Recommendations

What should now be done

This chapter presents thirteen recommendations arising from the findings of the meta-evaluation study. They respond to a number of major questions, concerns and issues put to the meta-evaluators in the course of the study. They are:

1. Should the Priority Action Schools Program be continued beyond 2004?

2. If the Program continues, at what level should schools be funded, and for how long?

3. If the Program continues, how should it be managed by the NSW Department of Education and Training? Should it continue as a high-visibility program administered under the immediate guidance of the most senior officers of the Department, or should it now be regarded as a more routine part of the Department’s operations (for example, as one among a number of equity programs administered by the Department)?

4. Should the Program continue with the policy of supporting schools in developing local solutions to the problems they perceive in their own local contexts, and should it continue to be conceptualised as a learning program rather than as a program that aims to implement the best of what has already been learned from the experience of schools in 2003?

5. Should the Program deliver simply differential staffing to schools in communities with deep needs (that is, be provided with additional staff), or should the schools simply be encouraged or permitted to use staff more flexibly to meet their local needs? Or should the Program be based on a combination of differential and flexible staffing?

6. What can be done to improve the stability of staffing in schools participating in the Program, especially those that are difficult to staff – and, more generally, schools in communities with deep needs?

7. If the Program is continued, should the Program require that schools continue to keep school learning portfolios to document their work, and produce portfolio reports at the end of each year to inform the Department and other schools about what they have done? Should the purpose of such reports be principally accountability for funds
expended, or to document the knowledge schools have generated through their work – for the schools themselves, for other schools, for the Department, for academic partners working with PASP schools, and for other audiences?

8. Should the Program continue to require PASP schools to work with academic partners, or can it be assumed that academic partners have already served their purpose and are no longer needed to advise schools on how to conduct self-evaluations through action inquiry, and how to document and report on their work?

9. On the basis of experience in the Program in 2003, what kinds of practices should the Program support in its pursuit of improved learning outcomes for students and improved professional development for teachers?

10. To what extent should the Program support school development strategies aimed at improving students’ behaviour in schools and classrooms (as a precondition for learning), and to what extent should it be seeking changed pedagogies – changed approaches to teaching and learning in schools? To what extent should the focus of schools’ be improved approaches to student welfare and well-being, and to what extent should the focus be pedagogies aimed at improving student engagement in learning?

11. Should the Program continue to fund mentoring as a strategy for professional development in schools – especially since funding for mentoring may be available through other initiatives of the Department?

12. Should schools in communities with deep needs focus more or less exclusively on transformation of what is done within the school, or should they also focus on interagency work and community development and capacity-building?

13. Should this report be regarded as fulfilling the need for accountability of schools to the Program, and used principally as an internal report to inform decisions about the future of the Program, or should it be published by the Department and circulated to participating schools, academic partners who worked with schools, other NSW DET schools, or other audiences?

In the judgement of the meta-evaluators, the recommendations we have made here are well-justified and reasonable responses to the questions proposed above, and entirely feasible of implementation without significant additional cost or effort.
Recommendation 1

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

The Priority Action Schools Program has been designed to serve the requirements of schools with “deep needs”. These include needs revealed by substantially lower levels of learning outcomes achieved by students, and needs revealed by lower than average rates of school attendance, retention and other indicators of student well-being and welfare (see Recommendation 8).

The causes of these deep needs vary. On the one hand, many schools in the Program must address needs their students bring to the school as a consequence of their family and community circumstances. These include needs related to the socio-economic circumstances of the families and communities served by the school, together with family and community health, housing, welfare, and justice and policing issues. On the other hand, some schools have needs with sources within the school as an organisation. For example, some have a high proportion of new and inexperienced teachers, and face a variety of staffing instabilities. Some have either or both significant numbers of new, relatively inexperienced staff and numbers of staff nearing the end of their careers. Some are in need of systematic professional development and renewal for teachers and/or members of their leadership and executive staff.

Such schools will continue to exist, both because of the distribution of disadvantage in Australian society, and its concentration in particular communities, and because of the different capacities of schools, as organisations, to evolve and develop in relation to changing circumstances of staffing, changes in preferred pedagogies, and changes in preferred modes of organisational development and leadership. Since schools in these circumstances will continue to exist, explicit provision should be made for them. It should nevertheless be acknowledged that, to the extent that this provision is effective in helping schools respond to their deep needs, especially those whose sources are within the school as an organisation rather than in the communities they serve, the number of schools involved in such a program may and should decrease.

Inclusion in the program should require both identification by appropriate criteria (see Recommendation 4) and carefully developed and guided submissions by the nominated schools. In general, the criteria and submission processes adopted during the first two years of the Priority Action Schools Program were appropriate and effective in helping schools to make targeted responses to the needs and circumstances of their students and their students’ families, and to the professional needs and circumstances of their staff and staffing. While these selection criteria and submission processes could be a little further refined and developed in the light of the experienced reported in this meta-evaluation study, in general they should be retained as the basis for proceeding with the Program in future years.
Recommendation 2

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

The level of funding received by schools varied according to the size of the school, between $100,000 and about $400,000 in 2003. Many of the schools funded by the Program were also in receipt of funds from other support programs (for example, the Priority Funding Schools program, the Country Areas Program, the NSW DET Mentoring initiative). It is clear from the evidence reviewed in this meta-evaluation that these levels of funding from the Priority Action School Program were sufficient for schools to make substantial and, in most cases, appropriate responses to their deep needs. Since changes of this extent and appropriateness were not observed on the basis of the schools’ ordinary operating funding supplemented by the funding and support received from these other programs, it is reasonable to conclude that it was the funding and the support they received from the Priority Action Schools Program that enabled them to “make a difference” in the learning outcomes achieved by students, in attendance and retention, and on other indicators of student welfare and well-being. This being so, we conclude that the level of funding offered to schools from the Priority Action Schools Program in their first year of funding should remain at about the levels applied in 2003.

The experience of the Program from 2002 to 2003 suggests that it is unrealistic to expect substantial change to be both achieved and made sustainable in a single year in schools with deep needs. Some schools did produce sustainable change in one year, but it is likely that, even in these schools, the level of sustainability would have been compromised if the funding had been withdrawn abruptly. Early reports from schools continuing in the Program in 2004 with about 90% of the value of funding received in 2003 (down by about 12%) suggest that this incremental decrease in funding will not present insuperable difficulties and may in fact help to secure sustainable change in their modes of operation. We thus conclude that funding should be available to schools from the Program for at least two years. In the case of some schools with deep needs, we also recognise that achieving sustainable change will take longer than two years – especially since communities’ circumstances of poverty, health, housing, and welfare are unlikely to change in a two-year period to such an extent that the community could no longer be said to be in deep need. In such cases, it would be prudent to permit funding for at least a further (third) year.

The meta-evaluators are not of the view that funding should continue into a second or later year without reviewing the circumstances of a school and its community, or without consideration of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the school’s efforts to make changes in the ways they work. It would be prudent, therefore, to require continuing self-evaluation by schools with the support and advice of independent academic partners, as in 2003, so schools can provide end-
of-year school learning portfolio reports to the Program on the nature and efficacy of their efforts to change.

**Recommendation 3**

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

The success of the Priority Schools Action Program is, of course, a testament to the work and achievements of the schools principals, executives and staff who, together with students, parents and others, made the changes in schools’ ways of working that produced improved student learning outcomes, rates of attendance and retention, and improvements on other indicators of student welfare and well-being. At the same time, however, the achievements of the PASP are in no small measure attributable to the quality of the state team responsible for managing the Program.

As indicated elsewhere in this report, part of the success in the management of the Program was no doubt due to the particular experience, expertise, conviction and commitment of the members of the team. It is clear from the observations made by the meta-evaluators, and from the evidence presented by schools, that these particular people, in these particular roles, made a difference. The Program operated with a sense of drive and commitment to outcomes that reflected the deep belief of members of the team that a program like the PASP could make a difference for students and for teachers.

It is therefore reasonable to acknowledge that, to an extent, the achievements of the Program in 2003 might be regarded as person-dependent. But it is also reasonable to conclude that it was the location of the management of the Program in the NSW DET that contributed significantly to the Program’s achievements.

The state PASP team had good access to the most senior managers in the NSW DET, and the Program and the state team had the support of these senior managers. The directness of these contacts was undoubtedly critical in galvanising the Department across administrative areas (for example, to secure the very active cooperation of the Schools Staffing Unit), in securing the relationships of the state team with District Superintendents, and in securing relationships with schools. The Program was highly visible, politically and organisationally. It proceeded not so much with a sense of urgency, if that implies haste alone, but also a sense of conviction that it could take significant steps towards the achievement of genuine
improvements for students and schools in challenging circumstances. It proceeded
with a sense of purpose, continuously monitoring progress towards its objectives in
a critical and self-critical manner. Because it was rigorous in self-monitoring, and
therefore always able to tell the story of the Program’s unfolding achievements
against a backdrop of challenging circumstances, the team appears to have earned
the trust of senior officers of the Department.

This level of access to, contact with, and trust from officers reporting directly to
the Director-General or a Deputy Director General is probably crucial for a
Program working to produce substantial change in seventy-four NSW schools with
the deepest needs, in some of the most challenging circumstances in the State. It is
probably crucial also because the individual, collective and political consequences
of not working highly effectively with these schools are great for the students
involved, their families, and for the teachers, school executives, school principals
and district/regional staff supporting them, and for the Department centrally.
Moreover, the Program arose from a need for cross-portfolio cooperation in
addressing the deep needs of these communities and their schools, and it
represents a continuing commitment by the Department to working in cooperation
with other portfolios in the interests of these children and young people and their
families and communities. Locating the management of the Program in ways that
secure this level of access to, contact with and trust from the most senior officers
of the Department is probably also crucial to ensuring its contribution to these
cross-Departmental objectives for families and communities with these deep needs.

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that, while the role of School Superintendent
no longer stands within the NSW DET’s organisational restructure, it is critical that
a person in a position of equivalent or greater status is allocated to lead the team
and that the team is one that is as capable and knowledgeable as the one that has
led the program for the greater part of 2002 – 2003. In view of the importance of
the cooperation achieved between the NSW DET and the NSW Teachers’
Federation in the operation of the Program, it also seems reasonable to conclude
that there should continue to be a representative of the Federation, in a fractional
appointment in the State PASP team, to assist with managing the professional-
industrial interface.

It is also reasonable to conclude that a central function of the management team
should continue to be the selection of schools to participate in the Program, using
open and transparent processes, and the provision of ongoing and high quality
advice and feedback to schools and the Department about the extent to which
participating schools are making progress towards attaining the objectives of the
Program. It also seems desirable that one member of the team be charged with the
particular responsibility of connecting to the wide range of State community
initiatives aimed at families and young people (see Recommendation 12).
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Recommendation 4

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

Through their learning portfolios, most PASP schools have demonstrated that they are well able to identify what their needs are in their particular circumstances, and that they have been able to develop appropriate and innovative solutions to the problems they experience in these circumstances. While a small minority have been less successful, it is clear that with continuing intense support these schools will be able to capitalise on their learning and thus design approaches and strategies that will meet their needs.

Knowledge about the Program should be disseminated widely. The wider educational community can learn much from the experience of PASP schools about the desirability and the viability of developing local solutions to local problems. Arguably, PASP is a learning program on behalf of NSW public education in general, demonstrating a variety of ways in which schools can be and become more responsive to local needs and circumstances.

Sometimes, observers of the Priority Action Schools Program have expressed a well-founded anxiety that PASP schools will be perceived not as schools working in communities with deep needs, and therefore facing challenging circumstances, but as “failing schools”. The experience of the Program in 2003 demonstrates that, contrary to this negative image, most PASP schools are schools rising to meet considerable challenges with the help of the resources and support the Program has provided. The achievements of these PASP schools and the efforts of those working in and with them deserve to be more widely understood and appreciated.

Recommendation 5

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

PASP schools have adopted a range of staffing approaches that have stood outside normal arrangements, both in terms of the number and allocation of staff to various roles and responsibilities. Critical to the success of the appointment and re-allocation of staff has been the assistance provided through case management of the School Staffing Unit and the support of the NSW Teachers’ Federation. This should continue. As well, schools should continue to be advised by the management team regarding the potential impact of their decisions on other staffing arrangements in the local area.

In the course of this study of the Program, the meta-evaluators heard arguments that schools facing the degree of challenge faced by PASP schools should have staffing at levels above those for other NSW DET schools. This is the argument...
for *differential staffing* of these schools. In effect, funding from the Program delivered differential staffing to PASP schools, since most of the funds made available were expended on additional staff.

The argument was also put that schools in challenging circumstances should be able to use all of the funding for staff available to them – from the Priority Action Schools Program and from other sources – more flexibly to produce patterns of staffing more appropriate to local needs. This is the argument for more *flexible staffing* of these schools.

It is perfectly clear from the evidence of the operation of schools in the Program in 2003 that the improved learning outcomes for students and teachers achieved through the Program were a result of the combined effect of *both differential and flexible staffing*. Given additional staffing resources, schools were able to identify how best to deploy them to meet specific needs in their particular circumstances – participation in the Program had delivered differential staffing. They were then able to consider how best to deploy all of the staff – existing and additional staff – across all of their operations, to best meet local needs – participation in the Program had delivered a realisable opportunity to deploy staff more flexibly.

It is reasonable to conclude that providing additional staff to schools in the circumstances faced by PASP schools would not necessarily meet their needs on a continuing basis, unless schools have the flexibility to deploy these additional staff strategically in relation to specific activities likely to produce enhanced learning outcomes for students.

As shown in Chapter 5 of this report, different kinds of additional staff were used in different ways in PASP schools. Some schools simply reduced class sizes by the use of additional staff; by itself, this did not produce particularly powerful effects in the improvement of student learning outcomes. Many added particular kinds of specialist staff to meet particular learning needs of particular groups – primary teachers helping to develop the literacy and numeracy skills of early secondary students with lower levels of development in these areas, for example, or information technology teachers to assist students to use computers in school. Other schools added specialist counsellors or social workers to help meet the needs of specific groups of students in the areas of student welfare and well-being. Others used the appointment of additional staff to create specialist positions in family and community liaison to assist with school attendance and retention for specific groups of students. Others created new executive positions of Deputy or Assistant Principal by appointing additional classroom teachers to replace the teachers transferred or promoted into executive positions. The greatest effects in improved learning outcomes were achieved

(1) when schools conceptualised the whole staff as a single team to be deployed strategically to meet the learning needs of students across the school as a whole, but particularly to meet the needs of students in the most difficult circumstances, and with the lowest rates of school attendance, retention and achievement, and
(2) when the whole school team embarked on programs of training and development supporting a whole-school process of change to pedagogy, teacher judgement, and assessment, and to student welfare, with the aim of clarifying, refining and enhancing the productiveness of teaching in terms of improved learning outcomes for students, especially those students who had previously been most disengaged from learning.

On the evidence of the Program in 2003, it is reasonable to conclude that achieving improvements in student learning outcomes for students in need, and improvements in professional capacity and practice for staff working with these students, requires both differential and flexible staffing of schools in communities with deep needs.

**Recommendation 6**

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

While it is recognised that the NSW DET, as an employing authority, has a responsibility to meet the requirements of its school staff for access to promotion, mobility and long service leave entitlements, the needs of students for a stable learning environment must also be recognised, especially in schools in communities with deep needs like those participating in the Priority Action Schools Program. Many PASP schools have been “hard to staff” for a variety of reasons including school or community reputation, changing demographics (producing increases or decreases in enrolment), and the recent history of professional development and morale in particular schools. These features produce circumstances in which it has sometimes been difficult to attract new and experienced staff to particular schools, and, in some cases, a concentration of older teachers with entitlements to long service leave that may impact on the stability of staffing in their schools. Some PASP schools also have experienced staff who are transferred to other duties and promotional opportunities at various times throughout the year. Some PASP schools also have great difficulty attracting and retaining casual relief staff able to assist when permanent staff are absent on sick leave – though it appears that in some PASP schools in communities with deep needs, the rate of teacher absences decreased under the improved staffing conditions made possible by the Program. Many schools in communities with deep needs thus experience various kinds of instabilities in staffing throughout the year. In view of the impact these instabilities can have on the continuity of learning conditions and opportunities for students, especially students with high needs, it seems reasonable to conclude that, to the greatest extent possible, changes to staffing in schools in communities with deep needs should be made at the end of the calendar year, and that, other than in cases of hardship, staff should remain in post in PASP schools for the calendar year.

A further issue related to stability in staffing is the procedure by which new staff appointed to “hard to staff” schools accrue additional transfer points as a kind of “bonus” for working in these schools. While this may help to attract staff to these schools, it creates long term instability if and when those appointed exercise the
option to transfer from the school. Some principals with long experience in schools in communities with deep needs indicated that this practice may remove from the school teachers who have undertaken professional development targeted to the particular needs of students in these communities, and whose experience is invaluable in teaching these students. Rewards for such staff to stay in these schools might thus be preferable to making transfer the reward for accepting appointment to them. The Department might be well-advised to consider instituting a system of access to promotion or other benefits within these schools for staff who demonstrate expertise and experience in meeting the needs of students in communities with deep needs.

**Recommendation 7**

The expectation of the Priority Action Schools Program that schools are knowledge creating organisations should be fully understood by all participating in the Program and should be demonstrated by continuing to require that participating schools develop school learning portfolios as a professional learning and accountability mechanism.

The development of school learning portfolios has been a critical means of PASP schools documenting their strategies and measuring the impact of those strategies on both student and staff learning outcomes (affective, cognitive and physical). The portfolios have not been merely celebratory, but have ensured careful documentation that has allowed schools and other observers to identify and analyse the effectiveness of chosen solutions to local problems. They have also enabled the meta-evaluators and the state PASP team to identify strategies that have been more effective than others. Schools in the Program, as well as other schools in communities with deep needs, have much to learn from the experience documented in the school learning portfolio reports. Schools should have the opportunity to modify or adapt the strategies they have chosen as local solutions to their perceived needs in the light of the knowledge harvested from the experience of the Program as a whole. The state PASP team will continue to have an important role in diffusing and disseminating this knowledge.

**Recommendation 8**

As a means of supporting PASP schools in their work it is essential that they have links to academic partners to advise and support them in their substantive enterprises and their evaluation strategies. A generic protocol that makes clear and explicit the role and remuneration of academic partners should be prepared to assist schools in making this appointment.

The experience of the Program in 2003 demonstrates that academic partners frequently played a crucial role in assisting schools in the development and implementation of the strategies schools chose in the effort to improve learning outcomes for students, and to enhance the professional development of staff. The advice of an independent ‘outsider’, with evaluation expertise, was crucial in assisting schools to demonstrate what they had learned through their work in the Program. Academic partners were often crucial in assisting schools to plan,
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conduct and report on sound evaluation activities that would permit schools to draw well-founded conclusions about the effectiveness of the strategies they chose as local solutions to local problems.

Given the diversity and difficulty of many of the challenges confronting schools in communities with deep needs, the advice of an independent academic partner was frequently a steadying and highly constructive influence in the work of PASP schools as knowledge building schools. Those schools who had the most extensive access to experienced and expert academic partners, and who chose to use them as an essential element of their work as part of the Program, produced the most comprehensive and systematic reports of their learnings through the Program. Schools that understood their knowledge-building evaluation activities as essential for their own self-reflection and learning, and as a basis for communication with others about their learning, produced the most insightful and substantial school learning portfolio reports. As indicated in Chapter 5 of this report, these schools were frequently ‘node schools’ that confidently and characteristically draw on a variety of sources of consultancy and advice to assist them in their work, and/or ‘network schools’ that participate actively in collaborative professional dialogue and learning with groups of other schools, usually but not only in their geographical region. In short, these are schools that plan for their own learning, approach it systematically, use advice to make their learning more effective and substantial, and reflect systematically – as individual knowledge building organisations and in dialogue with others – on what they have learned. Having an academic partner was one of the most powerful ways that schools could ensure that their learning processes were effectively managed and sustained.

The experience of PASP schools with academic partners in 2003 clearly suggests that the terms of engagement for academic partners should be flexible, recognising that different schools, at different times, will require different kinds of consultancy and evaluation support. The experience of the relationships between PASP schools and their academic partners, reported in Chapter 5 of this report, nevertheless suggests guidelines that could assist schools in choosing, paying and utilising the services of an academic partner in ways that can formalised and agreed, though also subject to renegotiation as the partnership proceeds.

Recommendation 9

The central concern for PASP schools should be a focus on transformative pedagogies that enhance learning outcomes for all students.

PASP schools, quite properly, have chosen a wide range of strategies for working more productively with their students. These include: class size reduction; the introduction of specific teaching programs in areas such as literacy, numeracy and ICT; the creation of specific purpose learning centres; and the like. However, it is changed pedagogical practices that lie at the heart of these solutions – the ways in
which teaching and learning engage with each other. On the basis of the overall experience of PASP schools in 2003, and especially the meta-evaluation findings about improved student learning outcomes presented in Chapter 5 of this report, it is reasonable to conclude that if schools’ pedagogical practices are not transformed it is less likely that other strategies will be as successful as hoped.

The overall experience of the Program suggests that pedagogical change in schools was the most powerful strategy leading to improved student outcomes. Strategies that enhanced student attendance and retention, or assisted in meeting needs in the areas of student welfare and well-being, helped to increase the opportunity to learn for students, but that changes to pedagogy were more influential in improving student outcomes.

A further learning was that PASP schools that made student classroom behaviour and welfare issues their prime concern frequently produced only marginal improvements in these areas, while schools that focussed in addition, or centrally, on pedagogical change frequently produced greater improvements in student classroom behaviour and indicators of student welfare and well-being.

Many PASP schools adopted some version of productive pedagogies as the platform for pedagogical change. Most that made concerted and consistent school-wide changes to adopt and strengthen productive pedagogies produced the greatest improvements in student learning outcomes. The NSW Department of Education and Training (2003) discussion paper Quality Teaching in NSW Schools provided many schools with the framework for adopting productive pedagogies. The Queensland Longitudinal School Reform Study notion of productive pedagogies and successor initiatives in Queensland also proved to be a powerful resource for many schools. The notion of productive pedagogies has proved to be a powerful source of professional development for schools, and a powerful influence in revitalising teaching and learning in the PASP schools that made quality teaching and productive pedagogies the focus of their PASP work.
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Recommendation 10

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

Crude behaviour management models may serve in the short term to pacify students but do little to encourage them to more productive learning outcomes. The experience of PASP schools in 2003 makes it clear that a number of students in PASP schools have significant needs in terms of boundary setting and maintaining a stable, settled learning environment. At the same time, however, for reasons discussed in relation to Recommendation 9, this school environment should be one governed by expectations that students can and will be successful learners, not just that they will behave in accordance with expectations of reasonable behaviour in the classroom and elsewhere in the school.

In some PASP schools, it appeared that some teachers had, over time, developed lower expectations of students, given that students in some communities served by the Program present at school as high needs students, and given the extent of needs in their families and communities. Of course the needs of these students, families and communities must be recognised. But evidence from the schools suggests that school was also seen by many students in need as a source of welcome stability and support in their lives. The evidence suggests that students achieve improved learning outcomes when their teachers have reasonable but high expectations of these students, and when they create learning conditions that allow students to experience encouragement, engagement and success.

Those schools that focussed their PASP strategies on the management of student behaviour frequently produced small improvements in schools attendance and retention, and on other indicators of student welfare and well-being, but there was more equivocal evidence that focussing on these strategies produced noticeable improvements in student learning outcomes. Conversely, PASP schools that focussed on improvements in pedagogy frequently reported not only improvements in student learning outcomes but also greater improvements in classroom and school behaviour and indicators of student welfare and well-being than the improvements noted in schools with these as their central focus. As 2003 progressed, there was a strengthening conviction across the Program that schools should move from a focus on student welfare to a focus on student engagement through improved pedagogy if they were to attain improved learning outcomes for students. Forms of pedagogy that engage students in learning more productively pre-empt some of the conditions that lead to inappropriate student behaviour in schools and classrooms – conditions of frustration, alienation from school and frustration and boredom in the classroom. On the evidence of the Program in 2003, it is reasonable to conclude that school change strategies that focus on student compliance without creating more engaging learning conditions seem doomed to fail both in terms of improved behaviour and in terms of improved learning outcomes.
Recommendation 11

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

PASP schools characteristically have a high proportion of new and beginning teachers and new and beginning executive staff. Some also have high numbers of staff reaching the end of their professional careers. The evidence of PASP in 2003 suggests that each group can be assisted by carefully designed mentoring processes that are not tied to performance appraisal.

Different PASP schools took different approaches to professional development for staff through mentoring.

- Some PASP schools provided mentoring only for new and inexperienced teachers; some provided it for all staff, in teaching and in executive roles.

- Some PASP schools linked mentoring to the supervision of staff (with supervisors acting as mentors); some provided mentoring outside the structure of supervision of teaching staff.

- Some PASP schools provided mentoring based on external ideas about what good teaching practice is; some involved staff in a collaborative exercise of developing the criteria by which they would evaluate and reflect on their teaching practice.

- Some PASP schools provided specialist mentoring by making this a major part of the work of one or a few senior staff; some provided it through a pairing or other ‘buddy’ system that made staff mentors for one another.

As a broad generalisation, it is reasonable to conclude that the latter approach in each of these pairs was the more successful. The evidence is more equivocal in relation to the last.

Creating and maintaining good practices and processes of mentoring takes skill and expertise. On the basis of the evidence of the Program in 2003, PASP schools should continue to be assisted in developing and maintaining sound mentoring strategies by within- and between-school training. Further consideration should also be given to the relationship between the Priority Action Schools Program and the NSW Department of Education and Training mentoring initiative (a relationship begun in the early days of the Program when the state PASP team consulted with the Mentoring initiative people and decided that PASP should also support mentoring in view of the number and needs of beginning teachers in PASP schools). Indeed, some PASP schools received support from the mentoring initiative as well as from the PASP. While not wanting to suggest that mentoring in PASP schools should be supported only through the mentoring initiative rather than as an integrated component of PASP, it would be useful for the state PASP
team to continue to consult with those managing the mentoring initiative to see how the knowledge being developed in each program could best be shared between them, and how resources could be most effectively used to support mentoring work in PASP schools.

**Recommendation 12**

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

The PASP had its genesis in a variety of encounters across a range of State initiatives directed towards providing assistance and support to communities with deep needs. While most schools have been aware of these initiatives and some have been active participants in them, it is still the case that there is not a great awareness of the potential for interagency cooperation. It would assist many PASP schools if they were able to attend a forum aimed at sharing information about the possibilities for interagency cooperation in communities with deep needs, and possibilities for community capacity building. Some PASP schools already participate in such forums at the local level, and some are participating in the NSW Building Better Futures initiative coordinated by the NSW Department of the Premier and Cabinet. In general, however, the evidence from the Program in 2003 suggested that interagency work and community development were underdeveloped aspects of the work of a number of PASP schools and their communities, and that a greater awareness of exemplary practice and possibilities in these areas could enhance the work of PASP schools in assisting young people in communities with deep needs.

**Recommendation 13**

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

Much of the body of this report has been drawn directly from the documentation provided by PASP schools. For this reason alone, it is imperative that the schools have access to its findings and recommendations.

Academic partners have also made a significant contribution to the Program, and to the evaluation efforts of schools that produced their reports. Not only can these academic partners learn much from the overall results reported here, but many would welcome the findings of the report as a guide to their future practice in providing evaluation advice and support to PASP schools and other schools.
Finally, the Program has a number of features that make it a model professional learning program and, therefore, one that can contribute to policy making in a number of areas, both in NSW and federally.

For these reasons of principle and utility, the meta-evaluators therefore believe this report must be provided to those whose work it represents (PASP schools and their academic partners), and that it should be made available those who can learn from the work of the Program.