the resources available to public schools are viewed as inadequate across the community and that public funding regimes are dysfunctional. These views were widely reflected in submissions to the Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools in 2004, including from the non-government sector:

*The general statement I would like to make is that we recognise that our society needs quality schooling for all children. We are a supporter, not an opponent, of state schooling. We support the call for adequate - and, indeed, better - funding for state schools. We are often portrayed as opponents, but that is far from the truth.*

Association of Independent Schools of NSW, Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools, Hansard, 27 July 2004

*...the Catholic community and the Catholic school community share the concern of the Australian community as a whole and the educational community as a whole that the present mechanisms we have in this country for funding public and non-government schools - that it is partly Commonwealth, partly state and, especially in the case of non-government schools, private income - have reached a point of dysfunction. It is a system that lets governments and other groups blame each other for inadequate resources or inadequate responsibilities.*

We think the national goals provide the basis for a long-term solution in determining the resourcing levels of Australian schools and our need to find some mechanism to measure resources and changes in resources over time.

NSW Catholic Education Commission, Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools, Hansard, 26 July 2004

These perceptions are well founded. The Vinson Inquiry identified many areas where the recurrent and capital resources were inadequate for the challenge faced by public schools. It has also been obvious to the Public Education Council from its visits to schools that, despite the best intentions and efforts of school staff, many are operating with a resource standard below that expected by the community.
The NSW Government’s funding priorities of recent years recognise the need for greater investment in public schooling. The Council commends the major initiatives that have been made including in particular those relating to the quality of teaching and the related early years class-size reduction program. The Council also commends the NSW Government for leading national research into the development of a coherent outcomes focused schools funding framework which would clarify the resource requirements of the public schools.

The Council urges the NSW Government to make clear its primary obligation to public education by ensuring that public schools have the resources required to deliver on the National Goals. Ideally this should be in concert with the Commonwealth. If that is not possible the Council believes it is incumbent on the NSW Government to give full effect to the provisions of the Education Act in setting its own funding priorities.

The principles on which the Act is based reflect underlying civic and democratic values; a belief that in a democracy education is a public good and that the community as a whole benefits from every child’s having access to a high quality education. They also reflect the belief that the principal means by which the NSW Government carries out this duty is through providing that child with a place in the public school system, without discrimination of any kind. It is also clear that this entails a duty by government to provide in public schools the resources necessary to ‘education of the highest quality’.

Parents of course may exercise their right to choose a non-government school for their children. The lack of adequate and appropriate resources in public schools should not be a determinant of such decisions.

But the clear intention of the Act, in the view of the Council, is that it is through its provision of public education that the NSW Government should set the resource standards that guide its total investment in schooling and the allocation of public funding to schools outside the public sector.

**The importance of the environment for teaching**

As is outlined in several areas of the Council’s advice, access to quality teaching is the most important variable in the education production function. Teacher salaries and related costs also represent the largest element of public schools funding. Maximising the impact of teaching effort through quality teaching is thus of critical importance to achieving the best student outcomes.

The teaching environment is critical to this objective. Aspects of the teaching environment include physical and financial resource factors, school organisation and management practices, the professional climate within the school, professional respect and support from the school and wider community and student related factors such as behaviour and academic profile. While researchers have grappled with the statistical complexities of unravelling their individual importance, there is general support from the research that these factors strongly influence teacher morale and professional satisfaction and that concentrations of professionally satisfied teachers in schools produce better results (Lamb et al, 2004).
The NSW Government has taken some important steps in recent years to improve the environment for teaching, including improvements to class sizes in the early years, professional development, and security and student behaviour management. The Council commends these initiatives.

The continuing mismatch in the extent and quality of resources and facilities available to public schools relative to their non-government counterparts, however, does not serve to build the morale of teachers in the public system.

Schools should provide modern, congenial and educationally appropriate learning spaces, technology and other resources by which teaching and learning can best be achieved. Equally, modern and professionally appropriate accommodation and facilities should be provided for teachers and school executive staff. From the Council’s experience, such conditions are the exception rather than the norm. Investing in the teaching environment is a significant means by which the government can recognise and support the professional nature of teaching, lift the morale of the teaching service and the attractiveness of the profession in NSW public schools.

The physical and professional environment for teaching is an important aspect of positioning NSW public schools as employers of choice for high quality graduates and talented teaching professionals.

**A coherent funding framework for NSW public schools linking outcome standards, context and delivery resource needs**

The Public Education Council supports the principle of resource standards based on research into actual costs of achieving outcome standards in actual school contexts. This is a means of establishing the total resources needed to enable all schools to achieve what is expected of them, as well as a means of distributing resources among schools according to the distribution of the total workload of schools. Those schools required to do more than their share of the ‘heavy lifting’ should have this recognised in the share of resources provided to them.

The NSW Government has recognised this general principle in implementing its reforms to the Higher School Certificate. The criteria that apply to curricula for these later years of schooling are set out in the government’s White Paper, *Securing Their Future: The New South Wales Government’s reforms for the Higher School Certificate*. These criteria are prescribed to assure rigour, subject integrity, relevance and equity. In setting these criteria the government had the considered advice from Professor McGaw in his final report. Important criteria to be met in approving new Board developed courses or reviewing existing courses include evidence that there are not undue difficulties in delivery, including the availability of suitably qualified teachers and other resourcing, or in satisfying equity principles. The capacity of schools to deliver the senior school curricula effectively and equitably is thus an explicit requirement, rightly articulated by the government in framing the new HSC. The Council sees these concerns as equally relevant for the primary and junior secondary stages of schooling.

Resource standards based on real evidence of the costs of schooling have the benefit of providing a defensible basis for schools funding, and for recognising the additional costs relating to those students with various forms of learning difficulties or disadvantages.
standards are consistent with the principle of basing funding on the costs of achieving actual learning outcomes for students rather than on categorising the causes of learning deficits. This in no way denies that an understanding of the causes of learning problems may be critical to developing educational strategies for dealing with them. It is the cost of those responses that needs to be recognised in the setting of resource standards and in related funding programs.

Resource standards based on real evidence of costs linked to the context of schools and the achievement of outcomes also provide a basis for research into the most efficient and effective use of resources.

New South Wales has played a lead role in a concerted effort, through the MCEETYA Schools Resourcing Taskforce, to establish the actual costs of schooling across the spectrum of operational contexts, the impact of resource levels on student learning outcomes and the central question of the recurrent funding requirements of meeting the National Goals.

This means that New South Wales is well placed to undertake the development of explicit recurrent and capital resource standards for NSW public schools, drawing on experience gained in the work of the Taskforce. It may also be worth considering the feasibility of continuing to work with other states to develop such standards, in order to share the costs of such research and development.

Developing explicit resource standards for public schools is, in the Council’s view, a necessary means of strengthening the confidence of parents and the public in the government’s commitment to public education. Dependent upon budgetary realities, these standards could be expressed in the form of ‘target standards’, to be achieved through a planned program of investment over a specified period. This would provide a more principled basis for funding public schooling in New South Wales than a continuing reliance on unpredictable annual adjustments to existing patterns of expenditure.

Establishing such resource standards would also provide a principled basis for the NSW Government, acting in concert with other state and territory governments, to influence the directions of Commonwealth schools funding policy to redress the current neglect of public schools in its funding allocation; and for setting rational and transparent policies for public funding of non-government schools in this state by the NSW Government itself.

**Private funding of public education**

There is a need, in the Public Education Council’s view, for an increased investment in our public schools by governments. The funding of public schooling by government through a fair taxation system is consistent with the view that education is a public good and that it is in the interest of the community as a whole that every child and young person have access to high quality schooling.

There is no evidence here or overseas to indicate that private funding is more than a useful supplement to adequate public funding of public schools.

In New South Wales, the *Education Act* provides that attendance at a public school must be free of charge so that any parental contributions are provided on a voluntary basis. The
most common ways of raising private funding at the school level are through voluntary 
contributions, fundraising by parents and citizens organisations and subject levies. Income 
can also be raised through hire of school resources or property, and here also systemic 
guidelines have been developed to balance local and system-wide benefits.

Some have suggested in recent times, in regard to the growing disparity in resource 
standards between public and non-government schools, that it is somehow improper for the 
children of other than the needy to use the public system. The view has been put that those 
who can afford to pay should do so by sending their children to non-government schools or 
being levied fees to attend public schools. Such arguments are seriously flawed. Our 
progressive taxation systems are designed in large part to ensure that the costs of public 
goods are borne equitably. Charging some parents for their children’s attendance at a 
public school – while not others - would undoubtedly lead to these parents questioning 
why this was so, given their greater contribution through taxation. Introducing such a fee 
would be widely interpreted as a deliberate disincentive to such parents to send their own 
children to public schools. Changing the purpose of the public system away from the 
inclusive and largely socially representative system it continues to be into a welfare safety- 
net would produce a range of educational, economic and social externalities which would 
make the task more difficult, the outcomes less desirable and yield doubtful cost 
advantages. It would be analogous to asking the ‘better heeled’ to pay higher prices for 
public transport or alternatively use taxis or their own vehicles. While there might be some 
cost savings to government through reduced train and bus operations, though even this 
would be arguable, the externalities in pollution, congestion and additional road 
infrastructure would be serious offsetting factors.

The public-private partnerships introduced by the NSW Government for the construction 
and maintenance of selected new public schools are more properly examples of finance 
and procurement policy rather than direct private contributions to public schools.

The Council is also aware of the charter school movement in the United States and the 
development of independent academies within the public system in the United Kingdom. 
There are varying definitions of a ‘charter’ school. Often a charter school denotes changes 
in the governance of existing public schools, enabling them greater flexibility in managing 
their own resources free from systemic or bureaucratic constraints, or in attracting 
additional private funding. Research into charter schools has found that improved student 
outcomes are often achieved through increasing their flexibility to select their student 
take, through increased resources that enable improved incentives for teachers, or a 
combination of these. There is no clear evidence that management by private partners of 
the same pool of resources with the same student intake produces gains.

Sponsorships are another source of direct income for schools, often in the form of funds 
donated locally for scholarships, prizes, or towards the cost of local events. The sensitive 
issues raised by larger-scale sponsorships have led to their being generally negotiated and 
managed at system level.

Where funding comes from private partners or sponsors, the Council believes that the 
benefits of the arrangement for these parties as well as for the public school system should 
be transparent.
There is a great deal of support in the New South Wales community for public schooling and the Council sees vehicles such as the Public Education Foundation as a useful means for enabling community members to express their support in altruistic ways.

The Council’s view is that private funding from philanthropy and community sources as well as from responsible and appropriate forms of sponsorship and public-private partnerships should be encouraged, but should not be seen as any form of substitute for the adequate and planned resourcing of public schools by governments. There are many advantages to be gained in strengthening the links between communities and their schools and tangible evidence of enhanced community sourced resources is part of that important connection. Even if such funding can benefit only some students, if these benefits do not harm the interests of other public school students then it would be churlish to oppose it.

It must be recognised, however, that increasing the unevenness of physical and teaching resources across public schools increases the importance of needs based funding for the allocation of the funding provided by government.

**Recommendation 2.1:**

*that the NSW Government endorse the development of explicit evidence-based recurrent and capital resource standards for NSW public schools that provide a transparent link between expected outcomes and the costs of providing the services needed to achieve those outcomes.*

This would strengthen public confidence in the government’s commitment to public education in New South Wales and in the capacity of all public schools to provide a high quality education for their students. New South Wales is well placed to undertake this development given its leading role in the work undertaken recently to develop national school resource standards through the MCEETYA Schools Resourcing Task Force.

**Effective management of public school resources**

The education production function, relating inputs to outputs to outcomes, is a complex concept in the abstract but even more so in practice. Research over many decades suggests that the relationship between resources and educational outcomes is ambiguous. Systems, schools and teachers with the same resources may utilise the resources differently, with different results for student learning. The corollary of this is not that there is no point in providing additional resources, but that existing and any additional resources brought to bear need to be applied to maximise student learning outcomes.

The current resource advantage enjoyed by the majority of non-government schools and the substantially lighter load they carry of students with higher support costs makes it understandable that many concerned with the inadequacy of resources in public schools cast all the blame on government support for non-government schooling. As outlined in Chapter 1, such resource disparities between sectors and public funding priorities which sustain them are areas of major concern that need addressing by state and Commonwealth governments.
There is clear evidence that the resources available to students are more equitably distributed among schools according to educational need within the large systems, public and Catholic, than within the independent sector where vast disparities in resource standards reflect the differences in parents’ capacity to pay fees. Nonetheless it is also true that the public system is disparate in nature and resources; and prone to many of the forces which distort the equity of resource provision which apply to school education more generally. These forces affect the distribution of workload and the resources – public, private, human, financial and social - available to schools within the public system, creating winners and losers and a less even playing field.

As proposed above, the Public Education Council sees the government’s first priority for schools resourcing being the development of a more transparent funding system for public schools based on the notion of a resource standard premised on evidence of funding levels associated with effective delivery in the various contexts in which public schools operate (recommendation 2.1). Concurrently it is essential to ensure that the structures and incentives within the public system maximise the effectiveness of that funding in achieving learning outcomes.

Two key concerns at the heart of effective resource use within the public system relate to ensuring equality of access to quality teaching for all students and strategic planning of infrastructure and human resources to respond to demographic change. Advice in relation to each of these issues is provided in Chapters 3 and 4 of this report. The Council also views the following resource effectiveness issues as important areas for consideration.

**A question of balance – devolvement versus strategic capability**

The debate about the virtues and shortcomings of devolved administration as opposed to more centralised structures in terms of organisational effectiveness is perennial. New South Wales has tested various structures over the past decade and a half, each trying to find a better balance between local responsiveness and effectiveness of delivery on the one hand and, on the other, maintaining strategic capability for system wide action. The recent restructure involving increased devolvement of administrative authority to regions and additional funding discretion to schools is the latest attempt to adjust this balance. The administration of the NSW public school system nonetheless continues to be characterised and criticised by some as unduly centralised, distant from and insensitive to the needs of local school communities. Where these perceptions arise from an underlying inadequacy of resources to meet community expectations of service delivery standards, devolution of decision-making about how best to apply the resources available may serve to reduce some tensions but, of itself, will not remove the problem of inadequacy.

The Council is not in a position to advise in any detailed sense where the balance should be struck between central prescription and regional and school flexibility in managing resources. In broad terms, however, it has the view that, consistent with a system-wide framework to safeguard equity and to enable accountability, questions of flexibility for regions and schools in applying their resources should be seen from an educational perspective. The Council does see advantage in schools having the flexibility to align their resources to the educational strategies needed to maximise learning outcomes in the light of their local circumstances.
The need for differential resourcing of schools to meet different needs

Teachers are the major resource that schools need and in New South Wales the staffing formula is the main mechanism for allocating resources among public schools. With the benefit of a coherent schools resources standard and clarification of the broad resourcing needs of schools in various contexts the Council is of the view that it would be feasible and desirable to develop a staffing formula that continues to recognise the range of common factors that confront schools; but that is also more sensitive to the persisting differences among school communities. These differences mean that some schools confront a broader range of tasks and challenges on a daily basis than others, with sustained and identifiable resource implications. Some schools, for example, have high concentrations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Data on past achievement trends indicate that such schools have greater difficulty than most in achieving acceptable standards of student retention and outcomes. Such schools may also have very high student turnover because of the transience associated with families and communities experiencing hardship. Other schools need to confront the challenges of distance. These and other factors are often predictable and long term challenges. What is needed, in the Council’s view, is a formula that provides schools with some certainty the recurrent resources appropriate for their known circumstance.

A transparent formula for sustainable resourcing of schools to meet on-going needs should be made up of:

1. A base allocation - equivalent in concept to the lowest category in the cost triangle shown in Figure 1, plus
2. Supplementary operating resources for sustained and predictable school based needs.

Existing school recurrent resourcing arrangements provide the first element essentially through the staffing formula and global budget allocations – though without the benefit of explicit linkage of resource needs to outcomes expected. The second element is currently delivered through a large number of often small and limited term ‘categorical’ programs – also determined without the benefit of explicit linkage of resource needs to outcomes expected.

The Council is of the view that the multiplicity of short-term add-on programs across the NSW public school system is a symptom of a deeper problem, namely the inadequacy of recurrent resourcing. There is a need for more systematic recognition of the real and ongoing differences in the degree of difficulty facing schools in attaining comparable curriculum outcomes. These differences can not be addressed by short term programs, particularly when the resources allocated bear little relationship to resource needs.

The approach suggested would make more transparent the resources available to individual schools, give greater certainty of sustained funding for persisting challenges, thereby enabling longer term planning and delivery structures to address the task at hand, and serve to minimise the dissipation of scarce resources caused by atomisation of programs and their administration. Schools should be responsible for determining the best use of these resources on agreed terms and be accountable for their effective use. As the bulk of the resources needed by schools translate into teaching effort and therefore teachers, existing staffing arrangements could continue to support schools.
The Council takes the view that there is logic, on grounds of equity and efficiency, for retaining a centralised staffing process to provide schools with their basic teaching staff as a matter of common entitlement. There is also logic to giving individual schools entitled to supplementary resources greater flexibility over the mix of resources needed to meet local needs and the freedom to decide whether teaching staff are best acquired through the central staffing operation or through local arrangements. The Council would expect that the same conditions of employment would apply to locally selected staff as to those appointed through the general staffing processes. While schools receiving supplementary operating resources would apply the majority of these resources in teaching effort, they could also be allowed some flexibility to vary the mix of teaching and support staff (such as youth workers or counsellors), and other resources such as teaching support materials or other equipment.

In addition to developing criteria and processes that are more sensitive to differences in needs among schools for providing them with teaching staff, there is also a need to apply the same principles to the global budget allocation. This should also consist of a base allocation adequate to the needs of schools at the ‘low cost’ end of the spectrum, with supplementary funding for those schools facing greater pressures on their budget due to local circumstances.

**Recommendation 2.2:**

that the Department of Education and Training develop new school recurrent resource allocation criteria for determining the allocation of teaching staff and global budgets for public schools to address the differing resource needs among school communities by providing:

- a base allocation to meet the common entitlement to teaching staff and other resources for all schools; and
- a variable supplementary allocation to meet sustained and predictable additional school-based needs.

These criteria and processes should be developed with the benefit of a coherent schools resources standard and clarification of the broad resourcing needs of schools in various contexts, as proposed in recommendation 2.1 above.

**Resources for specific purposes**

The Council has recommended above that priority should be given to providing schools with the recurrent resources needed for their day to day operations, through changes to the criteria and processes for allocating their teaching staff and global budgets. The Council recognises the need, in addition, for particular schools to receive resources over and above these, to deal with variable, less predictable and often resource intensive requirements. These additional resources, needed by individual schools to meet the needs of particular groups of students, may not be predictable from year to year, and should therefore be held centrally and allocated to schools based on demonstrated needs. The need to ensure recent migrant students from non English speaking backgrounds gain sufficient fluency in English to participate effectively and gain the desired outcomes from schooling is such an example. These students tend to concentrate in individual schools, though their arrival is
often known only close to the event. Some schools may need, at short notice, to provide high-level support for students with disabilities. Another kind of unpredictable need would be major property damage. Administering these resources efficiently will undoubtedly require a continued central role by either statewide program heads or regions.

Equally a strong capacity is needed to manage system wide infrastructure and to pursue strategic system-wide initiatives. There is clearly a place for some fixed term programs to deal with government policy priorities from time to time; and with the achievement of particular goals that may require resources to enable actions for a specified period. It should be noted that targeted Commonwealth programs provide supplementary funding for schools and systems that can be used for meeting sustained needs in identified schools, for funding support for particular students or groups of students and for specific initiatives.

The Council notes that these issues have been looked at in the recent restructure, continue to be an area of focus in the Excellence and Innovation review and are flagged for detailed consideration in the current Review of Equity Programs being conducted by Professor Richard Teese. The Council recommends that the general principles outlined above be used to inform these considerations.

*Increasing effectiveness through collaboration*

The Council sees great potential to increase the effectiveness of delivery within a given level of resources by developing practical structures which support, encourage and professionally reward collaborative and innovative endeavour. There are many examples of high schools working closely with feeder primary schools to more effectively manage transition and system retention. There are numerous examples, several highlighted by the Vinson Inquiry, of outstanding locally organised collaborative arrangements which are enabling a stronger curriculum with high quality teaching to be delivered within communities served by several schools than would be possible from those schools acting independently. These arrangements are further strengthened where TAFE colleges and schools are working together; and where, in some instances, universities are also involved. The Public Education Council was particularly impressed by what it saw first hand during its visits to the Riverina, Illawarra and South Coast and South Western Sydney regions.

While such local arrangements are clearly feasible, and often applauded within the system, they rightly depend very heavily on the vision and energy of the individual school and regional executives in each case. The Council is of the view that such examples would be much more prevalent if professional collaboration between schools were recognised as a highly valued and essential criterion of professional standing for school executives and as an important element of performance accountability for regional senior executives.

**Recommendation 2.3:**

*that the Department identify and promote examples of successful professional collaboration and coordinated delivery among schools.*

In order to promote collaborative initiatives, skills and experience in achieving professional collaboration and coordinated delivery amongst schools should be highly valued criteria for leadership positions in NSW public schools.
Recommendation 2.4:

that the Department support greater collaboration between schools and TAFE NSW Institutes by removing disincentives that currently act as barriers to such collaboration.

Regional senior executive officers should be responsible for facilitating collaborative arrangements between public schools and TAFE Institutes in the delivery of appropriate vocational and other programs.

Information systems

Few would argue that informed decision and planning processes based on sound evidence are essential to enhanced student learning as well as system-wide performance. High quality information systems enable the detection of and timely response to individual and systemic operational concerns as well as the identification and evaluation of new strategic directions.

The Council from its vantage point has noted many gaps and discontinuities in the Department’s information gathering and delivery systems. It is likely that education system administrators, school executives and teachers required to plan, monitor and manage effective delivery arrangements would identify many more areas where improved information systems are needed. Advice on this important issue is provided in Chapter 5.

Public funding priorities in a mixed system of schooling

The Preamble to the National Goals for Schooling acknowledges the role and responsibility of governments for balancing competing policy objectives, such as pursuit of excellence, the enabling of a diverse range of educational choices and aspirations and the need to safeguard the entitlement of all young people to high quality schooling in order to promote the economic use of public resources and to uphold the contribution of schooling to a socially cohesive and culturally rich society.

The various objects of national schooling policy, as expressed in the National Goals, can only be achieved in practice through balanced and complementary state and Commonwealth policy. In recent years policy tensions have mounted to the level of outright conflict with the increasingly divergent directions of Commonwealth and state funding priorities.

The place of choice and competition

The overriding priority of Commonwealth schools funding since 1996 has been providing choice in education through increases to recurrent grants for schools in the growing non-government sector.

The Public Education Council accepts that schooling is an arena for competition, as parents seek to advantage their own children, teachers seek employment in schools where they can
experience satisfying working lives and schools seek to enhance their own reputations and viability. The question that needs to be answered is whether or not governments are justified in using public funds to intensify such competition as a means of achieving better educational outcomes. By encouraging greater competition among schools through further financial incentives to the diverse range of non-government schools, backed by rhetoric, are public policies enhancing the environment in which all schools are operating?

The arguments put by advocates of unfettered ‘choice’ policies are that parents have a right to choose whatever specific form of schooling will most advantage their own children; and that widening choice opens up competitive forces which will improve the efficiency and quality of school education overall. There is a question whether the former, as a private benefit, should receive priority for public funding. The latter argument, suggesting that there is a public benefit in subsidising individualised parental choice of school, is not sustained by economic theory or empirical research here or overseas.

Research here and overseas on the impacts of choice policies in education clearly indicates that they result in greater segmentation and sorting of students by socio-economic status and educational achievement. There is no evidence of general improvement in the efficiency or quality of school education overall – in fact the reverse is the case. Barry McGaw, Director for Education at the OECD, noted at the Australian Council of Education Research Conference in 2002, that countries like Australia with competitive and highly stratified school education markets, while producing high levels of excellence, tend to do so at the expense of equity. McGaw challenged Australia to ‘level up’ as shown possible by other nations – by narrowing the performance gap between the lowest and best performing students while not reducing the achievements of the best. McGaw noted that Australia was at the extreme of international approaches and needed to reassess funding policies and priorities which exacerbate the stratification of and sorting within schooling markets.

McGaw, with other eminent Australians, expanded on these issues in the context of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of their high school (Indooroopilly HS in Brisbane) and public education more generally:

_Australia is unique in the extent to which non-government schools are able to combine private resources with government funding to achieve a substantial advantage over the public system._

_We do not wish to see Australian private schools compromised, nor do we believe that it is possible to turn back the clock to an earlier era. However, resources in public schools need to be raised. We are dismayed to see the original 1960s buildings at Indooroopilly High still in use. That is not true of the private schools that existed in the '50s. They have been transformed with wonderful capital developments. These growing differences among Australian schools matter._

_There are no grounds for the typical Australian fear that any attempt to achieve greater equity in education will lead to dumbing down. Levelling up can be achieved, as Canada, Finland and other countries have shown. That is what we want to see in Australia._

(Peter Doherty, Barry McGaw & Brendan O'Loghlin
‘Level the learning field’, The Australian 30 April 2004)
From a strictly economic perspective, the Commonwealth Government’s policy of ramping up the per capita subsidisation of non-government schooling to ‘provide choice in education for all families’ has been a particularly expensive and inefficient use of public resources.

Between 1995 and 2005 the Commonwealth will have raised real outlays per student on non-government schooling in Australia by some 50 per cent. Over the same period the non-government schools’ share of total enrolments are estimated to have increased by some four percentage points only.

Clearly the price has been high. Most of the increased real funding to non-government schooling has gone to raise expenditure on students in families already committed to their choice of non-government school, rather than to extending that choice, because of the Commonwealth’s deliberate policy decision to de-regulate private fees. It is hard to rationalise any economic or educational justification for this approach to public funding of parental choice by the Commonwealth Government.

Statements issued by the Commonwealth in an attempt to justify this form of public investment claim that it produces ‘savings’ to the taxpayer. Particularly in a time where growth in the school population is predicted to slow, such ‘savings’ could only occur over a lengthy period as the result of abandonment of public schooling on a significant scale by parents and state governments. If that is the purpose of this policy, then the Commonwealth needs to be asked to clearly state this intention so that the Australian public can understand the consequences. The Council would expect the NSW Government to reject this kind of specious rationale for shifting resources away from the public school sector.

It is doubtful that public resources would be saved even in the longer term. If student drift followed recent trends, from public schools into ‘low fee’-high public subsidy non-government schools, the difference in the public expenditure on these transferring students would be of a very much lesser order than often suggested by advocates of unfettered choice. By way of example, currently public funding for Catholic schools and comparably resourced schools in the independent sector, from Commonwealth and NSW Government sources, represents over 80 per cent of their recurrent expenditures. For such modest public savings to accrue, the drift would need to be representative of the full spectrum of students as portrayed in Figure 1 (p. 25) and it would need to be possible to adjust to and maintain efficient capital utilization in the public system. Realistically it is likely that neither of these conditions would prevail and per capita costs would be driven up for public provision. Potential public savings from increased participation in non-government schooling are thus essentially illusory.

There is a need for action to deal with fundamental concerns about:

- the absolute funding required by schools, and the need for a transparent and rational relationship to the tasks required of those schools; and
- the relative funding of schools from public sources, and the need for these to align with the government’s principal obligation and its economic and social priorities.
The combined effects of Commonwealth-state funding arrangements for schools

Current Commonwealth-state school funding arrangements compromise the realisation of the National Goals through their countervailing tendencies. Policies designed to produce greater equality of opportunity are at cross purposes with policies that are widening the gaps between the resources available to students growing up in the poorest circumstances and their more advantaged peers and between the public schools that serve the whole population and a growing non-government sector.

The Public Education Council supports fully the finding of the Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in New South Wales that:

\[\text{The point at issue here is not the fact of support for any one sector but rather the distribution of resources in support of the fundamental principle that all children and young people should have an equal entitlement to fulfil their educational potential.}\]


The Vinson Report sets out the effects for public schools in this state of the NSW and Commonwealth policies for the funding of non-government schools. These policies combine to produce tangible resource advantages for many non-government schools over the public counterparts. It concludes that the degree of imbalance in the resources currently available to schools between the public and the private sectors makes comparisons of their respective outcomes fraught.

The mechanism by which the NSW Government provides recurrent grants to non-government schools is through a 25 per cent linkage to NSW average public school recurrent cost. This figure is a product of both underlying cost movements (indexation to maintain the real value of recurrent funding) and betterment factors (designed to address the inadequacy of resourcing in strategic priority areas).

The effect is to pass on increases in public school costs to non-government schools automatically, regardless of whether or not they already have superior resource levels or whether the increases resulting from the government’s policy decisions for public schools have any relevance to schools in the non-government sector.

Resources that could be available to public schools to meet agreed areas of educational need are being directed by the Commonwealth to schools in the non-government sector. Its program for providing recurrent grants to non-government schools takes no account of the resources actually available to students in these schools and encourages increases in private upfront fees with no corresponding adjustment to the level of public funding provided.

Both state and Commonwealth governments are contributing increased public funding to schools in the non-government sector with the combined effect of increasing the gap between the resources available in public schools and those in an increasing proportion of non-government schools.

Drawing on a survey of 1000 independent schools’ tuition fees and on funding data from Commonwealth, state and territory governments, Watson has estimated that, nationally, 27 per cent of their students attend schools where the income from tuition fees alone now exceeds the average resources per student in public schools; and that these schools receive
$368 million per year in government grants that assist in raising their total average resources per student to more than 62 per cent above average public school resources. Overall, 55 per cent of students in these schools attend schools where the total average resource level per student is higher than the average resources in public schools (Watson, 2004).

It could be argued that public schools in some areas would find themselves at a resource disadvantage in any case, competing with schools whose income from fees alone far exceeds their own per student expenditure. But this does not mean that it is a responsible use of public funds for education by the NSW Government to place the public school system at a further resource disadvantage through funding non-government schools in addition to their high fees and other sources of private income as well as the grants they receive from the Commonwealth.

The policy rationale underlying the mechanism for funding non-government schools set out in the provisions of the NSW Education Act has clearly been overtaken by the preferential treatment of non-government schools in the funding policies of successive Commonwealth governments. The point has now been reached where the 25 per cent link policy in New South Wales is inconsistent with the principal responsibility of the state in the education of children to provide public education of the highest standard.

The fact that the NSW Government contributes to raising the resource levels in some non-government schools to a point so far above those in the public schools, which are its principal responsibility, has the potential to destroy public confidence about the adequacy of resources available in public schools generally; and, as noted previously, to waste public funding for education on purposes for which there is no educational justification.

This is particularly relevant to the government’s consideration of the second tranche of advice from the Grimshaw Review. In the Public Education Council’s view the review was undertaken within inappropriately restricted terms of reference which failed to acknowledge the relationship between the operation and funding of non-government schools and the public schools alongside which they operate. The Public Education Council is concerned that options for non-government school funding are considered in isolation from the effects on public schools and the students they serve.

Changes in the demographic context signal urgent need for new funding policy and mechanism

There is now an urgent need for the NSW Government to develop an alternative mechanism for its funding of non-government schools. This arises from the demographic outlook and the changing socio-economic composition of the public and the non-government school sectors. As discussed in Chapter 4, Strategic planning for demographic change, without any change to the factors affecting current trends, the student population of the public sector will fall as a consequence of a downturn in the total school population. This smaller population will, at the same time, have an increasing proportion of students from low SES backgrounds (Ryan & Watson, 2004). Per capita utilisation infrastructure and maintenance will also deteriorate. These factors will then combine to increase per student costs in the government sector. The retention of the 25 per cent link in these circumstances would be even more unjustifiable on either educational or financial grounds than it is now.
The Vinson Report recognises the reality that schools that have been in receipt of public funding, even if they have comparatively high levels of resources at their disposal, will not be open to any sudden or complete removal of that funding.

The Council agrees with this assessment of political realities. It is clear, however, that a circuit breaker is required to enable a frank and transparent assessment of the financial and educational consequences of existing funding arrangements and to provide a basis for greater integrity and complementarity in funding policies between public and non-government schools at state level and between the state and the Commonwealth.

The first step proposed by the Public Education Council recognises the need for the NSW Government to make explicit the values and principles that will guide any future developments in its funding policies for schools in the context of a mixed system of public and non-government schools.

These values and principles should enshrine the interests of children and young people and their shared entitlement to quality learning. They should be consistent with the principles on which the Education Act is based, in particular the responsibility of government to ensure that every child has an entitlement to an education of the highest quality and that all schools are able to provide the conditions necessary for this entitlement to be meaningful. They should also recognise that the state’s principal responsibility is the provision of public education, and that it is only through the provision of a place in a public school, free from financial or other barriers to admission, that the NSW Government can ensure that this entitlement exists for every child. They should be premised upon a policy of NSW public schools as the first choice for families, through the provision of the highest educational standards.

The Council recognises that the public funding of non-government schools in Australia is a political reality, being supported by both major political parties since the 1970s at both the Commonwealth and the state and territory levels within the federal system.

What the Council is arguing here is that it is necessary for governments to take shared responsibility for setting the level and the conditions for public funding to non-government schools with a view to ensuring that the operation of public school systems and their capacity to cater for the full range of students are not compromised.

It is also the Council’s view that governments have a responsibility to protect the interests of those children without the advantage of families and communities well-placed to protect and advance their educational interests and that providing the resources necessary to maintain a strong and socially representative public school system is the best way to do this.

**Standards for resourcing non-government schools**

The next step proposed by the Council is the application of the resource standards for funding of public schools (recommendation 2.1) to the public funding of non-government schools.

Development of resource standards has the potential to provide a circuit breaker. It provides a means of understanding better the resourcing needs of schools to meet the
National Goals, and a more rational and transparent basis for allocating public funding for public and non-government schools.

The Public Education Council proposes that the NSW Government explore the potential for a national approach to allocating public funding within and between the public and the non-government sectors. This could be taken up first with other states and territories and, depending upon the outcome, with the Commonwealth. This need not entail an identical funding approach by each state and territory, but could consist in the adoption of a common framework, underpinned by explicit principles and values, within which each jurisdiction would develop its own funding policy. If this could be achieved, there would then be a basis for developing options for Commonwealth policy to overcome the inequities and flaws that have been widely documented in its current regime.

In undertaking this approach, and in developing a schools resources standard relating to its provision of public education, the NSW Government will be well-placed to take a further step by using this standard to derive a benchmark for its funding of non-government schools. Developing such a benchmark will enable proper account to be taken of the similarities and differences in the educational tasks taken on by public and non-government schools and the mix of students that they enrol. This will then provide the government with an alternative mechanism for funding non-government schools that has greater educational and financial integrity than the current 25 per cent linkage.

**Government responsibility for ensuring equality of access to quality teaching**

Chapter 3 *Ensuring equality of access to quality teaching* sets out the challenges facing New South Wales in ensuring that there is an adequate supply of effective teachers across the state to provide all students with access to quality teaching. The government has already taken a number of significant policy decisions to meet these challenges and further measures are proposed in this report.

Ensuring that NSW public schools are well-staffed, with teachers who can give students access to the highest quality education, is a principal responsibility of the NSW Government that derives from the provisions of the *Education Act*. It is necessary for the government to guard against a situation where, through using their greater resources to attract teachers, non-government schools can counteract the effect of the government’s initiatives.

In this context it is well to note that recurrent grants provided by both Commonwealth and state governments to non-government schools are now sufficient to cover the full cost of their teachers in all but a small proportion of these schools. Around 95 per cent of all Australian school students are in schools where their teachers are publicly funded.

As a first step, the NSW Government needs to have accurate and up-to-date information on the remuneration of teachers and executive staff in those non-government schools in receipt of public funding. This will provide a factual basis on which to base judgments about whether or not there is a case for stronger conditions on its funding for non-government schools, to avoid public funding being used to subsidise inflated remuneration packages for staff in some non-government schools at the expense of funding for strategies to improve educational outcomes in other schools.

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3 At equivalent salaries to public school teachers.
The Public Education Council urges the NSW Government make public funding to non-government schools conditional upon public transparency regarding the remuneration of staffing, including senior executive and teaching staff.

**Demographic planning**

The challenges for the public school system of dealing with projected demographic changes over the next two decades are outlined in Chapter 4.

In this context, the Council is concerned by the effects of the government’s decision, in its response to the *Review of Non-government Schools in NSW* (Grimshaw, 2002) to reject the need for any considerations of demographic demand for school places in the criteria for the establishment or expansion of non-government schools or in the provision of public funding for those places.

This has created a situation where the responsibility for demographic planning, and for maintaining an economic balance between the supply of and the demand for school places falls on the public sector. That is, the planning of public education must reflect planning decisions taken by a plethora of non-government schools in response to their own target markets. The availability of public finance can restrict the speed and responsiveness of establishing public schools in new population areas, while public funding is being made available for additional places in the non-government school sector wherever non-government school authorities decide to place them.

The first report of the *Review of Non-government Schools in NSW* contained international comparisons of schools funding arrangements, which showed that governments generally only provide capital assistance for school buildings owned by private authorities where these schools operate inside a regulated and integrated public system. The current NSW Government has inherited an Interest Subsidy Scheme for non-government schools of the kind originally introduced by governments when they were faced nationally with a significant expansion in the school-age population. In such circumstances, it could have been argued that it was in the public interest to provide some funding assistance to kick-start the construction of school buildings outside, as well as within, the public sector. These circumstances no longer exist. A key concern with current non-government school funding arrangements is the lack of consideration of the underlying student demographics and the erosion of public resource efficiency where there are insufficient students to utilize available capacity. These tensions will become increasingly obvious over the coming years as the underlying primary and secondary populations decline.

**Interest Subsidy Scheme for non-government schools**

The priority for the NSW Government, consistent with the provisions of the *Education Act*, is to meet the challenges presented by demographic changes within the public education system in a way that enhances and protects the standards of education provided in public schools across the state. This challenge is exacerbated by the backlog of maintenance needs and capital works in these schools. The Interest Subsidy Scheme for non-government schools is diverting public funds that could be better used in the public sector, widening an already significant gap in average capital expenditure per student between the sectors.
The Council acknowledges that action has been taken by the government to rectify some of the anomalies and inequities in this scheme. These include the introduction of a means test, to overcome the inequity identified both in the Vinson Report and by this Council, whereby a grossly disproportionate share of the funds went to the best-resourced and highest income non-government schools.

Any public funding to be provided by the NSW Government to non-government schools through the Interest Subsidy Scheme in the future should be better targeted within the non-government sector, to allow savings to be transferred to overcome gross deficiencies in the physical infrastructure of numbers of public schools.

The Council recommends that action be taken to restrict eligibility for interest subsidies to those non-government school authorities prepared to provide improved services to students with specific needs. There is a case for providing assistance to existing non-government schools operating within similar resource parameters as public schools and needing to make provision for access for students with physical disabilities. There is also a case for providing assistance to any non-government schools seeking to provide high quality services for students with learning or behaviour problems that present a challenge to educators and where there may be a case to augment the services currently available in existing schools, public or non-government. In such situations, there should be a requirement for planning that reflects demographic realities.

Access to public funding for capital facilities in non-government schools in the future should be contingent upon the non-government owner of the buildings agreeing to an appropriate share of public ownership in the building and agreed conditions for public access to such buildings.

The Council believes that these changes would be a responsible limiting of the Interest Subsidy Scheme to proposals which align with demographic demand and that provide for student groups with special needs thereby aligning the scheme with the educational and financial objectives of the government.

**Student Transport Scheme**

An important area for consideration, raised in the Council’s advice on primary education, concerns the Student Transport Scheme. While the Council acknowledges that secondary students will need to travel further afield, it firmly believes that there is more to be lost than gained by transporting primary age children past their local public school. Following this logic it would be anomalous to retain this subsidy for non-government school students.
Recommendation 2.5:

that the NSW Government, in allocating public funds between public and non-government schools, ensure that its principal obligation under the Education Act, to provide public schools of the highest quality, is not compromised; and that public funds are not allocated to non-government schools with superior resources (either from private sources alone or in combination with Commonwealth grants).

These measures would improve the integrity, complementarity and fairness of funding policies for public and non-government schools. They also recognise the fact that providing public resources through public schools is the only way for the NSW Government to secure any child’s or young person’s entitlement to access these resources without discrimination on the ground of sex, race or religion or parental capacity to pay fees.

Recommendation 2.6:

that the NSW Government continue to work with other states and territories to achieve national agreement with the Commonwealth for a coherent national framework for school funding, recognising the need for complementary and shared responsibilities across the levels of government for resourcing public schools.

This national framework should include the development of a resource standard for recurrent and capital funding that will provide a transparent and rational basis for allocating Commonwealth funding for schools.
Chapter 3:

Ensuring equality of access to quality teaching

INTRODUCTION

The importance of quality teaching

Of all the resources that schools can provide to support learning, quality teaching is the most important. The Report of the Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales, *Quality Matters: Revitalising teaching: Critical times, critical choices*, (Ramsey Review) states:

> There is one issue that now seems to have been put to rest, judging by the current level of acceptance in so many segments of the community: by parents, who have always known it, employers, the media, the university sector, and the learned academies. This is that the teacher really does make the difference in student learning.

Ramsey, 2000, p. 12

A significant body of research has confirmed that the quality of teaching is the key school-based variable influencing students’ education outcomes. A study prepared for the Interim Committee for a NSW Institute of Teachers by Kenneth Rowe of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), found that the quality of teaching provision had the greatest influence on students’ cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes from schooling – regardless of their sex or social backgrounds (Rowe, 2003).

An overview of educational research on the role of the teacher by Professor Terence Lovat, University of Newcastle, indicates that teacher quality is the ‘single greatest factor in explaining student achievement, more important than classroom related issues such as resources, curriculum guidelines, and assessment practices, or the broader school environment such as school culture and organisation’ (Lovat, 2003, p. 2).

This is supported in a study presented at the 2003 ACER Research Conference by Professor John Hattie of the University of Auckland which found that, after students themselves who account for about 50 per cent of variance in achievement, teachers are the most significant variable, accounting for a very significant 30 per cent (Hattie, 2003).

Ensuring that all schools have access to quality teaching

Given the importance of quality teaching, a key responsibility of the NSW public education system is to ensure that all students in all public schools across the state have equal access to quality teaching.
The Report of the Teacher Education Review Taskforce, set up to provide advice to the NSW Government on the implementation of the Ramsey Review, stated:

_It is clear to the Taskforce that many people are worried about growing inequalities in education. They understand the link between student learning and good teaching. Within the school sector in particular, they are concerned about the likely effect of policies that are driving schools into an unequal competition with each other for students and, increasingly, for teachers. This is a policy challenge for education authorities the world over. It becomes most acute at times of teacher shortage._

Teacher Education Review Taskforce, 2001, p. 4

The complex market forces that affect schools produce a situation where some schools are harder to staff than others. These hard-to-staff schools typically receive disproportionate numbers of beginning teachers and experience high rates of teacher turnover. They also tend to have relatively inexperienced executive staff, with most in their first executive position.

As these schools tend to be in areas with high numbers of students from low SES communities, or in isolated rural areas, this results in a situation where those students growing up in communities affected by social and economic hardship and geographical isolation are at risk of having less than their fair share of the teaching resources of the system than those in more advantaged areas.

It also means that the beginning teachers in these schools do not have the same level of support within the school from numbers of experienced teachers and that the executive staff, many of whom are themselves comparatively new to the position, have a large responsibility to support their less experienced colleagues.

While the issue of supporting beginning teachers is critical in these hard-to-staff schools, it is also an issue for the system as a whole. With an ageing teacher workforce, it is essential that the NSW public education system manages the replacement of retiring teachers by new recruits in ways that benefit students, that reinvigorate the teaching force and minimise the risks of loss of expertise.

**What does quality teaching look like?**

The quality of teaching in schools results from a combination of the individual teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills and the school and system wide structures put in place to support good teaching. These structures include, at the school level, educational leadership and the sharing of professional expertise and at the system level, the appointment of skilled and qualified teachers, the assurance of professional standards and the provision of on-going professional development.

There is a large body of research into what makes for quality teaching and the characteristics of good teachers. While different researchers have focussed on different aspects of teaching, some broad generalisations may be drawn from the studies. The research demonstrates that teaching is a highly complex task and that quality teaching results from the combination of a number of factors. Broadly, these may be summarised as teaching that provides intellectually demanding and relevant content with a clear focus and
appropriate levels of support to enable students to learn, in an environment marked by
good relationships and mutual respect between teachers and students.

Effective teachers are well qualified and have deep knowledge of their teaching area. Their
lessons are organised as part of an overall teaching plan. They have an understanding of
how to engage students, how to make the learning relevant to them and support them in a
staged process of learning. One of the key determinants of good teaching is the quality of
the relationships between teachers and students. Good teachers know and care for their
students as individuals and ensure that the classroom is a positive learning environment
that provides support for the diversity of learning needs of individual students. Of course,
most teachers do not begin their teaching careers with all these qualities already at a high
level – they require experience and support to develop their pedagogical knowledge and
skills.

A summary of key research findings on quality teaching is provided on page 67 at the end
of this chapter.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Current strategies to enhance and promote quality teaching

In recent years two major reviews relating to the provision of public education in New
South Wales have been conducted – the Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales
by Dr Gregor Ramsey in 1999-2000 (Ramsey Review) and the Inquiry into the Provision
of Public Education in NSW by Professor Tony Vinson in 2001-2002 (Vinson Inquiry).
While the scope of these reviews was very broad, a number of findings and
recommendations of each related to ensuring high standards of teaching in schools.

Following these reviews, the NSW Government and the Department of Education and
Training implemented a number of strategies to enhance and promote quality teaching in
public schools. These include initiatives to establish professional standards for teachers,
support for professional development programs and initiatives to recruit and retain quality
teachers.

Professional standards for teachers

A key initiative has been the establishment in 2004 of the NSW Institute of Teachers,
recommended by the Ramsey Review and supported by the Vinson Inquiry. The Institute is
an important commitment to the professionalism of teachers and teaching, which will
implement a career-long framework of professional teaching standards for all teachers. The
Institute will:

- articulate professional standards of accreditation for teachers at four levels: graduate
teacher; professional competence; professional accomplishment; and professional
leadership
- introduce processes for judging teachers’ achievements of the standards
- introduce the mandatory accreditation of all beginning teachers as professionally
competent from 2005 onwards
- endorse courses of initial teacher education
- endorse teacher professional development courses and providers.
Professional development

Several recommendations of both the Ramsey Review and the Vinson Inquiry related to the need to place a renewed emphasis on the importance of pedagogy and to strengthen teacher education, including support for beginning teachers and ongoing professional development.

A renewed emphasis on teaching practice has been provided through professional development programs supporting the NSW Department of Education and Training’s model of pedagogy, outlined in the paper *Quality teaching in NSW public schools* (2003). This model of pedagogy provides a framework for considering the range of inter-connected elements that together make for high quality teaching. The model builds on the Productive Pedagogies work in Queensland and identifies three dimensions of classroom practice that have been shown by research to be linked to improved student outcomes:

- **Intellectual quality**: pedagogy that is focused on producing deep understanding of substantive concepts and skills.
- **Quality learning environment**: pedagogy that creates classrooms where students and teachers work productively in an environment clearly focused on learning.
- **Significance**: pedagogy that helps make learning meaningful and important to students.

The model was developed as a framework for teachers’ professional self-reflection and for school improvement practices in NSW public schools. It is currently being implemented in schools through the Quality Teaching Program, with schools using funds available for professional learning.

Two other recent initiatives are relevant in any consideration of ways to enhance quality teaching - the Teacher Mentor Program and the Priority Action Schools Program. The findings of both of these programs demonstrate the powerful effects of successful mentoring in raising the quality of teaching.

As induction for beginning teachers occurs at the school level, in schools with significant numbers of newly appointed teachers this is a large responsibility. A pilot Teacher Mentor Program for beginning teachers in schools which have received high numbers of beginning teachers over a number of years was implemented in 2003-2004.

The Priority Action Schools (PAS) Program was implemented as a pilot program in 2003-2004, designed to support a number of schools in communities with deep needs. The PAS Program was structured as a ‘knowledge building program’ with each school conducting a systematic evaluation of its own work, assisted by an academic partner. Many of the schools included an emphasis on pedagogy as part of their program. Some significant findings relating to quality teaching were:

- schools that focussed on professional development related to productive pedagogies or explicit and systematic teaching showed the greatest gains in student outcomes in literacy and numeracy
- larger improvements in social skills and student behaviour occurred when the focus of the school’s work was on pedagogy rather than on the management of student behaviour
many teachers noted that when they raised their expectations of their students they were consistently rewarded by improved student performance.

Quality teaching is a broad policy agenda and the Council commends these initiatives as well as existing action by the Department to define, support and promote quality professional development across the system, including:

- increased professional development funding and devolution of funds to schools, along the lines recommended by the Vinson Inquiry
- the Professional learning policy for schools and associated support to help schools plan and manage professional learning within their school communities
- a range of initiatives and materials to support schools with beginning teachers
- The School Leadership Development Strategy to support new principals and other school leaders
- the Teaching and Learning Exchange (TaLE), to provide a forum for professional dialogue as well as access to high quality teaching and learning resources
- teacher professional development to improve the teaching of literacy under the State Literacy Strategy, since 1997.

**Recruiting and retaining quality teachers**

New public school teachers are recruited each year through a range of programs. The Graduate Recruitment Program recruits new graduates based on academic performance, practicum reports and personal suitability; pre-service teacher education scholarships are offered in Mathematics, Science, Technological and Applied Studies (TAS) and English; and the Accelerated Teacher Training Program recruits skilled workers from industry to teach Mathematics, Science and TAS.

Two initiatives, *Beyond the Line* and *Beyond the Bridge*, encourage teacher education students to undertake their professional experience in schools in rural and isolated locations or in western and south western Sydney. A program has also been established to place casual teachers in designated hard-to-staff schools on a long term basis instead of schools having to find casuals to fill daily absences.

**Current challenges to the equitable distribution of quality teaching**

While the Council acknowledges the work that is being done to support quality teaching, the focus of this advice is on strategies for dealing with current barriers to the achievement of greater equity of access to quality teaching among students across all NSW public schools.

**Hard-to-staff schools**

Currently equity of access to quality teaching is compromised by the disproportionate reliance on early career teachers and by high levels of teacher turnover in some schools and areas of the state. The inequity is compounded by the fact that it is precisely the children and young people in these “hard-to-staff” schools who rely most heavily on teachers in schools for their education and whose challenging needs would best be met by greater access to experienced and accomplished practitioners.
Table 2 below shows the concentrations of these beginning teachers in a comparatively small number of schools. A total of 85 schools - 55 high schools, 22 primary schools and eight central schools - have received 506 of these beginning teachers. Thus in 2004 some three per cent of schools are responsible for providing support for about 30 per cent of teachers beginning their careers in public education.

Table 2.  Numbers of beginning teachers appointed to individual schools, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High schools</th>
<th>Primary schools</th>
<th>Central schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nos beginning teachers per school</td>
<td>Nos. schools with beginning teachers</td>
<td>Nos beginning teachers per school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DET 2004, Human Resources Directorate
Note: The total number of beginning teachers appointed in 2004 (to September) was 1,742.

Of the 506 beginning teachers in these 85 schools shown in Table 2, 362 were appointed to high schools with at least five beginning teachers; and 102 to primary schools and 42 to central schools with at least four beginning teachers. In the great majority of these schools beginning teachers comprise at least ten per cent and in some cases over 20 per cent of the teaching staff. Compounding the issue is the fact that for many schools this is a repeated pattern, with significant numbers of new teachers appointed over the last five years.

Of the 85 schools identified here, 26 were included in the Teacher Mentor Program and 15 in the Priority Action Schools Program in 2003 – 2004.

Table 3 below shows the locations by region of the 85 schools identified in Table 2. Most of these schools are located in western and south western Sydney and in rural areas, in particular western NSW.

Table 3.  Schools with concentrations of beginning teachers in 2004, by region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Nos. of schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Western Sydney</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Sydney</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western NSW</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter/Central Coast</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Sydney</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DET 2004, Human Resources Directorate
Projected teacher turnover

The system is also facing the challenge of managing the impending retirement of older, experienced teachers and the rejuvenation of the teaching workforce.

Table 4 below shows the age distribution of teachers in NSW public schools. The table indicates that 58 per cent of teachers are aged 45 or older and 36 per cent are aged 50 or older. This means that over one third of the teacher workforce can be expected to retire in the next five to ten years. This projected teacher turnover is in addition to the significant number of teachers who resign within the first few years of teaching service. It is imperative that teacher turnover be managed in ways that maintain and enhance educational opportunities and outcomes for all students.

Table 4. Age distribution of teachers in NSW public schools 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–29</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1624</td>
<td>3631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–34</td>
<td>2618</td>
<td>2848</td>
<td>5470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–39</td>
<td>2272</td>
<td>2618</td>
<td>4898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–44</td>
<td>2662</td>
<td>2917</td>
<td>5584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>6017</td>
<td>5007</td>
<td>11054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–54</td>
<td>5387</td>
<td>5817</td>
<td>11227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–59</td>
<td>2663</td>
<td>2784</td>
<td>5461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–64</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>1081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 +</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>24724</td>
<td>24624</td>
<td>49439</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DET 2004, Human Resources Directorate
Note: The total number of teachers includes an additional 91 who are not included as either primary or secondary teachers.

Figure 2 (p. 54) highlights the shifting age profile of the NSW public school teaching service and the progressively and substantially increasing numbers of teachers reaching retirement age. Annual age retirements are projected to increase substantially from some 1,200 in 2003 to around 1,600 in 2008 and reach some 1,900 by 2010.

Though student numbers are projected to decline over the next two decades, smaller class sizes in the early years plus continuing resignation and medical retirement separations at current levels when combined with the growth in age retirements will mean that some 14,500 new teacher appointments are projected to be required over the period 2005 to 2010\(^4\).

\(^4\) DET Workforce Planning projections
Figure 2.
Age profile of permanent public school teachers, NSW

Source: DET 2004, Human Resources Directorate

Figure 2 also indicates an increase in the numbers of teachers staying in the permanent teaching service past previous retirement age norms. Teachers aged 59 and over have increased in number from some 420 in 1990, to 1,300 in 2000, and some 2,200 in 2004. As a proportion of the permanent teaching service they have grown from 0.5 per cent in 1990 to 2.9 per cent in 2004 as shown in Figure 3 below. This trend is largely a function of the weight of the ‘baby boomers’ in the teaching service rather than any trend in deferment in age retirement by teachers. As such it is likely there will be a growing pool of teachers aged 59-64 years over the next seven or so years.

Figure 3.
Permanent NSW public school teachers aged 59 years or over

Source: DET 2004, Human Resources Directorate
The role of incentives and rewards in promoting quality teaching

The role of incentives and rewards in promoting quality teaching is the subject of considerable international experimentation and debate. A common strategy used to attract qualified teachers to hard-to-staff schools in the United States has been additional incentive pay or ‘signing bonuses’. While research suggests that adequate pay is significant in attracting quality candidates to teaching in the first place (Darling-Hammond & Sykes 2003), it is less clear that financial incentives alone are sufficient to attract and retain quality teachers in challenging school environments.

Research indicates that the issue of hard-to-staff schools is best addressed by making the working environment generally more professionally and educationally attractive and rewarding. In 2002 the American Southeast Center for Teaching Quality identified a number of factors that were important for influencing the recruitment and retention of teachers in particular schools. These were: strong school leadership; working with like-minded, supportive colleagues; having sufficient knowledge and skills to help all students learn; the presence of expert teachers to serve as leaders; and attracting and developing local talent.

A survey of American teachers and administrators, A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why, found that raising teacher salaries by itself wouldn’t solve the problem of staff shortages in urban schools. ‘The pay issue overlooks incentives that are significantly more important to most teachers and would-be teachers. What teachers most want is what they believe will make them more effective in their work: smaller classes and much stronger support from administrators and parents’. It was also found that new teachers felt that they needed better preparation for the real world of the classroom, such as maintaining discipline and helping students who are doing poorly. Most administrators and new teachers believed that mentoring programs for new teachers would be very effective in improving teacher quality (Public Agenda Online, 2000).

This is supported by research in Australia which indicates that teachers are most sustained in their work by factors intrinsic to their profession. For example, a 2003 survey by the Australian College of Educators (ACE) found that the five items with the highest positive impact on teacher satisfaction were: seeing students grow in self-confidence; seeing students’ understanding grow over time; seeing low achievers learn; feeling that they had positively influenced a student’s chances in life; and working with students in the classroom.

Current incentives to teach in NSW public schools

The Department offers a range of incentive benefits to teachers who accept positions in many rural or remote areas. These include: additional training and development days; a rental subsidy; incentive transfers; an annual retention benefit for teachers in 39 isolated schools and a number of locality allowances paid in addition to the salary. In addition, sponsorships are offered to people in the Accelerated Teacher Training program who are willing to teach in areas of staffing need.

The Council recognises the potential for financial incentives such as these to play a part in attracting quality teachers to challenging schools or to train in subject areas of short supply, as well as to recognise accomplishment against recognised standards. However, it
is felt that strategies to improve equitable access to quality teaching through enhancements to working conditions that foster intrinsic professional rewards may be more effective in the long term.

**ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The challenge for the NSW Government and the system is to find ways to ensure that all schools are equally well resourced to meet the learning needs of the particular student communities they serve. A significant element is providing support to enhance the professional expertise of teachers at all stages of their careers. All schools must be equally able to provide their students with access to their fair share of teaching – not only in terms of teacher numbers, but in terms of the expertise of the teaching force as a whole.

**Supporting quality teaching through ‘professional practice’ schools**

One of the most important issues is how to provide support to those identified hard-to-staff schools to ensure quality teaching for their students. The characteristics of these schools include having high numbers of beginning and early career teachers year after year, relatively inexperienced executive staff, with most in their first executive position, and high rates of teacher turnover, due to incentive transfers.

Such a situation has clear educational consequences. One school located in the far western suburbs of Sydney made the following submission to the Vinson Inquiry:

> In a recent two-year period over forty teachers (executive staff and classroom teachers) left the school. This represents approximately 80 per cent of the teaching staff. Forty-two of the forty-six current members of the executive and teaching staff are in their first appointment in those positions. In the past four years just one member of the school’s executive has remained at the school. ... Strategic planning over a period longer than a year becomes problematic. Most importantly, there is an impact on student learning outcomes. A key finding of recent research commissioned by the DET in New South Wales into HSC ‘success’ was that the teachers identified as being successful teachers were typically highly experienced with strong continuity of experience in their present school. This is a demographic totally alien to our school.

Vinson, Third Report, 2002, pp. 13-14

As the Vinson Report points out, it is precisely the students in schools like this who need high quality teachers the most. Students in low SES communities (where hard-to-staff schools are most often located) are more likely to depend heavily on schools for access to the formalised knowledge and skills that are the gateway to further education and training and many jobs.

The current situation means that effectively new teachers get their initial teaching practice in these more difficult schools with more vulnerable students and then, after two or three years, when they have developed some teaching skills, they are eligible for an incentive transfer. As a result, the schools experience constant teacher turnover and other, more desirable schools get the benefit.

In order to support the professional development of beginning and early career teachers and to take advantage of the concentrations of these teachers in particular schools, it is proposed to designate an identified group of schools as ‘professional practice’ schools.
Professional practice schools would become centres for nurturing new teachers, giving them the time and attention they need to develop their skills.

Professional practice schools would build on the successful strategies of the Teacher Mentor Program and would also apply some of the features of the Priority Action Schools (PAS) Program.

The pilot Teacher Mentor Program involves 50 teacher mentors appointed to 54 schools, at a total annual cost of $3.6 million. Each of these mentors is responsible for supporting a number of beginning teachers (from six to eight) in their school. The teacher mentors provide professional support to the new teachers by assisting with teaching strategies and resources, classroom management, team teaching, and linking to professional networks.

The PAS program provided 74 of the most needy schools with between $100,000 and $400,000 to improve learning outcomes for students and support the professional development of teachers – a total of $16.1 million in 2003 (an average of $491 per student).

The findings of both programs demonstrate the powerful effects of successful mentoring in raising quality. Evidence from PAS schools showed that team teaching, mentoring and a focus on effective pedagogy had significant effects in improving teacher performance, effectiveness and morale as well as improving student behaviour and learning outcomes.

**Professional practice schools initiative**

The purpose of the proposed professional practice schools initiative is to consolidate the pilot Teacher Mentor Program with enhanced support for schools, sustained over time. It would target similar schools, but provide them with a sufficient level of funding to support both the beginning teachers and their mentors and give the schools the responsibility to design professional development programs to meet their needs.

It is proposed that professional practice schools would, like schools in the PAS program, receive an allocation of additional funding, based on the number of beginning and early career teachers at the school and taking into account the total staffing allocation and the relative experience of the school executive.

While the proposal draws on some features of the PAS program, it is not intended that professional practice schools would replace the PAS program. The PAS program targets the most disadvantaged schools, based on a number of educational and social indicators related to the nature of their school communities, whereas professional practice schools would focus on supporting the professional development of new teachers. While the future of the PAS program will be determined following the review of Equity Programs, the Council commends the achievements of the program so far, as reported in the findings of the independent study *Knowing Makes the Difference*. If the PAS program continues, it is likely that some schools would qualify for both programs and this would need to be taken into account when determining funding levels for individual schools.
**Requirements of professional practice schools**

Professional practice schools would use the allocated funding for initiatives to support professional development for beginning and early career teachers, with a focus on quality teaching, based on the NSW model of pedagogy and taking into account the professional standards of the NSW Institute of Teachers. While the needs of the beginning teachers are most important, it would be essential to have a whole school commitment to quality teaching, through a collegial approach to improving practice.

Principals of professional practice schools should have proven success in building schools as learning communities and each professional practice school should have a core of experienced teachers with demonstrated success in comparable teaching and learning environments who would be able to act as mentors.

Principals of professional practice schools would have the discretion to use the funding to employ additional, more experienced staff and fill identified gaps in specialist knowledge through general advertisement and merit selection procedures.

Professional practice schools would undertake school-based evaluations of the program, in consultation with staff, students and parents, to determine its success and guide its future development.

Schools would be able to determine their own professional development program to meet their needs, designed around the following suggested strategies:

- **Reduced teaching load for beginning teachers.** This will allow beginning and early career teachers additional time for planning lessons, team teaching with experienced colleagues, taking part in professional development programs and professional networks within and across schools. A reduction of at least ten per cent in the teaching load is recommended (approximately two hours release from face to face teaching per week). A school could choose to employ long-term casual teachers to replace the teachers for that time.

- **Appointment of experienced teachers as mentors.** These could be teachers from within the school, or from other schools. Mentors would be expected to have a reduced teaching load in order to provide effective professional support. If appointed from outside the school, mentors would be appointed by merit selection; if from within, by an expression of interest followed by a merit selection process. Mentoring programs could also support newly appointed school executive members.

- **Strong and focused professional development partnerships with universities or other outside experts.** A professional practice school may choose to have a university partner or other expert to work with the school to identify and meet individual and group professional learning needs. This relationship would provide a basis for the development of particular teaching expertise in areas of particular relevance for the school community. This expertise would then be available, more broadly, to other schools within the public system. The university partner could also involve teacher education students in the program.

- **Additional professional and paraprofessional support.** The presence of other professionals and paraprofessionals at the professional practice schools would allow teaching staff more time to concentrate on their core teaching activities as well as
providing expertise in areas such as behaviour management. The nature and mix of support would reflect individual school needs but could include time for teachers’ aides, community liaison officers, welfare or health or youth workers to support the work of classroom teachers.

This proposal recognises the fact that a small number of schools function as a training ground for large numbers of beginning and early career teachers who then transfer to other schools and other systems. The recommendation seeks to turn this to advantage by establishing structures that facilitate the nurturing and development of beginning teachers, with likely benefits for both student outcomes and teacher retention (within the school and within the teaching profession).

The findings of the Teacher Mentor and PAS programs confirm the need for a more systemic, strategic, sustained investment in these hard-to-staff schools. With a program of high quality, professional support and the ability to develop strategies to meet the needs of students and staff, professional practice schools would have the potential to become attractive appointments for both beginning and executive staff, thus reversing the hard-to-staff stigma.

The professional practice schools initiative reconceptualises the nature of these schools from one of ‘disadvantaged’ to one of ‘professional training ground’. It thus has the potential to change the negative perception of these schools in the eyes of both teachers and the general public.

It is proposed that the cost of this initiative be met from the savings that will accrue to the Department through the gradual retirement of experienced teachers and their replacement by new teachers on a lower pay scale. The additional resources for professional practice schools would be an acknowledgement of the significant difference in staffing costs between schools with a majority of teachers at the upper end of the salary scale and those with a majority at the bottom. (See recommendation 3.7).

**Recommendation 3.1:**

that the Department designate a number of schools as ‘professional practice’ schools to nurture the development of beginning and early career teachers.

The professional practice schools initiative would be an investment in beginning teachers for the benefit of the teachers, the schools and the system as a whole. Professional practice schools would be professional training grounds for committed, enthusiastic young teachers, supported by high quality professional development programs focussed on quality teaching. The initiative has the potential to turn hard-to-staff schools into attractive appointments and to reinvigorate teaching in those schools.
Supporting quality teaching by supporting beginning teachers

Each year, between approximately 1,700 and 3,000 beginning teachers are appointed to schools across the state. Almost as many start their careers on a casual or contract basis. The Ramsey Review recommended that all beginning teachers should have a reduced teaching load in their first year of teaching and receive effective mentoring in the early years of teaching.

Beginning teachers need to have the space to deal with, reflect on and acquire knowledge about the range of complex issues which confront any beginning teacher. This includes those issues associated with the management of student behaviour. No other profession expects so much from their new practitioners in their early years on the job.

Ramsey, 2000, p. 67

The Vinson Inquiry also received many submissions relating to the need to better support beginning teachers and advocating a type of ‘internship’ or ‘apprenticeship’ program.

The Council strongly endorses Ramsey’s recommendation, and believes that this would be an investment in beginning teachers for the benefit of both the teachers and the public education system as a whole.

The Council recommends a reduction of ten per cent in the teaching load (approximately two hours release from face to face teaching per week) for teachers in the first year of a permanent appointment. While this is a modest reduction, it would allow beginning teachers additional time for planning lessons, team teaching with experienced colleagues, taking part in professional development programs and professional networks within and across schools.

The cost of this proposal is estimated to be between $5,000 – $6,000 per teacher, depending on the mix of permanent and casual replacement staff. This would amount to a comparatively small investment by the government in quality teaching for the future.

Recommendation 3.2:

that the Department give beginning teachers a reduced teaching load in their first year of teaching, to allow time for professional development to improve teaching practice.

This additional professional development time would be used for planning lessons, team teaching with experienced colleagues, taking part in professional development programs and professional networks within and across schools.
Supporting quality teaching by encouraging the mobility of late career teachers

The trend evident in Figure 3 (p. 54) of increasing numbers of late career teachers staying in the teaching service will occur as the substantial turnover of the teaching service plays out through increasing retirements and new appointments. This period of change offers substantial opportunities to strengthen the teaching service and to provide more equitable access to quality teaching. It also poses potential risks if not managed well.

The increasing group of experienced, late career teachers presents a real opportunity to strengthen the equality of access to quality teaching through their capacity to share their wisdom and skills, particularly in areas of greater need.

It is likely that the majority of these late career teachers will have been in their current schools for some time and that these schools are most often in more easily staffed areas. The majority may be comfortable and disinclined to change their life and work arrangements. However, a useful proportion may be encouraged and indeed may be interested in a short to medium term posting (eg of one to three years) to strengthen public education delivery in areas of greater need. The interests of such teachers would vary, but might include one or more of the following:

- an opportunity to give something additional and significant back to the system
- an opportunity for high esteem and recognition – eg mentoring roles
- an opportunity to revitalise and experience new challenges and localities
- an opportunity to transition to retirement, possibly with the benefit of part-time work arrangements.

From the public system’s point of view such movement offers the opportunity both to raise teaching quality in areas of need as well as refresh possibly staid settings in easier to staff locations.

Financial incentives are currently paid to recruit and retain new teachers in harder to staff settings. Similar financial incentives could also be paid to attract late career teachers to appointments to schools with generally less experienced staff. These experienced teachers would add to the strength of those schools not just through their knowledge and skills but also because their motivation is to make a professional contribution in probably the last stage of their careers. Such appointments would reduce the need to appoint as many newly recruited teachers to more difficult to staff locations.

**Recommendation 3.3:**

*that the Department trial a program to attract late career teachers to harder to staff schools with significant numbers of less experienced teachers.*

Late career teachers would assist in strengthening the quality of teaching in areas of greatest need by applying their teaching skills and experience and sharing their wisdom with less experienced teachers. Financial incentives would assist in attracting late career teachers to these positions, as would options for part time or shorter term appointments.
Supporting quality teaching through targeting positions for new graduates

The first step to equitable access to quality teaching is through a quality teacher recruitment process. This needs to occur at both systemic and school levels. Quality teacher recruitment includes the ability to closely match candidates with areas of particular need as well as the ability to attract and recruit high-calibre candidates.

Currently, high-calibre candidates are recruited to the public school system through the Graduate Recruitment Program. This program uses a combination of online applications and mid-year interviews to identify promising final-year teacher education students who are then made offers of employment subject to satisfactory completion of their course.

The Graduate Recruitment Program is part of the current Staffing Agreement with the NSW Teachers Federation. Under this agreement, up to 1,000 new graduates may be offered a position each year, although in practice the number of graduates appointed annually is usually between 400 – 600. The positions to be filled by graduates in each local area are negotiated between the School Staffing Unit and the Teachers Federation on the basis of area Teacher Workforce Profiles which include information on anticipated vacancies, teachers seeking priority and service transfers, placement of scholarship holders, retrainees, staff returning from leave and graduate recruits. Graduates who are trained in an area of identified staffing need or who are prepared to teach anywhere in the state increase their chances of employment under the program.

The program has the virtues of attempting to retain quality new graduates in the public system in the face of competition from non-government schools, which are currently able to offer employment to quality candidates prior to completion of their studies. The program is, however, labour intensive; does not always succeed in placing targeted graduates (resulting in early experiences of frustration and disillusionment); and does not always result in a good match between graduate and school.

It is proposed to replace the current Graduate Recruitment Program with a Targeted Positions Strategy. The Strategy would set aside a group of forthcoming positions for new graduates. All potential graduates would be entitled to apply for any positions in which they were interested. Selection would be on the basis of merit, with the principal of the appointing school as a member of the interview panel. A number of these appointments should be made prior to the completion of the academic year (subject to satisfactory completion of studies). This proposed strategy would be consistent with the Staffing Agreement. A similar number of positions could be set aside for new graduates as is currently the case, in locations to be negotiated with the Teachers Federation.

This Targeted Positions Strategy would:

- ensure that new graduates had an interest in the jobs and schools to which they were initially appointed
- promote a relationship between the new graduate and the principal of their school of first appointment
- encourage the appointment of new graduates to positions in the communities in which they already live
- free up resources for investment programs to recruit and support beginning teachers.
**Recommendation 3.4:**

*that the Department institute a Targeted Positions Strategy to replace the Graduate Recruitment Program to set aside a number of forthcoming positions for new graduates.*

This strategy would set aside a number of forthcoming positions for new graduates and would be consistent with the Staffing Agreement.

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**Supporting quality teaching through quality professional development**

The NSW Government has recognised the importance of professional development for fostering teacher professionalism. The 2003 election commitments largely adopted the recommendations made by the Vinson Inquiry, both significantly increasing resources for professional development and devolving responsibility for the use of these funds to schools. The Council is aware of extensive work within the Department to assist schools in forming professional learning teams to plan, implement and evaluate the professional learning component of the school plan.

The Council commends the devolution of primary responsibility for professional development planning to schools. Such a strategy will increase individual and school-based ownership of professional learning in ways that resemble other professions. This is in contrast to ‘top-down’ approaches, which evoke a deficit model rather than the belief that learning and development is an ongoing element of professionalism.

The Council believes also that the size of the public school system confers certain advantages in the mounting of high-profile professional development events. In order to build on this strength, it is proposed that an annual program of high-profile activities, focused on Key Learning Areas or pedagogical issues of priority, be implemented to supplement existing professional development provisions.

These activities would:

- involve speakers of national or international reputation
- provide a forum to recognise and to disseminate the work of leading NSW practitioners
- allow teachers to develop deeper knowledge of subject or other pedagogical specialties which research indicates is a key factor in quality teaching
- provide opportunities for professional networking across school, education area and regional boundaries
- enhance teacher and community perceptions of teacher professionalism.
Recommendation 3.5:

that the Department implement an annual program of high-profile professional development activities, focused on Key Learning Areas or pedagogical issues of priority.

These activities would supplement and reinforce school-based professional learning planning and programs.

Supporting quality teaching through professional standards

One aspect of ensuring equality of access to quality teaching is ensuring that high standards of teaching are maintained for all schools.

The professional teaching standards articulated by the NSW Institute of Teachers will provide an important mechanism for recognising teacher quality and expertise. While these professional teaching standards are necessarily broad, they provide a framework for describing good teaching, while allowing for the diversity of skills that teachers bring to the task. As the Vinson Inquiry recognised, the obverse of recognising quality and expertise is recognising and addressing inadequacies in performance. The Inquiry noted that ‘good teachers and good students stand to be alienated by failure to do something about poor teaching’.

The Council recognises that the Department has a range of clearly defined procedures for teacher assessment and for managing staff causing concern. In 2001, the Department strengthened the Teacher Assessment and Review Schedule (TARS) in consultation with the NSW Teachers Federation. Every teacher in every school undertakes the TARS process each year. The process involves conferences, observation of educational programs and review of documentation. The TARS process for principals has also been strengthened.

In addition to the TARS process, new strengthened procedures to manage teachers experiencing difficulties with their teaching were implemented in 2000. Under these procedures, if a teacher’s performance is questioned, a program of support, including a range of strategies such as professional development and team teaching, is implemented. If after ten weeks the teacher has not improved, the teacher’s case may be referred for an independent review and subsequent disciplinary action which could lead to dismissal.

Each year, a number of teachers undergo these processes and are subsequently dismissed or leave the teaching service. However, there is concern that there may be a number of teachers within the system who are underperforming and who are not referred under the procedures. This may be because principals or other supervisors are concerned to ensure natural justice, particularly in relation to early career teachers or teachers whose personal circumstances may impact on their ability to teach effectively. The Council is concerned that in spite of the TARS process and procedures for dealing with ineffective teachers, there is a public perception that poor teachers are allowed to remain within the public school system.
The Council endorses the need to ensure that the small proportion of underperforming teachers do not erode confidence in the public education system at large. In order to enhance current programs which support teacher assessment and performance, it is proposed that the Department establish a working party to develop options for addressing teacher underperformance based on the professional teaching standards of the NSW Institute of Teachers. In particular, the working party could examine ways of linking performance management with professional development, including teacher mentoring programs. The working party should ensure that processes are transparent and consider ways of enhancing public confidence in teaching standards in public schools. The proposed working party should include members of the Department, the NSW Teachers Federation, the NSW Institute of Teachers and the Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Associations of NSW.

Recommendation 3.6:

that the Department adopt the Institute of Teachers Professional Teaching Standards as an essential element in assuring teacher quality, including through the application of these explicit standards to teacher efficiency procedures.

A working party, including representatives of the Department, the NSW Teachers Federation, the NSW Institute of Teachers and the Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Associations of NSW, should be established to: develop options to address teacher underperformance based on the professional teaching standards; ensure that processes are transparent; and to take such other steps as appropriate for strengthening public understanding of and confidence in the quality of teaching in public schools.

Resourcing opportunities in changes to the workforce profile

The ‘greying’ of the teacher workforce has attracted much comment throughout developed countries. While the severity of the situation depends on factors other than just the age profile of the workforce, it is clear that the turnover of teachers must be managed to the benefit rather than the detriment of students in NSW public schools.

Teacher turnover has a number of potential advantages as well as more easily identifiable risks. New recruits can be critical to maintaining the currency and vitality of a profession. The Council has heard anecdotal evidence from principals, administrators and academics that young staff members can reinvigorate a staffroom or school of largely long-serving teachers. If beginning teachers are short-on in terms of classroom experience, they are among the most up-to-date in terms of subject specialisations. They can also be particularly adept at relating to and gaining the confidence of students, to whom they are closer in age.

The replacement of retiring teachers by new recruits also has potential advantages in freeing up salary resources for reinvestment in other areas of education and training, particularly in strategies to support equitable access to quality teaching. Departmental projections indicate these salary savings are in the order of $30 - $40 million each year from 2004 – 2010.
This is a rare and significant opportunity for governments to reap considerable rewards within existing resource levels. In order to take advantage of this opportunity, it is proposed that the NSW Government commit to reinvesting the ‘dividend’ generated by teacher turnover in the public education system. This would enable strategies such as those outlined in this advice to be implemented.

**Recommendation 3.7:**

that the NSW Government reinvest the ‘dividend’ generated by teacher turnover in the public education system, with a view to resourcing strategies such as those outlined in this advice.

The salary savings accruing from the retirement of significant numbers of teachers and their replacement by beginning teachers should be used to fund strategies to support teacher professional learning and enhance teacher quality.
Quality teaching: A summary of key research findings

There is a significant body of research into what makes for quality teaching and the characteristics of good teachers. While different researchers have focussed on different aspects of teaching, some broad themes emerge from the studies.

Work by Newmann and others in the United States on ‘authentic pedagogy’ found that teaching that emphasised higher order thinking and deep understanding, had high expectations of students and at the same time provided strong social support, was linked to better student engagement and improved student performance (Newmann, F.M. 1989, Newmann, F.M. & Associates 1996).

Shulman emphasised the importance of ‘pedagogical content knowledge’, described as comprising mastery of a body of content and mastery of effective pedagogy. The importance of content knowledge has also been supported by the Australian Council of Deans of Education and the USA National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (Shulman 1987, cited in Lovat, 2003).

The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (1998–2000) looked at possible relationships between teaching practices and enhanced student outcomes, both academic and social. The study found that classroom practices that were intellectually challenging, that made connections to problems and situations beyond the classroom, that were socially supportive and recognised cultural knowledge had significant links with improved student outcomes (Lingard & Ladwig, 2001).

The attributes of expert teachers were identified by Hattie in a study of the differences between expert and experienced teachers. Expert teachers make lesson content relevant to other learning; are better at planning lessons, monitoring and assessing student learning and providing feedback; create a positive classroom climate, respect and care for students and have deeper pedagogical content knowledge (Hattie, 2003).

In making judgements of teacher quality, experience is also a relevant factor, as it is acknowledged that newly appointed teachers do not in general have the same skills as teachers with several years of experience. Studies have suggested that less experienced teachers typically produce smaller learning gains in their students than their more experienced peers, although most studies have also discovered that the benefits of experience level off after the first five or so years of teaching (Fetler 1999; Murnane & Phillips 1981).

This is supported in the findings of An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project (AESOP) that undertook to identify the factors leading to outstanding outcomes in junior public high schools in New South Wales. The key factors were: a strong sense of team; highly qualified staff with a breadth and depth of experience; solid teaching; time on task; assessment as a catalyst for teacher cohesion; high expectations; and caring for students (Pegg, 2004).

In an overview of research in the United States into what attributes of teachers make a difference in student learning, it was found that: ‘multiple factors are involved and that teachers with a combination of attributes – knowing how to instruct, motivate, manage, and assess diverse students, strong verbal ability, sound subject matter and knowledge of effective methods for teaching that subject matter – hold the greatest promise for producing student learning’ (Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 2003).
Chapter 4:

Strategic planning for demographic change

INTRODUCTION

The importance of planning in maintaining the quality of public education

The maintenance, development and organisation of the land, buildings and other facilities are key variables in the effective provision of quality public education. They are critical to quality teaching and learning, public perceptions of safe and stimulating learning environments and the efficiency of public education.

Recruiting, developing and resourcing an adequate supply of quality teachers and school leaders is likewise an undisputed key factor in meeting the challenge of delivering the highest quality learning opportunities for public education students.

Challenges to the management of the NSW public education system

The projected downturn in the New South Wales school age population, and therefore total school enrolments, is likely to exacerbate planning and optimal use of infrastructure within public education. One effect of declining primary and secondary age cohorts over the next two decades will be excess physical capacity in many areas of the public system.

The challenge for New South Wales will be to manage this enrolment decline in ways that maintain and, ideally, enhance the quality of education service delivery for students across all areas of the state. This will entail the need to avoid driving up costs in affected areas in ways that threaten the overall quality of provision. At the same time, there is a need to ensure that any unavoidable costs and disruption associated with enrolment decline are not simply borne by students in affected areas.

This challenge is occurring in a context where the condition of public schools in New South Wales in many areas is poor when measured against the houses from which their students come. The level of investment per student in school buildings and facilities in public schools nationally, including in New South Wales, falls far short of the funding being invested in non-government schools to the point where public confidence in public schools is being put at risk.

Governments are obliged to ensure that there are sufficient places in the public school system to cater for all students who need them. Governments also have a responsibility for maintaining an economic balance between the supply of and demand for school places. This presents a challenge since the school population is not evenly spread across all localities nor moving in uniform ways. While the school population is declining in some
areas, it will be increasing in others. It is relatively easy to move teachers to keep pace with changes in demographic demand. It is more difficult for the government to reorganise under-used facilities. While the use of ‘demountable’ buildings assists this asset management task, it will often be problematic due to the variable age and nature of the existing stock of school properties and buildings (eg surplus capacity may arise where there are no demountables to remove or demand may be high where additional capacity is impractical).

**Demographic trends and projected outlook**

Following sustained growth of the primary age population in New South Wales over the last fifteen years and of the secondary age cohort over the last ten years, the outlook for the next two decades points to substantial reduction in these population groups. The primary school age cohort is projected to decline by 35,000-57,000 persons over the period 2003-2020. The secondary school age cohort is likely to fall by 21,000-40,000 from 2007-2020, reflecting the lagged impact of the primary aged population trend.

The total school age population in New South Wales is likely to fall by some 45,000-85,000 by 2020 – a decrease of 4-7 per cent.

**Figure 4.**

**NSW primary(a) and secondary(b) school age population trends 1985-2020**

The projected decline in both the primary and secondary school age populations will have significant medium to longer-term infrastructure and budgetary planning implications for the public system. While year-on-year changes may appear small, across the next decade or so the changes compound to substantial proportions. If non-government schools were

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5 The population projections used in the paper are drawn from two sources. They should be interpreted as the best estimates based on current understandings of the underlying demographic factors by the ABS on the one hand and the NSW Population Projections Group convened by the NSW Department of Infrastructure, Planning & Resources (DIPNR) on the other. They should not be regarded as representing the high - low range of possibilities.
successful in maintaining student numbers, public schools will have to adjust to the bulk of the impact of the projected decline in the school age population.

Statewide movements, however, hide disparate regional and more localised trends. The pattern experienced between the last two national Population Censuses (Figure 5, p 75) shows that over the five year period 1996-2001, when the secondary school age population in New South Wales grew by more than 20,000 persons, some localities in Sydney grew strongly whilst others experienced either modest or low levels of growth. When the trends in public school enrolments are viewed within this context (Figure 6, p 75) even more diverse patterns emerge across localities.

**ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Council’s advice directs itself to three main areas of concern:

1. Educational implications
2. Optimising the use of available assets
3. Ensuring assets are effectively maintained

**Educational implications**

For the NSW public school system, there are educational opportunities as well as risks inherent in the predicted enrolment decline outlined above.

In the best of all possible worlds, falling enrolments can bring opportunities to upgrade and renew schools. Depending upon local circumstances, there may be options for various providers of government services in particular communities to work together to bring the community improved services through re-configuring existing facilities. New, ‘fit-for-purpose’ buildings, including schools, could replace older facilities and be financed through the release of some land for redevelopment. This would enable the upgrade to be achieved within reasonable cost limits.

While the NSW Public Education Council believes that ways can be found to turn enrolment decline to educational advantage, it is also aware of the potential risks.

The impact of enrolment downturn will vary across localities. In an increasing number of localities, however, the task of providing high quality teaching and learning will become more difficult and costly unless decisive action can be taken to prevent the potential for resources to be diverted away from teaching and learning and into the maintenance of growing numbers of under-used buildings and facilities. The NSW Government may need to be prepared to make an upfront investment to contain costs and to maintain the quality of educational services over the longer term.

There are numerous examples of schools entering a downward spiral as the result of the pressures on them when they are placed in an unequal competition with surrounding schools for a dwindling pool of students. As student numbers decline, the size of the teaching staff may be reduced to a point where the school experiences difficulty in providing its students with an engaging curriculum; and with balancing the time spent on welfare and order issues and on teaching and learning.
In some areas of the state, small schools are necessary. This occurs essentially where distance and sparse population make them the best feasible option. These schools commonly reflect the communities they serve.

It is not an option, in the Council’s view, in most urban areas, in both regional and metropolitan New South Wales to allow schools to decline in enrolments to the point where their teachers are bearing an undue burden, in striving to provide their students with the same range and quality of learning opportunities that are taken for granted in larger schools. It is equally unfeasible to allow a decline to the point where excess and ageing facilities are simply a burden on the system’s budget.

It is important to note that the issues raised here are different from and not contradictory to those being debated in the United States on the merits of ‘smaller high schools’. The debate in the US is about high schools being beyond an optimal size to deliver effective service. They are particularly concerned about very large schools which are commonly much larger than our largest schools. Research in Australia and overseas indicates there are problems at both ends of the size spectrum. In addition, optimum size for primary schools will generally be substantially less than for high schools.

Assuming the most extreme, though not totally implausible, outcome that the decline in school population is wholly absorbed by public schools, the public school share of primary enrolments would decline from 70.6 per cent in 2004 to about 60-64 per cent in 2020. In high schools in the same period the public school enrolment share would decline from 62.9 per cent to 57-62 per cent.

While it is arguable whether this extreme is a realistic possibility, it is likely that a disproportionately large impact will be borne by the public sector. If, as is probable, the demographic impact combines with continuing social and funding trends to preference non-government schooling, then further residualisation will result involving additional loss of share.

The implication of such a likely development is increasing recurrent per capita costs of public schooling, due in part to recurrent property overheads but also to loss of economies of scale and probable increased requirements for supplementary support as even greater concentrations of students with educational disadvantages form. If provision is not made for these requirements, the implications for public education in many areas are dire. If provision is made in the public sector, under current arrangements, the benefit will also flow unjustifiably to non-government schools.

First and foremost it is the Council’s view that it is imperative to ensure that public schools in New South Wales are adequately resourced for their task. While it is taken as a given that these resources need to be well managed, their quantum must reflect the cost factors arising from the students and communities served. The work being undertaken by the MCEETYA Schools Resourcing Task Force is designed to clarify the differing cost structures across public and non-government schools. This work should provide benchmark measures which will inform judgements on the adequacy of existing and future per capita resourcing.

The second issue regarding the flow-on of any public education per capita funding enhancements to non-government schools will be touched on in these national
developments but will also need to be appropriately addressed in New South Wales arrangements. This issue is addressed in Chapter 3.

The Council is concerned that future demographic trends are likely to exacerbate past social and public funding trends to the substantial disadvantage of public school students by accelerating the social and educational stratification of schooling. In the Council’s view responses are called for from:

- the Commonwealth Government: re-aligning funding priorities with the educational needs of students
- the NSW Government: to ensure public schools have the necessary resources for their task
- the NSW public education system and the communities they serve: to ensure optimal structures and maximum effectiveness of resources available.

**Optimising the use of available assets**

Optimising the social and economic use of public assets is an ongoing objective, as is maintaining and enhancing public assets in line with community expectations and the demands of changing technology and curriculum. These objectives represent quite a challenge, but one which, if not met, will increasingly sap confidence in the capability of the public system to deliver schooling to acceptable standards.

Confronting the disparate school asset needs and priorities across localities within limited resources involves consideration of the optimal application of existing assets. An important factor in such considerations is the high cost of land, particularly in Sydney and other large urban areas. Under-utilised property assets, land in particular, are an opportunity cost limiting options for improved service delivery. Reducing the under-used property overhead carried by the public school system through the adaptive re-use of all or part of existing facilities or other options which improve educational services and functionality for communities remains a critical consideration.

While many accept this argument, many do not. Much of the difficulty in optimising public asset provision in school education stems from the strong local allegiances associated with public schools and concerns that once these public assets are disposed of they cannot be replaced. The corollary of this is that strategies to more optimally utilise these assets need to be open and inclusive and founded on clear and generally accepted principles and a strong research and evidence base.

Public education and training infrastructure planning and provision in New South Wales are guided by the detailed yet generic government-wide *Total Asset Management Policy*. This policy requires appropriate interpretation to reflect the circumstance of different areas of government. To assist the development of such a policy interpretation for public education the Council commends the draft principles for school education infrastructure planning on page 74.
Ensuring assets are effectively maintained

Financing the maintenance load will become more difficult as student numbers decline since several recurrent funding streams are determined by per capita based formula.

A second major challenge is meeting the rising expectations of communities and staff for high standard facilities and the resources required to bridge the gap between existing facilities and those expected standards.

While steps are being taken as part of the restructure process to better address these issues, and substantial funds have been allocated in recent years, a substantial backlog is perceived to persist. ‘So far as the majority of teachers, students and parents are concerned, the maintenance and refurbishment of the education estate has been neglected and fitfully managed for such an extended period that the tag “povo”’, aptly describes its standing relative to the private sector’ (Vinson, 2002, Second Report, p. 83).

The decline in the school age population provides an opportunity for a quantum enhancement in public education that should be made to work to the benefit of public schools by:

- highlighting the need for, and providing the opportunity for creating, a more optimal utilisation of existing assets and
- providing the opportunity to lift the quality and extent of human and physical resources applied to the schooling of public education students within current real budget levels.

Recommendation 4.1:

*that the Minister commission a detailed study of the projected demographic outlook and the implications for public schooling in New South Wales.*

The study would form an essential part of regional planning and consultation processes. The timing for such a study is opportune as updated small area population projections are due for release by the NSW Population Group early in 2005.

Recommendation 4.2:

*that the Minister commission a consultation paper, designed for use within the public education community, to develop an understanding of the issues relating to the options for dealing with projected demographic change.*

The paper should usefully include suggested ‘trip-wire’ considerations which would set in train regional and community educational evaluation, consultation and planning processes. This paper could then provide a guide to regions and communities having to deal with declining demographics and enrolments.

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6 A term devised by some students to denote what they consider to be the poverty stricken state of school buildings and equipment in public schools.
Recommendation 4.3:

that the NSW Government recognise and make financial provision for increasing real per capita costs to maintain quality educational opportunities for public education students in future decades of demographic decline.

The projected demographic decline, combined with current social and public policy trends, is likely to accelerate the social and educational stratification of schooling and to drive up per student costs in the public sector. Recognising that there are competing priorities confronting government, the projected decline in total student numbers provides some opportunity within current real budget levels of meeting the challenges of providing public schools with the resources they need to do the tasks expected of them.

Strategies for improving infrastructure planning and provision

Guiding principles for school education infrastructure planning

While NSW agencies operate within a well articulated asset management policy framework - the Total Asset Management Policy - which details the broad criteria, considerations and processes involved, the Public Education Council suggests the following principles would facilitate improved practical application of these policies:

- **Plan regionally** – local communities and regions need to understand the capacity of existing education and training provision and its weaknesses; and be partners in planning new developments.
- **Service delivery objectives should drive change** – while physical, financial and human resource factors will frame the consideration of options, including possible disposal of assets, it is important that the arguments for enhanced service delivery stand in their own right. It is equally important that cost saving considerations not be perceived as the “real” driver of proposals for change.
- **Use open and inclusive processes** – with active engagement of parents, community and staff in each stage.
- **Take it step by step** – (1) map issues and processes; (2) identify feasible options for strengthened educational provision; (3) identify preferred options.
- **There should be significant reinvestment of funds from asset disposals in the community ceding an asset** – while there are cogent arguments that educational outcomes across the state are best served by redistributing resources to areas of highest need there needs to be sufficient incentive for regional communities to constructively engage in the planning process.
- **Where improved educational delivery options are constrained by local concern for loss of public assets the option should be available to separate the two issues by transferring under-utilised school facilities to some form of public asset trust.**
Changes in student populations and public school enrolments, 1996-2001

Figure 5.

Change in 5-14 and 15-19 year old population, 1996-2001
Sydney Statistical District

Figure 6.

Change in government school enrolments, 1996-2001
Statistical Sub-divisions within Sydney Statistical Division
Chapter 5:

Information systems and organisational intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Good information is essential to support student achievement and organisational effectiveness

The capability for planning and for making decisions informed by a body of sound evidence is essential for highly effective organisations. In a public education system, this is particularly so because of the scale and diversity of the services it provides, the complexity of outcomes and ends to be served, and its public accountability responsibilities. Schools and the system as a whole need high quality information systems to support individual student learning, the detection of and effective response to operational concerns and the identification and evaluation of new strategic directions.

Well developed information systems and the strategic intelligence they can provide are also essential to promoting constructive dialogue among those with an interest in decisions, since a clear and accepted understanding of the matters at issue, and the nature of challenges to be overcome, is critical to finding agreed ways forward.

Need for improved information systems to support the public education system

The Public Education Council has found in the course of its work that the information systems of the Department of Education and Training fall significantly short of serving these purposes.

While it is true that New South Wales has led other jurisdictions in Australia for many years in the area of standardised assessment of educational outcomes, particularly the basic skills, it has lagged other jurisdictions in information systems necessary to assist education and training policy and planning for children and young people. There continue to be significant gaps in key data areas, a lack of strategically important data linkages and underdeveloped analytical and user delivery systems.

Some examples, noted by the Council, of information not gathered or systemically compiled include:

- student transport scheme usage by level of schooling and sector
- system data on in-area and out-of-area enrolments and their sources (1)
- system data on prior-to-school early childhood education (1)
- beyond the basic skills in statewide skills tests
longitudinal data on student curriculum participation, levels of achievements and pathways taken through schooling and to post school destinations.

- teaching service characteristics.

(1) It is noted that these items have recently been added to School Enrolment forms following the Council’s advice on early childhood and primary education. Systems to compile this data systematically are yet to be developed.

There are no doubt many other areas of need which would be identified by school, regional and statewide program areas.

In the view of the Council, the information and organisational intelligence systems operating within the Department fall short of what is needed in the best interests of public education. The Council sees value in drawing on what has been achieved in comparable jurisdictions, to determine priorities for improving NSW education and training information systems.

**ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Information systems as a strategic priority**

It is clear that concerns and risks relating to the use of information are likely to have been factors limiting progress on information system development. The Council is well aware that the task of managing access to and use of information is complex. There are real risks to public schools where information concerning its operations and performance is accessed by external interests and used inappropriately or unfairly. To avoid gathering important data, however, due to fear of access or misuse, does not serve the interests of public schools. There is an obvious tension between these two concerns, which is heightened in a competitive schooling environment, especially one with a less than even playing field. In such an environment, for example, there is a concern to protect what might be reasonably seen as ‘commercial-in-confidence’ information about the operations and performance of public schools. In addition to public schools having to ‘do the heavier lifting’ with fewer resources, they also have statutory reporting and information access requirements which do not apply to non-government schools. The Council’s view is that policies need to be developed for managing access to and use of information, rather than avoiding the collection of information required for planning and decision-making.

The Council appreciates that the NSW Government has grappled with these issues whilst framing the data access framework set out in the Regulations to the *Education Act*. These regulations, which proscribe the release of specified data or their use in other than particular ways, are founded on experience and research identifying those data release purposes that do not serve the public interest. Particularly relevant in framing of these provisions was the expert and independent advice from the HSC reviewer, Professor Barry McGaw.

Based on this precedent, the Council believes that an external review by a respected individual or team with substantial experience in education and training information systems is the best means of identifying gaps and development needs. Major information system development for a large and diverse public education system like the New South Wales one will involve substantial resources as well as expertise. Such developments are
unlikely to receive priority over the many competing service delivery demands on the Department. If the Department is required simply to absorb this task, little progress is likely.

The Council urges the Minister to support strongly the development of comprehensive information systems by the Department to support student learning, school and system management and improvement, and provide the essential foundation for evidence based strategic policy and planning. This will entail additional funding for this purpose, to which conditions should be attached that include the achievement of specified objectives and outcomes.

**Recommendation 5.1:**

*that the NSW Government institute a project to benchmark NSW education and training information systems against other comparable jurisdictions and determine strategic priorities for information systems development.*

An external review by a respected individual/team with substantial experience in education and training information systems is recommended as the best means of identifying gaps and development needs.

**Recommendation 5.2:**

*that the NSW Government give favourable consideration to a budget enhancement to fund priority system developments.*

Given that major information system development will likely continue to receive lesser priority than the many competing service delivery demands on the Department, budget supplementation will be essential if substantial progress is to be made.

**Improving service delivery – responding to parent and community views**

The recommendations made in the preceding section relate to what is commonly described as ‘hard’ data. This is an essential and large part of the information required. In addition, planning and managing quality school education services also requires understanding of the experiences, perceptions and views of students, parents and the broader community. It similarly needs a sound understanding of the views of teachers and other staff in schools.

It is essential that individual schools and the NSW public school system as a whole be capable of combining the strengths of a large and representative system with responsiveness to the aspirations of today’s families for their children and their communities.

The Council believes that the public education system needs to build in ways of capturing the perceptions of parents, students and the community, their experiences – good and bad –
and their ideas for how services might be improved. Principals and teachers gather such information first hand in their various interactions with their communities. Principals, in particular, play a key leadership role within their community and need to develop a firm understanding of community interests in order to advance the standing and quality of service of their school. The understandings of school staff of their local communities are a key source of authentic and essential operational knowledge. These understandings need to be supplemented by regional and system-wide perspectives, to enable understanding of how the system as a whole is viewed and how schools might be supported to better serve their communities.

There are many structures and processes for gathering and consolidating the perceptions, experiences and expectations of parents and the broader community. In the view of the Council a critical element in any approach to be adopted is to ensure effective input from those most concerned: students and their families.

Gathering such intelligence, and putting it to useful effect in the operations of the Department, will result in better services to the community as a whole and to students and their families, who will feel their views have a real place in the ongoing administration of public education in New South Wales and in shaping its future directions.

**Recommendation 5.3:**

*that the Department develop a strategic capacity to gather and consolidate the views, experiences and expectations of parents and the broader community concerning their public schools and the system more generally.*
Chapter 6:

Early childhood education – building blocks for life and learning

**INTRODUCTION**

The importance of early childhood experiences to lifelong health and wellbeing

The foundations for lifelong health and wellbeing are laid down in the first years of life. Children’s experiences during the early years shape their physical, emotional, social and cognitive development for years to come. Dr Clyde Hertzman, Canadian expert in population health, summarises:

> Children who have good early childhood experiences before age 6 in stimulating, nurturing environments have better outcomes throughout their life and the earlier they have these experiences, the better the result. They have better school grades, better self esteem, fewer social problems, and fewer health problems and are less likely to be teen parents, use drugs or be involved in crime.


Hertzman is one of a group of international researchers, including Australian Professors Fiona Stanley and Alan Hayes, whose work has underscored the importance of early childhood experiences to later health and wellbeing. Drawing on many scientific disciplines, this body of research:

- reveals the integrated nature of children’s development in the early years, such that it is fruitless to attempt to separate physical health from cognitive development, or care from education
- demonstrates the interrelationship of nature and nurture – children’s early experiences directly affect ‘the wiring of the pathways of the brain’ (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p.5), which in turn affects their capacity to interact positively with their environment
- highlights the importance of relationships as the building blocks of human development, thus emphasising the importance of supporting children by strengthening families and communities
- underlines the ‘gradient effect’ for developmental health whereby the effects of socio-economic status are pervasive across outcomes – from physical and mental health, to behavioural adjustment, literacy, and achievement in mathematics – and persist over the lifespan (Keating & Hertzman, 1999)
- explains that developmental health and wellbeing ‘is a population phenomenon rather than a purely individual affair’ (Keating & Hertzman, 1999, p.3) and that the greater the socioeconomic disparity within a broad population, the greater the risk of compromised outcomes for all members of that population.
Early childhood – a window of opportunity for governments

Recent research highlights children’s vulnerability during the early years of life. We should not however, interpret this work as a ‘counsel of despair’ (Edgar, 2002, p.1). Early development is shaped by the interplay among ‘sources of vulnerability and sources of resilience’ (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, p.4). The latter include an easy temperament, good health, the presence of a caring adult, and ‘external sources of support, such as a supportive teacher, supportive school environment, which encourage and reinforce coping’ (Ochiltree, 2001, p.13). These can make all the difference between a child establishing ‘fragile or sturdy foundations’ for life (NSW Parenting Centre, 2003, p.1).

It used to be thought that education began and ended at the school gate. It is now understood that learning is an integral part of children’s development and that the once conventional distinction between the education and care of young children is unhelpful (OECD, Starting Strong, 2001, p.14). Supporting early childhood education is a whole-of-government responsibility, which is shared in Australia across Commonwealth, state and local jurisdictions.

Governments can have a profound influence on the conditions of early childhood. These early years provide governments with a window of opportunity for initiatives to promote resilience and wellbeing in children and families. Such initiatives are in our collective best interest. The entrants to the workforce of 2025 will be born next year (cf. McCain & Mustard, 1999, p.2). While we may not yet understand fully what jobs they will enter, their contribution to economic wellbeing will be vital. Socially the importance of an emotionally competent, well-adapted and engaged population is equally great.

A cost effective investment

Investment in helping our youngest citizens get off to a strong start is cost effective – in our interest as taxpayers as well as fellow human beings. The most detailed cost-benefit analyses of early childhood intervention programs have been undertaken in the United States. Studies of various high profile programs have estimated returns of between four and seven dollars for every taxpayer dollar spent (NIEER, 2003; Vimpani, Patton & Hayes, 2002; Karoly et al, 1998). According to one researcher, the rate of return on the Perry Pre-school program ‘was higher than the long-term rate of return on investments in the U.S. stock market’ (Barnett, 2000, p.601).

Savings and benefits accrue across a range of domains. For example:

- participants in the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention project in North Carolina were more than 20 percentage points less likely to have required special education
- participants in the Prenatal/Early Infancy Project in Elmira, New York (PEIP) experienced 33 per cent fewer emergency room visits through to age 4
- participants in the Perry Pre-school program had earnings at age 27 that were 60 per cent higher than the control group (Karoly et al, 1998).

Looking more broadly, one of the most significant ways early intervention programs save money is through a reduction in crime (Australian National Crime Prevention, 1999, pp.42-3).
The cost-benefit methodology produces economically powerful arguments. To complete such analyses, however, requires patience and commitment on the part of governments. The NSW Government’s Families First Evaluation Strategy recognises that it will be two to five years before population-based indicators show a decrease in risk factors, and five to ten years before they show an improvement in positive and healthy development. For long-term change in educational outcomes we will have to wait ten to fifteen years (Families First, 2002, pp. 5-6). The NSW Public Education Council commends the NSW Government’s adoption of this forward-looking strategy, which will facilitate detailed understandings of how best to support children and families in this state.

A central role for the public school system

Public schools have always played an important role in early childhood education by providing quality learning opportunities for children in Kindergarten, Years 1 and 2. The Department of Education and Training has a responsibility to support public schools directly in meeting their responsibility to provide a positive start to school for all their students; and, in doing so, to set the standard for all schools.

Children who have developmentally rich experiences in their prior-to-school years are less likely to require additional support at school, to repeat years, or to drop out. It is now time to recognise that public schools are primary sources of expertise in children’s learning; and that the public school system is well placed to play a more active role, along with other agencies, in shaping the circumstances that affect children’s learning in the years prior to the start of formal schooling.

There are direct benefits for the public education system in supporting early learning beyond the school gate, especially since public schools enrol the vast majority of children whose circumstances place them at educational risk. A stronger profile for public schools in the early years is also a positive means of challenging the drift of primary-school enrolments to the non-government school sector.

The Public Education Council commends the NSW Government’s current initiatives to support children’s development and wellbeing in the early years – particularly the reduction of class sizes from Kindergarten to Year 2 and Families First. The recommendations contained in this advice seek to maximise the returns on this investment.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Existing policy framework

Australian and international policy settings

In Australia, responsibility for early childhood education (broadly understood) is shared by Commonwealth, state and local governments across a number of portfolios. Within New South Wales, primary state-level responsibility is split between the Department of Community Services (DoCS) and the Department of Education and Training (DET). Internationally, such a mixed arrangement is common and reflects the fact that services for children between the ages of 0 and 8 years have developed in response to diverse objectives, including educational reform, philanthropic concern for children’s wellbeing, and facilitating women’s participation in the labour market.
Spreading responsibility for the development and learning of young children has some risks. The OECD’s comparative analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy found that ‘countries are more likely to provide quality, accessible services when they take a systemic and co-ordinated approach to ECEC policy’ (OECD, *Starting Strong*, 2001, p.127). Well-connected services are especially important for children with special needs, or whose parents face challenges additional to those of caring for a young child (Corter, 2001).

Some jurisdictions have sought to address the need for co-ordination through structural reform. Both England and Sweden, for example, moved responsibility for early childhood services from the welfare system to the education system in the late 1990s (Moss, 2001). Conversely, in Victoria all prior-to-school services fall within the ambit of the Department of Human Services. Ultimately, however, connectedness is less a matter of structures than it is of shared understandings and strong interagency relationships (Moss, 2001; Pugh, 2001).

In New South Wales, interagency approaches have been preferred over structural change. Families First is the NSW Government’s primary commitment to community strengthening and ‘joined-up’ government for the benefit of young children and their families:

*Families First aims to change the organisational practices of agencies from reactive management to prevention and early intervention, and from working singularly to working collaboratively. That is, it is as much about changing the way government ‘does business’ as it is about providing new services.*

Families First, 2002, p.6

Introduced in 1999, $117.5 million over four years to June 2006 has been allocated to the initiative, which combines universal, targeted and specialised programs. The Council has been impressed by the work of Families First and its capacity to leverage existing investments. Such strategies may not obviate the need to supplement funding in some areas.

**A diverse early childhood sector in New South Wales**

The early childhood sector in New South Wales comprises an array of services, including pre-school, long day care, occasional care, mobile services, family day care, home-based care and adjunct services such as a childcare worker in a neighbourhood centre or in a family support program. Diversity exists in governance and funding arrangements as well as service type. For example, in 2002, 735 of 899 pre-schools were community managed, 85 were privately managed, and 79 were run by the Department of Education and Training. Approximately 75 per cent of long day care centres were under private management, while 25 per cent were community managed (Rice and Press, 2003, pp. 10-11). Within the privately managed segment, some enterprises are commercial while others are not-for-profit, though both may receive public funding via the Commonwealth Child Care benefit. In addition, there is diversity within the school sector, which provides early childhood education during the infant years (K-2).

Diversity within the early childhood sector can broaden the range of options available to parents. This can benefit children, particularly when ECEC services facilitate employment that increases family income levels. It also challenges governments to ensure that increasing commercial provision (Kirby, 2003) does not compromise children’s rights to
quality services. While evidence for the efficacy of high-quality programs is extensive, there is no evidence in support of mediocre programs (Weikart & Schweinhart, 1992).

Ingredients of quality include:

- well trained staff
- good relationships between staff and parents
- appropriate children to staff ratios
- appropriate group sizes.

The Council urges the government to retain its focus on children as the primary consumers of early childhood education and care as the sector evolves to meet changing family and community needs.

**New South Wales commitment to a child-centred policy framework**

The NSW Government already has a policy framework to support early child development and learning. This framework includes:

- *Early Childhood Services Policy for New South Wales*
- *Centre Based and Mobile Child Care Services Regulation (No 2) 1996*
- *Family Day Care and Home Based Child Care Services Regulation 1996*
- *Children’s Services Regulation 2004*
- *NSW Curriculum Framework for Children’s Services*
- whole-of-government initiatives such as Families First
- Department of Education and Training policies and programs.

Explicitly child-centred, the *Early Childhood Services Policy for New South Wales* recognises the importance of the early years to child growth and development and identifies ‘fostering children’s intellectual, physical, emotional and social development as the core element in service provision’. It seeks to promote collaboration among organisations, parents and caregivers. The centrality of positive relationships to early learning and development is also highlighted in the *NSW Curriculum Framework for Children’s Services*, which is premised on the understanding that children develop as competent learners within the context of their families and communities.

**Early learning within the public school system**

The Department of Education and Training’s primary role in supporting early learning is as the major provider of education for children in the infant years of school (Kindergarten–Year 2). These early school years are crucial as research shows that ‘the window of opportunity for laying down some of the basic mathematics and literacy knowledge and skills narrows after age 8’ (Wylie, 2001, p.10). The Public Education Council commends the NSW Government’s commitment to improving teaching and learning in the early years through its substantial class-size reduction program. The reduction in K-2 class sizes will help children make a positive transition to school and lay strong foundations for their educational career. The Council also notes the elements of the NSW *State Literacy and Numeracy Plan* that support young learners, including the Early Literacy and Numeracy
Initiative, Reading Recovery and Count Me In Too. The expansion of the Premier’s Reading Challenge to cover Kindergarten to Year 4 will encourage our youngest readers.

The Department also supports prior-to-school learning through:

- The operation of 100 pre-schools, including 21 established in 2004 in areas of high need, catering for children in the year before they enter Kindergarten. Approximately 4,000 children attend DET pre-schools each year. Of the existing pre-schools, 11 cater specifically for Aboriginal students, providing culturally appropriate programs in consultation with the local Aboriginal community. The Aboriginal pre-school located in Wilcannia is a joint project with DoCS and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).
- Programs to support early learning in targeted population groups, such as the Parents as Teachers Program, Early Intervention support classes and the Transition to School Program for Aboriginal children.

Department of Education and Training early learning programs recognise the significant educative role of parents and caregivers and the importance of establishing strong partnerships between families, schools and communities. Partnerships and community strengthening are also the focus of the Schools as Community Centres (SaCC) program. The Department is the lead agency for this Families First initiative. Originally established in six centres where indicators of disadvantage were high, there are now 36 SaCCs, with plans for a further five. SaCCs support families through activities such as parenting education programs, child development workshops, play groups, workshops on early literacy development, adult English classes, transition from home to school programs, speech and occupational therapy programs and programs to support positive behaviour and school attendance. Professor Vinson praised the significant achievements of the SaCC at Windale Public School in the Vinson Inquiry’s Third Report (2002, pp.10-11).

An emerging national agenda

New South Wales initiatives sit within a national context, in which there appears to be growing momentum for the development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood (Australian Government Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, October 2003). Key foci for the National Agenda are early child and maternal health; early learning and care (support for the professional development of child care and early childhood workers); and child friendly communities (Anthony, May 2003).

‘The great disruption’ – social, economic and labour market trends

Much is made of change, but much change is good. Don Edgar points out:

_If we take a longer-term view of Australia’s development, the picture is one of growth and rising living standards. Life expectancy has risen 60 per cent since the 1880s (from 51 to 81 years for women, from 47 to 75 years for men). Indeed the ageing of Australia’s population (not as steep a rise as in many other countries because of immigration), reflects improvements in sanitation, water, housing and nutrition ... Australia’s GDP has increased fivefold in real terms this century, and has doubled since 1950 ... Overall, the quality of life improved for the majority of people._

Edgar, 1999, p.3
The majority of people for whom life improved included the majority of children. More recently however, improvements in health indicators such as infant mortality have been set against evidence of a relatively high rate of mental health problems in Australian children and young people, a high rate of youth suicide, rising notification rates of child maltreatment, and concern about rising crime rates in young people (Vimpani, Patton & Hayes, 2002, p.14).

Commentators have linked the deterioration in some indices of young Australian’s health and wellbeing to ‘the great disruption’ – ‘the contemporary progression from an industrial to information and service-based society’ (Vimpani, Patton & Hayes, 2002, p.14). Key elements of this socio-economic shift with implications for children, families and policies include:

- changes to family formation – decreased fertility and an increase in separated, divorced, step, blended and one-parent families
- changing roles for women
- changes to working life – Australians increasingly work under casual or short-term contract conditions; one quarter of Australian jobs are in enterprises with fewer than five employees, where the buffer between company and personal fortunes is slight (Edgar, 2003, p.17); and the equivalent of the entire labour force finds a new job every four to five years (Edgar, 1999, p.10)
- increased time pressures and weakening ties within and between families and communities.

These changes are particularly challenging because their effect is ‘marbled’, unequally spread in socio-economic, geographic and cultural terms. If the number of people working more than 49 hours per week has increased 225 per cent since 1978, close to one in every five Australian children is raised in a jobless household (Edgar, 2003, p.17). Gaps between people are turning into gulfs between population groups. Stanley describes ‘the paradox of progress’ whereby indicators show an increase in both serious problems for children and the social disparity of these problems (2003). In Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations (1999) Keating has argued that, globally, we are at risk of developing ‘a technological and cognitive elite separated from an increasingly marginalised mass population’ with all the problems, for everyone, that this would bring (Vimpani, Patton & Hayes, 2002, p.27). It is imperative we use our advancing knowledge about early child development to avoid such an outcome.

**The demographics of early childhood education**

It is well known that Australia’s population is ageing as its fertility rate declines. As the following graphs (Figures 7 and 8) indicate, the cohort of children aged eight years and under is projected to decline both as a percentage of the total population and in absolute terms.

Whereas children aged eight and under comprised just over 13 per cent of the total New South Wales population in 1990, by 2020 they are likely to form not much more than 9.5 per cent. The size of the cohort is projected to decline from a high of 799,993 in 2001 to a low of 730,427 in 2017.
The conjunction of demographic and socio-economic change is likely to influence the composition of the cohort as well as its absolute and proportional size. In turn, the shrinking cohort of young children and shift in the cohort’s characteristics have likely implications for the public education system. Recent media reports have highlighted the trend away from public schools as early as Kindergarten. Since 1999, the public sector’s share of Kindergarten enrolments has been below its share of primary enrolments as a whole. While this shift is of intrinsic concern, it is particularly significant in light of declining overall numbers. Should both trends continue, over time they may challenge the viability of classes and even schools in some areas. The changing socio-economic background of the cohort, together with the projected demographic trends, threatens to further compromise the representative nature of public schools.
Ultimately, the fact that there are fewer children in our society does not diminish their significance but increases it. Falling birth rates and an ageing population will make our children ‘more important, not less, and their parents will become more demanding of quality and participation in the services they are provided’ (Edgar, 2003, p.2).

**Participation in early childhood education**

It is estimated that approximately one in five children who enrol in NSW schools each year have not attended an early childhood education and care setting. According to the ABS 2002 Child Care Survey, approximately half the cohort of four-year-olds attended preschool and just fewer than 30 per cent attended long day care, with family day care the third most common type of formal care (Rice and Press, 2003, p.7). Some children attended more than one type of care.

Given the availability of educational programs in New South Wales long day care centres, the most important questions concern those children who do not access any formal services. While all children may benefit from out-of-home learning experiences, they are most important to those who may otherwise miss out on the stimulation necessary for optimal development.

It is currently impossible to identify adequately those children not accessing formal early childhood education and care, though unpublished ABS data suggests the picture is complex. Significantly, while approximately 15 per cent of 0 to 4 year olds whose families earned less than $400 net per week in 2002 did not attend any formal care, for families in the next income bracket ($401–$599/week) the proportion nearly doubles.

Received opinion within the early childhood sector is that ‘the children who are missing out are, on the whole, the children who would most benefit from early childhood education’ (NSW Children’s Services Forum, Dec. 2002, p.4). This is confirmed by the draft report on the Hunter Transition to School survey, funded under the Families First plan, which found that ‘schools in communities of high disadvantage commonly had fewer students attending early childhood education services prior to starting school’ (Hunter Families First, 2004, p.43).

Participation is dependent on the availability of an appropriate service as well as its affordability. Once again, reliable data on this question is difficult to obtain. Analysis of patterns of provision and population data indicates wide variation in the accessibility of ECEC services between areas. A parent delegate at the Council forum pointed out that in non-metropolitan areas, access to prior-to-school services is dependent upon access to a car.

At the Public Education Council forum, a delegate from the Aboriginal Early Childhood Services Support Unit estimated that up to 40 per cent of Indigenous children do not access formal prior-to-school educational opportunities, though culturally sensitive and well-structured programs ‘are likely to produce outcomes for Indigenous children which are at the same level as those for non-Indigenous children in the same or similar locations’ (McRae et al., 2000, p.177), no mean feat. The same delegate suggested that the disengagement of Indigenous children from schooling as early as Kindergarten was due partly to a lack of access to early childhood services.
ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First things first – a positive transition to school for all students

Understanding needs in order to set priorities

Prior-to-school education and care plays an important part in providing many young children with the developmentally supportive environment that increases their chance of positive school and life trajectories. *Competent Children*, a longitudinal study of New Zealand children’s competencies, found that, while family income and mother’s education accounted for much of the variation in children’s competencies at age 5:

> early childhood education services (ECS) experience, quality, and type were also shown to count, particularly for social, communicative, and motor skills and for perseverence competencies. Thus it is possible for ECS experience to temper the otherwise dominant influence of family background on children’s competency levels

Wylie, Thompson & Hendricks, 1996, p.141

In a survey of longitudinal studies of the effects of US early childhood education programs, researchers David Weikart and Lawrence Schweinhart conclude:

> ... the essential finding is that high-quality early childhood education programs for 3- and 4-year-old disadvantaged children can significantly alter their later performance in both school and life ... While results differ markedly from program to program, the findings indicate that the issue is not the capacity of children to benefit from such intervention services, but the ability of adults to deliver the assistance.

Weikart & Schweinhart, 1992, p.67

As noted previously, approximately one in five children in New South Wales do not access formal ECEC. There is a need to understand more clearly who these children are so that services can be better matched to need and transition-to-school programs effectively planned. As the Families First Evaluation Strategy observes, this will require agencies to work collaboratively on data collection practices, to develop and use uniform data standards, and to implement open inter-agency access arrangements. Substantial improvement in early childhood data systems on a national basis is also necessary. While some developmental work towards this is under way, such an initiative inevitably takes substantial time.

The Public Education Council commends the work to develop a more comprehensive data framework under the aegis of the Families First Evaluation Strategy. The following recommendations identify ways in which the Department of Education and Training could contribute to an improved understanding of children’s early learning experiences, with a view to better meeting student needs and to developing significant local knowledge on the relationship between prior-to-school experiences and later school success.
Recommendation 6.1:

that the NSW Government develop strategic population measures of prior-to-school participation as a basis for assessing need for prior-to-school education services across the state and for setting future priorities.

Information on the prior-to-school educational participation of children enrolling in Kindergarten should be collected by NSW public schools in a form that can also support local dialogue between prior-to-school and school teachers (see recommendation 6.2).

Strengthening the capacity of schools to support transition and early learning

The Kindergarten year has been described as pivotal in securing the foundations for children’s later academic and social success (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.2). Schools need the capacity to engage and support all students during their transition to school and early years of formal education. This requires, in the first instance, a greater understanding of the link between early learning opportunities and later evidence of school achievement.

Recommendation 6.2:

that the Department undertake research to improve the effectiveness of transition and early learning programs by developing the facility to link data and information on prior-to-school experience (see recommendation 6.1) to later schooling outcomes data.

Current debates about starting school

Children starting school have been the subject of considerable recent interest. The first National Education Goal of the United States asserted that ‘by the Year 2000 all children will start school ready to learn’ (Pianta et al, 1999, p.3), but in reality ‘striking disparities in what children know and can do are evident well before they enter kindergarten’ (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p.5). The vast bulk of these disparities cannot be attributed to individual differences between children but ‘replicate the fault lines of culture and society in general’ (Pianta et al, 1999, p.7).

Internationally, the challenge inherent in teaching substantial groups of young children of varying abilities has resulted in some unhelpful trends. Too often, school readiness has been discussed as though an attribute of the individual child rather than as the product of the child’s environment and relationships among children, parents, communities and schools. ‘Checklist’ approaches to assessing readiness have been employed despite the fact that the ‘screening tests’ commonly employed in the United States ‘predict on average only 25 per cent of variance in early school academic/cognitive performance, and less than ten per cent of the variance in social/behavioural measures in Kindergarten, first grade, or second grade’ (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.5). Far better is the approach of Families First,
which has as a primary aim ‘healthier children who are better prepared to learn and develop when they start school’ (Families First, July 2003, p.5).

School readiness has also become entangled with debates about the optimal age for starting school. By law, all children in New South Wales are required to attend school from six years of age and are entitled to enrol at the beginning of the year in which they turn five, provided their birthday falls on or before 31 July. While the compulsory starting age is similar across Australia, the age of eligibility varies (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.3). In July 2003, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) agreed to consider a position paper on the issues associated with establishing a uniform starting age for school, in the context of Commonwealth support for standardisation.

Some people (teachers as well as parents) believe that delaying entry until children are at the upper end of the age range will benefit both children – who may be more mature and thus educationally advantaged – and teachers, for whom older children may be ‘easier’. In the United States, this practice has been dubbed ‘redshirting’ after the sporting practice of allowing young athletes additional time to mature physically before subjecting their bodies to the full rigours of competition. While there is no comparable term used in Australia, ‘there is no doubt that the practice is prevalent in some areas and among some communities’, and that the decision to delay entry ‘may well be made on the advice of educators in both the prior-to-school and school sectors’. The children concerned are usually boys, especially those from more affluent families (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.4). This claim was supported during a Council visit to a metropolitan DET pre-school, where approximately 20 per cent of families had requested an additional pre-school year for their child.

The reality is that variation among children is inevitable and only a fraction of it will be related to age. The practice of delaying school entry has not been proven to be of lasting benefit to children and some research has associated it with later behaviour difficulties (Marshall, 2003, p.8). By contrast, younger children may make the most cognitive gains at school in the short term (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.3). Given the contribution of educational experience itself to overall academic success, restricting comparatively early access to school by children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and low socio-economic communities may exacerbate existing disadvantage (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.4).

**Ready schools build relationships**

It is as important to focus on ensuring that schools are ready for children as it is to focus on getting children ready for school. In North Carolina, school readiness is defined as both the condition of children when they enter school and the capacity of schools to educate all children. The two facets are always mentioned together (Maxwell et al, 2001, p.60). This may seem like commonsense but it took significant leadership to forge consensus among stakeholders on this sensitive issue.

Schools’ readiness for children and their ability to support early learning can be strengthened in a number of ways. All of them focus on building strong relationships because, as transition expert Pianta observes:
The transition to Kindergarten is fundamentally a matter of establishing a relationship between the home and the school in which the child’s development is the key focus or goal.

Pianta et al, 1999, p.4

At the Public Education Council forum, the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People pointed out that her young constituents see the world through relationships. It is time now for society at large to catch up with its kids.

Transition-to-school programs

Most people are familiar with school orientation days, when children are shown the bubblers and the toilets and told when they will be allowed to use them. Familiarity with the school setting and school rules is important but transition to school is a deeper and ongoing process of establishing the strong relationships that underpin learning: ‘Effective transition programs have the potential to help children – and their families – feel comfortable, valued and successful in school’ (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.11). Strong relationships with teachers and schools are particularly important to the wellbeing of vulnerable children.

Considerable work on transition to school programs has been undertaken in New South Wales. The Starting School Research Project, undertaken by the University of Western Sydney in collaboration with DET and DoCS, developed a series of Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs (Dockett & Perry, 2001), which have been tested successfully in a number of settings across New South Wales (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.11). The evaluation of the guidelines found that they provided a comprehensive yet useable framework for the planning and review of transition programs.

Research confirms that effective transition programs:

- establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators
- facilitate each child’s development as a capable learner
- differentiate between ‘orientation to school’ and ‘transition to school’ programs
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources
- involve a range of stakeholders
- are well planned and effectively evaluated
- are flexible and responsive
- are based on mutual trust and respect
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants
- take into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community. (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.11; Dockett & Perry, 2001)

As the emphasis on context and relationships suggests, transition programs will necessarily vary between schools and communities, although the principles guiding them will be similar. The Council is aware of some excellent initiatives to smooth transition to Kindergarten in public schools. Examples include:
• In Kempsey, transition to school is a community affair, described as ‘Njinanjang Mulung Ga’ or ‘All the people coming together’. Since 2001, the School as Community Centre (SaCC) located at Kempsey West Public School has co-ordinated dates for orientation and transition activities at all schools in the Macleay. These are advertised in local papers, at local pre-schools and through family day care.

• A starting school expo is held in Kempsey Mall each year, which celebrates transition to school as an important milestone for children and families. At the expo, starting school packs are distributed to kids; teachers are available to speak with parents; families can access a before-school-screening nurse and referrals to necessary services. Kempsey has a high Aboriginal population and the expo helps overcome barriers between Indigenous families and the school environment. It is also a powerful promotion of public education.

• Individual schools and pre-schools also support transition. At Dalaigur Pre-School, the Durri Aboriginal Medical Service conducts hearing tests twice each year and children spend blocks of time at local primary schools. At Kempsey South Public School, Commonwealth funding allowed Kindergarten teachers to visit pre-schools and homes during Terms 4, 1 and 2. Parent workshops were also held on literacy, numeracy, and health issues such as otitis media. Students from Years 3 and 4 visit local pre-schools to help with reading groups. The SaCC has reading nooks to encourage children’s reading, mums’ groups, men’s groups, a teenage parent group and parent workshops.

• In the Campbelltown District, children attending the Oorangah Wandarrah Multi-purpose Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS) centre visit Briar Road Public School three days per week for 10 weeks, allowing for extensive modelling of school language and expectations. Some children also access the DET Leapfrogs into Learning program, which supports the early identification of specific needs of pre-school children. While this program usually involves parents, Oorangah Wandarrah found that Indigenous families found it difficult to overcome previous school experiences. Instead, early childhood staff participated, with considerable professional development benefits.

The challenge now is to render such programs not the exception, but the rule. The recent survey of transition programs in the Hunter region found many positive initiatives, such as:

• operating a playgroup for 2 hours per week throughout the year
• giving each Kindergarten child a library bag with coloured pencils, stationery, a starting school colouring book and information for parents on how to help their children with literacy and numeracy
• school teachers visiting local pre-schools
• buddy programs that pair beginning students with older children at the school.

Overall however, activities focused on orientation rather than transition, which was largely reserved for children with special needs. Outreach from schools to families focused on information provision rather than relationship building, the message usually being that it is ‘time to enrol your child’.

By the end of the project, schools were re-evaluating their strategies. Changes being considered by schools included:
• greater number of orientation/transition sessions
• evening sessions for parents to expand knowledge of the Key Learning Areas
• teachers to observe children in pre-school settings
• closer liaison with pre-schools
• contact with other service providers, e.g. family workers
• revitalisation of a professional group for Kindergarten and pre-school teachers
• transition pre-literacy program of one session per week for four weeks.

This study suggests schools would benefit from a resource providing examples of effective transition programs in a wide range of communities. The aim of this resource is to facilitate the implementation of transition-to-school programs in all NSW primary schools.

The context specific nature of effective transition practices makes it preferable that children attend a transition program at the school they will attend. It is important however, to distinguish the broader educational benefits of transition programs from other issues such as orientation to a specific school and recruitment of students. It is common practice for public primary schools only to offer orientation or transition to students with an intention to enrol. While this is understandable, this approach means that some children will miss out due to logistical difficulties.

The Public Education Council commends the example set by Fairfield Public School. Located in a culturally diverse and highly mobile community, Fairfield PS welcomes approximately 80 children to orientation each year. Of these, approximately 50 return at the beginning of the Kindergarten year, together with approximately 40 others. While this means additional effort by the school to ‘catch-up’ the new recruits, the school works on the basis that their investment in the 30 children who have not returned ‘hopefully helps elsewhere’.

Recommendation 6.3:

that all NSW primary schools provide transition-to-school programs.

The Department should lead a project, within the Families First framework, to develop guidelines for effective practices and describe examples of programs that are working in a wide range of communities.

Early childhood teacher expertise

The best support for transition to school is quality teaching in the early years. Research indicates that teachers have the greatest influence on learning outcomes after students themselves, accounting for about 30 per cent of variance of achievement (Hattie, 2003). The price of inferior teaching in the early years is high. As Professor Vinson has observed, ‘failure to master the basics in the beginning years [of school] can cast a long shadow across the remainder of a young person’s school career’ (Vinson, First Report, 2002, p. xviii). A number of principals have highlighted to the Council the importance of allocating their ‘best people’ to Kindergarten classes.
Excellent teachers of all years are better equipped to facilitate learning in diverse classrooms. They are adept at meeting individual and community needs within a common curriculum. Good K-2 teachers also have a strong understanding of early child development. The Council commends the Department on its endeavours to maximise the success of the class size reduction strategy through the appointment of appropriately qualified and experienced teachers to the additional positions.

Professional development opportunities are necessary however, to ensure ongoing currency of teachers’ knowledge and widespread adaptation of good practice. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) point out: ‘As the rapidly evolving science of early child development continues to grow, its complexity will increase and the distance between the working knowledge of services providers and the cutting edge of the science will be staggering’ (p.12). Expanded professional development opportunities should also encourage the retention of teacher expertise within the infant years.

The mechanism of the ‘critical friend’ is a means of providing these opportunities. A respected peer from outside the school, the critical friend would stimulate professional dialogue and support constructive review of pedagogic practice. The role of critical friend itself would help develop depth of leadership within the system.

**Recommendation 6.4:**

*that in shaping its professional development program, the Department recognise the critical importance of early learning and of maximising the benefits of government investment in reduced class sizes.*

The Department should develop and trial the mechanism of the critical friend to stimulate professional dialogue and improve practice among K-2 teachers.

**Collaborative planning between Kindergarten teachers and prior-to-school educators**

Collaborative planning and consultation between Kindergarten teachers and prior-to-school educators smooths transition. Collaborative planning and consultation facilitates the sharing of information about individual children. Professional dialogue, including joint planning, also contributes to quality teaching at all levels.

In early childhood education, collaborative planning and consultation would help move beyond a perceived opposition between ‘child-centred’ and ‘didactic’ approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. Communication between educators in Kindergarten and prior-to-school settings ‘sets the scene for greater understanding of the roles and functions of the different settings, enhanced awareness of the educational value of each setting and the staff within it, and most importantly, a strong sense of working together for the benefit of children and families’ (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p.7). Closer links between public schools and early childhood services would also likely benefit enrolments.

The report on the Hunter Transition Survey notes that ‘a few schools are developing closer links [with early childhood services] and are experimenting with changing the early
Kindergarten environment and experiences to more closely follow on from those at preschool (p.44). In Kempsey, prior-to-school and school teachers have met to more closely align the children’s services curriculum framework and the Early Stage 1 syllabus. More commonly however, reviews of transition arrangements identify communication between the sectors as in need of significant improvement.

Collaboration across sectors requires support from DoCS as well as DET, particularly in view of the fact that collaboration requires time and ‘time is money’. For this reason, the Public Education Council addresses this recommendation to the NSW Government. The Department would itself, however, benefit from pursuing collaborative opportunities wherever possible.

Recommendation 6.5:

that the NSW Government accept the need for collaborative planning and consultation between Kindergarten teachers and prior-to-school educators.

The Departments of Education and Training and Community Services would need to identify and cost the most practical approaches to such planning and consultation.

Effective transition for students with special learning needs

Transition to Kindergarten is a time of potential vulnerability for all students. The situation is more complicated however, for students with disabilities, who may require extra support to get a good start at school.

This issue overlaps with the inquiry by the Legislative Council’s Standing Committee on Social Issues into early intervention for children with learning difficulties (Standing Committee on Social Issues, Sept. 2003). The Public Education Council is aware of the range of concerns related to the provision of education for students with special needs, including perceived inadequacies in funding and access to specialist services. Within the frame of reference of this advice, the Council makes the following points:

- The earlier special needs are identified, the less impact they are likely to have on learning outcomes. Identification prior to going to school is preferable.
- Schools are better able to meet special needs of students if they are aware of them in advance.
- The transition period for these students may need to be significantly longer than for their peers.

Effective transition for students with special learning needs is dependent upon clear communication and timely planning. A child’s transition to school should be a reassuring experience for parents (Gallagher, 1999, p.353). When a child has a disability, this requirement is all the more acute. The Council commends the DET publications Who’s Going to Teach my Child? A guide for parents of children with special needs and Transition to school for young children with special needs, as well as the ‘Disability Access’ presence on the DET internet site.
No parent or caregiver should face difficulties enrolling their child in a school place to which he or she is entitled. The Council recommends an additional effort to ensure that parents are aware of their children’s entitlement to a place in the local neighbourhood school; and to the range of specialist support services available and the conditions for access to them. In planning for the enrolment of their children, parents are entitled to information on the range of options for best meeting their children’s needs and to having these canvassed in an open and balanced way.

**Recommendation 6.6:**

*that the Department make information about transition and enrolment, in particular for children with special learning needs, widely available.*

Information should be readily accessible to parents via the DET Internet site and in other appropriate places, such as early childhood education and care settings, early childhood and community health centres and general practitioners’ rooms.

**Capitalising on initial success – public schools as community foundations**

Families First, July 2003, p.12

Public schools have long operated as community foundations, central to community networks, vibrancy and resilience. The principal of Parkes Public School described not only the school’s early literacy initiative but how the town has proudly identified with it. One of the OECD scenarios for the future of schooling paints a picture of schools as primary contributors to the formation of social capital and ‘the most effective bulwark against social fragmentation and a crisis of values’ (OECD, *Education Policy Analysis*, 2001, pp.127-30). In some areas however, social change is challenging the capacity of schools to fulfil this role.

The Council recommends a renewed focus on the local public school as the foundation of community strength. This entails supporting schools to develop an outward-looking approach to education provision rather than an increase in school responsibilities. There are strong educational reasons for strengthening relationships between schools and their communities. Chief among these is evidence that parental involvement in a child’s education is a strong indicator for academic success. Importantly, research has suggested that parental involvement is more influenced by school practices than it is by other variables such as socio-economic status (Christenson, 1999). Socially, children benefit from sustained peer relationships, which are more easily fostered within the local neighbourhood.

As for transition programs, the nature of school–community engagement varies with local circumstance. Schools would benefit from the identification and promotion of principles of successful community engagement together with a wide range of good examples. In communities facing marked challenges, the Schools as Community Centres (SaCC)
program has proven a highly effective model. The Vinson Report described the success of the Windale SaCC, noting that its resources are popular with people whose own school experiences may have been unhappy (September 2002, p.11). Many respondents to the Legislative Council’s inquiry into early intervention for children with learning difficulties ‘perceive SaCCs as a very successful model of parent support’ and the Standing Committee on Social Issues supported this view (2003, p.29).

Recommendation 6.7:

that the NSW Government renew and strengthen its focus on public primary schools in their local neighbourhoods as foundations for community.

To strengthen support for the local public primary school, the Department should identify and promote principles of successful community engagement together with a wide range of good examples and continue to implement the Schools as Community Centres program in school communities facing marked challenges.

Becoming leaders – directions for future provision

Positioning the Department of Education and Training as a source of expertise in early learning

Strong relationships are built on effective communication. Parkes Public School’s ‘Birth to Kindergarten – Spread the Word’ campaign has particularly impressed the Council. To support the development of early literacy in the community, Parkes Public School has developed a series of illustrated booklets to encourage parents to read to their children and share other language-based activities. The school focuses on both wide coverage and ongoing reinforcement of messages. The extensive series comprises:

- a booklet of nursery rhymes offered at hospital, pre-school, and play-group, and distributed to all Kindergarten students as a colouring book
- a booklet suggesting ways of engaging babies with language, distributed to expectant mothers when booking into hospital
- a booklet wrapped with a children’s book and distributed to mothers and their babies while in hospital
- a leaflet posted to mothers when their newborn is six weeks old
- a booklet given to parents at the immunisation clinic, *Immunise Your Child Against Reading Problems*
- a booklet, *The Attack of the Sponge Toddler*, designed for a child’s first birthday, mailed out to addresses published in the local paper when baby announcements are printed
- a booklet, *Getting Ready For School*, distributed to parents enrolling their children in pre-school or childcare
- a booklet, *Injection For Success*, distributed to high school students when they are vaccinated for rubella, which addresses them as possible future parents.
The Parkes initiative serves two important ends:

- encouraging parental involvement in their children’s learning, which is a strong indicator for later educational success
- positioning the school as a source of expert advice on early learning and child development.

These dual ends could be pursued more broadly within the Families First framework, with significant benefits for children and families as well as for the standing of public schools and likely enrolments.

**Recommendation 6.8:**

that the NSW Government disseminate information to parents, starting at the birth of their children, to support their involvement in their children’s learning and their knowledge of child development.

An inter-agency project led by the Department, under the aegis of Families First, should develop a strategy for disseminating information on early literacy, learning and transition to school to parents.

Information on early learning and child development should be provided to parents via the Department of Education and Training website, in conjunction with relevant agencies such as NSW Health and DoCS. Information should include:

- good child development practices
- strategies to support early learning and literacy development
- starting school
- NSW public schools
- early childhood education and care services and financial support to assist attendance
- early childhood health issues
- assistance for children with disabilities and their parents.

Parent libraries should also be established in all schools that include a capacity for outreach to parents of pre-school aged children.

**From sessional pre-schools to multi-purpose centres for early learning and child development**

Public pre-schools administered by the Department of Education and Training provide an important service for children in disadvantaged communities. Sessional pre-schools are, however, only one means of promoting early learning and child development. While the pre-school model is favoured by some communities, changing family needs and research into the developmental benefits of multi-purpose centres (Pugh, 2001) argue for a more flexible approach to any future expansion of prior-to-school provision in public schools.
Nationally and internationally there is a movement towards ‘joined-up’ services for young children and their families. In England, Early Excellence Centres provide ‘one-stop shops’ for parents and children, providing nursery education with high levels of parental involvement, access to health professionals and other community links. In Australia, the Commonwealth Government has announced funding for 12 child care neighbourhood hub centres and a partnership project between the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and the NSW DoCS to integrate children’s services in the Wyong, Culcairn and Lockhardt communities.

The Public Education Council recommends that, in the context of future budgetary options, the government consider establishing multi-purpose centres for early learning and child development in new public schools and those undergoing major refurbishment. Such centres would build community networks, foreground the leadership role of public schools within their local communities, and familiarise children and families with their local public school and the benefits of public education.

**Recommendation 6.9:**

that the NSW Government trial and evaluate the establishment of multi-purpose centres for early learning and child development in selected public school sites.

Subject to the evaluation of the trial, the government should make provision for such centres in new public schools, and in public schools undergoing major refurbishment. Any future review or expansion of prior-to-school education by the Department should also consider the model of the multi-purpose centre.

Children are born ‘wired for feelings and ready to learn’ (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p.4). Given the significance of early childhood experiences to long-term educational, social and economic outcomes, it is the shared responsibility of parents, carers, teachers, communities and governments to help them do well what they do naturally.

The period of formulating this advice overlapped with the Public Education Council’s consideration of subsequent stages of education. The Council has been struck by the congruence between the ingredients of quality early childhood education and of quality education further down the track, notably:

- strong relationships between educators, children, parents and communities
- teacher expertise and ongoing professional renewal
- structures to ensure positive transitions.

While evidence indicates that government resourcing of the early years is a sound investment, it is ‘magical thinking’ to expect that it will obviate all need to assist children and their families later on (Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p.1). Early intervention can come at any point in a child’s life, ‘early’ meaning in time to halt the further development of problems.
Chapter 7:

Future directions for primary education

INTRODUCTION

Primary schooling: the foundation for ongoing educational progress

Children who complete primary school having developed a solid core of basic skills and knowledge, confident in their identity as learners and of the value placed on learning by their families and communities are more likely to remain engaged with education and achieve well in later years.

The citizens of the 21st century have ambitious expectations of the education system. While literacy and numeracy remain at the heart of primary education, children are also expected to access a broader curriculum encompassing science and technology; human society and its environment; creative and practical arts; and personal development, health and physical education. Increasing levels of affluence and families’ ability to provide their children with a stimulating environment from birth have raised expectations regarding the nature and extent of children’s experiences in these areas.

All children are equally entitled to learn throughout their primary school years. Children’s entitlement to learn begins with their government-guaranteed right to enrol in the local public school for which they are eligible. Once enrolled, all children have an equal right to acquire the skills that allow them to access the K-6 curriculum, to achieve the outcomes described in Stages 2 and 3 of the syllabuses (or where this is unrealistic to make steady progress towards those outcomes), and to the conditions they need to do their personal best. Facilitating this right is the shared responsibility of parents, teachers, communities and governments.

The benefits of local public schools

The Public Education Council is convinced that high quality and equitable outcomes can best be achieved by educating children within their communities at local public schools; and that the benefits of local public schooling accrue to children, families, communities and our society at large.

The socio-economic value of the local public school

Local public primary schools have long been a focus of NSW communities – the place where children met, learnt and played with their neighbours, and where their families too forged connections. As such, they have contributed significantly to building the social as well as the human capital that supports economic and broader community wellbeing.
The local public school has also been a fiscally efficient and responsible means of honouring the state’s legislative obligation to 'ensure that every child receives an education of the highest quality' (*Education Act 1990*), regardless of their family's capacity to pay. School systems provide economies of scale in terms of centralised management and support for school services.

**Educational benefits of local public schools**

Research shows that parental engagement with schools raises student achievement. Schools that identify strongly with their local communities are likely to have the knowledge and skills amongst their staff to engage their parent communities in productive partnerships and to forge the shared culture of high expectations for students that is an important contributor to student success. Strong school–family partnerships will also assist schools and teachers to personalise learning to meet individual student needs.

Interpersonal skills and a secure sense of personal identity in the midst of difference and change are increasingly identified as ‘new basic’ skills for life in the twenty-first century. Public primary schools are well placed to foster these attributes, drawing on the strengths of population diversity rather than relying on the comforts of various chosen forms of affiliation and homogeneity. The obligation of local public schools to cater to all comers provides a practical basis for teaching explicitly the skills necessary to understand, respect and negotiate different points of view while identifying and working towards shared learning goals.

Children learn well when they understand the practical importance of their learning. Neighbourhood primary schools offer excellent opportunities for exploring the curriculum through engagement with the local environment and local issues. This has the potential to strengthen children’s sense of both a shared community and their developing personal agency within it.

**Health and wellbeing benefits of the local public school**

Healthy children are better placed to learn effectively. The importance of promoting general health and wellbeing through and within schools has been recognised internationally and in Australia, including through the Health Promoting Schools Initiative. This initiative was identified by the Better Futures Roundtable on ‘connection to education’ as a key strategy of interest for promoting students’ engagement with schools and learning.

Local public schools provide particularly good opportunities to link education, public health and other social priorities. For example, a ‘walk to school’ program, such as that initiated by the Central Sydney Area Health Service in conjunction with Forest Lodge Public School, is one means of addressing the growing incidence of obesity among children. The benefits of such programs could extend to parents (either as a health benefit through active participation in the program or by reducing the need for morning ‘drop-offs’ for working parents), to the environment (through a reduction in car usage), to child safety (by increasing the visibility of children within communities and the network of trusted adults to whom children may turn for assistance), and to the community at large (through reducing the cost associated with transporting children to school).
Threats to the local public school

Despite the evident benefits associated with educating children at public schools within their local communities, this practice has been challenged in recent years by a powerful combination of demographic shift (an overall decline in the school-aged cohort, affecting some areas of the state more than others) and increased competition within the education sector. These shifts threaten to compromise the efficient and effective use of the resources as much as they threaten the social fabric itself.

The Public Education Council recognises that an element of choice is important to parents. Choice among competing schools is, however, expensive, relying by definition on a surplus of places. The Council believes that policy development should prioritise strategies that encourage families to make their local public school the first choice for their children, primarily through enhancing the capacity of schools to engage and stimulate each and every learner.

The benefits of local public schools are so closely woven into our social fabric that we are in danger of taking them for granted. There is an urgent need to recognise and build on these benefits, rather than to forego them by default in responding to demographic and socio-economic change.

Families will only enrol their children at the local public school if they feel it is the best available option for their child. Families should never, however, be discouraged from sending their children to their local public school because of its offering an inadequate education or substandard facilities.

For families to continue to make the local public school their first choice for their children, they need to be confident that it:

- achieves high quality academic and other valued outcomes for all its students
- is staffed by high quality teachers, with the skills and resources to meet the needs of individual learners across the achievement spectrum
- offers, or is a point of access for, services and programs that meet the needs of local families, which may include extra-curricular and outside-school-hours activities
- provides a safe, comfortable physical environment that promotes student learning.

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This advice contains recommendations designed to improve the capacity of schools in all communities to meet these requirements and to be perceived to meet them.

This advice focuses selectively on issues of particular importance for primary education, suggesting strategies to: support the local public school as the first choice for families; promote strong school–community relationships; support smooth transitions from Year 6 to Year 7; and strengthen student achievement through the use of statewide assessment data.
Supporting the local public school as the first choice for families

Understanding school enrolment patterns

It has been commonly assumed that, while parents may select from a range of public and non-government schools for their children’s secondary education, the local public school remains the preferred choice for the primary years. This assumption is now challenged by data indicating that the drift to the non-government sector is shifting to the primary years and by anecdotal evidence that public primary schools in sought after areas are attracting significant out-of-area enrolments.

To ensure the continued strength and vibrancy of local public schools, it is necessary to understand clearly the pattern of school enrolments across the public system. There are currently insufficient data accessible at the systemic level to determine the ‘localness’ of public primary schools or to analyse with any subtlety how demographic and other changes are driving the pattern of school enrolments.

For example, there appear to be no readily available system-level data on:

- the number of in-area and out-of-area enrolments for any given school or group of schools
- for those primary schools with significant out-of-area enrolments, where those students are coming from
- the extent to which a school’s population is representative of its catchment area
- a school’s share of the total possible enrolments in its local catchment area.

Such data would:

- support the targeting of systemic assistance to schools in meeting the needs of their communities
- combine with demographic data to inform planning of education provision across the system
- inform the development of policies to address market share issues.

The Public Education Council recognises the potential sensitivity of such data and emphasises the importance of using it only in ways that support the quality of service available to students in all areas of the state.

**Recommendation 7.1:**

*that the Department collect the data necessary to understand enrolment patterns and trends within schools and across the public education system.*
Strengthening school–community relationships across the public system

Research shows that parental engagement with schools raises student achievement. Schools that identify strongly with their local communities are likely to have the knowledge and skills to engage their parent communities in productive partnerships, based on mutual trust and respect. This is a pre-condition for forging the shared culture of high expectations for students that is an important contributor to student success. Strong school–family partnerships will also assist schools and teachers to personalise learning to meet individual student needs.

The Department and NSW Government more broadly have explicitly recognised the importance of schools in building strong communities with programs such as the Schools as Community Centres program, Primary Connect and the Better Futures initiative. These strategies acknowledge the priority need of some communities for government support to build resources and resilience. While engaging schools is central to this process, the interdepartmental approach of these strategies also recognises that community regeneration is not the primary responsibility of schools and that schools alone will not be able to ameliorate broad social inequities.

The Public Education Council commends these initiatives as well as the Department’s working paper, Developing home, school & community partnerships, designed to support school communities participating in the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program. The working paper demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the need for school–parent partnerships to go beyond the ‘two parent–teacher nights, canteen and fete model’ and significantly pre-empted the recent Commonwealth announcement of support for the development of a national School–Partnership Framework.

The Council remains conscious, however, that a focus on school–parent and particularly school–community relationships risks becoming identified only with disadvantaged communities. It is important to recognise that public schools have a role to play in building and supporting all communities, particularly in the context of changing family arrangements that may preclude conventional school–family interactions. The Council therefore reiterates the recommendation made in its advice on early childhood education, that the Department identify and promote principles of successful school–community engagement together with a wide range of good examples.

Recommendation 7.2:

that the Department identify and promote principles of successful community engagement together with a wide range of good examples.

Meeting the changing needs of students and families

Changes in family structures and family work patterns, together with increasing expectations regarding children’s access to extra-curricular activities, have important implications for public schools. The increasing tendency for both parents to be engaged in the workforce means that significant numbers of primary school aged children require care before and after school hours. Many non-government schools meet this need through the
provision of supervised activities that allow students either to consolidate learning through the completion of homework or to pursue extra-curricular activities in areas such as music and sport.

Over 400 public schools have out-of-school-hours (OOSH) centres. These are run by incorporated parent committees, P&C Associations or other community-based groups including some local councils. A small number are operated by commercial providers. OOSH centres are committed to supporting children’s development through providing a safe, secure environment for children to play, experiment, learn new skills and participate in cultural and artistic activities.

The Council is pleased to note that the Department has addressed issues compromising OOSH centres’ access to public school facilities. The Guidelines for Not-for-Profit Out of School Hours Centres in NSW Government Schools (2004) should provide greater consistency and security of arrangements for these services. Given the importance both of adequate facilities to the successful operation of OOSH Centres and of OOSH Centres to the appeal – indeed the viability – of public schools for today’s families, the Council believes that every attempt should be made to support OOSH Centres on public school sites.

In the previous chapter on early childhood education, the Council recommended (recommendation 6.9): ‘that the NSW Government trial and evaluate the establishment of multi-purpose centres for early learning and child development in selected public school sites’. The Council also advised that subject to the evaluation of the trial, the government should make provision for such centres in new public schools, and in public schools undergoing major refurbishment. Further, any future review or expansion of prior-to-school education by the Department should also consider the model of the multi-purpose centre.

The advice stipulated that services and service providers should be determined through a transparent process, at the local level, and in response to community needs. OOSH centres are among those services that could usefully be incorporated in such multi-purpose centres.

The time that some children spend in OOSH centres is a critical part of their day. The hours after school are among the few available to children for engaging in physical recreation and completing homework. Along with less structured play, both these activities have far-reaching implications for overall wellbeing. The Council understands that where possible OOSH centres make space available for students to complete homework if they wish. The OOSH sector peak organisation, Network of Community Activities, has collaborated with NSW Health to address the issue of childhood obesity and also liaises with the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation.

It is important that the full value of such activity to the public school system be realised. To this end, the Council believes there may be a case for a broader strategic approach by the NSW Government, under the leadership of the Department of Education and Training, to the co-ordination and provision of activities for children out of school hours on public school sites. This approach would build on and complement existing OOSH centres and be developed in collaboration with the Network of Community Activities, the OOSH sector and other government agencies, such as the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation, the Office of Children and Young People, NSW Health and the NSW Ministry for the Arts.
Strategies may include opportunities to involve parents, incorporating relevant training where necessary and thereby further building family, school and community resources. Programs may also incorporate mentoring roles for recent graduates of the school, providing benefits for transition as well as a supervised setting after school for young people in their early high-school years.

**Recommendation 7.3:**

that the NSW Government convene an interagency team, under the leadership of the Department, to develop options for a broader, strategic approach to the co-ordination and provision of out-of-school-hours (OOSH) activities on public school sites, building on existing OOSH activities.

**Ensuring public school buildings meet school–community needs**

Public schools are significant elements of community infrastructure. Given the considerable resources already invested in school buildings and facilities, it is important to maximise their use and effectiveness. The Council supports the Department of Education and Training’s policy on community use of school buildings, currently being updated, which recognises the wide-ranging benefits of making school facilities available for appropriate community use.

Policies to extend the use of school buildings are, however, only as good as the buildings themselves. The Council has heard numerous accounts from principals that confirm the Vinson Report’s findings of inadequacies in the physical infrastructure of some public schools. Expanding access to facilities that already struggle to meet basic standards would only exacerbate problems. While the Council is mindful that the standard of physical facilities does not necessarily correlate with quality of education, it is equally convinced that the quality of physical space affects self-esteem (of students and teachers), peer and student–teacher interactions, parental involvement, discipline, attention and motivation (Vinson Report, May 2002). All of these play important roles in establishing positive conditions for learning. In addition, the quality of school facilities can function as an important symbol of the regard in which public education is held by society.

The issue of providing and maintaining fit-for-purpose educational facilities in a time of demographic decline and shift has been considered in Chapter 4. In addition to the analysis set out there, the Council also recommends a re-evaluation of the School Student Transport Scheme with a view to making funds available to improve the physical quality and attractiveness to parents of public primary schools. While the Council acknowledges that secondary students will travel further afield, it firmly believes that there is more to be lost than gained by transporting primary-aged children past the local public school. The Council believes that the School Student Transport Scheme should be consistent with a broad commitment to educating primary age children within their local communities.
Recommendation 7.4:

that the NSW Government review the eligibility criteria of primary-aged students for the School Student Transport Scheme with a view to re-directing resources specifically to improving the buildings and facilities in public primary schools.

Supporting high quality teaching and learning

Supporting strong transitions

As the Council noted in its advice on early childhood education, transitions between stages of education are critical points in a child’s educational career – times of expanding opportunities but also, for some children, times of vulnerability. The transition from primary to high school is also a time of opportunity and vulnerability from the point of view of public school sector share. Steps taken to strengthen transition for students have the potential to encourage families to remain within the public system.

Students’ vulnerability through the transition period can take many forms. While students who have experienced difficulties with Stage 3 curriculum outcomes may need special assistance to tackle Stage 4, more adept students run the risk of disengaging if secondary teachers fail to recognise and build on the knowledge and skills they bring with them to high school. Transition poses additional risks for some groups of children, particularly those whose families may be itinerant, including some Aboriginal children and children of prisoners. The Council has heard anecdotal evidence that some children are lost completely to education after the primary years, and even before.

The Council is aware of the range of successful transition programs in NSW public primary and high schools and of work within the Department to support both students and schools. A resource entitled I’m Starting School, providing information for parents on ways to support children as they start school, has been developed and distributed to all public schools and other agencies. In addition, the Department is currently conducting a nationally funded research project on best practice in transition to school in Indigenous communities. This information will be disseminated to schools and communities once the project is completed.

These initiatives are important components of a broader approach that understands transition not just as the movement of children from Year 6 to Year 7 but as the ongoing process of educational and social growth, supported by individual schools, school networks and systemically. It is this broader understanding that informs the Council’s advice on primary education. Recommendations throughout this advice – to support the local school as the first choice for parents, to strengthen school–community links, to improve the Department’s ability to track student achievement and to share data across schools, and to support quality teaching across a broad curriculum – will all strengthen the transition experience for students and the appeal of public schools for families.
Ensuring the assessment framework serves all students

One of the strengths of the NSW education system is its rigorous curriculum and assessment framework. In primary education the curriculum includes six key learning areas (KLAs). The syllabus for each is divided into stages and contains outcomes for student achievement. Every child is expected to achieve the outcomes described in Stages 2 and 3 of the syllabuses, and to thereby have developed a solid core of basic skills and knowledge to support their transition to high school.

Parents and the community expect that teachers and schools will respond to the individual needs of children. Valid and reliable assessment equips teachers with the knowledge they need about students to best meet their needs. The Basic Skills Tests (Years 3 and 5), Primary Writing Assessment (Years 3 and 5), English Language and Literacy Assessment and Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program (Years 7 and 8) are designed to measure students’ mastery of basic literacy and numeracy skills, and to provide diagnosis of each student’s strengths and weaknesses.

The introduction of the BST and outcomes-based assessment and reporting was not entirely smooth. While the Vinson Report acknowledges the value of the BST’s diagnostic role, it also quotes from teachers who perceived it to have undue prominence in the curricula and to undermine teacher professionalism (Vinson, First Report, 2002). The Report on the Evaluation of Outcomes Assessment and Reporting in NSW Government Schools, Time to Teach – Time to Learn (2003) made recommendations to strengthen the outcomes-based approach to teaching, assessment and reporting, by increasing systemic support for teacher professionalism. The Council’s advice is complementary, focusing on strategies to maximise the contribution of statewide assessment and other data to improved teaching and learning.

The Council endorses the current statewide assessments as effective tools for targeting low achievement and diagnosing specific difficulties. Less information is generated, however, about higher achieving students. While monitoring all children to identify those failing to meet minimum standards is essential, it is also necessary to guard against underachievement at all levels of ability. The Council perceives a need for assessments to go beyond the testing of basic skills to provide information to teachers on students operating across a spectrum of achievement.

Assessments could be expanded to discriminate higher achievement more effectively and provide teachers with information about students’ content knowledge across the KLAs. Extension assessment that is curriculum-based could provide detailed diagnostic information to teachers and parents about students’ skills and difficulties. The development of extension assessment could in time provide a more equitable and effective means for selective school and opportunity class (OC) entry selection than the current system.

Recommendation 7.5:

that the Department explore options for enhancing the facility of statewide tests to diagnose the needs and understand the skills of students at the higher end of the ability spectrum.
Using assessment data to improve teaching and learning

The primary purpose of all assessment data is to inform teaching practice and educational outcomes. Educationally sound measures of student performance provide teachers with evidence on which to base professional judgments about whether or not students are making adequate progress, and about planning future work. Such data may inform conversations with parents and children and support a partnership approach to student achievement. At the system level, student achievement data enable the Department to target where effective learning is taking place, and to build its understanding of what works generally and in specific circumstances.

The data generated by the existing statewide tests describe students’ performance against a set of measures: the rest of the state; the rest of the school; previous performance (Years 5 and 8 only); and scoring criteria. The data generated by statewide testing are available in several ways and significant professional support on the uses of data has been provided to teachers.

Other achievement data are gathered by individual teachers in the course of school- and class-based teaching and learning programs. For example, assessment tools such as the Sequential Early Numeracy Assessment (SENA) and Starting with Assessment (SWA) are used by some schools to profile students’ learning when they start school. This practice assists teachers to individualise learning programs during the crucial early school years. It can also inform decision-making and resource allocation at the local level.

Anecdotal evidence, including evidence from the Council’s forum on primary education, indicates that data can effectively inform planning and professional development directions for staff at the school level. However, there has been limited evaluation of the extent or effectiveness of the use of data, or of its impact on teacher practice or student achievement.

Recommendation 7.6:
that the Department conduct research into the uses of data to improve student outcomes at school and classroom levels and disseminate examples of good practice and support materials as indicated.

Recommendation 7.7:
that the NSW Institute of Teachers, in consultation with teacher training institutions, consider the inclusion of mandatory data analysis and assessment processes components, to enhance teacher practice.

Statewide and other assessment data also have the potential to be shared between schools to improve student outcomes. The Council is aware of schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students sharing SENA and SWA data to improve educational provision for this
group of children across schools. Similarly, data from the statewide primary testing can accompany students as they move between schools or when they make the transition to high school, to ensure that teachers have the best information possible about new students. Models of this practice already exist in the Bondi and St George areas.

The sharing of data depends on effective protocols within a culture of trust. While these exist in some areas, they are not universal. *Time to Teach – Time to Learn* notes that ‘further education is needed of some high schools to enable them to appreciate the significance of the considerable detailed data on student achievement available to them when students emerge from primary school.’ Conversely, ELLA data from the Year 7 test could be used constructively by primary feeder schools to target any particular areas where their cohort of students may be demonstrating consistent or particular difficulty. Sharing of comparable data between schools to improve outcomes for particular cohort groups is perhaps the most sensitive of these practices, though the example above shows that it can be done when a supportive culture is established and promoted.

**Recommendation 7.8:**

> that the Department develop effective protocols to enable sharing of the data between schools for constructive purposes, for example, to enable the sharing of data between public feeder primary schools and high schools (in both directions).

**Using assessment data to develop evidence-based policies and practices**

The Department of Education and Training’s bureaucracy, serves schools by providing services they cannot provide for themselves. To do this cost effectively and equitably the system must analyse evidence available. Reliable data enable the system to measure the success of its policy initiatives and resourcing decisions.

The information data system that the Department draws on for its analyses must:

- contain valid and reliable achievement data
- generate robust value-added measures
- have the capacity to track students over time
- produce longitudinal and trend data
- integrate demographic and SES data.

The information system should be modern and forward looking: a tool for planning. It must also be a reliable source for accountability and evaluation purposes: a tool for reflection. The information system must be capable of generating action, that is, it should provide information that triggers responses from the Department.

An information system should also support equitable resourcing and consistency of standards. The Council believes that the Department should have an information system that will sustain analysis to identify those schools where timely intervention is required to
lift student performance to acceptable levels. That is, Department should use data to target resourcing to achieve maximum effect.

The potential of data collected in NSW primary schools has yet to be fully realised. Currently longitudinal (growth) and cross-domain (literacy, numeracy etc) analysis is limited. Effective analysis of longitudinal data would provide a useful guide to policy formulation for the system. For example, it would be helpful to track students from entry to school leaving against their achievement data. This would enable the Department to answer questions such as which students had pre-schooling? Does it affect their literacy levels at Year 3? Are the students demonstrating low achievement at Year 3 the same students who become early school-leavers?

A system of unique student identifiers would also help schools support highly transient students, including some Aboriginal students.

**Recommendation 7.9:**

*that the Department create a system of unique student identifiers to facilitate longitudinal and cross-dataset research.*

**Supporting teaching across a broad curriculum**

One of the strengths of the NSW K-6 curriculum is its balance of core basics and other learning areas. The Council is aware, however, that the expectations of a broad curriculum can place pressure on schools and teachers. The Council perceives a need to support quality teaching in particular areas of the curriculum, for example, the creative and performing arts, science, and personal development, health and physical education, where there is evidence that some teachers lack expertise and confidence resulting in patchy curriculum delivery.

Some primary schools have addressed this issue through creative use of existing staffing entitlements, including release from face-to-face (RFF) teaching. The Council is aware of one school where the RFF and additional part-time staffing allocations were combined to employ a specialist science teacher. This met a perceived need within the school for expertise in science teaching, allowed for the finely tuned scoping and sequencing of learning programs against outcomes and the mentoring of gifted students, and provided significant professional development benefits for the school teaching community. To support such practices, the Council supports the principle of flexibility underpinning the recommendation by Vinson (Third Report, 2002) that school principals be given some discretion to fulfil identified school staffing needs through advertisement.

Another means of addressing this issue would be to draw on the resources of the public system as a large community of schools. Schools should be encouraged to construct networks with one another to share available expertise and facilities. The Council is aware of existing examples of such practice, but believes that more could be done to promote networks at the local level. These networks could be extended to encompass local community partnerships, particularly where resources exist that would supplement or
complement the curriculum, for example: museums, art galleries and other cultural institutions. Systemic support and guidelines, based where relevant on successful practices that already exist in some places, should be available to help schools identify and initiate relationships with appropriate organisations.

As part of broader community infrastructure, the public education system could also pursue partnerships at the state, national and even international level with other public (and perhaps private) cultural institutions, such as theatres, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and a range of other communications and media organisations, and libraries. Such partnerships would support the provision of a broad curriculum at the primary level by providing generalist primary teachers with access to the specialist knowledge and skills of professional educationalists in other settings. They would also provide students with a range of options for developing their individual interests, abilities and aspirations, broadening the audiences for their achievements.

**Recommendation 7.10**

*that the Department develop options for fostering public school and community networks to improve student access to a broader curriculum and range of teachers with specialist skills.*
Chapter 8:

Future directions for secondary education

INTRODUCTION

Secondary education, in partnership with parents and communities, guides students in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

In the junior secondary school years students build on the basic skills and knowledge they learnt at primary school to help them develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the world around them and to prepare them for adult life. In the senior secondary years students increasingly specialise according to their interests, abilities and post-school plans.

The task of public high schools is to ensure that all young people have access to the best opportunities life presents.

While each stage of education builds on the prior knowledge and understandings developed in earlier stages, the secondary years are increasingly high stakes as they provide the keys of entry to desired and competitive career pathways.

The importance of public comprehensive high schools

High quality and equitable secondary schooling outcomes for students rest heavily on the shoulders of public comprehensive high schools.

Almost all students now complete junior secondary schooling to the end of Year 10 and almost 80 per cent of public school students enter Year 11. This means that secondary education statewide is, by its very nature, comprehensive. Given the diverse range of students, secondary schooling must cater for a diverse range of preferences and abilities in order to prepare all students, whether they leave school at the end of Year 10 or after completing the Higher School Certificate, for their further education, employment and life after school.

The strengths of NSW public high schools are their accessibility and diversity. Public high schools are open to all, regardless of background, ability or capacity to pay. Their role has never been more important in ensuring a just and dynamic society.

The Public Education Council’s advice focuses on the question of how public comprehensive high schools can best be positioned to deliver for all students.

The strengths of the NSW high school curriculum lie in a high quality, rigorous curriculum framework based in the subject disciplines which provides for a range of student abilities
The NSW Government has made a strong commitment to ensuring curriculum standards for all high schools through the reforms to the Higher School Certificate recommended by Barry McGaw and outlined in the White Paper *Securing their Future* (1997) and the reforms to the Years 7-10 syllabuses implemented from 2004.

It is essential that public high schools have the capacity to ensure that all students can benefit from these curriculum choices and access the courses that are most appropriate for them. Ensuring that all students achieve a high quality secondary education not only benefits the individual students but provides future dividends for the community as a whole.

**Current challenges to public comprehensive high schools**

**Current and future demographic, labour market and social trends**

Public high schools are increasingly under pressure from changing demographic patterns and increasing choice and competition in the education market place fuelled by changing economic and social conditions and the increasing funding by the Commonwealth of non-government schooling. Comprehensive high schools are particularly vulnerable to these pressures and are increasingly losing market share with the drift to non-government schools. The promotion of parental choice, supported by public funding for non-government schools, results in public comprehensive high schools in some areas losing enrolments to the point that they can no longer offer sufficient curriculum choice to attract students with higher academic interests and abilities and so go into decline and eventually amalgamate or close.

The Public Education Council recognises the challenges involved in confronting these issues as well as the efforts invested in many initiatives over recent years to find ways of arresting these trends. It also recognises that these challenges have existed for several decades and are not unique to New South Wales.

The projected demographic decline in the school student population in New South Wales, combined with the continued preferencing of individual parental choice in public funding, will further exacerbate the plight of public comprehensive high schools in coming years. The Council strongly believes that this is not in the best interests of the students in public schools or of the community in general.

The structures, planning and resourcing of public high schools must be priority focus areas for strategies to promote strong public secondary education for all.

**Tension between demands for high academic rigour and system inclusiveness**

New South Wales has much to be proud of regarding the widening of educational opportunities for young people. The challenge remains, however, of reducing the achievement gap between top and bottom students whilst promoting high academic achievement levels and access for all.

Public comprehensive high schools, if they are to remain comprehensive, must be able to provide a wide curriculum choice and cater for both academic students and those who are aiming for vocational pathways. If comprehensive schools are not able to balance the
competing demands for rigour (providing courses that are academically demanding) and inclusiveness (providing for the full range of students served by the school) they risk losing one or the other group. This is a particular issue for public comprehensive high schools in low socio-economic communities with numbers of students who face barriers to education.

The Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination is a critical element in comprehensive schools being able to balance the tensions between inclusion and rigour. This examination provides students with challenging learning tasks and the opportunity to gain a publicly valued credential. Public schools must be equally well placed to support their students to meet this challenge. If they are not, then far from being a means of advancement for able and hard working students regardless of their background or personal circumstances, the HSC can become a tool for maintaining and consolidating privilege for children from families who can access schools that are able to provide adequate and appropriate support for their students.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Demographic and structural changes impacting on high schools

Demographic trends

Comprehensive public secondary schooling in New South Wales dates largely from the Wyndham reforms of the early 1960s. These reforms established high schools open to all students in the communities they served, providing quality education across a broad curriculum, with a common curriculum in the junior secondary years opening educational pathways previously closed to the majority of students. These reforms were pivotal in widening the opportunities of young people to successfully complete secondary education, access tertiary studies and improve their working life options.

The comprehensive high school remains the predominant mode of public secondary schooling. Indeed public comprehensive high schools still account for 91 per cent of public secondary students in New South Wales (2003). Since their inception, however, they have continued to change in response to emerging social, demographic, economic, labour market and funding realities. Different regional or local contexts have produced widely different challenges and structural responses. Public comprehensive high schools have had to absorb the brunt of these challenges. While still the dominant mode of secondary schooling, public comprehensive high schools now account for some 58 per cent of total NSW secondary students (public and non-government), down from 70 per cent in 1985.

Figure 9 presents the broad demographic and enrolment trends experienced over the past three decades.

Until the early 1980s public secondary enrolments were largely driven by the underlying demographics of the secondary school age population. The 1970s saw rapid growth with an additional 36,000 secondary students enrolled in NSW public schools between 1971 and 1977. Almost all of these additional students attended public comprehensive high schools, with public selective and non-government school secondary enrolments remaining relatively stable. Over this period retention rates to Year 12 also remained stable at around 30 per cent.
From the early 1980s, competition in the youth labour market intensified with youth unemployment rates increasing and full-time work opportunities falling significantly. These factors, combined with broader social trends including increasing participation of women in the labour force and post compulsory education and training, underpinned rapid growth in retention rates to senior secondary years. Retention rates to Year 12 of public secondary students rose from 28.3 per cent in 1982 to 66.5 per cent in 1993 (Figure 10).

These factors combined with strong demographic growth through much of the 1980s to produce sustained growth in public secondary enrolments – up by 17,000 students between 1977 and 1987. Once again the overwhelming proportion was enrolled in public comprehensive high schools. This growth occurred while non-government secondary enrolments were beginning to accelerate.

During the 1990s and early 2000s public secondary enrolments remained relatively steady despite strong growth in the underlying secondary population cohort. This was largely explained by the continuing drift to non-government schools as well as to TAFE. The macro stability in public secondary enrolments, however, masked complex compositional changes which were occurring which challenged the public system, particularly public comprehensive high schools in highly contested areas.

**Structural changes**

Eight new selective high schools were established in 1989 and a further two in 1990 with the objective of arresting the drift of more able students to non-government schools. Public selective high schools expanded from 11 to 21 with selective secondary enrolments rising by some 11,000 students between 1988 and 2000. Public schools were ‘de-zoned’ to enable greater schooling choice together with the designation of a large number of public comprehensive high schools as specialist schools (eg Technology, Language, Sports, Performing Arts) to provide marketing advantage. Since 1999 a number of multi-campus colleges have also been established, with a total of 10 colleges comprising 35 schools operating in some areas of Sydney and some regional centres.

In a period of continuing strong growth in the underlying secondary age population these developments appear to have had little impact on the drift to non-government schools. An intensification of competition with the non-government sector and within the public system, yielding no systemic advance in position, appears to be the defining outcome of the 1990s.

The last few years have seen little change in the underlying demographic and social trends. However, the enhancement of Commonwealth funding of non-government schools lays the foundation for increasingly challenging times for public high schools, particularly when viewed in the context of the projected decline in the secondary population.

**Projected enrolment decline**

Within three years the statewide secondary school aged population in New South Wales is projected to commence a sustained downward trend. Between 2007 and 2020 this cohort is projected to decline by between 20,000 (DIPNR) and 40,000 (ABS). The age cohorts for Years 7 and 8 have already started to decline.

Statewide movements, however, hide disparate regional and more localised trends. The pattern experienced between the last two national Population Censuses (Figure 5, p. 75) shows that over the five year period 1996-2001, when the secondary school aged population in New South Wales grew by more than 20,000 persons, some localities in Sydney grew strongly whilst others experienced either modest or low levels of growth. When the trends in public school enrolments are viewed within this context (Figure 6, p. 75) even more diverse patterns emerge across localities.
The projected downward trend in the NSW secondary school age population can be expected to provide much more challenging times for public high schools, particularly if the continuing drift to non-government schooling, now evident in the primary years as well secondary, is not arrested. Heightened competitive tensions will undoubtedly be experienced within contested schooling ‘markets’ as schools attempt to maintain student numbers and their academic and financial viability. The impacts of these market forces are not shared evenly. One of the effects is often increased (per student) cost structures of the affected public schools.

**Balancing rigour and inclusion**

Completion of the junior secondary years to the end of Year 10 is now essentially compulsory for all students, with less than three per cent of students not completing Year 10 in New South Wales. As noted above, a common curriculum through these years has been pursued with the object of ensuring all young people have the necessary educational foundations for further education, training or work, the pathways for which they will clarify and negotiate in their immediate post-compulsory years.

While over 80 per cent of students now enter Year 11, a larger proportion of students in New South Wales leave school at the end of Year 10 than in most other states. While different industrial structures, tertiary education provision and labour markets may explain much of this continuing pattern, questions remain about whether senior school completion rates might be usefully increased in New South Wales.

The past two decades have seen the senior secondary student body grow substantially and become much more diversified. There clearly are students in Years 11-12 who are preparing for higher education and who will gain the places for which they hope. There are others who have no intention of proceeding beyond secondary education. The majority are probably in between – not absolutely certain of what they want and certainly unsure about what might turn out to be possible (McGaw 1996). However the general purposes of senior secondary education are defined, they must accommodate that diversity of individual purposes and needs (McGaw 1997).

These diverse purposes of the senior secondary years and the diverse, though not evenly distributed, nature of the senior secondary population create tension within many schools, particularly public comprehensive schools. Debate on this issue often focuses on the curriculum framework and how it might best meet the needs of all senior secondary students. Some commend a highly differentiated HSC curriculum with a variety of levels of intellectual demand and assessment which enables all students to work at their own level and achieve success. Others contend that such arrangements reinforce social divisions that education should work to reduce. They argue that inequity results when low expectations set unnecessary limits on students’ potential achievements. The NSW HSC reforms implemented in recent years reflected this latter view.

Debate around these questions also includes arguments about alternative institutional and credential pathways to better meet the different needs of the more diverse student body. New South Wales has maintained a single senior schooling framework, the NSW HSC, within which diverse and flexible pathways are provided. Alternative vocational education and training options are provided by TAFE NSW and other providers for those opting out.
of school. Other jurisdictions are experimenting with alternative senior school credentials for the less academically able.

This tension between rigour and inclusiveness is the predominant, though not exclusive, challenge of public comprehensive high schools, particularly those serving high concentrations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds or schools experiencing increasing residualisation within their localities. Developing and resourcing structures which ensure access to quality teaching for academically interested and able students whilst also providing for the more diverse senior school body is a key challenge.

There are many variables involved in this process. Structures and resources are crucial considerations. Also important is the effectiveness with which the curriculum and resources are applied in schools.

Failure to satisfactorily meet these challenges will compromise the openness and opportunity which for so long have been hallmarks of NSW public secondary education.

**Recent and contemporary developments**

To address these challenges a wide range of initiatives has been introduced by the public school system in New South Wales. These include:

- Multi-campus colleges – there are now ten colleges with 35 campuses.
- Selective streams in comprehensive high schools – in addition to the 17 selective high schools and four selective agricultural high schools there are now seven comprehensive high schools with both selective and non-selective or community streams.
- Cooperative ventures with TAFE NSW and universities
- Revitalisation of targeted schools through major capital developments
- Selected expansion of specialist high school developments
- Strengthened delivery of vocational education and training for school students
- Innovative collaborative curriculum sharing arrangements amongst schools (eg in the Griffith area) enabling a wider range and higher quality curriculum delivery to students than would be possible within any individual school on their own.
- Flexibility pathways in senior schooling – involving part-time, re-entry, school-training-work options.

**ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Public secondary education is now at a critical juncture. With an enrolment share of 62.9 per cent in 2004, declining underlying demographics and with a continuing drift to non-government schools, the viability of many public high schools will increasingly be tested.

Disparate pressures and challenges have been experienced across regions. The public system, and public comprehensive high schools in particular, have borne the brunt of these. Residualisation pressures, often combined with under-utilisation of physical resources in highly competitive areas, have occurred with continuing growth needs in other localities. Future demographic and social trends are likely to create a growing number of hot spots.
The experience of the last decade casts doubt on the sense and value of stimulating greater parental choice as a means of producing more effective schooling and confidence in the public system. The drift to the non-government sector seems impervious to specialist labelling or segmentation of public provision. It is also naïve to think that this strategy provides a means of dealing with underlying demographic decline.

The Public Education Council believes that greater effort needs to be brought to bear on those hard-pressed schools where outcomes are persistently low. While there are many factors impacting on schools that are outside their control, there are other factors within the control and influence of the individual school that affect student outcomes. As part of its on-going monitoring of schools and schooling outcomes, the Department of Education and Training needs to closely monitor schools that are known to have persistently low outcomes compared with schools in similar circumstances which are succeeding in terms of student outcomes in order to put in place effective school improvement processes.

At a broader level, the Council believes that more information is needed in relation to the system-wide effectiveness of the structures and curriculum frameworks for high schools, in order to make recommendations for future directions in secondary education more generally.

While there have been many promising initiatives trialled in New South Wales over recent years, there is a lack of clear evidence of systemic improvement. There is a need to initiate an intensive effort to review, assess and identify the most promising among the range of initiatives of recent years to guide how secondary schooling might best be developed to produce better outcomes in the specific, local circumstances that prevail in the areas served by these schools.

There is a need, in particular, for the NSW Government itself to be clear about the extent to which the current secondary curriculum frameworks and the HSC are capable of producing acceptable outcomes in the circumstances that prevail in some of our most hard-pressed comprehensive schools

A comprehensive study could be developed to ‘test’ these frameworks in the context of local realities; to assess the improved educational outcomes and any strengthened aspects of public education provision arising from the range of initiatives already in train; and to identify what further action may be necessary.

It is opportune now to focus attention on these matters. The new HSC and School Certificate are bedded down and an assessment of how well they are meeting their design objectives would be possible. A second significant factor is the projected downward trend in the NSW secondary school age population over coming decades, with public comprehensive schools likely to bear the brunt of ‘market’ adjustment.

The proposed study would take the social, demographic and economic context and the uneven distribution of educational advantage as a given and ask what can be done better by public secondary schooling to raise the educational outcomes for students.

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7 Schools may be considered hard-pressed if they exhibit some or all of the following characteristics: falling enrolments; low retention to year 12; low attendance rates; behaviour problems; a significant proportion of students in the lower achievement bands.
**Recommendation 8:**

*that the NSW Government undertake a study of the existing structures and curriculum frameworks for public secondary education to determine whether they are leading to acceptable outcomes for the full range of students and whether any improvements need to be made.*

In the Council’s view there is a need for such a study to gather comprehensive evidence of the effects of the existing patterns of provision. The study should precede any further changes to the structures of secondary schooling.

**The broad questions**

Socio-economic advantage is unevenly distributed geographically within New South Wales, as it is in other states and territories and most comparable countries. The strong and persistent influence of the socio-economic status of school communities on the capacity of their schools and performance of their students is well documented. Socio-economic circumstance is a product of varied and complex factors, including ethno-cultural, parental educational attainment, occupational status and financial resources. While New South Wales and Australian schooling ranks highly in international student achievement studies, there is considerable ground to be covered in raising the achievement of students from lower socio-economic circumstances.

For schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic circumstances, as well as schools experiencing residualisation within higher socio-economic communities, the following broad questions are posed:

1. What is the extent of the issue of these ‘hard-pressed’ high schools within the NSW public education system?
   - What are the defining features of a hard-pressed public high school? Which features are common and which are location/school specific? What proportion of high schools could be described as ‘hard-pressed’?
   - Based on prior learning outcomes and socio-economic characteristics, are the students attending these schools significantly different from those attending other schools generally available to the communities served?

2. Do existing schooling structures and resources (physical and human) support access by students in these schools to the educational opportunities available to students more generally?
   - What have been the outcomes of the new collegiate structures, selective streams and cross-sectoral developments of recent years in terms of their impact on these schools?
   - Are executive, teaching staff and other resources available to deliver the curriculum offered of similar standards to those of comparable schools? If not what are the major inhibiting factors?
3. Are existing curriculum frameworks (School Certificate and HSC) appropriate, or appropriately applied, in these schools?

- Does the curriculum range offered cater for the full range of student academic abilities? How is it determined and how is it resourced?
- Are the curriculum options different from those found in higher performing schools in comparable SES and geographic circumstances?

4. How effectively do these schools engage their parent and local communities to support their missions?

- What collaborative structures have proven successful in strengthening delivery?
- How do schools experiencing residualisation relate to their parent communities? How do these relationships differ from those of more strongly positioned schools serving similar communities?

5. What can we learn from the New South Wales experience and developments interstate and overseas to guide policy and planning of public secondary education for the next decade and beyond?

- Which initiatives in New South Wales aimed at supporting student achievement in the most challenging school contexts have had demonstrated success?
- What successful initiatives have been applied in other Australian states and internationally to support schools in similar circumstances?
Appendix

NSW PUBLIC EDUCATION COUNCIL

The Public Education Council was established in 2002 to promote public schooling in New South Wales and to advise the Minister for Education and Training on future directions for public education in New South Wales to retain its high standards.

Terms of Reference

To provide the government with advice on the following key public education issues:

- a flexible public education system that responds to community needs, population growth and technology
- accessible and equitable public education system across NSW
- encouraging effective participation of students, parents and communities in the life of public schools
- promoting the quality outcomes of public education to the community
- identifying ways to support, motivate and recognise public school teachers
- ensuring that the unique and diverse educational needs of rural and regional communities are recognised
- ensuring that the unique and diverse education needs of Western Sydney are recognised
- other matters as referred by the Minister for Education and Training.

In formulating its advice, the Council has examined the public school system primarily from the standpoint of students and their entitlement to the highest quality schooling that this state can provide. The Council has held three forums and has visited a number of schools and talked to students, teachers, principals and senior officers in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions in order to reflect as wide a view as possible of the strengths of the NSW public education system and the challenges facing it.

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The Hon Susan Ryan AO Former Federal Minister for Education
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