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Progressing **Classroom First**



Department of
Education

From the Director General

Classroom First has been important in making our classrooms the centre of improvement efforts. While changes are occurring at all levels of our school system, we must never lose sight of the fact that if these changes do not result in improved classroom instruction and student learning then our efforts have been in vain.

Our goal is clear: a system of public schools in which every school is a good school, every teacher is effective and every student is successful.

Classroom First describes a comprehensive set of actions by staff at all levels to support high quality classroom teaching. It also recognises the role of central and regional offices to create the best possible environment for schools to operate.

There has been a positive response to Classroom First from staff in schools as well as from those supporting schools. I believe there is widespread support to continue to use it as the driving force behind our decisions.

While we have been acting on the strategy with considerable success, we need to do more. This statement sets out the progress on each of the six elements and outlines what we will be doing next to continue the Classroom First strategy.



SHARYN O'NEILL
DIRECTOR GENERAL

February 2011



The task ahead

Western Australian public schools serve their communities well. There are many effective principals, committed teachers and dedicated support staff working to help each student be as successful as they can. While our schools can always improve, we need to recognise that we have much to celebrate. Surveys repeatedly confirm that the overwhelming majority of parents who send their children to our schools are pleased with the quality of education provided.

There is some evidence, however, that while most students are well served, some are lagging behind. For example, Aboriginal students do not achieve at the same level as non-Aboriginal students and the gap is not being closed quickly enough despite the efforts we and others outside education have made in recent years. As well, many students who live in economically difficult circumstances achieve at levels below their more fortunate peers.

National test results in literacy and numeracy also indicate that by Year 3 our students are not doing as well as students in several other states. There are healthy signs of improvement in the most recent results but a re-examination of our approach in the early years of school is needed if we are to match the best in Australia.

We know even our best schools – those providing an excellent education for their students – are limited by some of the policies, rules and processes the Department requires of all schools. These requirements have, in the past, not been flexible enough to accommodate the needs of individual schools.

We also know that some parents choose not to send their children to public schools. There are many reasons for this, but the fact that this is happening should spur us to think of ways of making our schools more attractive choices for parents.

As a system, we need to take note of the evidence, analyse why things are as they are and decide what action we will take to improve. There is an enormous amount of professional capacity and goodwill in our schools: the challenge for the system is how to ensure this resource is applied fully for the betterment of our schools and students.

1

A focus on student achievement: success for all

The overriding consideration of Classroom First is to focus everyone's attention – those working in schools, regional offices and central office – on the achievement of students: on their academic progress and their personal and social development.

While this may sound obvious, too often as educators we focus on classroom and school processes rather than the value being added to each student's learning. Rather than judge ourselves in terms of how well we implement a particular program or strategy, we need to know what results the program or strategy has achieved.

In recent years, a lot of work has gone into setting the standards of achievement expected of students at each year level. Research evidence tells us that, in those schools adding the most value in terms of the achievement of their students, teachers have high expectations about what their students will achieve and how they will behave – and they help their students meet those standards. As the Australian Curriculum is implemented, we will support our teachers to understand the standards expected of students at each year level. We will also help them design programs so students achieve those standards.

A great deal of effort has also been put in to helping teachers use information about students' current achievements as a basis for moving them to higher levels of achievement. Use of student achievement data by teachers (using tools such as First Cut and SAIS) has become more sophisticated. The on-entry assessment program is now being introduced to all pre-primary students. This commitment from pre-primary teachers is providing information about students' development that can be used in a case management approach for those students who need assistance.

We will continue to support teachers in adopting more personalised approaches to identifying and addressing the learning needs of their students.

We have also raised the profile of the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy. While NAPLAN does not measure everything that is important about a student's literacy and numeracy development, it does measure critical aspects of literacy and numeracy which are important for every school to analyse and use, particularly the trends over a number of years.



We recognise that initiatives we have taken to improve the performance of our lowest achieving groups of students have not yielded the results we are after, so we must find more powerful strategies. This is particularly true for Aboriginal students and that is why, in the period ahead, we will adopt approaches involving, for example, innovative use of technology and governance arrangements.

In the future we will use the national agreements our State has struck with the Australian Government regarding low socio-economic status school communities to extend the reach of our programs. This will include incentives to attract and retain our best principals and teachers in schools where students need the most help.

Classroom First committed us to intervene as early as possible to put students on a path to success. The Review of Educational Practice in Kindergarten, Pre-primary and Year 1 has found that practice in the early years is inconsistent across schools, with no clear guiding vision and expectations. With the advent of the Early Years Learning Framework and Australian Curriculum, we will support early years teachers with a statement of expectations about student progress along with guidance about pedagogies appropriate to the early years. These will be based on the findings of the review and international best practice.

There is clear evidence that if we are to enable every student to make a successful start to their schooling, particularly those students in low socio-economic status communities, there needs to be intervention beyond the school. Some of our schools have been doing outstanding work in making a range of services available to students and their families through the school. In the future we will expand this extended service model to schools in other low socio-economic status communities.

2

A classroom orientation: sound teaching

One of the starting points of Classroom First was that the system should minimise the distractions that teachers and principals experience from the myriad system requirements. Teachers should be freed to teach and principals should be freed to lead.

In particular, student assessment requirements were identified as being excessive and overly complicated. That is why the decision was taken to abandon the use of levels to assess student achievement. We developed a new Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting policy so teachers had the practical support they needed to make sound assessments of student progress, using syllabus materials and exemplars, without the complexity of the levels system.

A further example of our Classroom First commitment to reduce administrative demands on principals is the change to the school review process. Principals and other key staff had previously been required to undertake the time-consuming process of compiling evidence of their schools' effectiveness across many areas of performance each year. This has been reduced considerably in recent years and this trend will continue as we move away from the demands of annual school review requirements to a system of rigorous periodic external review of all schools. The time that principals formerly spent on paperwork and preparation for school review can now be spent on educational leadership of the school.

The recent changes to Schools Plus are yet another example of reducing the system's administrative demands on school staff. Workload requirements of submissions have been reduced so less documentation is now required.

This effort to reduce compliance demands and tasks extraneous to a school's core business will continue. The group of schools operating as Independent Public Schools will be a key source of advice to the system in this regard. As we move towards a system of more autonomous schools, central office will be re-shaped into a smaller unit concentrating on policy and standards, resourcing schools and ensuring high quality education is being delivered in all our schools.



Context specific: distinctive schools

A central plank of Classroom First is giving schools greater flexibility and control over their own affairs so each school can become a distinctive school. Our schools operate in vastly different contexts and they should reflect this diversity. If the principal, school staff and local community have the capacity to respond to their particular circumstances and shape the school and its programs to best meet the needs of their students, the public school system will become a stronger system of distinctive schools.

The Independent Public Schools initiative is providing schools and their local communities with the opportunity for significantly enhanced decision making authority. School communities that opt to become Independent Public Schools gain considerable freedoms, matched by additional accountability. As more schools seek greater autonomy, the number of Independent Public Schools will increase. As these schools demonstrate the efficacy of greater flexibility, those changes that are feasible will be extended to all schools. This will lead to a public school system in which every school has the right balance of local decision making and central support to perform at its best.

The resource entitlement of each school needs to acknowledge that school's particular needs and circumstances. It is becoming increasingly clear that we need to re-assess the basis on which we allocate resources to schools so there is a fair, open and transparent mechanism that provides each school with the resources needed to deliver high quality education.

Once a school has been allocated its resources, it needs maximum flexibility to determine how those resources are used to obtain the most educational value. Operating with a one-line budget has given Independent Public Schools significant budget flexibility and similar flexibility will enable all schools to respond to student needs.

Flexibility for all schools has been enhanced by changes to the School Support Programs Resource Allocation in recent years. Rather than separate funding sources each with their own accountability requirements, funds are now combined into a single amount to support the school's own priorities. Other funds will be channelled through this mechanism in the future.

Increasing the flexibility of all schools in the area of staffing is a priority. Each school needs to be able to select teachers who will enable it to deliver the programs its students need and to advance the ethos it is seeking to create.

Local selection of principals is a further example of how local control has replaced central decision making.

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Practical support: making it possible

Classroom First placed particular emphasis on providing practical support for teachers – the kind of support that helps teachers deal with the everyday challenges of the classroom. This commitment resulted in syllabus documents giving teachers guidance about what is to be taught at each year level. Since then, exemplars are supporting teachers to make sound judgements about the standards students achieve.

The area of student behaviour is another challenging aspect of classroom life for many teachers. To assist further we have provided additional school psychologists, increased the number of behaviour centres and developed additional placement options for students with extreme behaviour problems. As we implement the *Better attendance: Brighter futures* strategy, we will see a positive impact on student attendance.

We recognise the most practical support for teachers is from other highly skilled teachers rather than from 'experts' detached from the realities of the classroom. This is one of the reasons we have created a new regional network structure of schools where highly experienced principals and teachers can be freed up to help colleagues in neighbouring schools.

These networks will ensure our teachers are properly supported as we move to implement the Australian Curriculum. Teacher development centres have provided practical support to teachers and these will be expanded as part of new school support structures.

The combined efforts of school and central office staff have resulted in a range of excellent online support materials for teachers. Increased use of technology will afford tremendous opportunities to enhance support for teachers in the years ahead.

As we move into an environment of increased school autonomy, the role of school leaders will become even more critical. We will establish the WA Centre for Public School Leadership to provide development opportunities for our school leaders – current principals, teachers in leadership positions and those who aspire to become school leaders. The new national professional standard for principals will influence the work of the centre. The role of network principals will become increasingly important as a means of sharing the high levels of expertise among principals across networks.

Many pressing educational problems we face demand more innovative approaches. Pockets of innovation have always existed in our schools but, as a system, we have not been as successful as we might at scaling these up into system wide improvement. The recently introduced innovation grants are mechanisms to encourage and recognise school level innovation.

We also know that teachers learn best from other teachers. We will continue to support collaboration between schools so innovative activity in one classroom or school can be shared with other schools.

Many of our schools have already set up collaborative partnerships to benefit their students. There are numerous examples of secondary schools planning together to provide wider course options for students, and primary schools have a long history of collaborating effectively.

The creation of regional networks is a recognition and extension of this practice. It will accelerate and support such cooperation in our schools across the State.

The critical role of support staff in developing distinctive schools is acknowledged. Initiatives to further develop skills for these staff will continue.



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Meaningful accountability: asking the hard questions

We will continue to put effort into improving the quality and rigour of school self assessment because that is at the heart of school improvement. School self assessment will remain the centrepiece of our school accountability framework.

International evidence shows that an effective school review framework places 80 to 90 per cent of effort on internal self assessment and 10 to 20 per cent on external validation of that self assessment. In the future, external review will be undertaken independently of the line management structure which links schools to the Director General. This will enable even greater confidence to be placed in the findings of these reviews.

We will continue to support each school's self assessment by providing a set of system gathered performance information about each school (the School Performance Monitoring System). Along with other information that school staff assemble, this can be used by schools to analyse their own performance. It will also provide the centre with an early warning system of schools that may be struggling and need support. It will be important for the Department, regional executive director, principal and school staff, and the school council/board to have access to the same information on which to base judgements about how well the school is performing.

Where information about any school indicates cause for concern, the Expert Review Group will undertake either a comprehensive school review (as in previous years) or a school performance enquiry which will be a less extensive investigation into some aspects of the school.



Public confidence: trusting public schools

We will continue to build the brand and reputation of public education in the community by marketing the diversity of opportunities available to students and highlighting high quality teaching practice. While individual schools promote a positive image of themselves and are highly regarded by their communities, we will also position our schools more broadly as innovative and collaborative learning communities. We will continue to profile the achievements of our students and the excellent work of our principals, teachers and support staff.

Those parents who become involved in their children's school invariably appreciate the efforts of staff and trust the quality of education their school provides. Many schools have made huge steps in increasing the level of parent involvement. We will continue to support schools to maximise the engagement of parents.

The move to school boards in Independent Public Schools recognises the stronger role that parents and community members can play in schools. Training provided to school board members assists them in enacting their roles effectively.

We will continue to help schools manage issues by providing media support and training, and we will maximise proactive media stories to build public confidence and trust in our schools. Communications and marketing support will focus on positive student outcomes, the effectiveness of our teachers and the diversity of our schools.

Conclusion

Our vision is for a Western Australian public school system of distinctive schools, empowered professionals, high standards and local community engagement.

Classroom First is a long term commitment to support high quality teaching in every public school classroom. It is not a quick fix and it is not a panacea. It backs the professionalism and innovative capacity of principals and teachers to provide educational programs that best serve the needs of their students. It seeks to give every school community the flexibility to develop local solutions to local problems. It requires a quite different kind of relationship between schools and regional and central offices – a relationship based on trust, support and responsibility rather than compliance and control.

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