INTRODUCTION

Young children enter primary school with high expectations of their primary school experience. This is evident in what some preschool children said in consultation meetings held by the Commission for Children and Young People:

I want my teacher to be like batman and teach me how to fly …
Teachers will be cool.
Big school will be fun. (Commission for Children and Young People)

For most children their primary schooling is a very positive experience.

From the responses to the consultation, it is evident that there are a number of reasons why primary education is successful. Primary schools are characterised by a secure, happy and nurturing environment. Most primary teachers teach one class of children and have responsibility for their well being and educational progress across all areas of learning.

I think Primary schools offer far better opportunities for holistic education and child centred learning than Secondary Schools, due to the simple fact that the children have one dominant teacher during any single year. This is a strength that is lost as soon as children enter the siloed world of secondary education. (Community member)

K-6 schools have proved very effective both academically and socially – don’t change. (School staff meeting)

Many respondents commented on some of the well established and successful programs and initiatives in primary schools that are focused on identifying the learning needs of children as early as possible and providing targeted learning experiences in literacy and numeracy.

Some parents indicated that they recognised that it is the quality of the teaching that really makes the difference:

In general I have confidence in the primary education that my children have received over the years. The only exception being when my children have had a poor teacher. (Parent)

Primary schools have been and, in many cases, still are, the focus of community activity. They are places where teachers, parents and the community work together to ensure that children have a happy and successful start to their formal education.

P&C Federation Policy views the first eight years of a child’s life as the most important in determining a child’s development. It is encouraging to see this view reflected in this document’s (Excellence and Innovation) identification of the primary years as important for laying a positive foundation for learning throughout life. (Parents and Citizens’ Association)

The current K-6 structures have proven sound and are strongly supported in our communities as this provides a positive environment to promote the educational and social development of students. There is no need to tamper with this successful structure. (NSW Teachers Federation)

Despite this satisfaction with education in the primary school years, respondents noted a number of concerns and made suggestions for improvement. The major concern related to the curriculum with a significant number of respondents saying that it is ‘overcrowded’. Many of these respondents indicated that the ‘overcrowded’ curriculum is impacting negatively on the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. Included in these concerns about the curriculum were issues relating to current assessment and reporting procedures.

There are a number of issues which need to be addressed to ensure that quality teaching and learning programs continue to be delivered in primary schools. Primary schools need to build on their successes and continue to meet the changing needs of their local communities.
THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

The curriculum in the primary school is based around six key learning areas:

- English
- Mathematics
- Science and Technology
- Human Society and Its Environment (including Languages other than English)
- Creative Arts
- Personal Development, Health and Physical Education.

The majority of primary school teachers are ‘generalist’ teachers and have responsibility for teaching all areas. This requires teachers to design programs that meet requirements of each of the six key learning area syllabus documents.

While children progress in their Year level, learning is divided into three major stages, Stage one relates to Kindergarten to Year 2, although syllabuses identify Early Stage one outcomes for Kindergarten. Stage 2 relates to students in Years 3 and 4 and Stage 3 relates to students in Years 5 and 6. The six key learning area syllabuses prescribe the outcomes that students are to achieve as a result of learning at each stage.

Since the latest English K-6 syllabus was released in March 1998, up until a revised Mathematics K-6 syllabus was released in November 2002, primary teachers have received new syllabuses or updated sections for each of the key learning area syllabuses.

In recognition of the demand on primary teachers to come to terms with such a rapid change in six syllabuses, the Department of Education and Training commissioned Professor Ken Eltis in November 2002 to conduct an evaluation into how teachers were using the outcomes, particularly for assessing and reporting on student achievement.

In November 2003, Professor Eltis presented his Report, *Time to Teach Time to Learn* (Eltis 2003). Work has begun to fulfil the recommendations of the Report but they are yet to be implemented.

In responses to the consultation, teachers expressed concern at the perceived rate and continuity of significant curriculum change and their limited access to professional learning time to support their knowledge of the curriculum and to provide opportunities for collaborative planning with colleagues.

_The DET and the Board of Studies need to come up with a much more realistic time frame for the implementation of their curricula and the achievement of student outcomes._ (School staff meeting)

_Schools will need to become different places sometime soon this century. Places that are wired to the world and changing with the world but also places of community stability that build community relationships._ (School staff member)
A significant number of respondents, both parents and teachers, stated that the primary curriculum is 'overcrowded'. There was a strong feeling expressed that this places unreasonable demands on teachers to program learning activities across the scope of the curriculum while providing opportunities for children to both enjoy their learning and explore topics ‘at depth’.

I would most definitely agree that the primary curriculum is far too crowded and at times too complex. I really do wonder how much of each topic sinks in to our children’s heads as the teacher may only have a limited amount of time to cover a topic and if your child is having trouble then usually the teacher does not have enough time to go over things individually because they have to move onto the next topic!! (Parent)

The primary curriculum is crowded and the biggest problem is always time. (School staff meeting)

Concern was expressed by some respondents that the overcrowded curriculum makes it difficult to meet students’ individual needs.

Our overcrowded curriculum has led to many students not acquiring pertinent literacy and numeracy skills …. Our curriculum needs to change dramatically in order to best meet what students need and deserve from their education in NSW. (School staff member)

Many respondents stressed the importance of quality teaching but suggested that the ‘overcrowding of the curriculum’ and an emphasis on formal assessment has a negative effect on the spontaneity of teaching and learning.

I would like to see more options for flexibility for primary school teachers in selecting quantity and depth of curriculum for their students … based on the needs of their students and in consultation with the school community. (TAFE staff member)

Another submission argued for:

More emphasis on engaging in an activity ’just for fun’, rather than for an assessable outcome … encouraging a balanced lifestyle with direction on outlets of energy and methods of relieving stress. (Personal submission)

In addition to meeting the requirements of the six key learning area syllabuses, respondents stated that additional topics are being added that they are required to teach.

Primary schools cannot fix all the problems of society. Many issues forced into the curriculum are important but not more important than achieving mandatory literacy and numeracy outcomes. eg drug education, bike safety, surf education. (School staff meeting)

The tendency to address every societal need through another “perspective” or additional cross-curriculum area needs to be re-considered. Teachers need permission to focus on the core topics.
business of the curriculum and not be excessively overloaded with add-on policies and programs. (DET staff meeting)

While some teachers agreed that the curriculum is overcrowded they were reluctant to remove anything as it was all seen to be important.

Not all respondents agreed that the curriculum was crowded.

The primary curriculum is manageable, however there is a need for specialist facilities for art, science, music and cooking for optimum learning conditions. (School staff meeting)

Some respondents suggested that the curriculum ‘feels’ crowded due to the rapid pace of the release of new syllabuses and insufficient professional development.

Part of the reason that the Primary curriculum feels so crowded, I feel, is that teachers like myself have been inundated with syllabi and support documents over the past few years and we haven’t been given the time nor adequate professional development opportunities to come to terms with outcomes and teaching to them. (School staff member)

While a significant number of respondents expressed concern at the breadth of curriculum, a number of respondents suggested additional areas which should be added to the primary curriculum.

These suggestions included swimming, more physical education and creative arts, greater emphasis on environmental sustainability, greater focus on information technology, teaching of local Aboriginal languages and the teaching of at least one language other than English.

Some teachers saw many of their teaching responsibilities as being the responsibility of families and the community. Some respondents suggested that classroom time would be better spent on activities more formally linked to the literacy and numeracy skills development of their students.

We need to raise the awareness of the community of the shared responsibility of our future generations. This involves agencies working together to provide support and programs which will collectively lead to a more cohesive community. If society were really aware of everything we are expected to achieve, they may have a more realistic expectation of what is achievable and what is already being achieved. The school community is not solely responsible for solving all society’s ills and dysfunctionalities. (School staff meeting)

Suggested Solutions

Several respondents stated that they do not have sufficient time to teach all that is required and to meet the needs of all students.

Many respondents noted that assessing and reporting on outcomes has contributed to the workload of teachers. The specific issues and suggested solutions identified by respondents are addressed below in the section, Assessment and Reporting.
In addition to solutions relating to assessing and reporting, a range of solutions was suggested by respondents to help ‘uncrowd’ the curriculum.

Examples of solutions include:

• providing teachers with professional learning opportunities focused on curriculum implementation across the key learning areas
• providing support for teachers to design teaching and learning activities that make connections between the key learning areas
• concentrating on English and mathematics and removing some of the requirements of other key learning areas
• reducing class numbers
• having a ‘core’ national curriculum and providing flexibility for individual schools to implement curriculum to meet local needs.

A significant number of respondents suggested that teachers need assistance in designing units of work that will help students achieve the syllabus outcomes.

Teachers need to integrate learning so that they can teach a multitude of topics to children with the limited time that they have available. (Preschool provider)

There was strong recognition of the value for young children as well as for the workload of teachers in designing teaching and learning activities that cross the key learning areas. The Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Association stated that they support initiatives that:

… seek to ease the pressure on curriculum requirements such as integrated programs that cross KLAs and through discovery based learning activities that engage children in constructing their own knowledge. (Federation of P&Cs)

Examples of other responses include:

We do need to have more integrated curriculum with overlapping outcomes of manageable proportions. (School staff meeting)

Integrated programming is one way to address issues and the crowded curriculum. (School community meeting)

While there was a strong acceptance of literacy and numeracy as primary priorities some respondents suggested that the formal teaching of other ‘subjects’ including science and technology could be deferred to later primary years.

Concentrate far more strongly on the 3Rs. In NSW primary schools there seems to be an inordinate amount of time devoted to subjects other than English and Maths. I feel very strongly that in the earlier years (K-2) English and Maths should be increased and other subjects should be decreased. This would prevent the situation we have at the moment whereby children are getting a long way through primary school before it is noticed that they can’t read. (Parent)
A significant number of respondents suggested that the appointment of specialist teachers to primary schools would provide ‘expert’ curriculum knowledge and help reduce the workload of ‘generalist’ classroom teachers.

Specialist teachers were suggested in a number of key learning areas but in particular for the creative arts, science and technology and personal development, health and physical education.

Specialist teachers eg music / drama may ease teachers load of crowded curriculum. (Personal submission)

Similarly it was argued that additional support teachers or aides should be appointed to assist teachers with the learning needs of students with special needs.

A comparatively small number of respondents were opposed to any specialisation of learning in primary school.

Many respondents stated that with less students in each class the curriculum would be more manageable and assist teachers to meet the individual needs of students.

Further restrictions in class sizes is a necessary precondition if teachers are to take a more ‘individualised’ approach to teaching and assessment. (NSW Teachers Federation)

Smaller class sizes are essential especially with the current policy of integration of special needs students. (Personal submission)

The class size reduction strategy was appreciated but many respondents requested that it be expanded to include the Years 3 to 6.

There was significant support for the implementation of a national curriculum including national standards, national testing and the adoption of a common starting age across the country. Some people felt that a ‘core’ national curriculum would allow individual schools more flexibility to implement a curriculum to meet local needs.

National standard set curriculum, national school starting age and national reporting to parents standardisation. (School community meeting)

Some respondents suggested that while some of these solutions may assist teachers with their workloads, the issues of curriculum including assessment and reporting are complex and also require management and consideration by individual schools.

The Catholic Education Commission response indicated support for the implementation of the Eltis recommendations as helping teachers with their workload but stated:

Reduction of primary school teacher workloads involves the school-based management of a complex set of curriculum, assessment and reporting issues as well as school based cultural imperatives. (Catholic Education Commission)
ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING

Assessment and Reporting

Many teachers were concerned about increased workloads as a result of assessing and reporting against outcomes in syllabuses.

A number of respondents, including the NSW Teachers Federation and the Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Association see the implementation of the recommendations of the Eltis Report, *Time to Teach, Time to Learn* as providing solutions to difficulties expressed by teachers.

Outcomes-based student assessment, introduced without adequate support or guidance has dramatically increased the workload of teachers. This must be addressed through implementation of the recommendations of the Eltis Review, *Time to Teach, Time to Learn*, in full consultation with teachers. (NSW Teachers Federation)

Federation Policy supports Professor Ken Eltis’ recommendation of reducing the specification of the primary curriculum and preparing advice and support for teachers and schools to develop effective and manageable assessment and reporting practices. (Parents and Citizens’ Association)

One of the recommendations of the Eltis Report is a strategy to define mandatory outcomes in syllabuses, so that teachers are better able to design programs to address all the current outcomes in syllabuses. A significant number of respondents expressed support for this strategy.

The curriculum needs radical surgery. Outcomes need to be drastically reduced including those in Maths and English. It is impossible to adequately cover and assess all KLAs. (School staff member)

The Board of Studies has commenced work on this strategy and distributed a draft discussion paper, titled *Defining Mandatory Outcomes in the K-6 Curriculum*, to schools for comment. There were mixed views expressed by respondents:

The CEC supports the approach taken to defining mandatory outcomes across the K-6 curriculum as outlined in the recent Board of Studies consultation paper. (Catholic Education Commission)

…. we need to ignore the recommendations of the Board of Studies discussion paper, ‘Defining Mandatory Outcomes in the K-6 Curriculum’: it is a regressive and limiting vision of the directions we need to take … (Parent)

While respondents were supportive of reducing the number of mandatory outcomes, many recognised that a range of strategies is required to alleviate the workload issues of teachers or improve teaching and learning in primary classrooms.

Some respondents feel that assessment of outcomes is too time consuming and that they spend too much time assessing and not enough time teaching. To others, assessment of outcomes was not seen to be an issue as it was noted that it was a natural part of the teaching and learning process.
Many teachers and schools focus too much on assessment and reporting and not enough on learning. I see many schools teaching for assessment not for student learning. (School staff member)

What was of concern to a significant number of respondents was a lack of professional development for teachers to engage in valid and reliable assessment.

Some respondents feel that the Department is using assessment for ‘accountability’ purposes and is not concerned about the important role it plays in teaching and learning.

The need for accountability by continually testing has now taken on a ‘life of its own’ and to the detriment of teaching itself. We have become so obsessive about testing that there is little time for teachers to reflect on their teaching and learning processes. The little time they have left is usually taken up with completing ‘administrivia’. (School staff meeting)

Some respondents expressed concern that there appears to be too great a focus on the results of the statewide Basic Skills Testing Program.

Too much emphasis is being placed in Basic Skills Tests and Primary Writing Assessment and Computer Tests. These tests represent 0.5 of 1 % of the school year. (School staff meeting)

Basic skills testing should not be used as measure of a child’s development. It does not recognise that children have a variety of experiences and backgrounds and is not concerned with the individuality of the child. (School staff member)

There were a number of responses relating to the use of student portfolios as a means of assessment and for use in reporting to parents. Some teachers expressed concern about the workload involved in assembling portfolios. Some respondents stated that the effort of creating portfolios has detracted from teaching and learning and has added little value.

I think portfolios are time consuming and offer little added value to teaching. I have watched too many times – teachers become stressed, cutting back on everyday lessons to complete sheets for portfolios. (Personal submission)

Some teachers supported the use of portfolios.

Clearly 3 way conference in conjunction with portfolios is the best way to report to parents. (School staff member)

Portfolios were working well – what students could and could not do – but major negative impact from industrial action. (School staff meeting)

Most parents were appreciative of the use of portfolios as a method of reporting on their child’s achievement. Some parents recognised the work involved in these portfolios and suggested that teachers need support to be able to continue to use portfolios.

There needs to be an increase in the funding for professional development of assessment and reporting practices and principles and the link to classroom teaching. (Education Measurement & School Accountability Directorate)

Assessment needs to be integral to the teaching and learning process, not as an ‘add on’. (School community meeting)

The pig does not gain weight the more you weigh it. (School P&C meeting)

External tests, such as Basic Skills Test should not be the most important measure of children’s achievement. (School staff member)

Under no circumstances should portfolios of work be generated. (Parent)

Support for teachers to be able to prepare learning portfolios. (School community meeting)

Staff need to be given training and time to implement portfolios. It is the best way to demonstrate students improvement, it shows where students were and where they are now. It shows if learning is taking place. (School staff member)
As a parent I found these folders invaluable as a way of making sense of the teacher’s reporting and also a form of reflection for my child. She still looks back on her folders and gains a lot of self esteem from seeing how far she has come. A report card just can’t match up. (Parent)

Portfolios are an excellent form of ongoing assessment, although time must be allotted for teachers to compile this. (Parent)

Not all parents agreed that portfolios are useful:

I was never impressed with the portfolios as a method of reporting/assessment. I always saw them as a nice way of showing your child’s work and as ‘keep sake’ for the future. (Parent)

There was strong support by respondents for providing schools with examples of assessment and reporting templates, as recommended as part of the Eltis Report.

These templates are currently being developed with the aim of assisting schools with the assessment and reporting process while providing the option of adaptation to meet local requirements.

Some schools stated that they have reporting systems that were developed in consultation with their school communities and meet local need and do not require changing at this time.

Our school, after much consultation, has devised and implemented a reporting system that fully satisfies parents/carers, staff and students. WE DO NOT WANT TO CHANGE IT. Please do not impose a system on us that may not work and puts more pressure on the busy staff of a small school. (School staff meeting)

The importance of consultation with the school community in developing reporting systems was raised by a number of respondents.

Many respondents stressed the need for effective tracking of students’ assessment information across years, stages and at the various major transition points. Some schools are using computer-based tracking systems. These are not uniform and cannot necessarily be used to track students on entry to secondary school.

More tracking from primary to secondary so secondary teachers know what levels the kids are at. (School staff meeting)

Not all respondents agreed to electronic tracking of student achievement:

Student achievement from one school should not be available to another school on any computer system. (Parent)

Parental Expectation

Many parents said that they do not understand the curriculum, how their child is assessed and what is being reported.
Many parents stated that they do not understand the outcomes approach and requested information that they could understand about their child’s progress. For some parents this was described as marks from tests and where their child ranks in comparison to other students.

As a parent I prefer a simple indication of marks and position in class and a face to face meeting with the teacher a couple of times a year … A simple indication that your child is passing the assessments set for them in class and some indication of where your child is placed in the class is all a parent really wants in my opinion. (Parent)

Other parents expressed quite a different view:

My son’s school (named) does an excellent job of regular outcomes-based reporting to parents … I am therefore astonished and concerned when I hear what happens at other public schools, where even infants school children are ranked as 1st, 2nd, etc. in their class and apparently their marks put on a bell curve. This means that even if every child in the class achieved the learning outcomes, only the top ones will be rewarded. (Parent)

Parents requested reports that were regular, clear, honest and in simple English:

Get rid of the jargon! If your doctor spoke to you in medical terms you’d leave his consulting room with only a doubtful understanding of what your diagnosis was. Schools are no different. (Parent)

The perspective of staff and students at one school was more optimistic, proposing that:

The outcome-based reporting is encouraging for children and is clearer for parents – allows for different learning rates and different maturity. Parents perhaps need to be educated to understand this form of reporting. Reporting should go to parents. (School community group)

The majority of respondents requested regular, timely, ‘jargon free’ discussions between the teacher, parents and student. Many respondents referred to this as “three way reporting”.

THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

The broad structure of primary schools has remained unchanged with children progressing through seven years of schooling, from Kindergarten to Year 6.

Respondents were generally satisfied with the structure of primary school. However, there were a number of comments made by respondents relating to:

- the entry age of school
- the length of the school day
- class structures
- the diversity of student needs
- staffing in primary schools

After 5 years at school I have very little idea what level my son is supposed to have reached. I know he is bright but for all I know he may be under achieving at the bottom of the class. I don’t think he is but no one will tell me for sure. (Parent)

Reporting is too vague and uses too many ‘eduspeak’ words. Parents often don’t know where their child is at and therefore cannot give them the support they may need. Euphemisms like ‘emerging’ simply frustrate parents and certainly don’t help children to deal with a problem if it is there. I’m not an advocate of pitting young children against each other but I think parents have a right to know how their kids are doing in relation to the curriculum/benchmark/general expectation right from Grade 1. (Parent)
• the importance of Years 5 and 6 as the middle years of schooling and
• the use of schools as community centres.

Some concern was expressed at the cost of maintaining numbers of very small schools.

Small schools which are no longer viable are sapping huge financial and personnel resources for no good reason when they are located within a reasonable distance of a larger school. (DET staff member)

Starting Age

There were many comments on the best age for children to start school.

There was a strong view that the starting age should be raised and a call for a national starting age to be introduced. Many people made suggestions of the ‘cut-off’ date and there was a suggestion that perhaps an additional transition class could be created so that children could enter at 5 years of age any time throughout the year.

The issue of starting age and school readiness was a major theme in response to the Early Childhood Years paper.

Length of School Day

A relatively small number of respondents suggested changing the length of the school day or school year to ensure more time for formal learning.

Consideration could be given to the extension of school hours and a slight change in services delivered to students. (Parent)

Class Structures

Schools and their communities have some flexibility in the way classes are established although the number of children in the school determines how many classes can be formed. There are many primary schools which form composite classes of two or more year levels and small rural schools that can have a class with students in each year level.

There were divergent opinions as to the value and effectiveness of ‘streaming’ students into either ‘ability’ groups of single sex classes. Both sides offered arguments for their opinions.

The use of composite classes in primary schools was not seen as favourable by the majority of respondents who commented on their use.

Composite classes appear to be a problematic concept. In my son’s school, composite classes are not structured according to students’ ability, at least not in infant years. (Parent)

Some support was expressed for composite classes:
I still agree with composite classes or grades. (School staff member)

In interviews with the Commission for Children and Young People, children expressed divergent views on the use of composite classes:

I preferred composite classes – friendlier.

Mixed ability classes depend on class size so teachers have time for everyone.

Composite class are not good. If you are good at things you finish long before the younger kids and have to wait. It’s boring. (Commission for Children and Young People)

For some respondents, the concept of achievement in ‘stages’ is confusing when students still progress in year levels or grades. Some parents said that they would rather have achievement in year levels and not over ‘stages’ which relate to two years of schooling.

After listening to parents who still have children in primary school, I was made aware of words like STAGES – GRADES. Grades I can understand. Stages I haven’t got any idea what is being discussed. I believe in some primary schools the curriculum is taught in ‘stages’, in ‘grades’ or ‘not in grades’. I feel a new parent not having previously been involved in understanding where their child is with education would not have any idea. This would push them further out the door because, for a lot of young parents, this would make them feel they are airing their ignorance. (Community member)

Middle Years of Schooling

Various submissions addressed the issue of the ‘middle years’ and the transition from primary to secondary schools. These issues are detailed in the Middle Years section of this report. Issues that were identified for the primary school included:

• the use of more specialist teachers in Years 5 and 6
• greater mobility for both teachers and students between primary and secondary schools, and
• increased training and development for teachers in effective teaching of younger adolescent learners.

Although there were divergent views on the benefits of the creation of a separate ‘middle school’, many respondents saw the issue as one of ensuring effective transition and the provision of continuity of learning rather than having an alternate middle years structure for students in Years 5 to 8. Some respondents identified that if middle schools were created, there would be additional transition points (between Year 4 and Year 5 and between Year 8 and Year 9) which may cause concern for students.

School Communities

Respondents spoke of the benefits of the co-location of representatives of other groups, such as the Departments of Health, Housing and Community Services as examples of government agencies with programs relevant to parents of school-age children.
This was also a significant issue in responses to the *Early Childhood Years* and is also referred to in the Community Partnerships section of Chapter 4.

**Staffing**

Some respondents felt that there should be an increased proportion of male teachers in primary schools particularly to provide role models for boys. Some people suggested reasons for the lack of male teachers are insufficient status and pay and concerns over child protection issues.

- At the moment males are not attracted to the job because of its relatively low status and remuneration; and the ease with which a male can become embroiled - child protection issues with no satisfactory way of defending himself against unfounded accusations. (School staff meeting)

- Male teaching staff are vital (not only to provide a balanced work force), but more importantly to provide positive role models for young boys who lack appropriate family models, or those without particularly single parent families mainly parented by mothers. (Personal submission)

Some respondents said that they thought that the staffing formula which determined staffing establishments in primary schools is inflexible. The major concern was that they felt that they compared less favourably with the staffing processes for high schools.

- There is a need for greater flexibility in staffing of schools. There is a need to at least determine the correct mix of staff for schools. Principals have no say in determining the needs of the school staffing in relation to school requirements. (Personal submission)

Many respondents also requested the appointment of additional staff to assist teachers in classrooms. In particular, respondents requested additional counsellor time in primary schools, support personnel to assist with technology, additional support teachers for students with learning difficulties and additional teachers’ aides in schools.

- **Counsellors in the primary school at least twice a week. Specialised support for technology when it breaks down or operating certain programs.** (School staff meeting)

- **Safety net for students with special learning needs. More assistance with greater funding for STLA’s, counsellors, and learning support and health specialists.** (P&C meeting)

- **Employment of school counsellors/psychologists – 1 for every pp1/pp2/3 school. Counsellor and psychologist shared between PP4/PP5/PP6 schools.** (DET staff meeting)

### Diversity of Student Needs

A significant number of respondents identified issues that need to be addressed to ensure that needs of all students are addressed in primary school.
I would like to see children valued as individuals and their individual educational needs being assessed in the first instance and then education being provided at the appropriate pace and level of learning for each individual child. (Parent)

There was some general concern expressed about the range of needs of students within one class. This is clearly illustrated in the following quote:

Teachers are having to cope (still) with 30-31 students including children from non-English speaking backgrounds, language disorders, refugee backgrounds and so on. It is impossible to provide meaningful, relevant, well planned experiences to cater for all needs and maintain a safe, well managed classroom all day every day. (Personal submission)

The needs of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds were identified as needing particular attention. The importance of teachers understanding of the needs of these students was highlighted.

Introduction of cultural awareness/community education for city teachers transferred to rural/remote areas where the majority of children are of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander. This allows the Teacher to adapt to the diversity of the area. (Parent)

Several responses spoke of the impact of ‘children with challenging behaviours’ on classroom dynamics. Some respondents suggested that there should be ‘more discipline’. Others suggested that additional support in classrooms or different programs are needed.

Increased level of support for students with behavioural difficulties – more Support Teachers (1 per large school) and more funding for aides (spec). Alternate programs for students with Behaviour Problems e.g. Wilderness Experience. (School staff member)

It was suggested by some respondents that more professional development was needed for teachers and that additional support in the form of specialist staff, classes or units within the school.

The need for professional development for teachers of mainstream classes who have children with specific disabilities was raised throughout the consultation.

Teacher training to address needs of children in mainstream classes today eg aspergers etc. (School staff meeting)

There were a significant number of responses relating to the needs of children who have a language background other than English (LBOTE).

Each year many LBOTE children enter primary school after Kindergarten as newly arrived students from overseas and require immediate and ongoing ESL assistance in order to access the curriculum. For these and other children, a primary curriculum that systematically supports the development of English language and literacy throughout every key learning area in every year is the hallmark of a linguistically inclusive...
Some respondents stated that there are insufficient numbers of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers available to cater for the increasing number of students with LBOTE, some of whom are refugees. The Ethnic Communities Council of NSW suggested that the needs of refugee children may require particular attention.

\[ \text{Students from migrant families may not require the same level of support as refugee students. Refugee students may have had experiences that are detrimental to their ability to learn. Their exposure to and understanding of education systems and processes, even in their home countries, may have been minimal at best.} \]

The Inner and Eastern Sydney Migrant Interagency Group recommended:

\[ \text{Increase in the provision of ESL support. There is an urgent need to appropriately train teachers and ESL counsellors to assist students at schools and TAFE Colleges to support refugee and new arrivals families to participate in the school community.} \]

A range of issues affecting children in rural and isolated areas was raised by a number of respondents. Many of these respondents felt that children in some rural and isolated areas lack the opportunities available to children in metropolitan areas.

\[ \text{Our school is geographically isolated and it is strongly felt by all participants that the students miss out on education opportunities. Although the school strives to achieve to overcome the geographic isolation there are ways in which this area can be better addressed. The first area needing to be addressed is transport. The students miss out on attending planned excursions as there is no private or public transport available. In the past the school has applied to the state government for a school bus. This was not successful as the school had to pay for it out of general funds. This is not possible as we do not have sufficient funds to purchase a bus.} \]

Some respondents felt that the needs of gifted and talented students are not adequately addressed by the current curriculum or school structures.

\[ \text{There needs to be an avenue for the ‘gifted’ or the ‘advanced’ to progress at an accelerated rate but still retain links to their peers.} \]

\[ \text{We have several bright children. They have consistently reported boredom and frustration with the slow pace of learning.} \]
HOME – SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Building Partnerships

Many respondents commented on the benefits for children if there are genuine partnerships between home and school. In the response from the Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Association, they stated that a positive relationship between children, parents and teachers:

… not only develops a sense of school community, but also allows parents to actively participate in their child’s learning and similarly allows children to be active participants in their own learning. (Federation of P&Cs)

A significant number of respondents emphasised the importance of frequent and effective communication between the school, class teacher and parents. These comments related particularly to keeping parents informed about their child’s progress.

A number of parents indicated that they would like to have more opportunities to participate in school activities.

More consultation – team work with parent’s involvement in processes with school life. (Parent)

A greater opportunity for parents to be motivated to participate in the learning of their children. (Parent)

Some submissions suggested that parents and community members who are able to assist teachers in the classroom could complete a course and be accredited in some formal sense. Another suggestion was that their time could be financially recognised through taxation incentives for the time devoted to school activities.

One way would be free or low cost courses that lead to a basic qualification that could then be credited toward a TAFE or Uni course. The area could be reading, math, science, art, counselling etc. This would help people out of work or not sure what areas to explore and as parents it would help their kids as the topics would be areas these kids are currently learning. (Parent).

Generally respondents felt that there needs to be clearer guidelines for parents and community members to work effectively in classrooms.

The issues of home and school partnerships are also addressed in the Community Partnerships section of Chapter 4.

Homework

Several submissions addressed the issue of homework, expressing concern at the purpose of homework and the effect that homework can have on families with limited shared recreational time.

I would encourage less homework in the primary years. (Parent)

Less homework. (P&C meeting)

delay homework until later – reading each night – no projects. (P&C meeting)
Some respondents expressed concern that not all children have home environments that support them to do homework.

Homework and major assignments to be done at home using computers/other resources is very difficult and ‘unfair’ for students with no one at home to help them. (School staff meeting)

Students expressed their views quite clearly about homework. The following comments by children were made in meetings with the Commission for Children and Young People:

Don’t learn from homework and repetition, just making mistakes over and over again.

Don’t do my homework ‘cos there’s no one to help me.

(Commission for Children and Young People)

IN SUMMARY

While the structure of primary schools has remained relatively stable, the primary curriculum has undergone significant change.

Primary teachers have seen a great number of changes to their syllabuses since 1995. The demands on teachers to come to understand new requirements and to start using outcomes to guide their teaching, assessing and reporting in each area are reflected in the comments they have provided. Even the support material that they have received from the Department and the Board of Studies to assist them with the task of implementing new syllabuses has clearly appeared as an additional burden.

Primary teachers are seeking a time of stability in regard to syllabus implementation. They need time to become familiar with the requirements of each key learning area and to develop successful programs that will meet the needs of their students.

Given the pace of change in syllabuses and the time given to key learning areas, the various regular aspects of their week such as sport, scripture and assemblies, as well as those special activities such as school camp and performances, it is not surprising that teachers have insufficient time to meet the needs of all their students. This consultation indicated that in teachers’ efforts to meet all curriculum requirements, it is possible to lose the focus on delivering quality teaching and learning in classrooms.

Several teachers identified ‘additional subjects’ that they are required to address in their teaching such as road safety education and drug education. Some respondents noted that some of these ‘additional subjects’ can be identified as aspects of one of the key learning area syllabuses.

Some respondents suggested other possible reasons why the primary curriculum is so demanding:

- there has not been sufficient support through professional development activities to assist teachers to design programs that will help them with the scope of the curriculum

  Support to date has been focused on specific key learning areas and not on assisting teachers with the whole curriculum. Now that teachers have the six syllabuses, it is timely to provide targeted professional development that will assist teachers with strategies that will make the whole curriculum manageable.

- teachers and schools have not received any information to clarify requirements or guide them in making decisions about the scope of curriculum.

A significant number of respondents mentioned that the current curriculum demands do not allow teachers any flexibility to meet the particular needs of their community. In particular, teachers indicated that they feel that their students have no time for ‘in depth’ learning. In developing guidelines for curriculum implementation, consideration should be given to what flexibility there should be for communities to have a say in the priorities of curriculum. The teaching of surf education, for example, may be very relevant to a
community by the sea but irrelevant for communities in rural and remote areas of the state. Should primary schools that are feeder schools to a sports high school or a performing arts high school, for example, give greater priority to physical education or creative arts?

As a result of the recommendations of the Eltis Report, there are already a number of strategies that are being developed that should assist teachers with issues of workload. Some of these include:

- defining organisers of K-6 syllabuses to guide teachers to plan, program, assess and report to meet the needs of their students
- providing units of work that will help teachers to make connections between the key learning areas, and
- providing clear assessment and reporting guidelines and templates that schools can adapt to meet local needs.

As a possible solution to the crowded curriculum, respondents suggested that specialist teachers may be of assistance in particular learning areas. Not all respondents agreed that there should be specialisation in primary schools but this suggestion should be investigated for those communities that feel that specialist teachers will be valuable for particular learning areas.

Another suggestion to help teachers to meet the needs of all their students was to reduce class sizes. Many respondents suggested that the Class Size Reduction Program in the early years should be extended to the Years 3 to 6.

Parents and community members said that they are overwhelmed by the curriculum and that they have little understanding of the ‘outcomes approach’ to teaching and learning. As partners in the learning process, parents and carers need clear information about the primary curriculum. They need to be able to understand what their child is being taught, how they are progressing and how they might assist them in their learning.

The solutions to a crowded curriculum are not simple. The responses indicated that there are numerous views about what should or should not be part of the primary curriculum.

What is clear is that schools need stability in syllabus development. They need clarity about the requirements for implementing the scope of the curriculum. Within guidelines, they need flexibility to design quality teaching and learning programs to meet the needs of their students. They need support through targeted professional development to help teachers with the scope of the primary curriculum and they need a range of strategies that help them better manage the demands of curriculum.

Ultimately school communities need to be able to make decisions about curriculum that are in the best interests of their students. School leaders need to have flexibility to guide their school communities to make decisions about the implementation of the curriculum. With this flexibility school leaders can help teachers to manage the curriculum and remain focused on quality teaching.

Concern about tracking student progress at major transition points in their education remains a major issue. The transferability of information is vital if students’ learning is not to be significantly disrupted. Respondents identified the issue as being particularly important between primary and secondary school but also when students move school education areas, regions or even out of the state. The Eltis Report identified the need to conduct a survey of school computer-based tracking systems. As a result of this survey further consideration needs to be given to effective and efficient ways of tracking students within the system.

Primary schools want more time – time to develop quality teaching programs to help students achieve outcomes – time to allow students to focus on their learning – time to meet the individual needs of the diverse range of students in classrooms – time to meet professionally with colleagues and to engage in practical professional development opportunities – time to meet with parents and carers – time to enjoy the teaching and learning process.

Primary teachers and their communities continue to do an amazing job of meeting the multiple demands within a school day. They have always remained focused on the importance of the individual child’s welfare and academic progress. With the implementation of a range of strategies, the curriculum should be simplified and school communities be able to move forward with satisfaction that they are making a positive difference in the lives of primary aged students.
References