Reflections: Topics for further thought

Some of the major issues that have emerged from the meta-evaluation study

In this Chapter, we explore some of the major issues addressed by the Priority Schools Program. We have entitled the Chapter “Reflections” because here we revisit some of the major issues considered in the design of the Program. Knowing what we know now, would the designers of the Program have constructed it differently? Would there have been different emphases in the way the Program was structured, advice from the state PASP team to schools, or in what schools themselves chose to do?

The reflections we present are reflections, from the meta-evaluators, informed by others in and around the Program, on the following questions:

- To what extent was the Program an adequate educational response to the circumstances of students, families, teachers and schools in communities with deep needs?
- To what extent did the ‘local solutions,’ devised by schools to meet local problems and concerns, turn out to be adequate in addressing the actual needs of the students, families, teachers and schools in these communities?
- Did the Program actually challenge orthodoxies in NSW public education? Or was it more reactive, and using approaches already widely-known and well-understood?
- To what extent was the success of the Program in schools dependent on the leadership of one or a few people in a school?
- To what extent was the success of the Program in schools dependent on issues concerned with staffing?
- How effective has the action inquiry approach been in assisting schools to document and evaluate their work, and how effective was the process of building a school learning portfolio and presenting a portfolio report? How effective was this approach in terms of accountability for school learning as well as, or as distinct from, the more usual forms of accountability which regard reporting as a form of acquittal to account for the use of program funding?
The Priority Action Schools Program was conceived as a reform program, especially in relation to the collaboration between the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW Teachers’ Federation. It was also conceived as a reform program in the sense that it aimed to transform ways of working in schools in communities with deep needs. How successful was the program in achieving these reforms?

The Program was conceptualised as a one-year, possibly a two-year Program – as a kind of “one-off” response to the challenges confronted by schools in communities with deep needs. Schools were advised to make changes to their ways of working that would be sustainable beyond this funding period. Were gains made, and were they sustainable on the basis of what was changed in 2003?

7.1 Social geography

Writing of the school in which he worked, one academic partner had this to say:

My overall impression of the school – staff and many parents – was one of shell-shocked and battle-weary people who had not given up where many others would have left long ago (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions from the meta-evaluators, December 18, 2003, p.1).

This was not an atypical response from outsiders visiting PASP schools. What circumstances made it appear that people in a number of these schools seemed “shell-shocked and battle-weary”? One might consider, first, the “subjective conditions” that underlie the comment – what is in the mind of the author. Many academic partners and outside consultants to schools like these are generally more familiar with schools in far less difficult circumstances. To them, what teachers in these schools work with each day seems disturbed and disturbing. Indeed, so impressed was one member of the state PASP team with the effort, energy and enthusiasm of teachers in several of the most difficult schools that he referred to them as “heroes”. One might consider, second, the “objective conditions” – the material and social circumstances of these schools and their communities. PASP schools are located in some of the most disadvantaged communities in NSW, with multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage (and sometimes discrimination) impacting on students and their families. In these schools, many students and their families not only have poor educational outcomes, but also in economic and health terms, and many other dimensions of individual and social well-being. They are trapped in cycles of poverty, family disruption, ill-health, social and cultural disadvantage and discrimination. They frequently have poorer access to relevant services – in education, physical and mental health, employment and others. They have limited access by virtue of the usual problems – poverty, distance and/or remoteness (the geography of disadvantage measures distance in the cost of travel as much as kilometres), health status, migrancy and/or refugee status, imprisonment, drug and alcohol problems, and so on. Any causal modelling of the compounding of these factors would show, as does the work on child health by 2003 Australian of the Year, Professor Fiona Stanley, that the predicted learning
outcomes for students in these circumstances are well below the outcomes many other Australians would expect or accept.

Looked at on the single dimension of expected learning outcomes for students, the schools qualifying for the Priority Action Schools Program performed poorly by comparison with other schools. Looked at on the multiple dimensions used in selecting schools to participate in PASP, the schools have multiple challenges to confront – poorer attendance and retention rates, poorer average outcomes of standardised tests and examination outcomes, sometimes higher rates of staff mobility, higher rates of severe behavioural problems. Given their circumstances, the circumstances of students’ families, and the circumstances of their communities, their poorer outcomes are hardly surprising. The PASP came into existence because the NSW Government recognised this compounding of disadvantage, and that it required whole-of-government, cross-portfolio intervention to prevent the intergenerational reproduction of these poor outcomes and disadvantages. Within the Department, the Program designers also recognised that whole-of-portfolio responses were also required (from finance, staffing, and a range of other areas of the Department). Only sustained and coordinated intervention can lessen the compounding of disadvantage, and the intergenerational reproduction of disadvantage that is its consequence. Only the naïve or the glib could assert that teachers and schools alone can change these circumstances – though teachers and schools can be part of an overall strategy for addressing them.

Many of the students, families and communities involved in the PASP are the victims of circumstances beyond their control. Approaches to improvement that blame the victim are unlikely to help them. Equally, well-intentioned approaches that treat them only as victims are unlikely to help, since such approaches may preserve their ‘victim’ status and deny their agency (as Noel Pearson’s argues in relation to the impact of welfare dependency on Aboriginal communities). Arguably, what is needed is to support and develop the capacity of these students and their families, and hence their sense of agency – and hope.

In his recent paper “Black holes of entrenched disadvantage in Australia”, Emeritus Professor Tony Vinson raises a number of questions highly relevant in considering the circumstances of communities with deep needs like those served by PASP schools. He is reporting on new research into the distribution of disadvantage in Australia to answer the question

... whether there are localities in social space that are so concentrated in their degree of disadvantage that life opportunities ordinarily available to most people are crushed by the force of a negative social spiral? (p.1).

The communities in which many PASP schools are to be found are communities of which this question might be asked – communities in which the concentration of disadvantage means that some individuals and households do not have friends who can help them find work, or tell them about the experience of attending a university, or readily provide resources that can tide them over a time of crisis. Vinson cites a study by Sampson (1997) who found that
... social cohesion (variations on the idea of a close-knit and trusting neighbourhood and willingness to intervene to promote the best interests of the community), and social control (people's willingness to intervene to control or correct young people's misbehaviour) were closely associated across neighbourhoods. So much so that Sampson concluded they were aspects of the same thing and he combined them in a summary measure called collective efficacy. Proceeding on this basis, he found that collective efficacy mediated a substantial portion of the association of residential stability and socio-economic disadvantage with measures of violence. After adjustments for confounding factors, this combined collective efficacy measure reflecting informal social control and cohesion and trust, remained a robust predictor of lower rates of violence, regardless of the level of poverty in an area. In Sampson's view, it is because poor neighbourhoods tend to have less social organisation and collective efficacy that their crime rates are high (p.11).

Communities with deep needs frequently lack this collective efficacy; indeed, on the basis of Vinson's research, it is reasonable to conclude that the lack of collective efficacy is a consequence of the concentration of joblessness, poverty and reduced access to resources and services. We quote Vinson at length because he eloquently describes the educational and social consequences of neighbourhood effects in communities with deep needs like many of the communities in which PASP schools are located.

When an area has an accumulation of human and economic problems does that simply reflect … the operation of competition bringing like-situated people together in less costly areas? Does it reflect the allocation policies of housing authorities that concentrate people in difficult circumstances? Are we simply looking at the accumulated economic and social effects of individuals and households? Or, are we affected by the economic and social circumstances of our neighbours?

We are assisted in answering these questions by increasingly sophisticated research that attempts to separate the impact of (1) broader social and economic influences upon the wellbeing of people in neighbourhoods, and (2) separates the economic and social attributes of residents, from neighbourhood effects per se. Taking these things into account results in a more considered answer to the question does place matter? However, careful research justifies the following conclusion:

There are causal associations between poor neighbourhoods and other social problems that are more than the consequences of macroeconomic forces and individual or household characteristics. The larger and longer running the area problems, the stronger the cumulative impact becomes causing a drain on services with resultant lower quality outcomes such as educational performance, housing services and health care.

Another important conclusion of research is that neighbourhood effects are stronger at certain times in people's development. In particular, it seems that neighbourhoods affect life chances during early childhood and late adolescence – the very times when a just society would be most anxious to open up life opportunities to children and young people. This conclusion has been reached after making adjustments for differences in the socio-economic characteristics of families. The development of mental and scholastic abilities in the crucial early years of schooling can be dampened or supported by neighbourhood effects. This capacity could hardly be more crucial in maintaining or breaking the bonds of disadvantage. The duration of a young person's schooling is one of the best predictors of health – physical and mental – in later life, as well as the likelihood of attaining a measure of economic security and personal autonomy. Education decreases infant mortality, the age-specific rates of illness, disability and mortality. Education is associated with children's nutritional intake, and in adults, exercise, moderate drinking, weight
control and avoidance of smoking. Females who have their first child as teenagers are more likely than those who delay childbearing to have low educational attainment, and subsequently these young mothers are more likely to become unskilled workers, and more likely to be unemployed and dependent on welfare. Child abuse and neglect are associated with incomplete high school education. Education can play a major part in reducing or increasing our shameful rate of incarceration of young Aboriginal people. The Indigenous person who has not completed secondary school has an over thirteen times greater chance of imprisonment than has his or her better-educated Aboriginal counterpart.

There are few things more tragic or socially wasteful than young people set on a course that will see their potential unfulfilled and their place in the human community marginalised. Every year, hundreds of Australia’s children and young people switch from the main track of academic and social development into sidings offering few life opportunities or ways of successfully preparing for adult life. The point of departure is commonly some form of learning difficulty, often in combination with emotional and relationship problems. A wealth of evidence and the practical experience of teachers point to the crucial importance of failure in the primary years of schooling to master the foundation skills of literacy and numeracy. Not only does the failure to resolve these problems block further learning but it also sows the seeds of misbehaviour and anti-social conduct. Demoralised failing students express their frustration by disrupting others’ learning and substituting attention seeking for real achievement in their own lives. The students enter secondary [schooling] dragging their unresolved problems with them with the distinct prospect of an early ‘escape’ around year 9 into a world that offers few legitimate jobs for the totally academically unqualified. The problems are compounded when the young people concerned are the second or third generation in their families to be poorly educated and suffering long-term, if not permanent unemployment – a situation increasingly characteristic of localities in which social disadvantage is concentrated (pp.6-7).

Vinson’s approach aims to show how social mechanisms, combined with social and housing policies that concentrate people in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances perpetuate, reproduce and intensify disadvantage.

In summary, the social geographic approach envisages a causal chain linking concentrated joblessness and the perpetuation and deepening of poverty. The concentration of joblessness undermines the odds of employment for young people which further augments the concentration of joblessness in the community and raises rates of crime and incarceration. To this scenario can be added the fact that the outcomes described may, in turn, increase the number of inadequately supported children in the area (p.9).

These kinds of circumstances are ones that haunt a number of communities in which PASP operates. And it is precisely the consequences for children and young people that Vinson identifies that teachers in PASP schools are working to try to avoid.

Vinson’s research points towards the cycles by which disadvantage reaches such a level in some communities that their members can be caught in a negative spiral of deepening need. This view is shared by Bob Connell, Ken Johnson and Viv White, who studied the Australian Disadvantaged Schools Program – precursor to the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program, and thus an antecedent of the Priority Action Schools Program – and reached similar conclusions about how disadvantage is reproduced intergenerationally and intra-generationally. Meta-
evaluator Stephen Kemmis (2003) referred to their theory in a paper, “From DSP to PASP: Changing conceptualisations of disadvantage”, prepared for the March Forum of PASP schools, held in Sydney. The following section is an excerpt from that paper.

**Connell, Johnston and White: A theory of poverty and education**

Between 1987 and 1990, Bob Connell, Ken Johnston and Viv White, working at Macquarie University, conducted the “Poverty, Education and the Disadvantaged Schools Program” project. An edited collection of papers from the project was published by Deakin University in 1991. In this book, members of the research team gave a clear account of the theory of schooling and social and cultural reproduction, particularly as it related to the reproduction of educational inequalities formed by poverty. They outlined some of the main elements of the theory in a series of theoretical schemata that I have adapted somewhat in the figures that follow.

The first schema, “Poverty Cycle A” (Figure 1), sets out the basic process of the inheritance of relative disadvantage. People from homes characterized by personal or community poverty experience labour market vulnerability (for example, unemployment, intermittent employment, underemployment) and social disempowerment. Children from such families experience difficulties in education (the schools do not “speak their language”, as it were); they are anxious to get out of school to find work; and they drop out of school at higher rates than their ruling class peers. Given their lower levels of educational attainment, qualifications and the kinds of work experiences available to them, they are likely to find themselves in situations of personal and community poverty.

It is easy to read Figure 1 too literally, as if Poverty Cycle A were inevitable. Of course it is not: many school leavers from backgrounds characterized by poverty break out of the cycle, and some people without such backgrounds become poor and thus risk “breaking into” the poverty cycle.

---

Connell, Johnston and White indicate that poverty is not just a matter of the circumstances of individuals – as if poverty were “inherited” and “passed on” by people and the ways they live and work. They indicate that poverty is also structurally produced – that is, through intertwined economic, social and cultural processes. “Poverty Cycle B” (Figure 2) outlines some of the processes which produce and maintain an unequal distribution of social assets.

Figure 2: Poverty Cycle B: The structural reproduction of poverty (adapted from Connell, Johnston and White, p.36)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POVERTY CYCLE B: Structural production of poverty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Unequal distribution of social assets (income, wealth, power, credentials, cultural goods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Private accumulation of wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Operation of credentialling system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Legitimation of inequality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a further series of schemata, Connell, Johnston and White elaborate some factors associated with the key elements of Poverty Cycle A – the inheritance of relative inequality.

Figure 3 shows a number of aspects of poverty related to education and the inheritance of relative inequality: low family and district income, economic dependence and labour market vulnerability, a shortage of educational resources, socially or physically damaging environments, and a shortage of organisational power. Families and communities in poverty may endure these conditions to a greater extent than other families and communities.

Figure 3: Some key aspects of poverty (adapted from Connell, Johnston and White, p.37)
Figure 4 outlines some of the features of schooling that contribute to difficulties in persisting in school for some young working class people. Given these obstacles, it is more likely that they will leave school, and leave under-qualified, and, as a consequence, be more likely to find themselves living in circumstances of personal and community poverty. The features include a hegemonic curriculum organized around ‘academic’ knowledge (that is, knowledge related to ruling class culture and language); a conformist, Anglo, middle class culture in the school; competitive individual selection and assessment methods; a narrowing range of educational offerings at upper levels of the school (making the content appropriate for a decreasing range of students and excluding others); an orientation to credentials (making formal qualifications essential in the marketplace of jobs, not just experience or actual competence); forms of school life and practice that embody the power of the state (for example, through examination systems, and procedures for suspension and expulsion); and lower funding of schools in working class areas.

Figure 5 outlines some of the effects of poverty on the experience of schooling for working class young people. In Figure 4, some of the features contributing to these students’ difficulties were enumerated; Figure 5 identifies some of the effects of those factors in terms of student-teacher relationships: teachers must spend greater time covering the curriculum; there is a greater social distance between teachers and students and their families; there may be a desire to get these students out of the school and into waged work as soon as possible; there may be difficulties in establishing good relationships between students and teachers, and in following through long-term career development plans for these students; there may
be problems in the playground (for example, bullying, inter-group violence) which maintain an atmosphere of tension, and through which certain students come to be labelled as ‘delinquent’; and a general sense among students, their families and communities that school is “not for them”, not “owned” by them – a situation in which students and their families and communities become alienated from schooling.

Of course it is hardly possible to do justice to this theory here, but this set of figures gives some taste of the dynamics of the relationship between poverty and educational inequality as understood from the perspective of the theory of social and cultural reproduction. As indicated earlier, this more elaborate understanding of the relationship between poverty and educational inequality suggested several kinds of innovations in schooling, aimed at assisting students and their families to “belong” to the school more readily (for example, by making more inclusive school curricula and cultures). As a response to the problems of poverty as a source and correlate of educational inequalities, the book made a great contribution to the theory, policy and practice of the DSP and schooling more generally.

The social geography of disadvantage described by Vinson, and the cycles of intergenerational and intra-generational reproduction of disadvantage theorised by Connell, Johnson and White, are characteristic of a number of the communities with deep needs served by PASP schools.

Of course schools alone cannot address the socio-economic problems of students’ families and households, nor address the problems of joblessness, poorer mental and physical health, violence and other problems that are to be found in communities with deep needs. The problem for schools is how to engage these children and young people, and their families, and their communities, in constructive ways that can help to break the negative spiral of reproduction of disadvantage. Schools have had this transformational role for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds for many years – at least for the last hundred and fifty years or so of public education in Australia. And, as always, the task has been most difficult where disadvantage is most concentrated – in Vinson’s “black holes of entrenched disadvantage”.

Schools have long explored the question of how to assist students to make this transformation. In PASP schools, there has been a systematic exploration of strategies that might work. And, as we saw in Chapter 5, some of the most powerful strategies were ones aimed at the heart of teaching and learning – the shift to productive pedagogies. While it has often been remarked that the “productive pedagogy” framework, as described in the (2003) discussion document Quality Teaching in NSW Schools, is mostly a codification of good teaching practice as this is understood in research literature, and in the experience of many exemplary teachers, and that many of its roots can be traced back to John Dewey and the progressive movement, it is also true that the framework is a pedagogical approach for its time. It responds to needs that are urgent in today’s busy schools, working with an increasing array of constraints placed upon curricula and thus on teachers and teaching, and thus on the conditions for learning experienced by students. The approach is “for its time” in the sense that it reminds teachers and those who formulate curricula that it is student engagement in learning that makes the difference to
student outcomes, not principally the content of externally-devised curricula. It reminds schools and teachers that good teaching and good curricula are ones that connect with and support learners, that scaffold learning, and assess students authentically against what they have learned, not just on what is in curriculum guides or external assessment programs – what was hoped or intended by the authors of curricula, rather than the students for whom education and schooling are intended.

So: there has been a slow evolution of approaches to schooling aimed at meeting the needs of all students, including those with special needs and those in circumstances of disadvantage. In the early years of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, it was conceived as a compensatory program, aiming, through schools, to compensate students for the disadvantage they experienced as members of families and communities in need – for example, by taking children on excursions, offering extra help with literacy and numeracy, and trying to create more comfortable school environments. This somewhat patronising view did not persist long in the DSP, for the very good reason that it adopted a deficit view of the circumstances of children and young people, extending the social distance between the school and the young people it aimed to help. It was replaced by views of disadvantage that were more attentive to cultural, social and economic issues affecting students and their families.

In relation to culture, the DSP began to adopt more liberal multicultural perspectives, and (later) approaches to engaging students and their families in the work of the school by approaches based on recognition of, and respect for cultural difference. In relation to issues of social class, schools became more aware of the social forms and practices of working class culture, once again aiming to engage working class people – and unemployed people – in the work and life of the schools. They also became more attentive to cultural and social issues of discrimination, cultural imperialism, racism, sexism, bullying and violence, offering a range of programs that would not merely “outlaw” such practices, but engage students educationally in examining, investigating and overcoming them.

Many PASP schools have transformed their teaching and learning practices towards productive pedagogies, towards “quality teaching” as this is described in Quality Teaching in NSW Schools. Moreover, many have shifted from approaches to meeting the needs of students through welfare approaches to pedagogical approaches. And, where they have maintained an emphasis on student welfare and well-being, they have shifted from approaches focussing on students’ school and classroom behaviour (the behaviour management approach) to approaches based on responding educationally to the causes of student misbehaviour, poor attendance and even violence. They have aimed to help students understand the social processes that cause or provoke bullying or violence or discrimination, and to change the way they participate in those processes – to help them act as knowledgeable, informed participants, not in the many roles of victim (that also include, though not with moral equivalence, the roles of bully and provocateur). Education of this kind helps students to understand the nature and consequences of destructive, self-destructive and anti-social behaviours – as social behaviour, socially-formed, not just as individual behaviour, the responsibility of the actor alone.
It is not just students in communities with deep needs that may fall into the role of victim. Sometimes, the schools themselves are also constructed as ‘victim’ schools.

Some of the schools involved in the PASP are in danger of attaining a kind of ‘victim’ status. They have come to be regarded as ‘difficult schools’, as ‘schools in crisis’ – one might say as ‘victim schools’. As is the case with communities and families, approaches to assisting them that blame the victim or confirm their ‘victim’ status are unlikely to help them. The designers of the PASP therefore intended it to be a capacity-building program for schools and their students. It aimed to develop and to enhance their sense of agency – recognising realistically that both the schools and their students are in difficult circumstances. It aimed neither to blame nor confirm schools or students in a victim role; instead, it aimed to find and develop the sense of capacity and agency of schools, teachers, students and families and communities.

Moreover, the Program aimed to draw on the ‘inside’ knowledge of schools about their communities and their circumstances, by assisting schools to develop ‘local solutions’ to the problems they perceived. Following the well-known community development process, it aimed to build from what people in the situation know already, what solutions they believe will work for them in their circumstances – strategies they ‘own’ and are willing to learn from.

The circumstances of the seventy-four PASP schools are different from one another, of course. Each is unique. But there are some strong similarities in composition and circumstances across settings, especially within three large groups of schools – those in western and south-western Sydney, the south coast and north coast schools, and the schools in the west and northwest of rural NSW.

The following is an extract from the portfolio report of one PASP primary school in western Sydney, PS38. We quote it at length because it gives an indication of the kinds of community context in which many PASP schools operate in western and south-western Sydney.

[PS38] draws its student body from the surrounding Department of Housing estate that predominantly comprises of high-density townhouses that are currently under redevelopment through the Intensive Tenant Management initiative being implemented by the Department of Housing. The initiative was developed to improve the community through the demolition of derelict and vandalized housing and the creation of gardens and safe areas for the children of the community to play and socialise within. The improvements undertaken throughout 2003 involved the demolition of some townhouses, which then provided private, enclosed gardens for the remaining tenants. The dwellings were upgraded through new facades being constructed and the building of verandas/porches, carports, fencing and paths. The improvements included the painting of exterior and interior surfaces. The demolition of townhouses required family groups to be relocated. Previously derelict dwellings that were renovated provided the opportunity for new family groups to move within the area. The initiative also focused upon improving the composition of the community through removing and relocating individuals or family groups which consistently created problems within the community through their actions and behaviour, including criminal activity and damage, thus providing a safer environment for the remaining community members. The Intensive Tenant Management initiative is a long-term project that requires years of implementation. The impact upon the community and thus the school cannot be accurately measured
currently, other than observing the general mobility rate not notably altering within the area and noting the general physical changes to the surrounding housing environment.

Centrelink provides payments to over 90% of the [PS38] community. 60% of these recipients are single parent families. Unresolved and difficult custody matters that require both a high level of confidentiality and sensitivity impact upon many of the [PS38] single parent families. These families then require a higher level of support from all levels of school personnel including the School Counsellor.

Mental health issues negatively affect the school community with a notable number of community members requiring mental health service support. Alcohol, violence and drug abuse also impact on the general community. A large number of community members have far reaching issues with a dependence on a variety of substances. The dependence and abuse of substances subsequently has a negative impact upon the ability of the community as a whole to function positively, leading ultimately to the negative effects impacting upon the student population.

The majority of students commencing Kindergarten at [PS38] have not attended playgroup or preschool. The Kindergarten students thus require a more highly structured and prolonged introduction to all aspects of schooling, including socialising with other children and establishing the foundations for their basic learning.

The mobility rate of [PS38] is approximately 40%. The impact of a disrupted schooling pattern affects many of [PS38] students. A significant number of [PS38] students have attended in excess of four schools in the first three years of schooling, which affects their ability to achieve the expected outcomes across the Key Learning Areas.

The student population of [PS38] comprises of 20% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and a further 40% identified from a Non-English speaking background. Most of these students are identified as requiring additional support across most areas of learning with a very significant need in Literacy and Numeracy. The support is delivered through a variety of methods across the school, including small group withdrawal and individual support within the classroom (p.1).

Neighbouring primary school PS25, on the same housing estate, gives a succinct statistical account of some features of the community it serves:

Within the Estate, unemployment is 42.5%, youth under 19 years is 52.8%, families with incomes under $16 000 p.a. is 31.1%, sole parent families represent 43.5% of the school’s population (p.1).

HS22 gives this snapshot of its community:

- The [school] has 636 students of which 33% are of Pacific Islander or Maori descent and 13% are Aboriginal.
- The school is situated in a Department of Housing Crisis Housing Area (i.e., tenants cannot buy their homes).
- The latest statistics available indicate that only 10% of students live in housing owned or being purchased by their family.
- 22.1% of households are one parent families.
- 78% of students come from families whose only income is government funding (Unemployment benefits, sole parent income or disability pensions).
- 38.9% of households earn less than $500 per week (the national poverty line).
47% of assaults recorded by the police are indicated as domestic violence (The area has the highest reported assaults in the state.)

Rates of Child Abuse and neglect in the … region are over 2 and a half times the state average.

The latest census statistics indicate that the suburb … has one tertiary-educated person living in the suburb. (the local doctor)

Of the 45 students who will sit for a Higher School Certificate in 2002 38 are the first in their family to receive a HSC.

70% of … residents have no qualifications at all.

At 15.75%, the school's attendance rates are below state average, despite implementing a phone intervention program for the past two years. (Many students do not have a telephone or it has been disconnected).

Student mobility is very high – on average 31% (200 students) leave the school each year and approximately the same number enrol. This necessitates the repetition of student programs such as anti-bullying, peer mediation each year.

Retention rates from year 10 to year 11 are at about 78%, of those 50% complete their Higher School Certificate (37% of year 7 students complete their HSC at HS22.)

The school has little parent involvement. It does not have a functioning P&C or a School Council, however the ASSPA committee is functioning and some parents of Pacific Islander students attend [school] parent Forums.

As part of the school's PSFP program a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) (3 days per week for 2002) and a Pacific Islander Community Liaison Officer (PICLO) (3 days per week for 2001 and 2002) have been employed. This has increased parent attendance at school functions and diminished some of the communication concerns between the school and community. (p.1)

A number of schools in the western and south-western suburbs of Sydney were built in the ‘60s when the suburbs were new and grew quickly into the ‘70s. Changing house values and population shifts have meant that some have now much reduced enrolments. PS27 is one of many examples of these trends:

Our school was built in 1965 to cater for the growing population in the new … housing estates. The school opened with 600 students and rapidly grew to a peak of 1303 in 1971. Enrolments have declined steadily over the ensuing years and currently hover around the 300 mark. (p.1)

The trend is similar at PS34:

In 1969 … Council sold a large slice of land to the Housing Commission. In 1973 colourful and interesting single and two storey attached dwellings grouped around short cul-de-sacs or access ways were ready to accommodate small and large families, single parent families, handicapped people and aged pensioners. The planning concept was described as being 10 years ahead of its time with an aim to separate vehicular and pedestrian traffic wherever possible to achieve a safer and quieter living environment. Over the years this glossy representation has eroded. What has replaced this idyllic existence are pockets of poverty, violence, loneliness, isolation, depression and desperation.

In 1975 [PS34], … Public School and … High School were established to educate the children in the Housing Estate. In its early years, [PS34] was responsible
for the educating of over a thousand students. Demountable classrooms were a part of our school landscape. The mobility of families and the removal of Department of Housing accommodation continues to impact on our school population.

Our school currently has 353 students and caters for students from Kindergarten to Year 6. We also have a Support Unit of four classes. The support unit caters for students with mild and moderate disabilities.

Our students come from a low socio-economic background. Most of our students live in accommodation provided by the Department of Housing. Many of the children at [PS34] come from Non English Speaking Backgrounds. A high percentage of these students are Samoan. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander also contribute to our school community (p.3).

In rural and regional NSW, the social context is in some ways rather different. While some rural and regional PASP schools may be located in communities in crisis, there may also be greater stability of populations and of school staff. The following quotation from the portfolio report of HS23 gives a sense of the kinds of issues being confronted by one PASP school in western NSW:

The district in which [our town] is situated has always been known as a major producer of wool, cattle and sheep. In more recent years the cotton industry has also been established, and employs the majority of workers in the area. As a result, the current drought has impacted severely on agricultural production and employment opportunities within the local district have dwindled.

At present the town is suffering as a result of the recent closure of several prominent businesses and services. The Aboriginal cultural museum, which provides insight into the early Aboriginal history of [our town], closed late in 2002. The only motel in town is closed, and currently in receivership. The local retirement home and the federally funded Aboriginal Medical Service both closed early in 2003. As well, and very important to the town, was the closure of the local chemist in 2002. This has caused major inconvenience to the town’s inhabitants, many of whom do not own a car. In addition, several other businesses have also closed over the last year. For example, there is no longer an air service to [our town], which means that locals must travel to … if they wish to fly to … or Sydney. Also, [our town]’s only plumber and electrician are both in the process of moving out of the district.

Altogether these closures have had a negative effect on morale within the community. As a consequence the community is battling against alcohol, drug, and gambling addictions, as well as family disintegration and the loss of social cohesion. This has got to the point where the community decided to ban the wine Moselle from sale, early in 2003. In a related manner, the introduction of poker machines into the two hotels in town is considered by most to be a backward step for a community that was already suffering from the results of excessive gambling. As well, poverty and domestic violence are additional major problems in the community, and the influence of these community issues commonly spill over into the School environment. Students can often be quite volatile, and especially so on Mondays when they might arrive at school after having been affected by negative events over the weekend only to continue in an agitated and aggressive emotional state. (pp.4-5)

In rural and regional locations, there are also problems of isolation of schools from relevant services. The report from a north coast public school, PS17, states:

In general, one of the major challenges experienced by [PS17] is an ongoing one, not related to the PASP, but which has impacted on its implementation. It is the scarcity of support from other professional agencies due to the rural location of the school. Teachers were strongly aware of the disadvantage this places them and their children at. For example, teachers noted that:
CHAPTER 7
REFLECTIONS

- "...[a school support organisation] have not got the personnel to support us in school programs on a regular basis. Not being able to access ST and OT have impacted on T & D and student learning."

- "Effective interagency support is virtually non-existent because of lack of personnel in those interagency support services." (p.19)

The kinds of social conditions illustrated in these examples demonstrate what the notion of “communities with deep needs” means. They also demonstrate something of the state of students when they come to school – when they begin school with below average language development, when some come to school each day carrying with them the reverberations of emotional or physical trauma observed the night before or the weekend before, when they proceed through school hampered by mobility that interrupts their education, and when they face the frustrations of poor performance or school failure that lead to various forms of acting out or to early school leaving.

It is no easy task for a school to be a welcoming place for students whose families have deep needs, or for the families and wider community. It is no easy task for schools to address the wide range of emotional, social and economic needs of students, their families, and their community. It is no easy task for teachers to maintain their resilience and sense of agency in the face of what are often dispiriting circumstances. Yet, with the support of the Program, many PASP schools have been able to make transformations in their ways of working that have begun to bear fruit in improved student learning outcomes, improved school attendance, improved student behaviour, and improved professional development outcomes for teachers – discussed in Chapter 5. As Chapter 5 also suggests, however, most were a little less successful in building interagency and community links – though experience suggests that developing the trust, protocols and cooperative arrangements to achieve these links takes time, frequently years rather than months.

The Program was founded on the aspirations borne of the NSW Community Police and Parents Forum held in Sydney in April, 2002. $2 million of the $16.1 million for the Program came from a community initiatives budget of the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. It was intended as a NSW DET contribution to addressing the problems of schooling in communities with deep needs. As this section has sought to show, the needs it aims to address are very deep, they have substantial effects on children, young people, their families, and their communities. Many of the needs are not ones that schools can address, but some are. The experience of the Program generally has shown that schools can and have changed their ways of working to address many of the issues that arise for students and their families in communities with deep needs.

In Chapter 5, it was shown that PASP schools in communities with deep needs had produced improvements in student engagement in learning, student learning outcomes, student behaviour issues, and school attendance. It might be added here that these improvements were achieved at a relatively modest cost – approximately $491 per student, if the $16.1 million for the Program is averaged across the total enrolments of the seventy-four schools in the Program. Given the
depth and extent of the needs of these schools and communities, 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%.

In his “Black holes of entrenched disadvantage in Australia” address, Vinson wrote:

Why don’t governments read the signs and prevent these consequences happening [the effects on health, education and social outcomes for people in areas with concentrations of disadvantage]? There are indications that governments are becoming much more interested in combating destructive neighbourhood environments and influences. The community renewal section of the NSW Premier’s Department and the Victorian Department of Communities testify to that awakening. What needs to be realised is that if a community has been in a downward spiral for decades the situation is not going to be remedied in a few years. Social disadvantage is more durable than that. Without being too theoretical about it the trajectory of decline seems often to resemble the path described many years ago by [sociologist] George C Homans. A contraction in the economy of the community and the running down of resources and influence triggers a loss of confidence and social cohesion that, in turn, feeds back (negatively) upon the adaptive capacity of the community … and so the spiral continues. The important implication is that helping a community to gain strength, either by way of renewal or even for the first time, usually requires that attention be paid to both its internal and external functioning. The capacity to set goals, marshal resources, form strategic alliances and attract and use external support, interact across a permeable membrane with certain inner strengths or shortcomings, the management of conflict and strength of commitment to collective goals.

It takes time for these qualities to develop but some authorities have no sooner embarked on a renewal program than they are talking about an ‘exit plan’. They will have to be patient if anything is to be achieved. An incomplete effort which encourages false hope may be more harmful than doing nothing (p.10).

There is surely a message here for those obliged to answer the question of whether the Priority Action Schools Program should be continued beyond 2004. Vinson may not have said it, but the meta-evaluators conclude that the small amounts of additional funding made available to PASP schools – 8% more per student for primary schools, 6% more for secondary – are bearing fruit, and, at a total cost of $16.1 million, are surely sustainable for the state of NSW. Schools did not achieve the results they achieved through PASP without the resources and support the Program made available to them, despite frequently having smaller amounts of additional resources from programs like the Priority Schools Funding Program and the Country Areas Program.

The question of how many schools are in communities with deep needs is, we believe, an unresolved question. At one stage in the process of setting up the Program, it appeared that about 40 schools would qualify on the criteria being applied at that time. As we suggested in Chapter 3, the criteria evolved, and the selection of schools changed; some were removed from the list and others were added. We cannot say whether 74 (or more) or 40 (or less) is the ‘right’ number.
But resourcing at the level the Program provided, between $100,000 and $400,000 per school, was needed to produce these modest – and, we would add – fragile gains. Given the depth of the needs, the evidence of Vinson’s “Black holes” research, the dynamics of the reproduction of disadvantage described by Connell, Johnson and White, and our observations of the Program, it is reasonable to conclude that additional funding on this scale will remain necessary to assist schools to change their ways of working to approaches that are more engaging for students in communities with deep needs.

The speed of change in PASP schools has been quite remarkable – their positive results were shown in a single year. In many, though probably far from all, they may not yet be sustainable without continued support (as is occurring in 2004). The question then is: “Is the program funding schools to change or is it providing additional base resourcing?” So far, it seems predicated on the idea of funding schools to assist them to make an initial change, and the question of long-term differential funding has been left open. It seems reasonable to conclude that schools will need some level of additional funding to make initial changes and to achieve new or transformed ways of working, but that they may need some other, lower level of enhanced funding for their work while ever the deep needs of their communities continue. In our view, PASP schools would be helped if they had a guarantee of substantially enhanced funding for two or three years, at or about the level they received in 2003. The question of continuing enhanced funding or differential (and/or more flexible) staffing, still unresolved in our minds, should, we believe, be examined as part of the evaluation of the Program in 2004.

7.2 Local solutions

The Priority Action Schools Program was predicated on the notion that schools in challenging circumstances already had some diagnosis of what would be needed to help them meet local challenges. In 2002, before the funding was released, the state PASP team worked with schools to determine what kinds of support might be most helpful in addressing local needs – ‘local solutions’ to local problems. This approach was consciously adopted rather than a more universalistic solution like offering additional staff to all PASP schools to permit a reduction in class sizes, for example. Indeed, the more universalistic approach was deliberately rejected. A school-based view of what might be most useful was to be preferred to a system-wide approach which risked treating the circumstances of communities in deep needs as broadly similar, despite differences in the schools and, of course, in the communities themselves.

The idea of ‘local solutions’ is very attractive. It is empowering for the school, for example, because it invites the school to make some assessment of its situation – frequently as a whole-school exercise – and thus creates ‘ownership’ of (commitment to) the strategies chosen by a school to pursue the Program objectives of improved learning outcomes for students and improved professional development of staff. But what does a school actually choose as a ‘local solution’? The record shows that schools chose many different kinds of solutions – though
they can be grouped under the headings around which Chapter 5 is organised, namely:

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

As we saw in Chapter 5, schools also adopted different strategies under each of those rubrics – for example, different approaches to staff professional development, including mentoring and, within that, different approaches to mentoring, or different approaches to pedagogy and pedagogical change.

‘Local solutions’ thus did not mean unique solutions, although the particular package of strategies implemented by every school was different. Indeed, the state PASP team were clear that schools did not need to adopt strategies that would be ‘innovative’, if by ‘innovative’ is meant an approach that might be regarded as ground-breaking or entirely new (or new to that school).

There are thus tensions between the idea of ‘local solutions’ and general or system-wide approaches, and between ‘local solutions’ and uniqueness. The local solutions actually adopted in PASP schools ranged somewhere between these poles.

The guidelines for the Program indicated what schools could and could not spend PASP funds on. This may have placed an in-principle limit on ‘local solutions’, but it does not appear to have been an issue for schools. Moreover, the state PASP team offered advice on the kinds of things that might be done with the funds – inviting schools to consider what kinds of additional staff might be most helpful in their circumstances, for example, or suggesting changes to pedagogy aimed at improving student engagement, or suggesting the use of Community Liaison Officers (or other kinds of staff) to help monitor and address problems of school attendance. These guidelines and advice were not generally received by schools as placing unnecessary constraints on the pursuit of ‘local solutions’.

At the end of 2003, in the light of experience across all PASP schools, how might schools now be advised?

The results from Chapter 5 suggest that schools would be well advised to make changes to pedagogy, particularly in the direction suggested by the document *Quality Teaching in NSW Schools*, in pursuit of improved student engagement; that
they should adopt supportive approaches to home-school liaison aimed at monitoring and improving student attendance; and that they should aim for improved student behaviour through forms of teaching and learning that improve student engagement. They should aim to appoint what some schools described as ‘in-built relief’ – instead of searching for casual teachers, unfamiliar with the students, to deal with staff absences, they should have relieving teachers on staff to meet unexpected absences. They should aim for approaches to mentoring of staff, especially new and inexperienced staff, that are systematic and long-term, with the guidance of experienced and insightful mentors, whether other classroom teachers or senior teachers appointed for the purpose. They should aim for whole school culture-building and development, especially in the area of pedagogical change aimed at student engagement – and at understanding the school community. They should work in ways that systematically build commitment, across the school, to shared and collaboratively-pursued school practices (including consistency of practice and teacher judgement in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment). They should aim at increasing parent and community involvement in the life of the school, and at working effectively with other agencies to support students and families in difficulty or in crisis. Perhaps not all schools now need to pursue these possibilities as assiduously as others, having already made significant strides in one or more of these areas. But some PASP schools might wish to consider these possibilities in preference to some of the strategies they tried in 2003.

Writing about the Victorian Transition Education Program in 1983, meta-evaluator Stephen Kemmis suggested that there is a paradox about the pursuit of local solutions and program-wide learning:

This then is the paradox of the grassroots philosophy, that as projects are given encouragement and freedom to experiment, learning takes place, but as learning progresses so do central interventionist strategies which favour certain types of action above others. In other words the centre takes a more muscular line about what constitutes a ‘good’ project. From one perspective, this may be seen as nothing more than a responsible attitude towards policy formation and program development; from another it may be seen as nothing less than bureaucratic intervention which serves to limit the processes of interpretation and exploration … crucial to the development of [a] program… (p.11).

In PASP, this report is perhaps the biggest way in which ‘central’ interpretations about local learnings have been shaped and solidified. If the guidelines for the Priority Action Schools Program are too much modified in the light of what has been learned in 2003, it is possible that some highly relevant and appropriate local solutions to local circumstances might no longer be favoured for funding. The meta-evaluators are not aware of any evidence that the managers of the Program have any such intention, but we raise the issue here because ordinary program management strategies frequently do narrow the range of what schools can try and investigate as strategies most likely to assist in their own local situations. On the contrary, the state PASP team have remained supportive of the notion of ‘local solutions’, especially when this is interpreted as a package of strategies best able to meet local needs, though the package may be composed of strategies shown to be effective in other places.
Before concluding this section, it is worth hearing the words of one PASP school, HS13, as it reflected at the end of 2003 on the package of strategies it tried. The reflections indicate the kind of judicious self-appraisal that was a feature of the best school evaluation efforts and the best portfolio reports:

Following recurrent discussions with most staff on the progress of PASP initiatives some observations and conclusions can be drawn:

1. The school (of 560 students) has gained many of the advantages held by larger schools through PASP funded offsets. E.g. HT Welfare, voc ed and technology coordinator, etc. While these appointments are not themselves innovative, they are just as useful to a small school and could never have been dreamed of without equity funding.

2. The in-built relief scheme is well structured and almost universally acclaimed. It should be available to all schools!

3. HT release for quality teaching development has been an excellent and flexible asset, forcing us to come to grips individually with larger concepts that we could never explore without the time. HT journals imparted a degree of accountability and rigour to the exercise.

4. Student outcomes have only appeared anecdotally so far and will require at least another year to quantify for most initiatives.

5. The success of so much of what we have done is thanks, not only to funding, but to the high quality of the additional teachers we were able to obtain to fill PASP funded positions. Apparently not all schools have been so fortunate.

6. Much of the success is attributable to the dialogue which necessarily took place throughout the year within the school. More experimentation with teaching practice was possible than had been evidenced before.

7. It will be possible to preserve some of the spirit and content of PASP ideas in a post PASP world, but no one really looks forward to the first post PASP year as “we are spoilt” by the benefits of this high level of discretionary funding! (p.24)

These are comments from a school that devised its own package of PASP strategies in relation to its own needs, and in relation to dozens of other initiatives also under way in the school. Part of the success experienced by this school was that it had sufficient resources to make significant changes to the way it worked, appropriate to its diagnosis of the situation of its students, teachers and community. It demonstrates that it is not the innovativeness or uniqueness of strategies that make them appropriate to local circumstances, but the way the package of strategies fits together within a whole-school vision of what will work, backed by sufficient resources to make substantial change. This is a pattern observed in many – though not all – PASP schools.

### 7.3 Challenging orthodoxies

Reflecting on the question “Are we challenging orthodoxies?” in the portfolio report of HS 13, the principal writes:

Yes, in terms of previous experience with lesser scale tied equity funding where schools usually were told how and on what to spend the equity funding.
CHAPTER 7
REFLECTIONS

No, in terms of the evolutionary rather than revolutionary structures chosen. As previously discussed, the collaborative process in 2002 tended to gradually “weed out” the more adventurous ideas and provided a platform for “speeding up” projects and plans which had been in the pipeline but would have taken several years to fund or implement under lesser funding. To this extent the infusion of funding did not act as a starting point for cultural change but did come at an opportune time to allow development of ideas that furthered change already in progress...

On a tactical level the uptake of ideas for energizing the classroom has been both encouraging and disappointing. Following almost every workshop, conference, faculty session, demonstration or seminar many teachers have adopted more engaging practice in the classroom for an apparently limited time, student centred enquiry, higher thinking skills, visual and practical teaching, more active student dialogue, greater integration of technology, etc. Regrettably, others only pay lip service or default to more conventional teacher centred practice after a short period. Long term sustainable change which will deliver effective outcomes is still frustratingly elusive...but it has been only one year. The quest goes on (p.25).

Other schools were more emphatic that they had challenged orthodoxies in their practice – especially those introducing productive pedagogies. For many teachers and many schools, the Program was a powerful stimulus to change. The shift from strategies based on addressing student welfare issues to strategies addressing student engagement was a powerful and transformative shift of perspective.

Still, the views of the principal of HS13 are probably an apposite observation about the evolutionary rather than revolutionary character of the changes that took place in many PASP schools. Many PASP schools were able to use the resources and support provided by the Program to make changes that would bring them in line with ideas already quite well-known elsewhere in the system – but given the difficult circumstances of schools in communities with deep needs, they had not previously had the resources to implement them. The Program did provide support that allowed a number of schools to cross a critical threshold of change – from being held in place in established practices and ways of working by the demands of their situation to being able to explore and investigate alternatives, even if the alternatives are not particularly innovative or unique in themselves.

The anthropologist W E H Stanner, in White Man Got No Dreaming, tried to answer the question of why, in the 1920s and ‘30s, so many Aboriginal people moved to the margins of country towns in Australia without moving right into the towns. Why did they stop at the margins? It was, he thought, because to come further would have meant these people had to un-become who they were to go further – they would have to become people who they were not – non-Indigenous people.

The same might be said about teachers changing in Australian schools – to take some kinds of initiatives and to adopt some new practices means that they have to “un-become” the teachers they are, and sometimes have been for many years. The PASP made it possible for many teachers to explore new ways of working, and new forms of pedagogy, because they could do so as a whole school, committed to whole school change in the interests of their students. They had enhanced resources and support, but also the kind of solidarity that makes collegial change possible. This ‘permission’ to change, and the commitment to collaborative school
learning that went with it, was one of the most important things that PASP gave participating schools.

### 7.4 Leadership, taking risks

The development of leadership capability has been a major challenge for the Priority Actions Schools Project. In many schools, facing very difficult and challenging circumstances, those occupying leadership positions are doing so for the first time. We earlier cited the case of HS9, located in an isolated rural area of NSW. It is an organisation in transition, bringing together the cultures of two former secondary schools in the area. One of the previous schools had a history of leadership instability.

In the period from 1997 – 2001 the school had a series of relieving Principals, Deputy Principals and Head Teachers. The initial year of the [school], 2002, was the first time that the … Site (catering for students Years 7 – 10) had the same Senior Executive for the entire year. … The majority of the [school] Executive are in their first promotion at that level and have less than five years in their current position. (HS9 Portfolio, p. 2)

New executive members, in situations such as these, are struggling to establish themselves as leaders in whom the staff and students may have confidence at the same time as they are meeting the need to maintain the school, or department, as a well functioning organisation. Furthermore, as leaders in a reform program they are also concerned with leading in a context of change, in particular changing beliefs about pedagogy and student engagement. This requires leaders to distinguish consciously between acts of management and acts of leadership and to clarify for themselves, and those around them, what their order of priority might be.

Leadership can be thought of as walking a tightrope between meeting individual and organisational needs. Leaders in PASP schools can be seen as risk takers as they attempt to build the internal capacity of the school, at the same time recognising the need for teachers and students alike to “unlearn” some of their previous ways of behaving and interacting with each other. They need to be able to read and interpret an educational landscape that is highly mutable. Unlike schools in very stable environments schools’ portfolio reports indicate that PASP schools are often volatile and demanding places in which to work. As Scott (2003) so poignantly put it:

… if leaders cannot remain calm when things go awry or are unable to work constructively with staff then, no matter how intelligent they may be or how much they may know, they will not be able to productively resolve the situations. Equally, however, simply remaining calm and being responsive is not enough. Leaders must have the where-with-all to accurately ‘read’ the total human and technical components of the situation and, with the assistance of well-developed networks, accurately figure out what really lies behind it if a productive solution to the situation is to be identified and implemented. (p.5)

Those in nominated leadership positions in PASP schools have been selected on the basis of their skills, knowledge and ability. They need significant reservoirs of
both professional and social capital. By that we mean that they must have accumulated deep knowledge about their practice and high levels of “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1996, 1999) in order to communicate sympathetically and effectively with those around them in the terms outlined by Scott above. Goleman (1999) describes emotional intelligence (EQ) as “the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in ourselves and our relationships”. (p.317) As we have recognised, throughout this report, there can be no question that PASP schools make significant demands upon the emotions of those who work in them. Teaching involves emotional labour. “It cannot be reduced to technical competences or clinical standards alone” (Hargreaves, 1998, p.330).

Leaders in PASP schools also need to motivate their colleagues and their students on the basis that improvement is possible. In effect they need to be able to reconstruct their schools as “Intelligent Schools”. Such schools are ones that have the ability “to apply the collective knowledge and skills that have the maximum effect in classrooms and across the schools as a whole” (MacGilchirt, Myers and Reed, 2003, p.3).

It is clear from the many sources of data available to the meta-evaluators that leadership, in a number of sites, has not been confined to those in nominated leadership positions. In some cases leadership has not only been widely distributed between staff who have taken on important consultancy and mentoring roles, but also been enacted by students as they, in turn, have counselled and supported their peers.

Distributed, or ‘dispersed’ leadership suggests a school culture where leadership is exercised by different participants in the organisation and at different points in its arrangements. Sergiovanni (2001) has used the terminology ‘density of leadership’ which he sees as a measure of how far leadership extends within a school. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) refer to a similar concept in their descriptions of ‘leader-rich’ cultures. However defined, it is clear that much is to be gained from the notion that leadership is shared within a community of practice; that leadership may pass from one person or one group to another, depending upon the task in hand. Many examples of such a culture were to be found in the portfolios. To select but one, HS19, it is worthwhile looking at the ways in which leadership dispersal has been characterised by the school:

Valuing learning, leadership dispersal and ownership of responsibility for one’s actions are the key elements of the school’s philosophy. The focus is on learning and leadership of learning at various sites across the whole school community (HS19 Portfolio, p.4)

The formation of professional learning teams at the school ensured that teachers’ and students’ academic and social outcomes could best be nurtured by an organisational structure that recognised that given leadership opportunities people will behave ethically and with integrity (Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2002).

PS14 is another example of one that subscribes to the notion of distributed leadership. Located in western Sydney the school is a participant in the IDEAS
Project\textsuperscript{13} which embraces the notion of the school as a community in which parallel leadership may be exercised in order for it to grow and flourish.

Thus it may be seen that new cultures of learning centred leadership are emerging in PASP schools. But it is not appropriate to be sanguine about these developments. There are professional and industrial issues at stake. If leadership is to be organisation wide, who will be acknowledged and financially rewarded as the school’s leaders? How can nominated leaders be supported in undertaking their management responsibilities while at the same time providing scope and space for their staff to flourish as leaders? These questions could well provide part of the research agenda for the next iteration of the PASP. For as Frost (2003) has advocated:

> If it is true that teacher leadership’s time has come, then it is also true to say that the time has come for some substantial research into teacher leadership that will inform emerging policy and practice (p.15).

### 7.5 Staffing

Closely associated with issues surrounding distributed leadership is the matter of staffing in PASP schools. As was strongly evidenced in Section 5.4 of this report, a number of variations have been made in staffing arrangements. There has been greater flexibility and differentiation in the ways in which executive staff have been appointed ‘above establishment’ and the roles that they have been required to undertake. As well, there has been a burgeoning of appointments involving counselling, consultancy and community liaison.

While, in the interests of equity, a very large employing authority, such as the NSW Department of Education and Training needs to maintain some kind of general formula for staffing its schools it is also clear that in the interests of social justice some schools, such as those in the PASP, have special requirements that need to be met. All PASP schools are also Priority Schools Funding Program Schools. As such, they are benefited by a small variation in the State’s staffing formula, but this is clearly not sufficient to meet the challenges and demands of schools in such difficult circumstances.

A level of local autonomy has been most important to PASP schools. But they have been also subject to the due processes of general staffing arrangements as conducted by the staffing branch of the DET. This has resulted, from time to time, in some frustration. In its discussions with the DET, prior to the PASP’s enactment, the NSW Teachers’ Federation advocated a process of “case management” for meeting special provisions (NSW TF, 2002, p.5). However, it would appear that on occasion this has either not been recognised, or not been possible. An example is to be found in the difficulties that HS7 experienced in appointing a PASP counsellor (see section 5.4). The requirement for the appointee...

---

\textsuperscript{13} IDEAS initiating, discovering, envisioning, actioning, sustaining. A project for schools’ renewal developed through a four year alliance between the University of Southern Queensland’s Leadership Research Institute and Education Queensland, currently being trialled nationally.
to undertake a counselling practicum in a primary school, rather than under supervision at the school led eventually to a breakdown in the appointment and subsequent difficulties in the role for the incoming counsellor.

Staffing issues surrounding casual relief have generally been sensitively handled. In a context of the difficulty in finding appropriate casual relief to enable PASP teams, mentors and within-school-consultants to go about their work an interesting staffing solution has been to make appointments so that in-built casual relief is available. This was clearly demonstrated in the portfolio of HS23 where the absence of any kind of qualified persons available in the local area was particularly notable. However, the process has raised other kinds of challenges. During her visit to PS13, one meta-evaluator had a discussion with the executive that indicated that their in-built casual relief appointment had been drawn from their existing pool of casual teachers whom they had called upon from time to time. They and she found that she required a considerable degree of support as she moved from a role that involved her occasional attendance at the school to one where she was more fully embedded and required to know a great deal more about both the school’s and the DET’s policies and practices.

Unquestionably most PASP schools have sought to establish a stable and safe learning environment for their students and their staff. This has produced significant staffing dilemmas. As indicated in Chapter 5, staff turnover threatens the ability of the school to build authentic communities of practice. Clearly it is not in any party’s interest to hold unwilling staff in an environment that requires their fullest commitment. However, it is essential that there is a recognition of the need to make that commitment by staff prior to their appointment. It may be necessary to re-think how appointments are made to schools with deep needs, with greater local consultation regarding the nature of the school and its community.

7.6 New forms of accountability

An amount of $16.1 million dollars was provided for the first year of the Priority Action Schools Program in 2003. This funding was distributed to provide resources to maximise educational outcomes, including teacher learning outcomes, and improve student performance. Schools participating in the Program received between $100,000 and $400,000. Schools have quite properly been required to be accountable for the ways in which they have used this funding as a means of achieving the Program’s objectives.

We have spelled out, in great detail, in Chapters 3 and 4 of this report, the processes that schools have undertaken in order to document their achievements. Our wish here is to emphasise that this has required a very different form of accountability than normally is the case for government schools. Every government school in NSW tables an annual report that fits a carefully planned template that meets bureaucratic rather than professional needs. It supposes a relatively strong hierarchical model of school management and development. The maintenance of an evidence based school learning portfolio has been challenging.
and demanding for schools, but has enabled them to systematically reflect upon the contexts for learning as well as the actions and outcomes of a change program.

In effect, schools have been asked to engage in what Groundwater-Smith & Sachs (2002) have called “activist professionalism”.

An activist professional is emerging in response to and perhaps in reaction against managerialism. Such a practitioner draws for inspiration and momentum from the work of people in the broad democratically based enterprises which hold the best interests of the clientele at heart in recognition that needs vary, are contextualised and require careful and thoughtful decision making (p.352).

We have emphasised throughout the report the notion that the PASP has simultaneously provided pressure and support. This has nowhere been more evident than in its accountability requirements. There has been considerable pressure on schools to develop well informed portrayals of practice; at the same time, through the various partnership mechanisms, there have also been high levels of support.

### 7.7 The PASP as a reform program

To suggest that PASP schools’ considerable focus on teaching and learning is a reform seems somewhat strange, given that this is the core business of all schools. However, what makes this focus a reform is that it has required a shift in schools’ priorities from spreading themselves thinly across a number of initiatives, especially those in the areas of welfare and behaviour management to one that attends primarily to what happens in classrooms. As Harris, Chapman & Mujis (2002) have argued:

Schools that find themselves in difficulty can be subject to a wide range of external interventions that can compete for time, energy and resource. The demands of numerous initiatives can prove to be counter-productive in securing school improvement, particularly in schools where there are additional problems of social disadvantage. One way of rationalising and focusing improvement efforts is to locate them strictly in the area of teaching and learning. A clear focus on a limited number of goals has been identified as an important contributory factor to effective schools (p.5).

A number of schools specifically recognised this imperative in their portfolio reports:

… quality programs, such as PASP, need a high degree of concentrated attention from staff who are already operating in an environment that is robust and involves multiple agendas. To ensure that there is a clear focus on the common goal it is often necessary to decline offers of various programs that would if taken up distract and overload staff to the detriment of the main program (HS27 Portfolio, p.43).

It is abundantly clear that PASP schools continue to attend to behaviour management issues. However, it is also clear that the great majority of them are now asking themselves serious questions about classroom pedagogy that can lead to improvements in teaching and learning. As Chapter 5 illustrates, there has been a great deal of attention paid in schools to notions of improved pedagogical
practices leading to increased student engagement. Dewey (1974) has long reminded us that the most that the strictly authoritarian school can achieve is an appearance of student orderliness and very likely a significant alienation from the school and its purposes. In his very considerable treatise on school discipline Arum (2003) argues that perceptions of fairness directly impact upon student engagement in their learning; far more so than the administration of direct disciplinary sanctions. He goes on to argue that schools acting as society’s agents are central to matters of moral authority and legitimacy. Students best internalise what is required of them as productive and engaged citizens when they are in contexts that model, guide and respect them as capable human beings.

So: PASP schools undertook some very substantial kinds of school transformation work in their efforts as part of the Program in 2003. According to the principle of ‘local solutions’, each was to some extent re-inventing itself in its own terms, within the objectives and the guidelines for the Program as a whole. The Program was a kind of vote of confidence in the capacity of schools to change – even sometimes overstretched schools in communities with deep needs. Many schools experienced this vote of confidence as a refreshing change, and particularly valued the sense of partnership they developed with the state PASP team as advisors and advocates for them in the Department.

The Program as a whole is a reform program in another sense, too. Unlike other support programs (including the Priority Schools Program and the Country Areas program), it is delivers a substantial amount of funding to schools in communities in deep needs, to give them resources to make substantial changes. It did so on a principle of “pressure and support” as one member of the state PASP team put it, but it was rigorously outcomes-oriented, committed to school capacity- and knowledge building, and thoroughly imbued with the conviction that it was and is possible to “make a difference” to learning outcomes for students in communities with deep needs.

It is right to think of the Program as a qualitatively different kind of Program from other equity programs. It is focused on a smaller group of schools, in communities with deep needs, and sometimes on schools that have deep needs as organisations. It was a courageous initiative, spurred by the conviction that whole-of-government approaches were needed to address the needs these schools and their communities experienced. It was initiated as the NSW DET contribution to addressing these needs.

It was a reform program in another sense, too. The NSW Teachers’ Federation saw it as a new kind of initiative, based on collaboration between the union and the Department in the service of public education in NSW. Through the Program, a number of industrial possibilities might be explored – like the question of differential (and/or more flexible) staffing for schools in communities with deep needs. It would permit exploration of relatively atypical forms of transfers of staff, the use of additional specialist staff, appointment of staff to newly created positions of Deputy and Assistant Principal, and the like. It would thus be a learning program for the Department and the union, allowing both to explore issues on which strongly established and strongly held positions had been reached in
industrial negotiations over the years. Seen in this way, the Program has permitted a great deal of learning about staffing and staffing conditions in “hard to staff” schools in communities with deep needs.

The learning possible through the Program was conceived as a one-off experiment to last for one or two years only. The Program was established as an opportunity to explore local solutions and the potential of differential staffing within a very limited time frame. It was also a high stakes program, since it was necessary for schools to show improvements in a short time, despite their considerable challenges and the enduring challenges confronted by their communities.

One of the academic partners for one of the PASP schools, invited to comment on the PASP as a program, gave an insightful commentary about the problems facing a short term, high stakes program like PASP.

The conceptualisation of the PASP is in some ways a creature of our political and bureaucratic processes (I’m saying this with my experience as a management development consultant to the NSW Public Sector for the past 12 years). On the positive side it ensures that monies are made available for initiatives that are seen as being public priorities. On the negative, these initiatives have political overtones. The PASP is undeniably worthwhile, yet it has only come into being as the government needs to quickly demonstrate that it is working to overcome areas of community education concern.

As such the PASP needs ‘runs on the board’ quickly, so as to meet the needs of both the community and the government. All of this is fair enough. However the Public Sector agency charged with facilitating the needs of government and the community has to be able to respond in an appropriate and timely fashion. The development of the relationships and skills necessary to achieve the desired outcomes are things that take time to learn. Yet the pressure is on to get results ASAP.

Even if the DET has the ability to pull together a project like PASP there is an assumption that the schools and their academic partners are able to all respond instantaneously to do wonderful things. These capabilities in both the schools and the academy needs to be developed in an ongoing fashion that recognises the value of this kind of work in developing organisational capability and resilience so that when issues are identified that people and systems are able to respond quickly and successfully.

The novelty of this kind of work is at the heart of the [school’s] issues with the PASP. The school and the teachers were ‘drafted’ into the PASP, albeit willingly as they were attracted by the opportunity and the resources. Yet they have really struggled to come to terms with what the PASP means both to DET, and to their school community. They are working to overcome these struggles but it has been a real challenge as they have felt quite professionally exposed and uncertain for the first six months of the project. (I feel sure the same would be true for many of the academic partners.)

This is being addressed but at the same time the behaviours and attitudes necessary to sustain the changes introduced are still being formed. For example: the feeling that the portfolio wasn’t that important and should only be done to guarantee funding for 2004 was felt by some staff, and the somewhat directive nature of the 2004 school/PASP planning processes only reinforce my views that it takes ongoing efforts over many years (3-5) to deeply establish collaborative and reflective work organisations as normal in the professional lives of school communities.

Unfortunately, we presume that a project over a finite time will ‘fix’ the situation, and the reality is often just as people and systems are being used to working in a new
and improved way the support and resources are reduced/removed before we can be sure that innovations are sustainable.

As you will find in the [school’s] portfolio some excellent things have been undertaken and achieved, yet the project objectives and achievements, the different way of conceptualising teacher’s work and the role of the academic friend are developing, yet remain fragile in terms of impacting upon and improving the learning outcomes for students (Academic partner’s emailed response to questions form the meta-evaluators).

Judged against the Program’s objectives, the Priority Action Schools Program has produced gains in student learning outcomes and in teacher professional development in a remarkably short time. It has been relatively well resourced by comparison with other change programs in Australian schools, but its achievements have been generated by the very substantial efforts of schools, teachers and school communities that have redoubled their efforts to justify the faith put in them by government and the Department. They have felt they were “under the microscope” – and they have certainly experienced both the pressure and the support from the Program and the state PASP team.

It is doubtful that the gains achieved by schools can be sustained and secured without reinforcement in 2004, but PASP schools made considerable strides towards changed ways of working in 2003. How to secure the transformation – the reform – initiated in 2003 for the long term is the question to which we now turn.

7.8 Sustainability and capacity-building

Throughout their engagement with both the PASP team and the participating schools it has been proposed to the meta-evaluators that the Program is a platform for change, but that it should not be seen as a fixed long term strategy. Schools have been expected to imagine a future where the funding will no longer be available to them and put into place solutions that will be self sustaining when funding ceases. This has required them to pay attention to building capacity among staff. This is no easy matter, given the issue of staff mobility that was referred to earlier in this chapter and in ones preceding it. Thus, sustainability and capacity building must be factored into the culture of the school itself, such that as both teachers and students move on there is a legacy of expectations of “how things will be done”.

Important to the notion of sustainability and capacity building in PASP schools has been the requirement to engage with academic partners (see section 6.2) to develop systematic inquiries on which to base ongoing improvement and development. If these are to be more than ad hoc arrangements then it will be important that schools and universities continue to grow and nurture the relationship. Already, there is evidence that some collectives, such as School Action in Liverpool (SAIL) with its connection to the University of Western Sydney, and a number of schools linked to the productive pedagogies teams at Newcastle University and the University of Technology, Sydney, are foreshadowing longer term associations. As McLaughlin (2003) notes, the facilitation and development of inquiry based learning
communities involves both the support of the research activity and the building of connections across communities allowing not only for the sharing of ideas, but also to subject the inquiries to commentary and critique.

Concerns for sustainability and capacity building are not confined to the participating PASP schools. The NSW DET and the NSW Teachers’ Federation also are facing the need to continue to attend to the central tenets of the Program after its cessation. It is a modest belief of the meta-evaluators that they have contributed to the learning of both of these organisations through their role as critical friends to the Program, providing both theoretical and practical resources.

References


MacGilchrist, B., Myers, K. & Reed, J. The Intelligences of the Intelligent School, Paper presented to the 16th International Conference of School Effectiveness and Improvement. Sydney, Darling Harbour, 5th – 8th January


www.jss.org.au/media/pdfs/black_hole_address.pdf

Accessed February 23, 2003