Partners in knowledge building

How schools were supported in their learning

In this chapter, we consider some of the means by which PASP schools were supported in their learning. It is clear from the evidence of school visits, case study work undertaken for the meta-evaluation, comments from schools at PASP Forums, and schools’ portfolio reports that most felt well-supported in their development work, and in their action inquiry and self-evaluation efforts.

There were exceptions to this generalisation, of course. For example, once again, some more isolated rural schools may have experienced the compounding disadvantage of their isolation – their access to support was probably more limited than the access some schools in outer Sydney have to departmental officers, academic partners in universities, other kinds of consultants and critical friends, and – perhaps most of all – other schools in similar situations.

The designers of the PASP aimed to make it a learning program. In addition to the learning going on in individual PASP schools, which was intended to be considerable, it was hoped that schools would learn from one another’s experience. Schools would also have access to various kinds of expertise, consultancy support and advice through three kinds of mechanisms: the state PASP team, academic partners, and in their districts. We have less to say about the last of these, but this Chapter presents our findings on all three, focussing more intensively on the first two.

We believe these learnings and findings have considerable relevance to the design, operation and location of the PASP in 2004 and beyond (should the Program be continued).

6.1 The consultancy role of the PASP team

From late 2002, the team managing the PAS Program from the state offices of NSW Department of Education and Training included one Superintendent, two Chief Education Officers, a Principal Education Officer and a NSW Teachers’ Federation representative (half-time). Later in 2003, because other duties intervened, one of the Chief Education Officers and the Principal Education Officer were replaced by school principals transferred from schools.
The team was formidable, both because of its location in the hierarchy of the Department, and because of the particular qualities and immense capabilities of the team members – knowledge of the Department across a wide range of its operations, knowledge about pedagogy and professional development, skills in project management, experience in dealing with contentious and politically-sensitive problems and issues, consultancy expertise, knowledge of equity programs, knowledge about industrial and other pressing issues faced by schools, and the like. They had seniority, many years of experience in different areas of the Department, many skills of the kind needed to facilitate a program like the PASP (especially one with short time-lines, and of which there were great expectations), and great credibility with other areas of the Department both centrally, in districts, and in schools. This comment is not made as a gratuitous evaluative remark, but because the team was hand-picked to match the needs and expectations of the job, and because they worked extremely hard and expertly to bring the Program into existence, and to guide it through its first year, in ways that gave the schools the best possible chance to succeed. The team overcame many obstacles in many quarters to get additional staff into schools, to help schools refine their action plans in ways likely to yield better learning outcomes for students and teachers, to assist them as they faced resistances and blockages, to keep them ‘on track’, and to help them refine their work and the ways they wrote about it so they could demonstrate what they had achieved. At the same time, the team efficiently managed all the internal relations and operations necessary to sustain a program of this size, scope and political significance. The overall workload was substantial, and the team worked with great dedication and commitment to give the Program as a whole the best possible chance to achieve its objectives.

It is not merely a piece of management-jargon to describe the group as a ‘team’. Not every group of people working on such a program, under such pressure, would function as smoothly as this team did, nor with such unity and clarity of purpose and effect; nor would every group manage the intense political interest in the Program, especially when the question of its continuation into 2004 or beyond remained so long unresolved (until almost the end of 2003); nor would every group manage so well when the spectre of a whole Departmental restructure loomed, as it did (see below), and when most of the staff concerned were unclear about their own future positions. This particular team ensured that the $16 million for the Program was distributed in accordance with the Program’s purposes and within the Department’s accountabilities, and that the work in schools was initiated and brought to fruition despite the ordinary and some extraordinary vagaries of change and resistance, including issues that necessarily arise given the very difficult circumstances faced ‘on the ground’ by so many of the PASP schools – for example, their already being ‘hard to staff’ schools, in sometimes very troubled communities, or with troubled histories behind them.

One of the members of the central PASP team described the role of team members vis-à-vis schools as a relationship of “pressure and support”. Schools needed to be made aware and kept aware of the privileges and responsibilities entailed by the grant of large additional resources through the Program – between $100,000 and $400,000 for each school, with an average of about $200,000. This is large by comparison with any other equity program in education in Australia, and
by comparison with most sources available to schools other than the basic operating funding that establishes and maintains the school and its staff. Principals, school staffs, school communities, District Superintendents, and neighbouring schools not funded by the Program, were all aware of the high expectations the Program engendered. It was one role of the PASP team to transmit these expectations to the schools, occasionally to remind people that the expectations continued, and to ensure that participants kept in mind the Program’s core purpose of improving learning outcomes for students – and, by the end of 2003, of demonstrating that these outcomes had been achieved.

By itself, merely emphasising such expectations and obligations would not be likely to assist schools to achieve them. Each member of the team worked closely with a group of about twenty-five schools in a broad geographical region. Each made many contacts with schools by phone, mail, email and visits. The PASP web site and internal email system also helped to maintain contact on many policy and operational issues. There was substantial contact helping schools to write their initial action plans, with assisting the schools to locate and appoint an academic partner or mentor, with the initial stages of staffing and implementation of plans, and then with monitoring and evaluating the strategies implemented. Arrangements were made to get available academic partners to the February Forum, school representatives to the March Forum, to get members of the PASP team to schools for the June visits, to get school representatives to the November Forum, and to assist schools to finalise their portfolio reports by the end of the year. Alongside all this went helping with financial arrangements and staffing issues, and all of the operational issues required to achieve funding and staffing in short time frames. At times, contact between team members and schools was almost daily; for most schools, and for most of the life of the Program, contact was initiated one way or the other, by one means or another, more than once a week.

In their end-of-year portfolio reports, many schools acknowledged the help of their contact member of the PASP team. Most schools experienced the relationship as one of support much more than as one of pressure. Most were pleased and a little surprised by the closeness of their relationship with a central unit of the Department – they felt that they were being ‘heard’ by the Department in a supportive but somewhat unfamiliar, atypical way. While aware that in a sense the eyes of the Department were on them – and that the team represented those ‘eyes’ – the predominant reaction from schools was that their contact PASP team member was someone committed to helping them with an urgent, difficult and immensely worthwhile task: the task of improving learning outcomes for some students and some schools in difficult circumstances, frequently circumstances of severe and cumulative disadvantage.

It is also clear from the portfolio reports that most schools felt they had made substantial strides towards achieving many or most of the goals they had set themselves – as much as could be done in a single year, or for a particular cohort or group within the school. The reader can detect in some of the reports a slight note of surprise within the schools at just how far and how fast they had travelled in their learning journeys. Their acknowledgements make it plain that PASP team
members helped to make these gains possible. Alongside this, one also detects anxieties about the possibility that funding will cease for the Program or the school, and that the loss for the school would be not only the loss of financial or staffing resources, but also the loss of a valued advisor and ‘friend at court’ in the Department.

It is clear also that members of the PASP team feel a sense of pride in the achievements of (many or most of) “their” schools. As these things do, team members’ relationships with schools varied from close to more distant working relationships, between being welcomed and being treated warily, between being a guide/adviser to and being a more distanced observer of the school’s efforts. In general, though, team members built effective working relationships not only with Principals and coordinators of PASP activities within schools, but also with a range of involved (and some uninvolved) staff. It was a pleasure for team members to visit most of their schools; they eagerly anticipated the June visits where a kind of progress report would be given on how the school was travelling; and they read the end-of-year portfolio reports from “their” schools with particular interest. For the PASP team, the relationships were not merely formal or “official” relationships between intersecting parts of the Department, but professional relationships between people who found themselves working together on sometimes difficult but worthwhile tasks. By the end of the year, at the November Forum, it was clear that each member of the PASP team had a highly nuanced range of relationships with their contact schools – and, though more subtle to detect, a highly nuanced range of personal-professional evaluations of the work and achievements of the schools. In short, it is clear that the substance of what each school had done and achieved, under its own unique local circumstances, and given the ‘local solutions’ it had chosen to try, was personally and professionally important to the member of the PASP team who worked with the school. The Program captured personal and professional commitment and conviction not only in the schools, but also in the PASP team.

As has already been intimated, the PASP is a ‘high stakes’ program. For those responsible for its design and implementation, much was riding on its outcomes and achievements. Would it show clearly that schools in difficult circumstances could change the outcomes for their students with extra funding and support? Would the funds disappear in purchases and activities that did not yield improved learning outcomes? Would the Program lay the foundations for differential or more flexible staffing of schools in difficult circumstances? Was its design robust enough, and were the strategies available to schools robust enough, to demonstrate gains in a single year? Would its place in the overall structure of the Department be appropriate in terms of capacity to ‘manage up’ and ‘manage down’ against the general background of day-to-day operations in the Department centrally, in districts, and in schools? If the Program went badly, would it be a poisoned chalice for those who initiated and/or managed it?

The Program was initiated in “interesting times”, as the old Chinese proverb says. Perhaps times are always interesting, and perhaps they get more interesting year by year in public education, but 2003 had its share of “interests”. There was a change of Minister soon after the Program began: would the new Minister share the
interest of the last Minister in the problems the Program aimed to address, and means by which it aimed to address them? And the Department was growing committed to a major restructure that would reduce the overall number of out-of-school staff and re-introduce regions to replace or reframe organisation around districts. Some staff in schools – especially those appointed to PASP-funded positions – had much riding on the future of the Program, but no less did the PASP team, all of whom were seconded to the task from other locations in the Department. These were staff already away from their seats when the music of restructuring began: where would they be when the music stopped? And what would the organisational outcomes of restructuring be for the Program, should it be determined that it were to continue? Would it be sufficiently funded and appropriately located to achieve the outcomes for schools and students that seemed likely to be achieved as 2003 unfolded?

Such uncertainties are not unusual in the highly reflexive, hyper-rationalised world of contemporary education and public administration. But they form a background against which the work of the PASP was done in 2003. This was not only an organisational climate for the work of PASP. It affected the work of the PASP directly, requiring transfers of staff from and into the state PASP team. As already indicated, the relationships between schools and their PASP team contacts were critical; the changeovers meant new working relationships had to be established – as they were. It is not clear what time was lost as a consequence, or whether gains in improved student outcomes were in any way affected, since the schools’ work was well under way by the time the changeovers occurred, but they might have contributed to a short-term instability in the work of some schools. Of course the changes may also have brought new resources of expertise to each affected school – a second round of external input and support.

The point here is that the organisation of a Program like the PASP is fragile, despite its high profile and the high expectations people have of it. It is not sacrosanct by virtue of its profile; on the contrary, it is likely that the qualities, expertise and experience that brought those particular staff to the PASP were the very ones that meant they were wanted elsewhere. Given a longer time horizon – three or five years, for example – and stable staffing, perhaps the PASP could play a greater role in helping schools in difficult circumstances to revitalise and change, and spread even further through NSW schools the culture of outcomes-orientation, capability and achievement that has been so central to the realisation of PASP.

One of the most important tasks facing the team – though perhaps it might not be mentioned in some accounts – was that of perspective transformation. Some schools in PASP, and some of their communities, have reputations as tough places for some people to be. One of the tasks of the PASP team was to unsettle some of the settled expectations and practices in these schools – to help change expectations and practices that help to sustain the circumstances schools endure. In some classrooms, for example, teachers may adopt unsuccessful modes of classroom behaviour management that in some ways sustain the problems they are intended to resolve; in some schools, for example, taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of a local community may yield low expectations of students.
One of the roles of the PASP team was to help the schools find alternative ways of approaching their work and the work of their students that would yield warranted and demonstrable improvements in student learning outcomes and staff professional practices and thus secure changed, high expectations of students. This is skilled consultancy work, requiring team work, access to expertise and support, and a skill in capacity-building. Given that some Principals were in their first year of the principalship, many members of school executives were in their first year in the position, and that many teachers in these schools were in their first years of teaching, a skilled consultancy team could be – and, in general, turned out to be – a useful source of support and advice about how and what to change.

One of the insistences of the PASP team is that teachers and principals and members of school executives are knowledge workers. Knowledge workers are the kinds of people who can be expected to be committed to critical thinking and analysis, to reflecting on and learning from experience, to sharing knowledge and leadership, to team work that draws on the collective resources of members, to seeking external advice and support, and to learning from sources beyond the place where one happens to be working. One member of the team contrasts knowledge workers with “manufacturers” – people who go through established, settled procedures to produce familiar products or outcomes, no matter whether the products or outcomes are no longer valued in the way they once were.

The team saw one of its tasks as working with schools in a way that realised this ideal. This meant putting schools in touch with local and more distant sources of advice (like neighbouring schools, district offices and networks, and academic partners and mentors), encouraging collaboration and the sharing of ideas (the Forums were just one example), finding ways to build and enhance capacity for staff and students in schools, bedding down and making productive processes of critical self-reflection about teachers’ and students’ work, and suggesting new approaches (like the ideas about teaching and learning elaborated in the NSW Quality Teaching in NSW Schools discussion paper). Of course many schools shared this vision, and were already putting it into practice in various ways. Not all did or do – a few have been less confident about how fruitful the discourse of knowledge work can be for them, in their circumstances. But, in collaboration with members of the PASP team, many schools have become far more confident practitioners of the knowledge workers approach to change and changing circumstances.

One of the most striking features of the school portfolio reports is that many schools have made a major transition from approaches to school improvement that focus on student behaviour (what some call a “fix the kids” approach) to approaches based on changing expectations of students through pedagogies that they find more engaging and productive. This is a process of making teachers and students more acutely aware that they are all knowledge workers, not “manufacturers”. The transition has been “in the air” for a number of years, fostered by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study and the emergence of the discourse of “productive pedagogies”. It remains resisted by some, but many schools, teachers and students have found it productive for them. Many schools were already in the process of change towards pedagogically-driven approaches, rather than student welfare-driven approaches – for them, the PASP
provided opportunities to make progress a little faster than they might otherwise have been able to move. A number were emboldened by the PASP team as they negotiated their action plans – what they would do with the resources that the PASP could provide – and some began exploring the ideas only after the Program had commenced. There is a strong directionality to the change, though, and the overall effect has been a major shift towards pedagogically-driven approaches across the PASP schools, with widespread adoption of the discourses of *Quality Teaching in NSW Schools*, productive pedagogies, authentic assessment and the like. This perspective transformation has been crucial for the schools and for the learning outcomes of many of the students in them.

It seems over-personalised to draw attention to the PASP team as if they were the agents of change in PASP schools. They were and are not. The schools carried the burden of changing themselves, with resources and support. But one should not overlook the significance of the relationships, on the one hand, between the schools and their districts and the PASP state office team facilitating the Program, and, on the other, between the PASP team and other parts of the Department. Credibility, capacity, commitment and conviction are at the fulcrum of the team’s relationships in both directions.

As mentioned before, this is a crucial issue about power to be addressed in the PASP 2004 – and beyond, should the Program be continued. The PASP deliberately chose to make its slogan “Making a Difference”, and the slogan is echoed in the portfolio reports of many schools. The team also believed that the work they were doing would and could make a difference to the way schools worked, and to the way the Department conducted some of its operations and programs (picking up and amplifying the use of academic partners and mentors, for example).

If the Program becomes established, there is a chance – perhaps a likelihood – of it losing its edginess and sense of drive. To maintain the sense that it continues to be about making a difference, it needs to be focussed on schools and issues where a difference needs to be made, with a sense of urgency and directness of response that permits the kind of perspective transformations we have observed in the work of the schools and the team. This boils down to the need for a kind of privilege – the privilege to do things differently, to create exceptions, to respond to local issues and circumstances in different and sometimes innovative ways. In short, it needs a sense of responding significantly to significant need. The location of the Program in the Department is part of the iconography and symbolism that permits urgent and direct response. If the Program were to run from the Office of the Director-General or a Deputy Director-General, for example, one kind of signal would be given; if it were buried deeper in a unit providing enhanced staffing resources for targeted schools, it would signal another.

One of the central tasks of educational leadership is creating discourses of possibility in which changes can be thought about and against which they can be realised and evaluated. The kinds of schools and school communities targeted for participation in PASP are schools and communities with significant and sometimes extreme needs. Arguably, they need not only strong leadership at the local, district
or regional level, they also need leadership from the Department centrally. As the PASP has shown, they need to draw on a kind of whole-of-Department responsiveness (involving staffing, finance, properties, professional development, mentoring and so on), just as they are themselves part of whole-of-government initiatives at the local level aimed at assisting their communities. Who in the Department leads them, and where in the Department they are led from, is part of the symbolism, the discourse and the relational power of possibility for them, and for the students and communities they serve.

6.2 Academic partners

In late 2002 and early 2003, schools and the PASP team went through the process of considering how academic partners, mentors and other critical friends might be identified and appointed to assist schools with their self-evaluation, action inquiry work to monitor and report on their work and their progress towards the Program’s key aims of improving student learning outcomes and teachers’ approaches to teaching and learning (pedagogies).

Mandating that schools have an academic partner, mentor or other critical friend was, as we have seen, a key element of the Program and its evaluation. But mandating academic partners can present problems. One very experienced academic partner, Neville Johnson, who has researched the role of outside researchers working with schools for about two decades, offered these comments on the general role of academic partners and other consultants in school improvement processes:

As we know only too well, systematic research and anecdotal information associated with projects that mandate the use of ‘outsiders’ … usually reports impact of such personnel as varying between ‘absolutely useless’ to ‘the most useful factor’. The knowledge, skills and commitment required by the academic partner to work in such projects are a challenge, as are those required by the school leadership personnel. We need to take this into account when projects mandate academic partners, or their equivalent. Given the reality of the academic world, there are just not enough suitable personnel available to staff large projects. In schools, leadership is not always able to ensure appropriate guidelines and expectations are negotiated. It is indeed a ‘minefield’ we are just learning how to negotiate. (January 4, 2004: emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, p.3).

In general, it seemed that the PASP was fortunate in the choice of academic partners by, for or with schools. A few schools may have hinted (and one or two principals may have said) that their academic partners were at the ‘absolutely useless’ end of Johnson’s scale, but most seemed to rate their academic partners close to the ‘the most useful factor’ end of the scale. It seemed that, in the small number of cases where the relationship didn’t develop or soured, it was not so much that the partners were ‘useless’ as that there was a mismatch of expectations about the role.

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10 Evidence presented in this section of the report is based on an email questionnaire sent to all academic partners and critical friends at the end of 2003. Responses were received from 33 (56%) of the 59 academic partners and critical friends, who worked with 49 (66%) of the 74 schools in the Program.
CHAPTER 6
PARTNERS IN KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

What put many academic partners at the positive end of Johnson’s scale was the way they conceptualised their role, based on experience of working with schools. In his comments to the meta-evaluators, one academic partner emphasised the role of the partner in developing the professionalism of teachers in schools – which in his view included developing teachers’ reflective capacities and critical thinking about their work:

An academic partner needs to acknowledge and affirm the professionalism of the participants. Teachers are rarely given an opportunity to engage with professional conversations, or to honestly affirm their skills and talents – it seems to be part of at least primary school culture. It is important not to assume that the only expertise is yours. My experience was that all teachers involved had a significant contribution to make to the success of the project, but were often reluctant to contribute for fear of appearing foolish or ‘big-headed’. It is vital to establish an atmosphere of collegiality … within the professional community if all of the skills of all of the participants are to be engaged. It is also important to acknowledge that teachers have the best interests of their students as a primary motive. If they can see that what is planned will benefit their students, they will be committed to participate…

I had nearly forgotten about ‘Departmental culture’. It had been a while since I had taught in DET schools, so the hegemony of the Departmental directive came as a surprise. A monolithic organisation does not, even with the best of intentions, foster innovative or creative thought. Lip service may be paid to dissent, but the reality is that it is very difficult for classroom teachers to swim against the tide. Not only that, but teachers tend not to have access to a critical discourse. One of the pleasing effects of this project is that teachers at the school actually began to ask critical and reflective questions not only about their own practice (and not necessarily measured against Departmental benchmarks) but also about Departmental requirements as well. On the one hand, the injection of funds and access to resources was regarded positively and teachers were happy to run with this, but there were quite a few questions about the constraints imposed as well. In my view, this is a positive, if unexpected, outcome.

From my point of view, this has been an enlivening experience. Cynicism stalks the older teacher as a wolf in the forest. My participation in this project has encouraged me to think that all is not yet an educational desert in schools of the western world (Academic partner’s response to questions from the meta-evaluators, December, 2003, p.2).

For many schools, it was the relationship with an academic partner that made manageable the initially daunting task of implementing strategies that would improve learning outcomes for students and genuinely support the professional development of teachers. One partner painted the picture this way:

Initially the school was overwhelmed by the size and diversity of the project. They had put in place structural changes such as reduced class sizes, reduced Head teacher loads and appointment of an administration officer to deal with the phone intervention strategy for truancy but there was no process for the mentoring aspect of the projects. This was the main area the school required support with.

And a little later:

The school appeared appreciative of the support they were receiving. The number of visits to the school increased significantly from the end of Term 3 as we conducted focus group interviews with teachers, students and some parents. During
my visits I was included in confidential discussions with the PAS co-ordinator and
Principal pertaining to school issues. I believe this demonstrated a close, trusting
professional relationship, established through previous years of contact and further
developed through the opportunities the PAS project [created] to be more involved
with whole school issues (Academic partner’s response to questions from the meta-
evaluators, December 24, 2003, p.2).

Partners, then, had important roles to play, if the school and the partner could
make the relationship work. Not all could, for one reason or another, on one side
or the other. In a few cases, it seemed that schools or principals were reluctant to
allow the relationship to develop. While wanting to emphasise that it was not
“there to judge the participants”, one partner felt that in the school with which he
was associated “the principal and teachers regarded outsiders as potentially
judgmental”. Later in his response, he wrote:

I would have to say that the relationship did not develop. The flow of
information from the school was minimal. All contact was initiated by the academic
partners. Minutes of meetings were not forwarded, neither were notices of meetings.
The only contact was at the … meetings, generally one per term. … A number of
offers to provide assistance were not accepted by the principal. … The academic
partners, principal and team leaders were professional and courteous at all times, but
the academic partners felt that contact between staff and academic partners was to be
minimised. … [The partners concerned] are strong proponents of action research,
with practical experience of working in a mentoring role. The literature shows, when
change or conditions are imposed, there are various responses, some of which
involve fear, disequilibrium, denial, defensiveness. This literature may be relevant to
the PASP. … The school did some undoubted good work in the PASP but they
could have done much more if they had reporting requirements that lifted them out
of their comfort zone and needed to use the academic partners. … There must be a
very good relationship between the principal and the academic partner as the
principal is in a strong gate-keeping position. Ironically, however, it could be that
schools with strong gate-keeping practices by the principal may be the ones that
could most benefit from a PASP (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions
from the meta-evaluators, December, 2003, pp.1-2).

So: the relationship between the school and the partner needed to be one of
mutual confidence and respect. Where the relationship developed well, great care
was taken with the identification of partners, establishing mutually-agreed and
understood roles, commitment to documenting, monitoring and reporting progress
effectively, and a great deal of common sense give-and-take that allowed the school
and the partner to build on their respective strengths. We will say some more
about these matters in the sections below.

Some schools already had established relationships with partners, often from
nearby universities. Other schools did not. In some cases, they were able to
explore local networks (through other schools or district office staff, for example)
and to identify possible partners for themselves. In other cases, members of the
PASP team used their knowledge and networks to identify possible partners –
sometimes in a nearby university, sometimes from a distant university, and
sometimes from other sources.

In most cases where schools had established working relationships with partners,
the collaboration went well. In most cases where schools identified partners with

Identifying partners
whom they did not have an established relationship, the collaboration also went well – but in a number of cases, the relationship did not develop easily or satisfactorily. The same is true for partners identified by the PASP team – most of these relationships went well, but there were occasional mismatches or misunderstandings that meant the relationship did not flourish as the schools might have hoped. In a small number of cases, there were also misunderstandings or differences of expectation between schools and partners that led to tensions, which sometimes required the intervention of the PASP team to resolve. In a very few cases, a school discontinued its relationship with an academic partner, and a new partner was found.

Not all schools in the Program had experience in engaging academic partners and mentors. Many sought guidance (usually from the PASP team) about how they should spend the resources available for the work of partners – about daily rates\[11\], number of days’ work expected, whether or not other expenses like travel were included in their budget for partners, and similar matters.

In a few cases, such schools were surprised by the daily charge-out rates expected by academic partners or their universities. In some cases, they were surprised by how few days of their partners’ time they would be able to ‘buy’. One or two schools remained surprised and disappointed by the extent of work they could expect from partners – they imagined that they would have a more extensive relationship for $10,000 or $15,000 (more than a quarter of the annual salary of a teacher, and suggesting to some that it could buy a considerable fraction of a university staff member’s time for the year). In some other cases, schools may have been reluctant to pay adequately for the support they in fact received. Invited to comment on whether there was any conflict in the relationship with their schools, one partner wrote:

Yes, the fee. I asked at the Academic partner’s session [the February Forum] about what was an appropriate fee to charge. I was told that that was up to me. I really wanted to be fair to the schools as I know how tight the budget is, but I also knew that I would invest a great deal of my own … time to this project which I considered worthwhile. The schools were only prepared to pay $3,000 and $2,500 for my time. I know that other academics got significantly more than this and I really felt that I wasn’t remunerated fairly. I didn’t pursue this with the schools as they had costed their budgets and that was all they allowed. I think the schools need some specific guidance on a fair remuneration as they didn’t really have anything to go on. Perhaps an absolute minimum amount could be noted for schools to consider and then if they wish to pay more then they can. I really think that they found the money so useful and needed that they didn’t want to spend any of it on an academic partner!!! (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, December 19, 2003, p.2)

The meta-evaluators understood that in fact schools did receive some guidance from the PASP office on what proportion of their funds they should set aside for an academic partner, and some general advice on the broad range of rates they might expect partners to charge. While the meta-evaluators do not believe that a flat rate should be set by the Program or NSW DET for rates of remuneration for

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\[11\] The NSW Teachers’ Federation advised schools that schools should set a ceiling of $1,000 per day as rates for academic partners. Many did the work for rates far lower than this, of course.
academic partners (flexibility is needed to take into account different circumstances on both sides), it might be wise to give an indication of the kinds of rates that would be fair for the work. It might also be pointed out that, once having established the relationship, many partners in fact did many more days’ work than the days for which they were paid – with the consequence that they did the job for a return that was well below the agreed rate. It would also be as well to indicate to schools and partners that their overall budget for the task should include any costs of travel and accommodation required – this was a matter of contention between some schools and their partners, with schools insisting that partners should include travel and accommodation in their daily rates. Clearly, working with a potential partner to specify the whole cost of the collaboration, and to budget properly for the whole cost, would reduce the possibility of such mismatches of expectations arising.

In most cases, the funds made available by the Program to pay for an academic partner’s work were sufficient to engage a partner for between 10 and 20 days, sometimes more, and sometimes considerably more because the work was highly valued by the partner who contributed further days without additional cost to the school.

In most cases, no formal agreement was drawn up between schools and partners. An exchange of letters offering and accepting the role was sufficient as a contract. Some academic partners reported that the role was clearly specified and agreed before the work began; many more that a general understanding had been reached that was clarified and evolved over time.

Engaging a consultant was an unfamiliar task for many principals. Some sought advice from district or PASP personnel before proceeding. Few schools erred on the side of over-specifying roles and expectations; as it turned out, some erred on the side of under-specifying roles and expectations. In most cases, however, these things were clarified as the task unfolded. Few academic partners reported difficulties about mismatches of expectations; though only a small minority, more schools did. That is, more partners than schools seemed more likely to have regarded their role and their relationship with their school as satisfactory.

There were some mismatches of perception of the role and expectations about what partners would or should do. Among the mismatches were:

- expectations by a few schools that partners would do the evaluation for the school (eg, collecting the most important data), rather than that the partner would help the school to do the work;
- expectations by a few schools that the partner would write the portfolio report for the school (which a few apparently did – though most provided only suggestions about what to include, and editorial help with the text as it neared completion);
- expectations by a small minority of academic partners that they would be conducting independent research on the school rather than collaborative research or evaluation with the school; and
• expectations by a few partners that their access to the school gave them rights to pursue their own particular research interests, using the school as a kind of case study, rather than pursuing a shared agenda of action inquiry and evaluation work under shared control, and with shared rights over publication of any findings arising from the work.

There were also some problems of conflict arising in a small minority of cases. Very occasionally, schools found that the relationship with their partner was not working, so it was terminated. In these cases – some of which happened early in the process, though a small number occurred as late as half way through the year – a new partner was found, often with the help of the PASP team. Some of the conflicts may have been as simple as questions of personality, some perhaps because schools regarded the relationship as a kind of master-servant or service-provision relationship (rather than as a collaborative arrangement between equals who share a commitment to a common task). Writing of one school where other partners had been appointed in late 2002 or early 2003 and later rejected by the school, and to which this partner had been appointed in the second half of 2003 (something that happened in several cases, for different reasons), one partner wrote:

To be quite truthful I think the school only really wanted an academic there to satisfy the DET's requirements. I assisted with organisation of writing reports etc., but whether their previous experience had hardened them I don't know - but they didn't seem to really want any substantial assistance - despite the fact I think they need it - re professional development, assistance re interviewing and constructing questionnaires, etc. I think the academic role needs to be more defined. Maybe if I'm involved next year things will be different. On a number of occasions I'd turn up to sit in an office and wait - which I don't have time to do (Academic partner's response to meta-evaluators, December 2003).

Though not singular, the relationship portrayed in this quotation was atypical – fortunately for the Program.

Most schools’ portfolio reports and many academic partners’ comments to the meta-evaluators make it clear that the relationship and the role was generally very much more productive and effective.

In some cases, academic partners and schools wrote about the struggle to clarify mutual understandings of the role, and expectations of one another. One academic partner wrote:

A significant learning I believe is that a previously established relationship of mutual respect contributes to the smooth running of a project such as PAS. Because of this existing relationship, when initial negotiations revealed differences in approach to a particular aspect of the project … these differences could be overcome and a mutually acceptable compromise reached…

The PAS project has given the school money to implement significant changes in its school structure, evaluate it rigorously, share the findings with the whole staff, make further refinements in the light of what they have learned, and plan for consolidating the gains made during 2003. What is significant throughout this process [is that] the PAS team [in the school] have taken the whole staff with them
on that journey. (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, December 24, 2003, p.3).

Another partner commented that

The relationship developed over time. Again, initially, I was perceived as external to the school community, but as time passed, I was accepted more as part of it. As this element developed, it became easier to make suggestions about how participants might become critically reflective on their practice and become more positive about the contributions they were making...

There were tensions from time to time, mainly to do with clarification of priorities. Participants were clearly committed to the best outcomes for students, but also felt constrained by their unfamiliarity with a project like this. The Principal was very concerned about record keeping and accountability (understandably), so some negotiation was required to achieve consensus. Some tensions emerged about ways of reporting, but they were ultimately resolved. Over time, participants became more proficient about articulating and justifying positions...

... I am impressed by the way in which the atmosphere of the school has changed significantly for the better, by the results that have been achieved, and by the cohesion and professionalism demonstrated by the participants... (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, December, 2003 p.1)

In many cases, the relationship was warm and effective from the beginning, and it developed positively over time. For example, at the end of 2003, one wrote that the relationship with the school was

... very positive. I believe [the PASP team in the school] appreciated my assistance, mentoring and guidance. The principal gave me a lovely bunch of flowers and stated they couldn’t have done it without me and how she appreciated my support. It was very touching.

Writing about her learning about the role of academic partner, she commented

The experience was very time consuming [for me] but very enjoyable. It taught me a lot about co-researching/mentoring a school/project leader without telling them what to do – how to work cooperatively when they sort of wanted me to do the evaluation and at the same time do it themselves... It worked out OK in the end for all concerned. (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, January 6, 2004, p.2).

Partners were of several different kinds – and many schools had more than one kind of partner.

The primary expectation of the Program was that a partner would assist a school in action inquiry into, monitoring of, and reporting on the implementation of its chosen strategies. The expectation was that partners’ research skills would provide a basis of expertise to help the school design and conduct its own evaluation, monitoring and reporting. It was also recognised that, in some cases, and by dint of their relative independence from the school, partners might be able to assist with data-gathering – for example, by interviewing some teachers or students or others. This primary role of academic partners was to provide collaborative assistance with the schools’ action inquiry and self-evaluation efforts.
It was clearly expected by the Program that schools themselves would be ultimately responsible for their action inquiry and self-evaluation work, and that partners would be helping with such matters as designing action inquiry and self-evaluation efforts, identifying relevant approaches to data-gathering, helping to manage the process, and giving advice on how findings might be reported. The final responsibility for the evaluation would rest with the school, but the relationship would be one of collaboration – a partnership. It would not be an independent research or evaluation study done for the school by the partner as an external and independent researcher or research team. In some cases, however, schools expected and had this kind of independent, service-provider relationship with partners (despite a few partners’ expectations and preferences that it be otherwise), and that some partners preferred to provide this kind of service to schools (despite some schools’ expectations and preferences that the relationship might be otherwise).

In many cases, the role of partners shifted and evolved as the relationship developed. Not every partnership was formed with absolutely clear expectations of what might be expected, and in most cases there was a kind of unofficial renegotiation of roles to suit both parties as the work unfolded.

Some partners had a different kind of role: the role of **expert consultant on the design and implementation of the school’s chosen strategies** for its PASP work. In some cases where schools had already established a working relationship with an academic partner to provide expertise in a substantive area like literacy, numeracy, ICT or productive pedagogies, the school and the PASP team agreed that these people could act as academic partners to the school, so long as they assisted the school in the evaluation effort as well. This kind of partnership was especially useful to schools whose PASP strategies involved the relevant area of expertise. In fact, quite a number of partners were of this kind, offering help with the design and implementation of the relevant strategies, with training and development for staff.

Almost all of the schools had an academic partner who played a major role in the design and implementation of the schools’ action inquiry, self-evaluation and reporting. A few had an academic partner who played only the expert consultancy role. A sizeable minority of schools in the Program had **both kinds of partners**, one or more of each kind – one helping with action inquiry and self-evaluation, and another helping with a literacy or numeracy program or with the development of productive pedagogies.

A small number of schools – perhaps ten – had academic partners of a rather different kind. These were people who might best be described as **critical friends**. In some cases, they had already developed a relationship with the school (in one case, for example, an independent consultant who had been helping with the professional development of members of the school’s executive). Some of these critical friends provided assistance with schools’ action inquiry, self-evaluation, monitoring and reporting efforts, but they were not always as actively involved (or perhaps as expert) as had been expected in the design of the academic partnership role for the Program in the second half of 2002. Similarly, some critical friends provided some consultancy on the strategies chosen by schools as the focus of
their PASP work, though once again they may have been less expert in these areas than another consultant might have been. In a very small number of cases, where critical friends were chosen for other qualities and experience than was expected in the evaluation adviser or substantive consultancy roles, however, the critical friends seemed to be less effective in assisting schools to meet their PASP monitoring and reporting responsibilities.

Some PASP schools had a number of partners and consultants of different kinds working with them in relation to their PASP efforts and other programs going on in the school. Sometimes district personnel (for example literacy or numeracy consultants) also worked alongside academic partners, mentors and critical friends. In these cases (one school, many partners), schools appeared to operate as nodes for consultancy, sometimes orchestrating the work of a variety of consultants in relation to a variety of programs (not only the PASP but programs like the Country Areas Program or the NSW school mentoring program). Some were participating in other kinds of programs like the IDEAS program for school leadership development that overlapped with their PASP strategies.

In other cases, one consultant or a team of consultants worked with a group of schools – some geographically close to one another, sometimes more dispersed. In some cases, these arrangements (one academic partner or team working with several schools) operated as networks of schools. The so called SAIL group (School Action in Liverpool) of schools working with a team from the University of Western Sydney (Helen Woodward, Cynthia Hall and others) is one of several examples across the Program. Another, smaller network was the PS38-PS25 network of two schools (which were also participants in a larger network of schools and teachers participating in a school leadership program facilitated by the Charles Sturt University-affiliated consultancy team of Doug Hill, Jenny King and Lex Bittars who became academic partners to these two schools). Still another was the group of schools in the Wollongong area working with academic partners from the University of Wollongong (including Brian Cambourne, Ted Booth and others) – some of these were, and some were not, members of its affiliated “Knowledge Building Coalition” schools. Peter Cuttance from the University of Melbourne worked with a group of four schools.

The portfolio reports of the schools suggest that both of these kinds of schools – nodes and those involved in networks – generally benefited greatly from the outside advice and input that became available to them. These schools appeared not to be self-conscious (let alone nervous) about opening their work and ideas to outsiders, and in general to be more willing to try out new ideas and practices, and to explore and document the new ideas and practices systematically through action inquiry. In the ‘node’ schools, there was often a very strong sense that a deliberate and collaborative self-transformation was under way. In many of the ‘network’ schools, there was a sense of professional dialogue shared across schools that helped to put problems and issues in a wider social and educational perspective.

The reports from both types of schools, gave a sense that the learning outcomes of their students were influenced by a number of factors, some of them outside the control of the school, but that the school could nevertheless intervene, with other
agencies, to make a difference in the lives and learning of students, and sometimes in the lives of students’ families. In these schools, more than in some PASP schools working alone, there was a more measured sense that schools are highly agentic forces in the lives of students, their families, and their communities, while not being solely responsible for the outcomes they achieved. This is to be contrasted with the impression given by some other schools’ portfolio reports which seem to suggest that schools and teachers have the kind of primary responsibility for student learning outcomes that reflects entirely on the competence of the staff. In these (few) reports, the reader has the impression that the documentation is intended to mask (without actually concealing) rather than reveal school learning – a school operating as a real learning community for its staff as well as its students. It appeared that working in networks, or working alone and drawing on other networks of contacts established around a school, was evidence of a school’s commitment to making deep change to deal with difficult issues, rather than of a school holding onto its practices and attempting to change only at the margins.

As other sections of this report show, the majority of schools in the Program operated as learning communities, actively promoting the professional development of staff and the investigation of new approaches (frequently but not only new approaches to pedagogy). The ‘node’ and ‘network’ schools were generally of this kind, and frequently appeared to be models of what it means to develop the idea of being a learning community. Moreover, these schools seemed to exemplify what it means for staff in schools to be ‘knowledge workers’ – to use the phrase favoured by members of the PASP team – developing their knowledge and practice by making critical analyses of their current circumstances and ways of working (treating them as problematic) and by using contacts, connections and communication with others to enrich their learning.

It was striking at the February 2003 Forum for PASP academic partners (about 40 came) that most of the selected partners had an immense wealth of experience working collaboratively with schools – from programs like the Commonwealth’s Innovative Links Program of the mid-1990s, some from years working with schools on self-evaluation work with the Disadvantaged Schools Program and its NSW successor the Priority Schools Funding Program. Others had worked very closely with schools in action inquiry projects of various kinds, and in teacher professional development projects. A few were new to the role, but most were not. (The same may or may not be true of partners who were unable to attend this Forum.) Thus it can be said that most academic partners were highly experienced in roles of the kind they were expected to perform in PASP.

Moreover, many academic partners – perhaps half – already had some links with ‘their’ PASP schools. Some had worked closely with the schools on other projects in professional development or other research and evaluation activities. They were chosen by the schools not only because they had credibility in the roles, but because they also knew something about the context and staff of the schools themselves. In other cases, university staff knew the schools because they placed teacher education students there for school experience, and some non-university critical friends knew the schools through working associations over many years (as
in examples like those of the former senior officer who worked with one school, or the retired principal of a nearby school who worked with others.)

In almost all cases, the relationships between schools and partners therefore started on a good footing, and developed well. A number of academic partners remarked at the end of 2003 that they had formed close friendships and professional associations through the year, and either were delighted that the role would continue into 2004 or regretted that they were unable to do so.

Some academic partners commented on the change in the relationship through the year. Writing of one school where members of staff were initially wary and perhaps cynical about the imposition of an academic partner on the school, one partner painted a pen-picture of the changing relationship:

Very early in the relationship I’d guess that most teachers thought that I was going to come and go without much impact. Teachers were generally quietly dismissive and non communicative. In fact, later on in the year a number of staff confessed to a quiet loathing of the idea of ‘me’ in their lives. Once I had worked in the classroom with teachers, they sought to further ‘check me out’ by drawing me out on classroom issues and rigorously debating the ideas I had promulgated. I took this as a compliment and always responded with classroom based examples or by up-front modelling.

By the end of Term 2, after giving them feedback on teaching and tying the elements of PP to alternative ideas for classroom practice, teachers began to ask for my opinion and ideas about what they had planned for in teaching and learning. As well, more teachers volunteered to be observed etc. I saw this as a step forward though still felt that understandably, they weren’t totally convinced about the benefits of making pedagogical changes to their routine.

During Term 3 I noticed an increase in professional dialogue between teachers in the staff room and at staff meetings. At this point I realised that my role had changed from what was perceived as one of an academic partner who visited, recorded, charted and left, to one who worked, challenged, conceded and digressed. The staff began to trust me and consider that I might have value. By the time the school submitted its learning portfolio I had teachers asking me to work with them in 2004. I guess, by these observations, most teachers at [the school] were civil enough to let me settle in. They were also courteous enough to avoid stand ups and soon realised that my role was one evolving around their needs (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, January 1, 2004).

Several of the academic partners in the Program are significant academic authors in the field of supporting schools in work like this. Geoff Munns and Helen Woodward and colleagues from the University of Western Sydney, and Neville Johnson and Peter Cuttance from the University of Melbourne were some among many examples. Writing to the meta-evaluators at the end of 2003, a few enclosed papers written for conferences or for their PASP schools in which they outlined their learnings about the role (and issues in enacting it), or about principles for working with schools in this way. Neville Johnson, for example, cited a 1994 paper written with his colleague Kate Murdoch, in which he outlined seven “Guiding principles for outsiders”:

- School culture and context
  Principle 1: Acknowledge that each context is different, with schools and classrooms having their own culture.
• The locus of control
Principle 2: It is not the outsider that brings about the improvement and change in teachers and schools – it is the school that improves itself.

• The stance of the outsider
Principle 3: The stance of the outside consultant should be positive, realistic and challenging and interpretive when appropriate. Use an approach which is personal and interactive.

• Quality and quantity of time and involvement
Principle 4: Be prepared to work over a long period. It takes time to get to know the teachers, schools and children and to have them know you.

• Conditions of, and opportunities for, teacher learning
Principle 5: Teacher change is connected to teacher learning. Personal and professional development is the key to teacher and school improvement and change.

• Consultant improvement
Principle 6: The outside consultant should work progressively to build and refine their own knowledge and skill bases.

• Potential dangers and obstacles
Principle 7: Be aware of potential dangers of role and conflict of interests. (Murdoch and Johnson, 1994, pp. 29-32).

One academic partner, Sue Purvis, has a particular ‘spin’ on the academic partner’s role that involves a very ‘engaged’ form of research and development role. Her advice to someone contemplating the role of academic partner or mentor to a school in a program like the PASP is:

• Spend quality time with the staff both professionally and personally (at school that is);
• Bond well with the gatekeepers (it's up to you whether you can do this or not);
• Be prepared to teach both teachers and students;
• Be flexible and accommodating;
• Use the language of the staff not the language of academia;
• Treat everyone as a ‘unique’ individual ie consider and empathise with everyone you work with;
• Give as many people as you can wings through whatever means you see fit and;
• Ignore all of above if all you intend to do is collect data, espouse theory and ruminate about what teaching should be like! (Email ed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, January 1, 2004, p.4).

In their paper ‘Collegial learning and collective capacities’, Woodward and Hall emphasised “the facilitator’s role of support, organisation and input”, and that facilitators needed to be “willing to listen and learn”, to have and give a great deal of time to the process (Helen Woodward spent about 50 hours with each of the schools she worked with in 2003), to provide leadership, and have “a strong affinity” with schools and their contexts. They also emphasise the issue of “a common goal among the participants” – in the case of the PASP schools with which they worked, “enhanced outcomes through improved student engagement”.

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And they draw attention to the importance and generativity of cross-school and within-school professional dialogue:

“*We need to have conversations about learning*” was a comment from one principal. The opportunity for such conversations was imperative to this process. The cross school and within school processes had to allow for interactions of this nature. These interactions were integral to the collegial learning and discovering of the collective capacities. The participants have noted that they now have “*time to talk and have conversations about what they are doing to share their knowledge*” (Woodward and Hall, p.6).

John Currie, academic partner for PS33, gave a succinct account of the role as he understood it – in general, echoing the Program’s view of the role (though it happened that, because he joined the school only mid-way through 2003, he had not seen any of the PASP documentation about the role):

I should also add that [in initial conversations with the school] I clearly established my views on the role I was prepared to play. I was there to: clarify, advise, support, strategise, research/evaluate and critique. Most importantly I stressed that I felt it was the school’s project and that I held strong views of this being a unique educational innovation, professional development and learning opportunity for the school community and my role was not to carry out PASP for the school. This message was quickly understood and the benefits of this approach are now recognised by the staff (Emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, December 18, 2003).

From our own observations of the Program inside and outside schools, and our data from 33 academic partners (working with 49 of the 74 PASP schools), we make the following observations about the role and how it might best be enacted in the future:

- It is desirable if, before the particular partnership project begins, academic partners already have good, established working relationships with the school or schools they intend to work with – having prior knowledge of the school, its staff and students, and its context is an advantage for partners, and having prior knowledge of the work, credibility and expertise of partners is an advantage for schools.

- It is desirable if academic partners already have an established record of working well with schools, with capacities to
  - be open and responsive to local school concerns and issues,
  - offer leadership (and to support and extend leadership by others in all roles),
  - offer structure and support in helping the school to organise and manage its development process (help with project management),
  - offer expertise in action inquiry and school self-evaluation processes,
  - provide substantive consultancy support in some of the areas in which schools aim to change,
• establish good personal-professional relationships with a diverse range of people in the school and its community,

• be able to ‘stand back’ when appropriate to offer interpretive (and sometimes critical) perspectives which help people to re-frame and re-think current ideas and practices and ways of doing things, and at times be an audience for regular reports from participants (helping to establish a rhythm of progress reporting),

• be positive and affirming wherever possible, to support the sense of worth and the professional self-understandings of participants,

• to be regarded as a constructively critical friend whose celebration of progress and achievements will be credible and encouraging to participants,

• be willing to use their skills in documenting, analysing, conceptualising and writing to help schools prepare reports, whether as constructively critical readers, editors, or co-authors with the school (though great care should be taken about writing accounts of the school on its behalf, since this may mean taking from the school its responsibility for representing itself), and

• be, and be seen by people in the school to be, learners themselves – people committed to learning about this school, these staff and students, this community, and the school development process.

• It is desirable for schools and academic partners to begin a potential partnership relationship positively but cautiously, with options on both sides to say ‘no’ if the relationship doesn’t ‘feel right’.

• It is desirable for schools and potential academic partners to explore the particular strengths and needs for expertise each brings to the relationship, and for schools to recognise that they may need particular skills or expertise that a potential partner does not have. In such cases, schools and potential partners may need to seek alternative or additional partners or consultancy support.

• It is essential for schools and academic partners to build clear, shared understandings of goals, roles and expectations of one another, perhaps formalising these in an agreement or contract, but always leaving room for the relationship to evolve and for goals, roles and expectations to be renegotiated as the relationship develops, circumstances change, and new opportunities and challenges arise.

• It is essential that schools and academic partners establish clear expectations about the time and duration of the project – how much time the partner needs to commit and over what period – leaving open the option of renegotiation and continuation after a predetermined period, and about the routine of visits to be expected.

• It is essential that schools and academic partners establish relationships based on mutual trust, recognition and respect. Each should have clear understandings of
what they and the other are responsible for. Even though participating in the collaboration with conviction and commitment, it is essential that academic partners recognise that school improvement is a matter for which the school itself is ultimately responsible.

- It is essential that schools should regard themselves as knowledge based organisations, valuing and practicing professional dialogue and discourse as part of their everyday work, and in training and development activities based on learning and sharing knowledge. While some evidence of this comes from dialogue within the school, it is and should be enriched by contact with external sources of ideas and expertise (as in the case of the ‘node’ schools referred to earlier, who routinely use consultants and other outsiders to enrich their development). For the same reason, schools should also seek opportunities to work in clusters on development projects to foster cross-school professional dialogue (as in the case of the ‘network’ schools referred to earlier).

- It is essential that, within schools, principals and the school executive should have a shared commitment to action inquiry into, monitoring, and critical self-evaluation of the development project they are undertaking. The principal and executive must champion these tasks for participating teachers. Similarly, principals, members of the school executive and participating staff must have a shared and collaborative commitment to working cooperatively with academic partners, evidenced by school staff taking responsibility for their share of the development and self-evaluation work rather than regarding it as something to be ‘sub-contracted’ to academic partners.

- It is essential that academic partners not use or represent the work done with the school as if it were entirely their own work and not the product of their collaborative work with the school. The school should always be aware of, and give permission for, any use by the academic partner of any relevant material arising from the collaboration, not unreasonably withholding permission for its use, but expecting that the school’s contribution will properly be acknowledged. The academic partner has the same right with respect to the use or representation by the school of any material generated through the collaboration.

6.3 District-school networks

The meta-evaluators have relatively little data on the relationships between PASP schools and their district offices. It is clear from schools’ portfolio reports, the June 2003 school visits in which the meta-evaluators participated, and interviews with various kinds of participants in the Program that some school districts took a particularly keen interest in the PASP and the PASP schools, while others were positively supportive but less actively so. It is also clear from the schools’ reports that some districts supplemented PASP initiatives in schools by connecting them to district expertise and resources.

A few district superintendents attended one or more PASP Forums, and appeared to want to do so in order to give strong and visible support to ‘their’ PASP schools.
Given the difficult circumstances of some of the PASP schools, no doubt they felt that the PASP presented an opportunity to make a real difference. It was sometimes said that the PASP was treated warily by some superintendents, given these schools’ difficult histories – perhaps, protectively, they were concerned that the Program would draw unwanted attention to schools already in difficulty. In the end, the meta-evaluation received no evidence to suggest that this danger was encountered by any PASP school.

No doubt district superintendents have their own evaluations of the achievements of the Program in general and ‘their’ PASP schools in particular. In the light of experience with the PASP 2003, it would be worth gathering systematic information about their views. Early in this meta-evaluation study, the notion of doing a case study of district involvement in the development of the PASP in schools was discussed. Resources were unfortunately insufficient to permit the meta-evaluators to undertake such a study on this occasion. Given our findings about the importance of external contact, connection and communication for ‘node’ and ‘network’ schools in the last section, it may be worth considering this option further should meta-evaluation work on the Program continue in 2004.
