Executive summary

The Priority Action Schools Program and its impact

The Priority Action Schools Program (PASP) was designed to support a number of NSW schools in communities with deep needs. Announced in 2002, the Program provided seventy-four NSW schools with between $100,000 and $400,000 to improve learning outcomes for students and support the professional development of teachers in these schools – a total of $16.1 million for the program as a whole in 2003.

Initially conceived as a one-year program that might be extended for a second year subject to evaluation (including this evaluation), the Program was extended into 2004 on the basis of preliminary assessment of its achievements.

Averaged across the total enrolment of the seventy-four PASP schools, the $16.1 million for the Program is equivalent to about $491 per student per annum. Given the depth and extent of the needs of the schools and communities served by the Program, this $491 is a small addition to the (1999-2000 financial year) funding per student per annum in NSW DET schools quoted in the Vinson Inquiry into Public Education: $6,092 for primary students and $8,113 for secondary students. In primary schools, the $491 is an additional 8% of funding per student; in secondary it is an additional 6%.

The objectives of the Program were to support schools to build their capacity to:

- improve students’ educational outcomes;
- improve student behaviour and attendance;
- support teachers through mentoring and induction programs;
- support whole school approaches to improved teaching practice;
- reduce high student turnover and increase retention to complete schooling;
- reduce the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage; and
- maximise interagency and community support. (NSW Department of Education and Training, Initial briefing to District Superintendents and Teachers’ Federation Organisers, 9th August, 2002).

Schools identified on a number of criteria (including educational indicators like student learning outcomes, attendance and retention rates, and several social
indicators) were invited to submit expressions of interest outlining strategies they would use in pursuit of these objectives. Each school’s package of strategies was to be designed as a ‘local solution’ to local problems and issues. Funding was delivered to schools at the start of 2003 after negotiations with the state team managing the Program to identify how these additional resources to the schools might be used – including for additional teaching, executive or support staff.

The Priority Action Schools Program was structured as a “knowledge building program”. Each school was required to conduct a systematic evaluation of its own work, assisted by an academic partner experienced in school-based research. Each school would build a school learning portfolio documenting its work. Each school would conduct action inquiry monitoring and exploring the strategies being tried, with the results of these investigations being archived in its portfolio. This archive of evidence then became the basis for schools to prepare a portfolio report to the Program, outlining its achievements and commenting on the success of its chosen strategies as responses to local needs and circumstances.

The Program was also a knowledge building program in the sense that evidence about its work was progressively collected and reviewed by the state PASP team as the Program unfolded. The state team was assisted by researchers conducting this meta-evaluation of the Program as a whole – Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith and Professor Stephen Kemmis. The meta-evaluators worked in a cooperative relationship with the state PASP team in a similar way to the academic partners who worked with each PASP school.

Together with their academic partners, schools explored a variety of strategies in pursuit of the objectives of the Program, including strategies aimed at developing

- pedagogy;
- improved learning outcomes for students;
- whole school vision and culture building;
- staffing solutions;
- organisation for learning;
- interagency work and parent and community involvement;
- student well-being and student support; and
- teachers’ professional development.

Detailed findings about the nature of the strategies employed by PASP schools are presented in the body of this report, bringing together knowledge from the Program as a whole. The evidence in this report was gathered in studies conducted by the meta-evaluators (based on interviews and discussions with the state PASP team from late 2002 to early 2004, school visits, and case studies of different aspects of the Program’s operation), together with our independent analysis of the archive of seventy-three school portfolio reports submitted at the end of
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December, 2003. In the sections that follow, some of the main findings about the success of these strategies are outlined, clustered under these three headings:

- outcomes for students;
- outcomes for teachers; and
- outcomes for other groups.

Improvements in student learning outcomes

Most schools presenting test data on literacy and numeracy showed positive increases in learning outcomes for students. Although very difficult to attribute to PASP, these are among the most significant gains through the Program. Some gains were small, some quite large. In some cases, data comparing 2002-2003 sometimes showed decreases in outcomes (some increases and decreases will reflect cohort differences). Many teachers and schools were surprised by the size of learning gains observed. The size of gain appears to be related to the kind of strategies tried by the schools, with greater gains in cases where schools tried aspects of productive pedagogies, or explicit and systematic teaching, or interventions related directly to the content area tested.

Teacher observation and student work samples frequently revealed gains in learning outcomes, ranging from small to substantial. Improved learning gains were most evident where the measure of outcomes matched the precise changes made (for example, authentic assessment of tasks of increased intellectual quality, or in reading scores for components of guided reading). Students and teachers frequently reported improvements in performance, in teacher and student attitudes, and in student behaviour.

In a few cases where test results on computer skills were presented, substantial gains were recorded. In three or four cases, only slight gains were observed. In some of these cases, ICT was not a major focus in the school’s PASP work.

Some positive gains were reported through teacher and/or student judgment. Some ICT PASP initiatives supported broad school reorganisation of computing in schools, covering more than student use of computers (e.g., centralising schools’ computing). A small number of schools reported substantial learning gains for parents in computer use.

A variety of gains were shown, in a variety of subjects, mostly based on teacher-set tests. In primary schools, these were in various KLAs; in secondary schools through the work of faculties participating in PASP initiatives. A number of schools used cross-KLA or cross-Faculty thematic work integrating learning.

Teachers and students reported gains in learning in various KLAs and subjects.

Teachers and students also reported improved satisfaction with teaching and learning, especially where the focus of a school’s PASP initiatives was on improved teaching and improved student engagement in learning (e.g., via productive

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pedagogies, authentic assessment), or on improved programming and consistency of teaching in nominated subject areas.

Many schools reported slight to moderate decreases in classroom behaviour problems – in some cases substantial improvements.

A number of schools reported improvements in the handling of welfare issues, including referral of students and families in need to other outside agencies.

Many schools (and teachers and students) reported improved outcomes in students’ social skills and behaviour, and decreased incidence of behaviour management issues. Perhaps paradoxically, it appears to be the case that larger improvements in social skills and student behaviour occurred when the focus of a school’s PASP work was on pedagogy rather than on the management of student behaviour.

Students in many schools reported improvements in classroom climate and in their engagement in, and their responsibility for, learning.

Many schools operating home-school liaison (attendance) programs showed very slight to moderate gains in school attendance and retention, especially in late arrivals, unexplained absences and partial absences, though not among the most-frequently absent students. Most of this improvement appeared to be the result of improved communication between schools and families about students’ unexplained absences. The extent of the improvement appears to be related to the degree to which a school community is afflicted by multiple social disadvantages.

Many home-school liaison officers and Assistant Principals Welfare reported that improved home-school communication, based on mutuality of concern for students, engendered more positive attitudes towards the school, greater care-giver willingness to participate in school activities, and greater support for students.

Improved professional development outcomes for teachers

The schools’ portfolio reports presented a substantial amount of quantitative evidence (surveys, school map data, etc.) about improved learning outcomes for teachers in every dimension of the work of the Program, from the improved teaching practice of beginning teachers through mentoring to gains in a variety of specific kinds of initiatives (in areas including literacy, numeracy, behaviour management, productive pedagogies, assessment, consistency of teacher judgement, and programming). This was supplemented by data from classroom observation by teachers' peers, academic partners, mentors and critical friends, as well as by some data from surveys of students. Gains were reported in many areas including:

- classroom management;
- techniques of Control Theory Reality Therapy;
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- programming;
- consistency of teacher judgment; and
- leadership – especially collegial leadership.

Qualitative evidence attests to improvements in a variety of areas, including teachers’ skills, attitudes and knowledge.

The school portfolio reports also presented a substantial archive of quantitative evidence from surveys about improvements in teachers’ knowledge of particular approaches to teaching and learning and pedagogy, as well as specific techniques for a range of KLAs and subject areas including

- productive pedagogies;
- authentic assessment;
- explicit and systematic teaching;
- guided reading; and
- pedagogies included in Count Me In and Count Me in Too.

There is also a range of qualitative evidence to support the proposition that many teachers have substantially improved knowledge, skills and attitudes through their participation in PASP initiatives in their schools.

Improved outcomes for parents, school communities and other agencies

Schools’ portfolio reports revealed slightly to moderately improved attendance by care-givers in school activities including parent interviews and various kinds of parents’ groups (and ASSPA committees)

Surveys of parents and care-givers revealed improved ratings of the interest of the school in their child, and improved attitudes towards the schools.

Evidence gathered by schools revealed increases in referrals of students and families by schools to outside agencies able to assist students and their families; increased contact and communication between schools and these outside agencies.

Evidence in school portfolio reports also revealed improved quality of contact, connections and communications between schools and students’ families, the wider community, and other support agencies for students and parents – from parent interviews, home-school liaison officers’ reports, and other feedback.
Some learnings about the causes of improved learning outcomes for students and teachers

It is difficult to attribute the kinds of improvements described in the preceding sections solely to the strategies tried by PASP schools. Other factors may have been influential, and there is, in any case, the possibility that some observed gains were the result of the Hawthorne Effect (the effect of being involved in an innovative program about which there are heightened expectations of success).

Moreover, the meta-evaluators noted that the “pressure and support” that PASP schools received from the Program (pressure to demonstrate improved outcomes, and support in finding ways to generate such improvements) was very influential in helping schools to “make a difference” to the learning outcomes for students and teachers. Moreover, schools were aware that the possibility of future funding for the Program as a whole (and for the school itself if the Program were funded for a second year) was contingent on demonstrating gains. The prospect of receiving funding at this level was a substantial incentive for PASP schools.

The improvements reported here are the more compelling because schools generally reported gains based on multiple measures (quantitative and qualitative data of various kinds), and because the evidence comes from multiple sites (from an archive of evidence from seventy-three of the seventy-four PASP schools). The archive of evidence from schools’ portfolio reports together with the other evidence collected by the meta-evaluators (including case studies, interviews and school visits) is substantial. On the basis of this evidence, is possible to draw well-founded conclusions about a range of matters concerning the effectiveness of the strategies tried by schools in pursuit of the Program’s objectives.

**Productive pedagogies, quality teaching**

There is strong evidence to suggest that more marked improvements in student learning outcomes were achieved by schools exploring ‘productive pedagogies” of the kind advocated in the *Quality Teaching in NSW Schools* discussion paper released by the NSW Department of Education and Training in May, 2003. These pedagogies focus on improving student engagement in learning, improved relationships between teachers and learners in the learning process, and assessment more authentically targeted to what was taught and learned.

**Behaviour management**

Schools that made behaviour management strategies a key focus of their PASP initiatives were generally not as successful as they hoped in achieving improvements in student learning outcomes. Indeed, schools that employed versions of productive pedagogies appeared to have greater improvements in classroom and school behaviour as well as greater improvements in student learning outcomes – almost certainly because they focused on improving student engagement in learning, with the effect that fewer students were disruptive.

**Reduced class sizes**

Reduced class sizes did lead to improved student learning outcomes, and improved professional satisfaction for teachers. Although this appears to be a matter of
general agreement among PASP schools, it is also clear that reduction in class sizes alone may not have accounted for these effects. Some reductions in class sizes were achieved by allotting targeted groups of students to specialist teachers or learning centres, and by providing additional teachers as mentors for other teachers, for example. Moreover, few schools adopted reductions of class sizes as their sole strategy. They also changed other things – especially approaches to teaching and learning. Taken together with reduced class sizes, these other strategies may have accounted for more of the improvements in student learning outcomes and improved professional satisfaction among teachers than reduction in class sizes alone.

**Team teaching and professional mentoring**
Most PASP schools are “hard to staff”. They have more principals in their first year of the principalship, more members of the school executive in their first year in these appointments, and more teachers in their first or first three years of teaching. It was very clear from the evidence across the Program that team teaching, mentoring of teachers, and mentoring of principals and members of a school’s executive had powerful effects in improving teacher performance, effectiveness and morale. Moreover, many experienced teachers remarked that schools’ PASP initiatives, especially those involving changes to pedagogy, improved the quality of professional dialogue in schools, and a greater shared commitment to professional development and effectiveness.

**Attitudes**
It is very evident from the findings that attitudes, of both teachers and students, played a significant role in the attainment of positive, or less positive, outcomes. Those schools whose staff worked together and embraced change as opportunity, rather than an imposition, were the schools who experienced the most positive outcomes. Similarly, those teachers who had a whole-hearted commitment to their students and who openly and genuinely expressed their belief in their students’ abilities, to their students, were the teachers who witnessed the most heartening and positive changes in their students’ attitudes and performance during the year.

**Support versus expectation**
Similarly, many teachers in PASP schools noted that when they raised their expectations of their students they were consistently rewarded by improved student performance. This resulted in increased self-esteem and self-confidence in the students, which had a direct and positive impact on their behaviour. According to one school portfolio report, there needs to be a shift in thinking from a framework or mindset of “support” (which sometimes results in students developing “learned helplessness”) to one of “expectation” which encourages students to reach their “personal best” levels.

**Partners in knowledge building**
The state PASP team played a key role in the success of the Program in 2002 and 2003, providing significant support to PASP schools in the design and development of their PASP initiatives. This form of consultancy and support to
schools is likely to remain necessary in the future work of PASP if schools are to achieve similar levels of success. The team assisted many schools to develop local solutions suited to their needs, and also assisted them in the process of transforming their perspectives on how they might approach meeting those needs. The seniority of the team, and its strong connections with officers at the highest levels of the NSW Department of Education and Training was undoubtedly a factor in the success of the Program, especially in producing substantial change within a short time frame.

Schools’ academic partners also played an important role in the success of the Program. While not all relationships between schools and partners played out as effectively as the parties may have wished, most did. Academic partners, with expertise in school based research provided a generally helpful and independent perspective on schools’ chosen strategies for achieving the objectives of PASP. Some were extremely experienced and expert in the role; the Program was fortunate in having access to academic partners of the kind and calibre of many of the partners with whom schools worked. The Program learned a great deal about identifying and appointing potential academic partners for schools, about how the contract between partners and schools might be negotiated (and renegotiated), about the need for schools to be open to the consultancy and evaluation support academic partners can offer, and about the roles that can reasonably be expected of academic partners. A number of these key learnings would be useful to other programs of the NSW DET in which academic partners are engaged to work with schools.

Less was learned through this meta-evaluation about the relationships between Districts and PASP schools. This was initially identified as a topic for more detailed examination through a case study to be undertaken as part of the meta-evaluation, but, in the end, it was not possible to conduct this study. The matter is one that deserves attention in any future meta-evaluation of PASP, especially with the shift to regions as a result of the restructure of NSW DET now under way.

**Reflections on major issues**

The Priority Action Schools Program was designed to assist schools in communities with deep needs. A majority of the schools involved were indeed in communities with very deep needs; some argued that perhaps a third of schools in the Program served communities where the need was less pressing. It is clearly evident that the communities with the deepest needs are likely to continue to have these needs for a considerable number of years to come. These communities have significant problems, not the least poverty and unemployment, but also problems of housing, mental and physical health, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and child sexual assault. These factors have well-known and long term impacts on the access of children and young people to education, and their levels of success in education. Indeed, the poorer educational outcomes for many students in these circumstances contribute to the intergenerational reproduction of poverty and its associated disadvantages. The reproduction of these effects is starkly evident in many PASP schools’ descriptions of their communities in their portfolio reports.
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This report cites evidence from Tony Vinson, author of the paper “Black holes of entrenched disadvantage in Australia (well known as the former chair of the NSW Inquiry into Public Education) that in NSW, and elsewhere in Australia, disadvantage has become more concentrated in fewer postcode areas in the last 25 years. The conditions that make a school support program like the PASP necessary are likely to endure for at least the next decade or more. This report argues that the Program should continue as a contribution from the education sector to addressing these deep social issues, as part of a whole-of-government approach to problems of entrenched disadvantage as experienced in many of the communities served by schools in the Program.

Schools in the Program were encouraged to develop ‘local solutions’ to problems arising in their local circumstances. While the strategies schools tried were rarely unique, the combined package of strategies developed by each made a composite that varied widely from school to school. Schools learned from the relative effectiveness of different elements of the package of strategies they tried, and have refined them for implementation in the Program in 2004. Some of the most successful strategies, like the shift towards transforming pedagogical practices, and whole-school vision and culture-building, are likely to be more widely implemented throughout the Program in 2004.

As the last section suggested, there was a sense in which PASP schools were not challenging orthodoxies, if by that is meant “challenging current knowledge about good educational practice”. But schools were often challenging orthodoxies in another sense: challenging established ways of working in these schools, especially where those inhabiting them have become used to disruption of learning, or have developed low expectations of students based on experience of working in sometimes dispiriting school and classroom environments, or have been reactive rather than proactive in engaging their school communities in the work of the school. Moreover, many schools were challenging orthodoxies in terms of professional revitalisation – in particular, whole-school shifts towards pedagogical practices that are more effective because they stimulate and sustain student engagement in learning, and thus improve student classroom and school behaviour, attendance and retention, leading to improved student learning outcomes.

Many PASP schools have less experienced people in leadership positions than is usual throughout NSW. They have more principals in their first principalship, and more members of the school executive in their first appointments to these positions. The Program did much to support and mentor these people, and to help them develop collegial styles of leadership that spread the work of leading throughout the staff of their schools. Further support from a number of experienced academic partners, and good monitoring of the effectiveness of strategies as they unfolded in practice, improved the confidence of school leaders in their capacities to achieve improved outcomes for students, teachers and school communities. This helped to build more resilient schools in these communities with deep needs, and to strengthen the collective teacher efficacy that research has shown helps schools to achieve improved outcomes notwithstanding the multiple disadvantages experienced by their students.
Across the Program as a whole, a range of different approaches to staffing were explored. Few schools simply employed more staff to reduce class sizes. Most employed staff with specialist skills – for example, community liaison officers, school counsellors or social workers, or senior staff to coordinate mentoring and professional development. They increased school capacity through the staffing solutions they chose. Some also made arrangements to counter their difficulties securing relief teachers by appointing “permanent casuals” to temporary positions for the year. It is evident, though, that these staffing solutions were chosen against a background of staffing instability in many PASP schools – high teacher mobility, sometimes high levels of teacher absences, and in some cases, more older teachers taking long service leave entitlements. It is clear that the Department needs to consider deeply how best to operate staffing policies for schools in communities with deep needs to counter some of the effects of these instabilities. Both differential staffing (additional teachers in such schools) and more flexible approaches to staffing (building school capacity by appointing people with particular needed specialist skills) are appropriate in addressing the needs of schools in these communities.

Schools participating in PASP did so with significant funding and other support. In addition to the usual forms of accountability for funds expended, however, they were also asked to report on their professional learning about the strategies they had investigated during the course of 2003, and their learnings about their own processes of professional learning and development. As might be expected, this provoked a mixed reaction – the new accountability requirements were in some ways more onerous than many were familiar with. By the end of the Program, however, many school portfolio reports referred to the school learning portfolio process as contributing significantly to professional development in the school, as well as to the refinement of the strategies being tried in the school.

As the evidence from school portfolio reports attests, the Program produced a considerable reform in pedagogy in participating schools. It was also a reform program in the sense that it offered a new kind of support to schools serving communities with deep needs. And it was a reform program in the sense that it was a cooperative initiative of the NSW DET and the NSW Teachers’ Federation as part of a commitment not only to these schools but also to the defence of public education more generally. The Program assisted the Department and the union to explore new ways of thinking about how to staff “hard to staff” schools in communities like these.

The PASP schools produced significant transformation in several areas of their operations, as is demonstrated in Chapter 5 of this report. The question of whether the gains in student learning outcomes and in professional development outcomes for staff are sustainable is as yet unanswerable. Schools believe and reported that much of what they have achieved could be sustained, but some of their strategies could not be sustained without the additional resources the Program made available. This applies particularly to some strategies that are dependent on the availability of additional staff (which may include some forms of “in-built relief staff”, and some forms of learning centres, for example) but less to strategies that
could be implemented through the work of all staff (like changes towards productive pedagogy – one of the most effective strategies).

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1**
The Priority Action Schools Program should be a permanent program within the Priority Schools Funding Program, with schools funded for no more than three years and no less than two years.

**Recommendation 2**
Schools in the Program should be guaranteed funding for an initial two-year period, with an incrementally decreased level of funding in the second year, and with the possibility of an additional year of funding determined on the basis of (a) continuing deep needs in the families and communities served by the schools, and (b) evidence of effective response to these needs in the first two years of funding by the school as an organisation.

**Recommendation 3**
The Priority Action Schools Program should be managed by a team of senior officers of the NSW Department of Education and Training, selected on the basis of their profound understanding of the goals of the Program, their ability to work successfully and cooperatively at the senior management level of the Department, their ability to work directly, effectively and collaboratively with schools in challenging circumstances from across the State, and their ability to provide advice to schools and to the Department on interagency and community links. Given the professional and political challenges associated with working with schools with deep needs, the state PASP team should also be organisationally and physically located within the Department in such a way as to ensure that it has access to, continuing contact with, and trust from the most senior officers of the Department.

**Recommendation 4**
The Priority Action Schools Program should continue to be conceptualised, managed and evaluated as a learning program, guided by the concept of local solutions, and by the provision of intense support.

**Recommendation 5**
The PASP schools should have a capacity to develop appropriate differential and flexible staffing solutions within their problem solving strategies. This capacity should be supported by both the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW Teachers’ Federation.

**Recommendation 6**
The NSW Department of Education should institute procedures for staffing in schools in communities with deep needs that foster stability in staffing for schools during the year, and that assist in retaining expert and experienced staff in these schools.

**Recommendation 7**
The expectation of the Priority Action Schools Program that schools are knowledge creating organisations should be fully understood by all participating in the Program and should be demonstrated by continuing to require that participating schools develop school learning portfolios as a professional learning and accountability mechanism.
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Recommendation 8
As a means of supporting PASP schools in their work it is essential that they have links to academic partners to advise and support them in their substantive enterprises and their evaluation strategies. A generic protocol that makes clear and explicit the role and remuneration of academic partners should be prepared to assist schools in making this appointment.

Recommendation 9
The central concern for PASP schools should be a focus upon transformative pedagogies leading to enhanced learning outcomes for all students – in particular, the notion of “productive pedagogies” presented in the NSW Department of Education discussion paper “Quality Teaching in NSW Schools”.

Recommendation 10
Meeting student well-being needs in PASP schools should be based upon positive strategies that will contribute to their substantive engagement with learning, that is, on pedagogical strategies that produce changes in approaches to and improved outcomes in teaching and learning.

Recommendation 11
PASP schools should be provided with ongoing training and development in mentoring using within and across school networks.

Recommendation 12
During the funding cycle all participating PASP schools should engage in an interagency and community development forum that familiarises them with the range of programs directed at supporting families and young people, especially in communities with deep needs (see Recommendation 2).

Recommendation 13
A full copy of this report should be distributed to all participating PASP schools in hard copy and made available on the NSW DET website for access by all with an interest in the Program, including academic partners and other government agencies.