

Director General's

CLASSROOM **FIRST** STRATEGY



Department of
Education



Director General's Classroom First strategy

Our goal is a strong public school system – a public school system that earns the respect of the community for the quality of the education it offers.

The public school system will be strong if we work at making:

- every public school a good school
- every teacher an effective teacher
- every student a successful student.

To achieve this we need an integrated strategy with a clear educational rationale.

The Classroom First strategy is just that – and it will be used as the framework for future decision making.

- It underpins our strategic plan.
- It provides the rationale for our corporate structures.
- It reflects our beliefs and commitment to quality public education.
- It is consistent with the best evidence available about school and teacher effectiveness.
- It will be implemented using the most effective change management practices.

This paper outlines the objectives and key elements of the Classroom First strategy in terms of students, teachers and schools.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sharyn O'Neill'.

SHARYN O'NEILL
DIRECTOR GENERAL

A shared understanding

Before describing the strategy, it is important to have a shared understanding of what we mean by successful students, of what effective teachers do, and what the characteristics are of good schools.

Successful students

We want all our students to leave school well prepared for their future. A successful education will equip them to prosper economically, be happy and secure in themselves, and contribute to their community. We believe in building on our students' strengths so every student leaves school confident they can succeed.

Our educational programs are designed to give each student the opportunity to achieve their academic potential. It goes without saying that mastery of basic literacy and numeracy skills is fundamentally important.

But to succeed in today's world, our students need more than sound achievement in the various learning areas. They need to be adaptable, resourceful and quick to learn. They need to be technologically competent, and adept at seeking out and using information to solve problems. They need to be able to think things through for themselves and show initiative, not wait for direction.

We believe a well rounded education also builds character. That is why our teachers emphasise self discipline, hard work and doing one's personal best. Students who understand themselves, learn to manage their emotions and get along well with others will be best placed to succeed in life.

Finally, we want our students to have a strong sense of being part of a community. This begins with a feeling of belonging to the school community and later to the wider community. We strive to instil in them a sense of service and responsibility to others.

Effective teachers

The best teachers are able to inspire in their students a love of learning. They build positive relationships with their students; they get to know them and are interested in their overall development and progress.

They have high expectations of students in terms of both their standard of learning and their behaviour. They treat their students with respect and expect the same in return. They know that a safe and orderly environment is necessary for their students to progress well and so their discipline is firm but fair.

Effective teachers are able to personalise the learning for their students. They monitor the progress of all their students and challenge each to take the next step in their learning.

They are in the habit of constantly reflecting on how well they are getting through to their students and they search for better ways of teaching those students who are not responding.

Good schools

The most effective schools have their students at the front and centre in the way they operate. The question that most drives what they do is: what is in the best long term interests of the students?

They provide a friendly, welcoming and cared for environment with clear expectations of the standards expected. Teachers are supported in the delivery of interesting and stimulating educational programs.

These schools are well led and well run. The leadership team provides an inspiring educational vision and puts practical measures in place to enable that vision to become a reality. The resources of the school are marshalled behind the vision.

Good schools are open and accountable, undertaking rigorous self assessments, setting themselves challenging targets for improvement, sharing information about their performance, and using that evidence to inform their improvement efforts.

These schools have an environment that supports teachers learning from their colleagues and sharing best practice throughout the school. They have a strong school ethos and cultivate a sense of pride in the school and a sense of belonging and connectedness in the students.

There are opportunities for parents to become involved and active encouragement for them to become partners in their children's education.

Six key elements of the strategy



The Classroom First strategy directly targets improved instructional practice. It differs from previous Department corporate strategy that has had a managerial focus. Such approaches have suffered from a tenuous link to educational improvement.

It also differs from previous approaches that have focused on the system and the school as the units of change. The evidence suggests these approaches have generally fallen short of penetrating the classroom. This strategy focuses on learning in classrooms.

It can also be distinguished from previous strategy that has treated all schools the same. Classroom First acknowledges that different schools will benefit from different forms of support and require different levels of intervention.

The strategy has an initial phase of minimising the distractions and workload of system requirements which over time have complicated teachers' work without adding value to students' classroom experiences.

There are six key elements of the strategy.

1. A focus on student achievement: success for all

Actions, programs and decisions will be judged by their impact on student achievement, not merely classroom and school processes. Teachers' attention will be focused on the standards of achievement expected of students and on monitoring the progress of students towards those standards. Teachers will

be assisted to use information about student achievement to help those students who are struggling and to extend those students who are achieving well.

Evidence of student achievement will not be based solely on test scores. Teachers are constantly gathering information about what students can do and understand, and this information is essential to an assessment of each student's progress.

Student achievement does not only refer to academic success. We want our schools to produce well rounded individuals who possess social and personal competencies and so our measures of success will encompass these outcomes as well.

For students who are not achieving the minimum standards in the core areas of learning we will re-think the way we currently support them and adopt a case management approach for each student. We will personalise their learning program to get them back on track. And we will do this as early as possible in their schooling to try and put them on the path to success.

Those students who find learning easy and achieve highly need the opportunities and the challenge to achieve their full potential. This not only means offering special programs of extension but every

teacher being alert to possibilities for enriching classroom learning for these students.

There are some groups of students who, on almost every measure of success, cause us great concern. We need to act more strategically to get our Aboriginal students to attend school and achieve well. We need to find smarter ways of ensuring our students being educated in rural and remote areas are not disadvantaged by their location. And we need to reduce the achievement gap between our students who live in economically difficult circumstances and their peers who have the advantage of greater home and community resources.

2. A classroom orientation: sound teaching

The focus of the strategy is the teacher and a class of students. That's where the Department's purpose is achieved. It goes without saying that placing a competent professional teacher in front of every class overrides all the management priorities of the Department. That is why we will be using imaginative approaches to ensure we have into the future enough good teachers to staff our schools. Central to that is taking steps to ensure our current staff feel they are well treated, well led, well respected and recognised for the hard work they do every day to help their students.

It is the quality of what goes on between the teacher and their students that counts. Everything else we do is to make the quality of that teaching as good as it can possibly be. It is why school leadership is so important. If the school is not led to enable each teacher to concentrate on teaching well, students will not get the quality of education they deserve.

The first thing to be done is to reduce the squeeze on teachers – the squeeze between the immediate learning and behavioural needs of their students and the myriad other demands of the system. Over time these other demands have created clutter and noise for teachers and distracted them from their core business of teaching students.

They take the form of administrative requirements, compliance paperwork and implementing a wide range of initiatives emanating from central office. In particular, assessment requirements have been excessive and overly complicated. These demands will be reduced without sacrificing the evidence teachers need to gather to inform their teaching and report on students' progress.

Not only do teachers have to implement central initiatives, they also have to fulfil separate accountability requirements for each one. We will integrate the accountability requirements so the workload associated with reporting to central office is reduced.

Teachers' workload in curriculum has been increased by what many teachers characterise as 'the re-invention of the wheel in every school'. In the recent past we seem to have been reluctant to spell out what we want our teachers to do. Some teachers thrive on the maximum professional discretion. They are confident, inventive and they draw on a range of resources to create and deliver stimulating, interesting programs. But other teachers like to have things laid out for them to follow. We need to cater for all our teachers. Hence we will provide syllabus documents that provide clear guidance but don't inhibit those who will, of their own accord, go well beyond the syllabus.

We will make sure that teachers have the room and the authority to do what they know is best for their students. And we will change our approach to professional learning for teachers by acknowledging the tremendous expertise that exists within the teaching profession and providing





the means for this to be shared across all teachers. This will also help reduce the professional isolation that many teachers feel.

Our teachers will not give of their best if they feel undervalued and criticised. We will take strong action to protect our staff from unfair criticism and build community respect for their work. Part of this strategy will be to more sharply define the purpose of schools so they are not asked to do the impossible.

3. Context specific: distinctive schools

Rather than thinking of the public school system as a whole, this strategy takes one school at a time. We aim to get rid of uniformity and the one size fits all approach. The strategy seeks to put in place distinctive schools each located in a specific context.

We will provide sufficient flexibility to enable each school to develop their own unique ethos. We want each local community to feel that their neighbourhood public school is their school, embedded in their community, reflecting their values and aspirations for their children – not a stock standard government issue school that is so rigidly defined by the centre that it can't be shaped into the community's school.

In the future we will allow schools to have greater flexibility in how they use the resources the Department allocates to them as part of an agreement to achieve specified outcomes and to operate within Department policy.

Flexibility in the programs schools can offer will also be enhanced by greater use of technology to deliver quality education from

a distance. While traditional delivery through a teacher in front of a class will predominate, technology will increasingly play a part as a complementary means of delivery with no sacrifice in quality.

Because each school is different with different needs, there will be no set pattern for district based support services. Central office will not take a standardised approach to all schools: some schools in supportive communities can be almost self-supporting; others are struggling and need significant intervention and support. The resourcing of schools will reflect their particular circumstances and needs.

Secondary schools will be encouraged to tailor what they offer to the needs of the students. Rather than have every secondary school try and offer the full range of programs, secondary schools will work together to ensure that students have access to excellent programs across a group of schools. Cooperation rather than competition between schools will ensure that the highest quality programs will be available to students in public high schools.

The programs our secondary schools offer will aim to equip students to achieve their personal goals. Through cooperation between our secondary schools we will emphasise excellence in the traditional disciplines leading to the TEE for students with an academic bent, and also excellence in vocational programs for students whose strengths take them in that direction. In the senior years our secondary schools will offer each student a learning program that includes different combinations of school education, training and work.

We also expect our secondary schools to work cooperatively with their cluster of feeder primary schools so students in a local community have a seamless transition from the beginning of their primary schooling to the end of their secondary schooling.



The improvement of each school will happen from the exercise of local initiative. We believe that the people who can make the difference (school staff) must be backed, given the room, the encouragement and the protection to do what they know will be right for their students. Of course this needs to be exercised within the limits of Department policy because that provides the common community guarantee that holds the public school system together.



4. Practical support: making it possible

We will ensure there is practical support for teachers that acknowledges the realities of the classroom. Teachers' work has become much more complex than in previous times. Teachers are not only dealing with students' educational needs but also with a whole range of social, family and community issues which impact on their students. The support we provide to our school staff needs to take account of the difficulties they face and the priorities they feel they need to address. Support resources will be allocated to the school in a flexible form so each school can decide on the particular support it requires.

We will ensure there are high quality professional learning programs provided for principals, teachers and school support staff. In particular we want our teachers to get the practical help they need to turn the *Principles of Teaching and Learning* in the *Curriculum Framework* into concrete action in their classrooms. There is no reason, however, for these to continue to be delivered by Department staff based in central or district offices. We will allow universities and other providers to design and deliver accredited professional learning programs for school staff provided they meet the requirements of the Department.

Support that currently comes to schools separately tied to central office programs with little flexibility will be provided in ways that enable a more holistic approach to be taken consistent with each school's plan.

The teacher is the main player in the system. Those of us in non-teaching positions have important roles to play in supporting our teachers to teach well. Our job is to create the best possible environment for our teachers to teach. The questions for us to ask ourselves are: Under what conditions will teachers give of their best? How can we remove obstacles to teachers teaching well? We need to be alert to decisions we make that inhibit good teaching and seek to make decisions that will facilitate it.



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5. Meaningful accountability: asking the hard questions

While we expect school staff to exercise their professional judgement, we also expect them to be accountable for their decisions. School accountability mechanisms should serve educational purposes – they should require staff to ask the hard questions of themselves in terms of their school's performance, and they should enable others outside the school to have confidence in the standards being achieved.

Internal accountability in the form of the school's self assessment is crucial but it is not enough. There is a need for external validation by others who have no stake in the school's performance. In keeping with the principle of not treating all schools the same, the Expert Review Group will ensure that only those schools whose performance is of concern are subjected to detailed scrutiny and planned intervention. District directors will

continue to provide the validation of all other schools' performance but the breadth of these reviews will be reduced and focused more on the standards of student learning and behaviour. This will enable district directors to devote more of their time to supporting those schools which have serious performance issues to address.

While the performance of each school is a key focus of accountability, so is the performance of individual staff within and outside schools. Performance management will provide the opportunity for each individual to demonstrate their achievements, examine areas of their work where they could improve, and get the help they need to do it. This needs to be strengthened at all levels of the Department but it is the effectiveness of the processes between district directors and principals, and between principals and their staff where the positive impacts for students will be most felt.

6. Public confidence: trusting public schools

We not only want our schools to be good, we want them to be seen to be good. This element of the strategy is directed at having our schools highly regarded by the community.

We will ensure there is public understanding of our vision for good schools, effective teachers and successful students. And that the measures we will take to achieve that are sensible and practical. We will have a measured approach to change so the public can be reassured we will only be adopting programs and methods that have a proven track record of effectiveness. New initiatives will be trialled and evaluated before their widespread adoption.

We will adopt easy-to-understand performance measures so our progress as a system is judged fairly rather than on a narrow set of indicators. We will deal with issues and concerns in an open and non-defensive manner so the public sees an organisation willing to face up to its problems and address them.

We will assist each school to maximise parent involvement in the work of the school. For parents this will not only benefit their children but will serve to increase their awareness of the tremendous work that is done everyday in public schools.

The public will see an organisation that places the interests of students and their parents as its paramount concern.



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