

PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

Improving literacy and numeracy in NSW public schools

October 2008

About the audit

Literacy and numeracy skills are essential in life and today's global marketplace. The *NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan 2007* emphasises that students skilled in literacy and numeracy are more likely to stay at school, and as adults be more productive and earn higher wages. Improving students' literacy and numeracy can have a positive effect on their confidence, their ability to deal with every day tasks, as well as their lifelong learning and health.

During the last ten years the NSW Department of Education and Training has spent a significant amount to improve literacy and numeracy in NSW public schools. Since 1998-99 funding for literacy and numeracy programs has increased three-fold from \$53 million to \$154 million in 2006-07. This \$154 million in funding, which consists of \$50 million directed towards literacy and numeracy programs and \$104 million of equity program funding, is to be maintained over the next four years.

Our audit looks at whether the Department of Education and Training's processes to improve literacy and numeracy are likely to be successful.

Audit opinion

For many years, and particularly over the last decade, the Department of Education and Training has focused on building the capacity of teachers and schools to improve the levels of literacy and numeracy in NSW public schools.

During the course of the audit we were impressed by the dedication and efforts of teachers in NSW public schools, particularly when dealing with the needs of students with learning difficulties.

Although NSW schools perform well nationally and internationally, NSW has a high concentration of poor outcomes in some schools and some regions. Each year a group of between 5 and 15 per cent of children are at risk of not reaching the minimum level of achievement needed to progress at school. In this group, indigenous students are over represented.

We were impressed by the Department of Education and Training's continuing focus on improving the literacy and numeracy of NSW public school students and the extensive range of programs it has developed for this purpose.

Despite this, over the last decade State tests have shown little change in results for numeracy and literacy. We see a number of risks to the success of the Department's efforts. There is no systematic assessment of what resources and support are needed. The recent increased focus and support may be too diffuse to make a significant difference, particularly for the lowest performing group. The lowest performing group are likely to have the least experienced teachers. The available support may not reach all students 'at risk', particularly if they are not in designated *Priority* schools.

In our view, all children who are having difficulties, and who are at risk of failing, need:

- a full assessment and an individual learning plan for their improvement that can move from school to school
- access to resources and support based on their individual needs and disadvantage, not the school they happen to be enrolled in
- a continuing record of their performance and the support they have received, so teaching can be better tailored to their individual needs and their progress can be effectively tracked regardless of their location.



Further information

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Internet site: www.audit.nsw.gov.au

Key findings

Is there a need to improve literacy and numeracy?

Overall, around 85-90 per cent of NSW public school students exceed national minimum standards and NSW consistently exceeds the national average. However NSW, in common with other states, has a higher concentration of poorer results in some schools and some regions. In some areas one in five students are at or below the minimum level needed. Under-performance in literacy and numeracy may be associated with a range of factors such as a disability or learning difficulty, a language background other than English, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, low socio-economic background or geographical location.

Are the literacy and numeracy needs of each child assessed?

State or national test results and classroom assessments allow schools to identify individual students and groups of students who are at risk of not meeting literacy and numeracy expectations, and areas of the curriculum where there are weaknesses.

While we did not find any Departmental system that supported schools to consistently gather and record information about a student's achievements, the Department's planned new *Student Administration and Learning Management* system (SALM) should enable it to sharpen its focus on those individuals and groups of students 'at risk'.

Are there adequate programs to help those with literacy and numeracy learning needs?

Over the last decade the Department has developed an extensive range of programs to improve literacy and numeracy. However, the delivery of these programs is dependant on schools knowing what is needed, what is

available, what works best, whether funding is available, and the skills and ability of the classroom teacher. We see a need for more intensive scrutiny of how under-performing schools are using their resources, what changes are being made, and what impact they are having.

How does the Department know which programs are successful?

We found that although the Department was aiming at increased levels of achievement for all students in line with State Plan targets, and had set explicit targets for regions, not all schools had set such targets.

We found that the Department had conducted a number of general reviews, but it had not evaluated the efficiency and effectiveness of its programs on a regular basis, using studies of individuals over time to assess their specific impact on student learning.

We found little consideration in the Department's programs and plans of the impact of early childhood education on its efforts to improve literacy and numeracy.

Summary of recommendations

We recommend a series of measures to assist the Department:

- sharpen its focus on those individual students at risk
- more effectively target its limited resources and support to the needs of individuals
- more rigorously review its programs and the performance of low achieving schools.