

VICTORIA

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Auditor-General  
of Victoria

**SPECIAL REPORT No. 52**

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**SCHOOLS  
OF THE FUTURE**  
**Valuing accountability**

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*Ordered by the Legislative Assembly to be printed*

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The President

The Speaker

Parliament House

Melbourne Vic. 3002

Sir

Under the provisions of section 16 of the *Audit Act* 1994, I transmit the Auditor-General's Special Report No. 52, "*Schools of the Future: Valuing accountability*".

Yours faithfully

C.A. BARAGWANATH  
*Auditor-General*

# Contents

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	<b>Foreword</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>PART 1</b>	<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> _____	<b>1</b>
	<i>Overall audit conclusion</i> 3	
	<i>Summary of major audit findings</i> 5	
<b>PART 2</b>	<b>BACKGROUND</b> _____	<b>11</b>
	<i>Major State education reforms since 1992</i> 13	
	<i>The Schools of the Future policy framework</i> 13	
	<i>The Accountability Framework</i> 16	
<b>PART 3</b>	<b>CONDUCT OF THE AUDIT</b> _____	<b>21</b>
	<i>Audit objective</i> 23	
	<i>Scope of audit</i> 23	
	<i>Specialist assistance</i> 25	
<b>PART 4</b>	<b>MEASURING SCHOOL AND SYSTEM PERFORMANCE</b> _____	<b>27</b>
	<i>Overview</i> 29	
	<i>Key measures for assessing school performance</i> 30	
	<i>Assessing Statewide performance</i> 49	
<b>PART 5</b>	<b>TRIENNIAL SCHOOL REVIEW</b> _____	<b>51</b>
	<i>Overview</i> 53	
	<i>Introduction</i> 54	
	<i>Piloting the triennial school review</i> 55	
	<i>External school reviews</i> 56	
	<i>School comments on triennial reviews</i> 59	
<b>PART 6</b>	<b>IMPLEMENTING ACCOUNTABILITY</b> _____	<b>65</b>
	<i>Overview</i> 67	
	<i>Introduction</i> 68	
	<i>Developing the Accountability Framework</i> 69	
	<i>Guidance, training and support to schools</i> 72	
	<i>Resource implications for schools</i> 79	
	<i>Meeting accountability requirements</i> 80	
<b>PART 7</b>	<b>IMPACTS OF IMPLEMENTING THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK</b> _____	<b>83</b>
	<i>Overview</i> 85	
	<i>Introduction</i> 86	
	<i>Learning outcomes for students</i> 86	
	<i>School reporting</i> 89	
	<i>School planning</i> 93	
	<i>Curricula and teaching strategies</i> 93	

# Foreword

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Accountability is the cornerstone of public administration and requires agencies to manage their human, physical and financial resources responsibly in the course of pursuing the purpose for their existence.

In the primary and secondary education sector, the Schools of the Future Accountability Framework is the mechanism put in place by the Department of Education to both enhance the accountability of schools and continuously improve their performance in raising standards of student learning. Indeed, as I stated in my October 1995 Special Report No. 36, *The changing profile of State Education: School reorganisations*, the Framework is designed to provide evaluative data on the important factors necessary for objectively assessing the quality of school education.

I acknowledge the magnitude of the task faced by the Department to develop the Framework, which brings school accountability in line with world best practice, and train schools in its application and use.

As I have indicated in the Report, while much has been achieved by the Department in a short period of time, scope exists to build on this work and ultimately generate reliable and valid information upon which to base assessments of the effectiveness of the primary and secondary education sector.

C.A. BARAGWANATH  
*Auditor-General*

# **Part 1**

## **Executive summary**

# Part 1.1

## Overall audit conclusion

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**1.1.1** The Department of Education recognised the need to put an accountability mechanism in place to complement the devolution of responsibility for school management from the centralised control of the Department to the local school community occurring under the *Schools of the Future* program. With this aim in mind, the Department has developed a framework, known as *Quality Assurance in Victorian Schools: An Accountability Framework*, which was adopted in August 1994, following a trial period in selected schools.

**1.1.2** The Accountability Framework represents an integrated planning, development and reporting mechanism comprising 3 key elements, a *school charter* which formalises a school’s goals and priorities over a 3 year period, an *annual report* which informs the Department and the local community of the school’s performance against its planned goals and a *triennial review* consisting of self-assessment by the school and an external review. The Framework is underpinned by a continuous improvement program driven by the Department and directed towards enhancing school performance.

**1.1.3** The introduction of the Framework constitutes a significant advancement in terms of measuring school performance and is, in the view of the Department, in line with world best practice. The action formalises a school’s commitment to improving student learning outcomes.

**1.1.4** The Department is to be applauded for its initiative and the progress it has made in a relatively short period of time in successfully trialling and overseeing the introduction of school charters in all 1 700 primary and secondary schools throughout the State. Annual reports have been produced by all schools since the progressive implementation of school charters commenced and, at June 1997, 300 schools had completed or were in the process of completing their first triennial review. By 1999, all 1 700 schools will have completed their initial 3 year cycle under the Framework.



**1.1.5** Audit found that, at this point in time, the 3 key elements of the Framework provide a sound basis for assisting the Department and schools in effectively evaluating and improving school performance, including student learning outcomes. In terms of ultimately achieving the aims of the Framework, audit considers scope exists for the Department to build on past achievements by:

- Enhancing the quality and usefulness of the performance measures and associated data, such as the assessment of students against the Curriculum and Standards Framework;
- Continuing research into value-added concepts with a view to including those concepts into the Framework. On this point, trials should be conducted in a selection of schools to assess the direct contribution a school has made to student learning by removing the effects attributable to factors external to the school environment such as student intelligence, peer group influences and socio-economic factors. This work should complement the Department's established approaches to benchmarking and facilitate ongoing improvement in this area;
- Assessing the equally important non-academic goals of education such as the social and cultural development of students, good citizenship, work preparedness, as well as school efficiency which, more than 3 years since the introduction of the Framework, now needs to be given greater attention;
- Increasing checks and balances within schools to ensure the accuracy and completeness of data collected by schools;
- Strengthening the evaluative role of the Framework by further developing appropriate performance targets and best practice benchmarks, providing more hands-on training and support to schools and enhancing the self-assessment guidelines to help schools improve the quality of data analysis and interpretation;
- Encouraging schools to use performance data in a constructive way to assist in improving student learning outcomes; and
- Ascertaining from parents the preferred form and content of school performance data to avoid the production of inappropriate information.

**1.1.6** In addition, enhancements in performance measurement through the Department's continuous improvement program need to be supplemented with the collection of reliable evaluative data such as baseline and trend data. The availability of such data will facilitate measurement of student learning outcomes so that the Department can eventually provide assurances on the *Schools of the Future* program's primary objective of providing high quality education which maximises the future potential of all students.

**1.1.7** It is important that all future enhancements to the Framework are considered in the light of their costs to schools and the Department and their benefits to key stakeholders. Furthermore, the ongoing costs of meeting the accountability requirements need to be determined and carefully monitored in terms of any adverse impacts on school resources.

**1.1.8** By addressing the matters raised by audit, the Department should be in a progressively stronger position to conclude with confidence on whether the substantial resources allocated to school education (around \$2.6 billion in 1996-97) are effectively and efficiently used in terms of enhancing accountability and improving learning outcomes for students.



# Part 1.2

## Summary of major audit findings

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<b>MEASURING SYSTEM AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>Page 27</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The Department has introduced an extensive set of performance indicators as part of the Accountability Framework, which provides a suitable foundation to measure system and individual school performance. <i>Paras 4.10 to 4.12</i></li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Assessments by teachers against the Curriculum and Standards Framework for measuring student learning achievements are not yet fully reliable primarily as such assessments still constitute a new process for teachers. <i>Paras 4.13 to 4.21</i></li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The Department, in conjunction with the Board of Studies, should develop approaches to use Learning Assessment Project results to assess the consistency in interpretation and application of the Curriculum and Standards Framework. <i>Paras 4.22 to 4.27</i></li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The time allocation measure used by primary schools in assessing curriculum goals needs to be improved so that the integrated nature of the curriculum is recognised. <i>Paras 4.28 to 4.31</i></li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● A more comprehensive perspective of the safety of a school environment could be provided by measuring factors such as student harassment, in addition to student attendance and accident data. <i>Paras 4.32 to 4.35</i></li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The form, content and impact of professional development should be measured in addition to the amount of time spent by teachers on the activity. <i>Para. 4.40</i></li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The level at which staff absence from classroom teaching duties adversely impacts on student learning should be investigated by the Department. <i>Para. 4.41</i></li></ul>	

- The introduction of teacher and parent opinion surveys by the Department is a positive initiative as they have the potential to provide useful information relating to school management and school performance.  
*Paras 4.43 to 4.45*
- Measuring the negative aspects of stress on teachers, that is distress, would be a useful additional indicator of school organisational health.  
*Paras 4.46 to 4.50*
- Parents are not necessarily in a position to provide meaningful or informed responses to survey statements seeking to assess the academic rigour or quality of teaching within schools.  
*Paras 4.51 to 4.53*
- Consideration should be given by the Department to developing and administering a statewide parent opinion survey to provide information on formulating benchmarks.  
*Paras 4.55 to 4.56*
- The Department should consider developing performance measures for the other equally important goals of school education, including welfare and social and cultural development.  
*Paras 4.60 to 4.66*
- The inclusion in the Framework of other measures, such as school efficiency and teacher performance, would provide a more comprehensive view of school performance.  
*Paras 4.67 to 4.69*
- Although audit recognises the achievements of the Department in developing and implementing a benchmarking framework, scope exists for improving the reliability and usefulness of benchmarks.  
*Paras 4.70 to 4.75*
- The existing criteria for defining *like-school* groupings could be expanded by the Department to improve the usefulness of *like-school* benchmarks.  
*Paras 4.76 to 4.80*
- The calculation of value-added attributed to those factors which impact on a student's learning capacity, such as his or her socio-economic background or intelligence level, is complex but critical in assessing the direct contribution a school has made to a student's learning achievements.  
*Paras 4.81 to 4.84*
- Comparisons of school performance on the basis of the achievement levels of their students could be enhanced if baseline data, relating to the student's learning capabilities at the point of entry into a school, were available and value-added was calculated.  
*Paras 4.85 to 4.91*
- The Department intends to include in its 1997-98 annual report aggregated information on school performance, excluding student learning achievement data.  
*Paras 4.92 to 4.96*
- Certain measures used by the Department for assessing school performance could also be utilised in assessing system performance.  
*Paras 4.97 to 4.98*

**TRIENNIAL SCHOOL REVIEW****Page 51**

- The Department's decision to initiate trialling of triennial school reviews in a small group of schools was soundly based.  
*Paras 5.12 to 5.15*
- A number of issues, which were raised during the Department's evaluation of the trials, have not yet been fully addressed.  
*Paras 5.13 to 5.15*
- It is important that the Department regularly monitors the costs of the external review program, currently set at \$1.8 million, as well as the performance of external reviewers, with a view to ensuring the program is cost-effective and reviewers meet the Department's expectations.  
*Paras 5.17 to 5.20*
- Overall, schools expressed a high level of satisfaction with the performance of the external reviewers undertaking the first triennial review.  
*Paras 5.24 to 5.27*
- Virtually all schools agreed that the triennial review had been a positive initiative in terms of providing directions for developing their new charter.  
*Paras 5.29 to 5.30*
- Although two-thirds of principals understood the use made of school performance data, the Department should view with some concern the apparent lack of awareness by the remaining principals.  
*Paras 5.32 to 5.33*
- The majority of schools acknowledged that formal checks and balances to ensure that performance data was accurate and complete had not been put in place in their school.  
*Paras 5.34 to 5.36*
- The Department needs to limit the extent to which schools perceive the triennial review to be too onerous by encouraging them to make greater use of specific purpose information technology developed by the Department to record and compile data and to expand the standardisation of data collection formats.  
*Paras 5.37 to 5.41*
- Although the vast majority of school principals and two thirds of self-assessment panels expressed satisfaction with the triennial review process, both groups had reservations, to varying degrees, about the accuracy and meaningfulness of the performance data required to be collected.  
*Paras 5.42 to 5.49*



**IMPLEMENTING ACCOUNTABILITY** **Page 65**

- In testing certain concepts and processes associated with the development of the Accountability Framework, the Department should be complimented for working closely with a sample of schools during 1994 and 1995.  

*Para. 6.13*
- The Department is to be commended, for initiating the concept of the Framework and for its implementation in a relatively short time frame. All schools will have completed a 3 year cycle under the Framework by December 1999.  

*Para. 6.14*
- In line with the dual role of the Framework, a stronger emphasis needs to be given by the Department to strengthening the evaluative role of the Framework for the purpose of continuous improvement.  

*Paras 6.15 to 6.16*
- Although the key elements of the Framework were known and stable from the beginning, various aspects and details were still subject to testing and refinement by the Department subsequent to the Framework’s implementation.  

*Paras 6.17 to 6.18*
- Most schools did not gain a full understanding of the dual role of the Framework until implementation was completed.  

*Paras 6.21 to 6.27*
- In addition to training and support, a comprehensive range of booklets, in the form of guidelines produced by the Department, were provided to schools to assist with the implementation of the Framework.  

*Para. 6.28*
- Scope exists for the Department to provide greater assistance to schools, particularly through a more timely process of revision and subsequent distribution of updated guidelines.  

*Paras 6.29 to 6.33*
- The Department could improve the self-assessment guidelines by expanding directions for schools on making evaluative judgements of performance data.  

*Paras 6.40 to 6.42*
- The parent opinion survey user guide could be enhanced by the Department addressing the issue of parent anonymity and the selection of random samples of parents for small schools in the guide.  

*Paras 6.43 to 6.45*
- The level of training, support and guidance from the Department could be improved through the provision of more hands-on practical training.  

*Paras 6.48 to 6.53*
- According to school principals, the level of training, support and guidance received from Regional Principal Consultants could have been substantially improved.  

*Paras 6.54 to 6.57*



**IMPLEMENTING ACCOUNTABILITY - *continued***

- Half of the principals and 16 per cent of self-assessment panels nominated the Office of Review as providing the most beneficial form of assistance.  

*Paras 6.58 to 6.59*
- Given there was a heavy reliance on collegiate networks, this form of assistance should in future be supplemented with close support from departmental officers specifically trained in implementing the Framework.  

*Paras 6.60 to 6.61*
- A high proportion of self-assessment panels considered more training in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data was needed by panels especially the school council representatives.  

*Para. 6.62*
- To date neither the Department nor individual schools have formally assessed the cost-effectiveness of implementing the Framework.  

*Para. 6.65*
- From the perspective of schools, implementing the Framework was considered time consuming and an additional task that had to be managed using existing resources.  

*Paras 6.66 to 6.71*



**IMPACTS OF IMPLEMENTING THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK Page 83**

- Schools are unable to accurately assess, at this point in time, the extent to which the Framework has assisted in measuring school performance and in turn improved student learning outcomes.  
*Paras 7.9 to 7.14*
- Longitudinal research involving school principals suggested that, after a period of 5 years, they were still uncertain of the extent to which the *Schools of the Future* program, including the Accountability Framework, had impacted on student learning outcomes.  
*Paras 7.15 to 7.17*
- While the overwhelming majority of parents interviewed by audit were satisfied with the way their school informed them about its performance, surprisingly two-thirds had not noticed any change over the past 2 years in the information they had received.  
*Paras 7.22 to 7.24*
- Half the school principals and two thirds of self assessment panels considered that the Framework had contributed to improved reporting of school performance to parents.  
*Paras 7.25 to 7.27*
- Most of the self-assessment panels and half of the school principals considered that implementing the Framework had a very positive impact on the quality of reporting to the school council.  
*Paras 7.28 to 7.30*
- One-third of self-assessment panels considered school councils needed help in interpreting performance data.  
*Paras 7.28 to 7.30*
- Schools expressed a high level of support in relation to the new reporting requirements, reinforcing the direction taken by the Department, for more formalised and objective reporting of school performance.  
*Paras 7.31 to 7.34*
- Most schools have made sound progress in improving the quality of school planning through implementing the Framework.  
*Paras 7.35 to 7.38*
- The Department needs to reinforce with school principals the potential benefits for assisting curriculum development from data gathered through the Framework.  
*Paras 7.39 to 7.43*

# **Part 2**

## **Background**

**MAJOR STATE EDUCATION REFORMS SINCE 1992**

**2.1** Since October 1992, the Government education system in Victoria has undergone substantial changes to address what the incoming Government assessed as major structural and financial problems identified by its Victorian Commission of Audit. That Commission was established in late 1992 by the Government to examine and report on the State’s financial position. An overriding objective of the changes to the education system has been to improve the effectiveness of schools. The major changes have been:

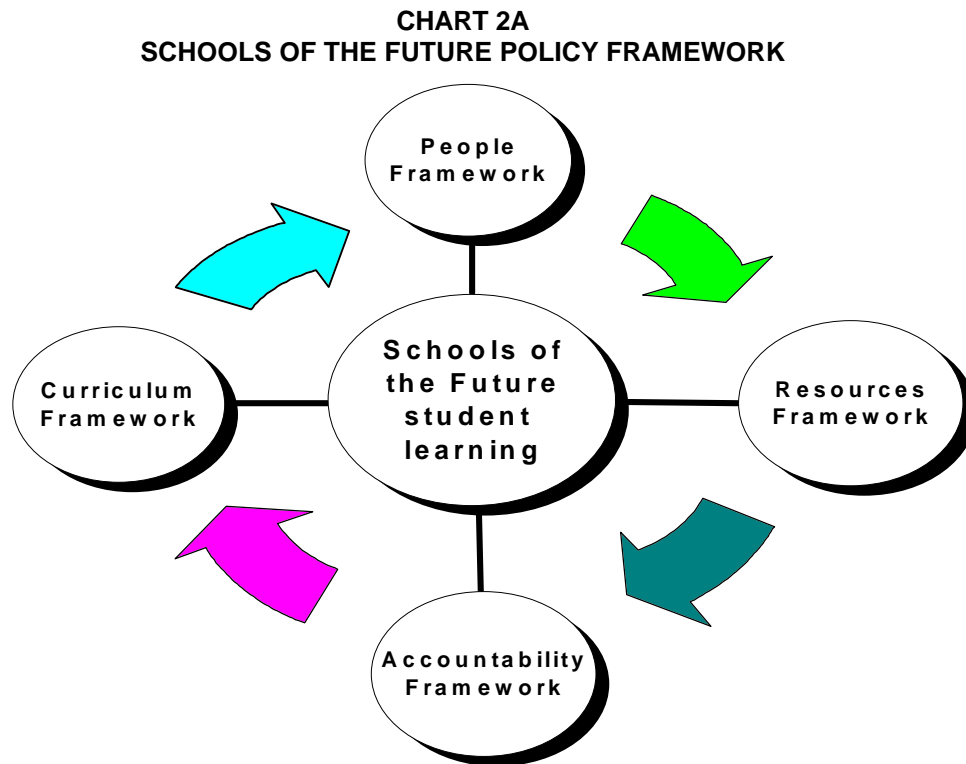
- Disposal of around 300 school sites (15 per cent of schools), by reducing the total number of schools from over 2 000 to around 1 700 in December 1996. This reduction was designed to take account of changes in the supply of and demand for education services with application of the sale proceeds directed towards improving the quality of remaining facilities. This initiative was reported upon by the Auditor-General in Special Report No. 36 *The changing profile of State education: School reorganisations* which was tabled in the Parliament in October 1995;
- Cutting administrative staff of the Department of Education from around 4 000 to about 1 200 in 1996 to re-structure the Department as a policy-setting body, a provider of shared support services and purchaser of educational services from schools; and
- Reducing the total number of teachers employed in the State system, in excess of school entitlements, by some 6 000 (from around 40 000 to 34 000 at June 1996), to address departmental budgetary pressures.

**THE SCHOOLS OF THE FUTURE POLICY FRAMEWORK**

**2.2** Around the time of the above reforms, a major educational reform, the *Schools of the Future* program, was initiated by the Government. Under this program, responsibility, authority and accountability for educational outcomes have been devolved from the centralised control of the Department to a system of self management at the local school level. Each school has been provided with a high degree of freedom to focus its energies and creativity on achieving the school’s stated objectives which, in broad terms, are required to be complementary to those of the Government and the Department.



2.3 Chart 2A outlines the *Schools of the Future* policy framework.



Source: Department of Education.

2.4 Chart 2A shows that the *Schools of the Future* policy framework is underpinned by the following 4 key elements:

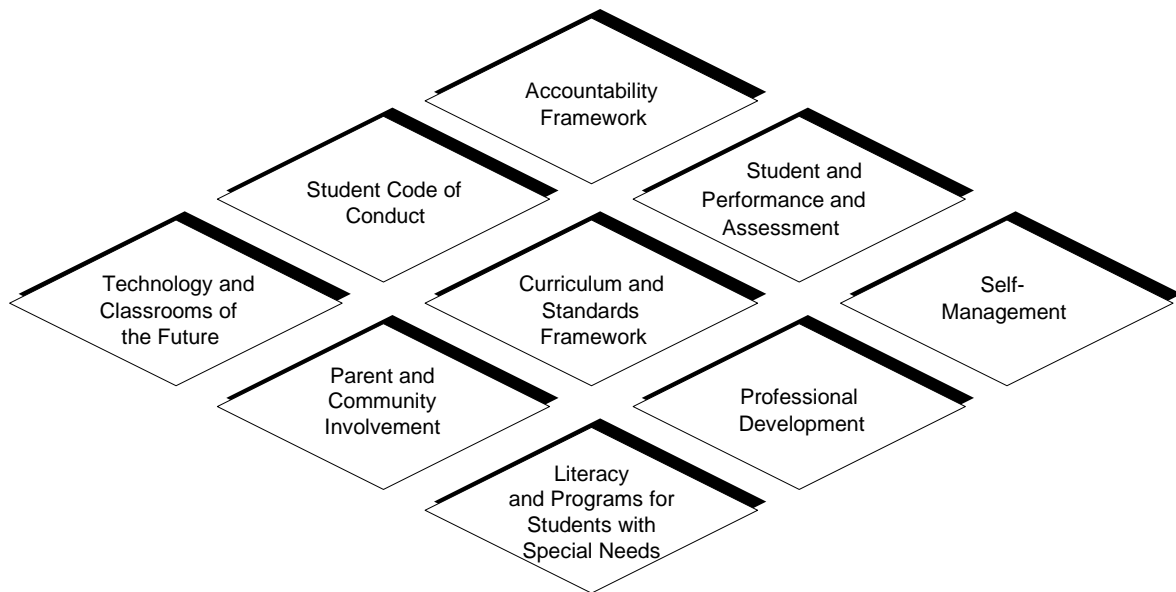
- a *Curriculum Framework*: this framework aims to assign curriculum outcomes to schools which are expected to be achieved by all students;
- a *People Framework*: with the objective of allowing schools to have full staffing flexibility and control over local selection of staff, performance management, professional development and new career structures;
- a *Resources Framework*: under which 90 per cent (\$2.6 billion, 1996-97) of the total recurrent budget for schools is now allocated directly to individual schools and, through the medium of a global budget, aims to provide schools with both flexibility to allocate all resources in accordance with student learning needs and a clear and equitable method of funding; and
- an *Accountability Framework*: which through the introduction of a school charter, an annual school report and a triennial review, schools are required to be more accountable for student learning achievements.

**2.5** The Department’s Corporate Plan for 1996-98 identifies the key education policy objective under the *Schools of the Future* program, as the delivery of high quality school education policy and programs which aim to:

- “provide every child with education and skills to give them the best chance for the future including the need for all students to be literate, numerate, adept at information technology and to have a strong knowledge base;
- staff all schools with gifted and inspirational teachers able to enhance the quest for knowledge and understanding so that young people can prosper and become productive citizens; and
- enhance education opportunities through innovative technologies and wherever appropriate reduce the current emphasis on traditional capital infrastructure with investment in technological infrastructure”.

**2.6** The Department developed 9 strategies, all of which are closely inter-related, to achieve the key objective included in its corporate plan. Chart 2B illustrates these strategies.

**CHART 2B  
NINE STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVEMENT OF KEY EDUCATION POLICY OBJECTIVE  
UNDER SCHOOLS OF THE FUTURE PROGRAM**



Source: Secretary, Department of Education.

**2.7** Through implementation of the above strategies, the *Schools of the Future* program has been progressively introduced across the government school sector, since 1993, comprising around 1 700 schools. Around 300 schools joined the program in January 1994 as Intake 1 schools followed by another 500 in July 1994 as Intake 2 schools. Some 500 schools entered the program in January 1995 as Intake 3 schools and the final group of 400 Intake 4 schools joined in July 1995.

**THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK**

**2.8** Integral to the increased autonomy extended to schools, in August 1994 the Department put in place a framework known as *Quality Assurance in Victorian Schools: An Accountability Framework* to ensure that, as authority and responsibility is devolved to the school level, schools become more accountable to students, staff, parents, the local community, the Government and the wider Victorian community for improved student learning achievements and the overall school performance.

**Key principles of the Framework**

**2.9** The following 5 principles reflect the Accountability Framework:

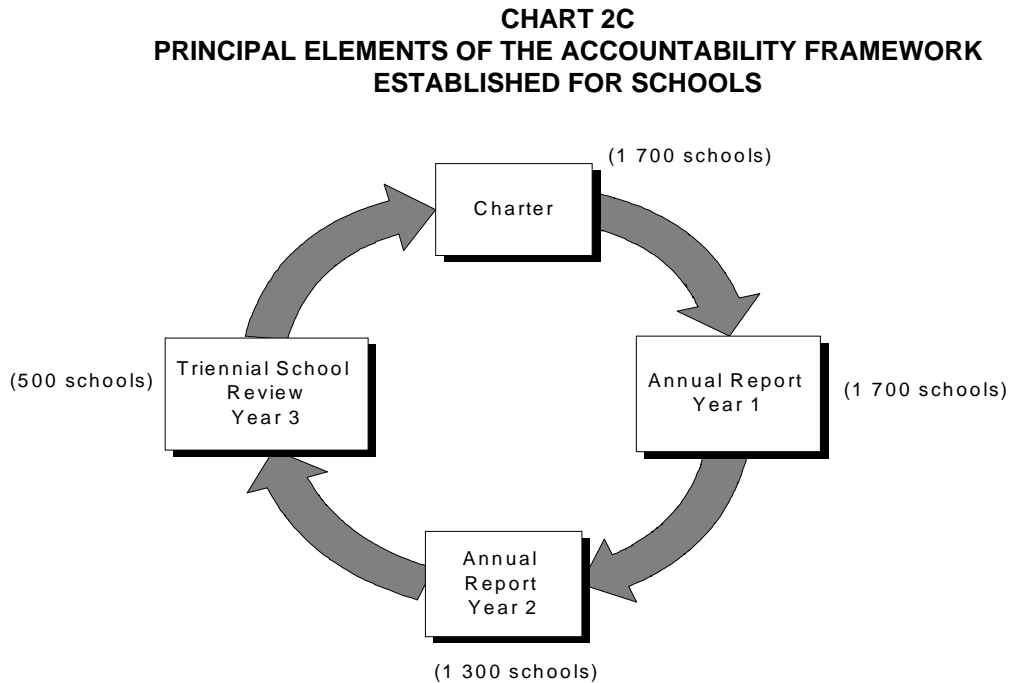
- *Client focus:* the school focus is to be on the needs of major clients, namely students and their parents, specifically to improve standards of achievement for each student;
- *Performance orientation:* emphasising continuous and strategic improvement, rather than focusing simply on compliance with policy and procedures;
- *Ownership and transparency:* processes and targets for improved achievements are expected to be visible and supported equally by both schools and the Department;
- *Integration:* key accountability processes are specifically linked to overall planning, policy and operational activities of the school and the Department; and
- *Commonality:* application of accountability issues to be in a common yet flexible way in all government schools, requiring schools to report on a standard set of measures as well as on school-specific activities.

**Key features of the Framework**

**2.10** The Accountability Framework is aimed at forming an integrated planning, development and reporting package that:

- allows schools to develop their own educational plans and priorities in line with government policies and programs;
- establishes a monitoring and reporting mechanism to enable schools to check on progress and, more particularly, to determine whether they are meeting their objectives;
- analyses a school’s performance against its planned achievements and provides a base for subsequent revision ;
- provides performance information for parents and a school’s local community; and
- constitutes an integral part of the Department’s policy regarding accountability of the school sector.

**2.11** Chart 2C below, shows the principal elements of the Accountability Framework which comprise a school charter, a school annual report and a triennial school review and the stages schools will have reached by December 1997.



Source: Department of Education.

*School charter*

**2.12** The school charter represents a strategic agreement between the principal, the school council responsible for overall school performance, and the Department. Its key function is to outline the school’s statement of purpose and educational goals consistent with both departmental educational policies and local community needs.

**2.13** The charter defines, in terms of measurable achievements, the school’s priority tasks for improvement over a 3 year period and formalises the school’s commitment to improve standards of educational achievement by students in all areas of school life.

*School annual report*

**2.14** All government schools are required to report on their activities through an annual report mechanism. Under the Accountability Framework, the purpose of this report is to:

- provide the Department and local school community with information on both the progress made towards achieving the goals and priorities specified in the school charter and on a set of performance measures common to all schools; and
- establish a record of the school’s performance over a 3 year period as the basis for a triennial school review.

*Triennial school review*

**2.15** A triennial school review is to be conducted at the completion of the 3 year charter and school council president or period and involves an internal school self-assessment, independent verification by an external reviewer engaged by the Department and subsequent development of a new school charter.

**2.16** A panel, which must comprise the principal and school council president or his or her nominee and other members determined by the principal, but typically the assistant principal and curriculum coordinator, is responsible for conducting the self-assessment which involves identifying and analysing trends in the school's achievements over the period using data presented in annual reports.

**2.17** The independent verification process is directed at validating the school's self-assessment and facilitating agreement between the school and the Department regarding the directions for improving performance to be incorporated in the next charter.

**Role of the Department**

*Office of Review*

**2.18** The Department's specific responsibilities in relation to the Accountability Framework are undertaken by its administrative unit, the Office of Review. Key responsibilities of this Office include supporting the Office of Schools (outlined under next heading) by providing:

- school and comparative data on like-school and on a State basis;
- performance reports on individual schools;
- consultancy and policy development support as required;
- access to the expertise and experience of school reviewers;
- training programs in data analysis and interpretation;
- benchmark and other publications regarding school effectiveness and improvement; and
- revised accountability guidelines and policy statements in response to the experience gained over time.

*Office of Schools*

**2.19** The Office of Schools, within the Department is responsible for administering primary and secondary schooling. In relation to the Accountability Framework, the General Managers (regions) in conjunction with Regional Principal Consultants, are responsible for:

- supporting the development of school self-assessments to ensure that the school review is effective;
- ensuring recommendations arising from school reviews are incorporated in individual school charters;
- assisting schools to implement the recommendations arising from school reviews;



- supporting schools to improve their student learning outcomes following the periodic reviews; and
- assuring the effectiveness of the school’s implementation strategies in achieving the intended outcomes of the recommendations.

**Role of the Board of Studies**

**2.20** The Board of Studies, which was established by the Government in June 1993, has an indirect involvement in the Accountability Framework through its role of:

- strengthening curriculum provision in Victoria by ensuring continuity and consistency of standards, study content and skill development in all students from Preparatory (Prep) to Year 12 level;
- ensuring that all students are able to undertake a balanced and challenging curriculum; and
- providing for comprehensive and reliable assessment of student achievements at all levels of schooling.

**2.21** In line with this role, the Board has developed the Curriculum and Standards Framework for Prep to Year 10 students and the Victorian Certificate of Education for Year 11 and 12 students.

**2.22** The Curriculum and Standards Framework, which was introduced in 1995, acts as both an assessment and reporting mechanism. It aims to provide schools with a clear, comprehensive and rigorous framework of curriculum in the 8 key learning areas, namely the Arts, English, Health and Physical Education, Languages other than English, Mathematics, Science, Technology and Studies of Society and Environment, expected to be undertaken by Prep to Year 10 students. The Curriculum and Standards Framework also specifies the standards students are expected to achieve each year in the 8 key learning areas.

**2.23** The Victorian Certificate of Education provides schools with a curriculum for Year 11 and 12 students which, according to the Department, has been revised and re-accredited to international standards.

**2.24** The Board has also developed testing instruments designed to assist schools in assessing student learning achievements. These instruments include the Learning Assessment Project (implemented in 1995) and Victorian Secondary Assessment Monitor (expected to be introduced in 1998) for Prep to Year 10 students and the General Achievement Test and the Common Assessment Task for Year 11 and 12 students. The Board analyses these test results and provides information on the progress of individual students to schools which, in conjunction with teacher assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework, provide the basis for reporting the results to parents. Victorian Certificate of Education results are reported directly to students.

**2.25** Results of student achievements against the Curriculum and Standards Framework and the Victorian Certificate of Education are used as the basis of measuring student learning outcomes under the Accountability Framework.

*Learning Assessment Project*

**2.26** The Learning Assessment Project, a standardised testing instrument, was first introduced in 1995 to assess how all primary school students in Years 3 and 5 were performing against teacher assessments under the Curriculum and Standards Framework. Information gathered through this process is aimed at improving curriculum for individual students and providing schools with more information on student performance to present to parents. Components of the English and Mathematics key learning areas were assessed in 1995 and then repeated in the following year. In 1996, Learning Assessment Project testing was also extended to cover the key learning area of Science.

# **Part 3**

## **Conduct of the audit**



**AUDIT OBJECTIVE**

**3.1** The overall objective of the audit was to assess the effectiveness of the Schools of the Future Accountability Framework as a mechanism for assisting in evaluating and improving school performance, including student learning outcomes. In pursuit of this objective, audit sought to give recognition to initiatives taken by the Department to improve the accountability of schools.

**3.2** Specific attention was directed at assessing whether:

- the initial development of the Framework was based on sound educational research and with input from appropriate expertise;
- mechanisms, tools and measures used in assessing school performance were valid and reliable;
- sufficient and appropriate training and support had been provided by the Department to assist schools in implementing the Framework;
- the expected goals of the Framework have been achieved at a school and Statewide level;
- appropriate evaluation processes were in place for continuous improvement to the Framework especially in terms of assessing its cost effectiveness to ensure that benefits exceed the cost of administering the framework; and
- parents were satisfied with the type and usefulness of information made available on school performance.

**SCOPE OF AUDIT**

**Agencies subject to audit**

*Office of Review, Department of Education*

**3.3** The Office of Review, within the Department of Education, has primary responsibility for the development and implementation of the Accountability Framework. The audit examination within this Office focused on:

- development of the Framework;
- the extent and quality of testing undertaken prior to implementing the Framework;
- the level and type of guidance and support provided to schools to assist in implementation of the Framework;
- the use made of data collected through school annual reports, including the development of benchmarks in relation to particular aspects of school activity which depict the average performance of both schools across the State and like schools;
- analyses of the cost-effectiveness of the accountability process undertaken by schools and the Department; and
- evaluation of outcomes in terms of expected results.

*Primary, secondary and special schools*

**3.4** A representative sample of 76 schools, stratified by location and type of school, covering primary, secondary and special schools located in metropolitan and rural areas of the State, was selected for examination from the total of 175 schools that, at April 1997 had completed their first triennial review required under the Accountability Framework (Intake 1 Schools of the Future). About half of the audit sample comprised schools that participated in a pilot exercise conducted by the Department to trial the school review process. The sampling design enabled results to be extrapolated across all Intake 1 schools.

**3.5** In addition, assuming that the experiences of schools in implementing the Framework are similar in all characteristics, it can be anticipated that like results will be evident in all schools in the State.

**3.6** Audit conducted extensive face-to-face interviews using a structured interview schedule with the school principal to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data, and separately with members of the self-assessment panel, the group responsible for data gathering, analysis and interpretation, using a less structured format at each school. The focus of interviews, which provided rich quantitative and qualitative data, centred on 4 broad areas, namely:

- the impact of the Framework on their school following its implementation;
- the reliability and validity of performance data compiled by individual schools and how it is used;
- training, guidance and support provided by the Department to implement the Framework; and
- issues associated with managing compliance with the requirements of the Framework.

**3.7** The audit covered both the Curriculum and Standards Framework and the Victorian Certificate of Education to the extent that, although they do not form integral elements of the Accountability Framework, the results of student learning achievements obtained through these assessment and testing tools are used as part of the Framework. A full assessment of the effectiveness of the Curriculum and Standards Framework was not conducted in this audit as the magnitude of the task warrants a separate examination.

**3.8** Given that a major Government review of the Victorian Certificate of Education was in progress, matters relating to evaluation of the Certificate were also excluded from the scope of this audit.

**Period covered by the audit**

**3.9** The audit covered the development of the Accountability Framework from August 1994 and its subsequent implementation up to June 1997. Any significant developments beyond this date have been acknowledged by audit.

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**Compliance with auditing standards**

**3.10** The audit was performed in accordance with Australian Auditing Standards applicable to performance audits and accordingly included such tests and other procedures considered necessary in the circumstances.

<b>SPECIALIST ASSISTANCE</b>
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**3.11** Specialist assistance was provided to audit by Professor Barry McGaw, Director, Australian Council for Educational Research. Specific advice included:

- assessing the soundness, reliability and validity of existing performance measures, and other tools currently used by the Department for assessing school performance;
- comment on the Curriculum and Standards Framework, in particular, in terms of evaluating its soundness in assessing student learning outcomes, the reliability and validity of teacher monitoring and assessment of student progress and full population testing such as the Learning Assessment Project; and
- identifying alternative measures, tools and models for assessing the effectiveness of school performance, particularly in terms of student learning outcomes.

**3.12** Professor McGaw has over 30 years experience in the education sector as a teacher and a researcher, and participated on a number of committees across Australia. He has recently completed a review of the New South Wales Higher School Certificate which included preparation of a *Government Green Paper*.

**3.13** Specialist advice was also obtained from Mr Neil Day of the Centre for Program Evaluation, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. This advice assisted in the design of the school sampling frame and school interview schedules. Assistance was also provided with school data analysis and interpretation.

**3.14** Mr Day has extensive experience both in Australia and overseas as a senior lecturer and in education research and evaluation, large scale social and political survey studies, health program evaluation, and labour market research. Mr Day has particular expertise in survey design, administration and analysis and in the application of computers to survey work.



**3.15** A market research firm, Quadrant Research Services (Vic) Pty Ltd., was engaged by audit to conduct a survey of parents and provide analysis of the results. Details of the survey are set out in Chart 3A.

**CHART 3A  
SURVEY OF PARENTS, JUNE, 1997**

Purpose of survey	To identify the level of parental satisfaction with the type and usefulness of information made available by their school on its performance.
Survey method	A telephone survey method was chosen as the most cost and time effective method of obtaining both qualitative and quantitative information.
Survey population	The survey covered 900 parents selected at random from a sample of 76 schools included in the audit examination. Around 1 800 contact telephone calls were made from 3 June 1997 to 5 July 1997 to achieve the 900 interviews, including a proportion to arrange appropriate callback times.
Profile of respondents	The survey targeted parents with children who had been attending their present school for at least 2 years.

**Other assistance provided to audit**

**3.16** During the course of the audit, discussions were also held with other relevant agencies including interstate and overseas education agencies, the Victorian Primary and Secondary Principals Associations, the Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), the Victorian Parents' Association, the Association of State Schools' Councils in Victoria and the Victorian Council of State Schools Organisations. In addition, an extensive literature review of both current national and international research was conducted.

# **Part 4**

## **Measuring school and system performance**

## OVERVIEW

**4.1** The Department of Education is to be complimented for establishing the Accountability Framework which was introduced in August 1994 to support its *Schools of the Future* program.

**4.2** For the purpose of measuring the performance of government schools and the education system as a whole in relation to the key objective of the *Schools of the Future* program, the Accountability Framework includes a range of performance measures. These measures, which are linked to the key goals for schools, broadly cover student learning achievements, the organisational health of a school as viewed by its teachers and parent opinion of the quality of education delivery.

**4.3** With a view to contributing to the important theme of continuous improvement, audit found that scope exists for the Department to improve the reliability and usefulness of performance measures relating to student learning achievements, school environment, staff management, and quality of education delivery.

**4.4** The Department also needs to direct attention to measuring non-academic goals of education such as the social and cultural development of students, good citizenship, work preparedness, student wellbeing and school efficiency. In considering these goals, the Department needs to ensure the provision of a quality education service is at a cost which is affordable to the community.

**4.5** In terms of evaluating student learning achievements, the current approach could be significantly improved by measuring value-added. This should involve assessing the direct contribution a school has made to student learning by removing the effects attributable to factors external to the school environment which impact on student learning, including the level of intelligence of the student, peer group influences and socio-economic factors. Although measuring value-added is costly and technically complex, the Department should continue undertaking appropriate research with the view to incorporating this feature in the Accountability Framework. When implemented, the Department will be in a stronger position to conclude with confidence on the performance of individual schools and the system as a whole.

**4.6** It was also encouraging to find that the Department has been progressively developing benchmarks, in the form of statewide and *like-school* averages, to complement each performance measure. As the range and sophistication of benchmarks, including the accuracy and usefulness of the underlying data from school annual reports, are further developed, schools will have a greater capacity to compare their performance relative to other schools. This will also assist the Department in substantially improving its monitoring of both individual school and system performance.

**4.7** While the Department's 1997-98 annual report is likely to include aggregated information on school performance measures as reported in school annual reports, it will not include student achievement data, a key measure of student learning, in the overall assessment of system performance. Consideration should be given by the Department to reporting against the measures recommended by the Productivity Commission, including the key measure on student learning achievements.



**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The development of the Accountability Framework was in part a response to the findings of the Commission of Audit in 1992 that the school system lacked any external mechanisms to ensure that the performance of students and schools could be compared with other schools both here in Victoria and elsewhere.*

*The framework combines the strengths of previous frameworks that relied on school self-evaluation with a rigorous external component and a regime of commonly accepted performance measures.*

*The Department of Education will monitor and continuously improve the framework to serve its twin purposes:*

- *accountability for performance based on a rigorous assessment of the achievements of the school using a common set of indicators; and*
- *improvement orientation built into the three tools of the framework (school charter, annual report and school review).*

<b>KEY MEASURES FOR ASSESSING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE</b>
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**4.8** In line with the evaluative role of the Accountability Framework, schools are now required to collect a range of data to assist in assessing their performance in meeting the goals and priorities detailed in the school charter. These data together with school performance assessments are included in both annual and self-assessment reports prepared by schools and are used by the Department in assessing system performance.

**4.9** Data collected for the purpose of measuring school and system performance should be accurate, complete, reliable and valid, ensuring that baseline data, including the development of benchmarks, against which to measure changes in performance over time (longitudinal) are also reliable and valid. It is important that critical performance measures are identified as early as possible in the process and that such measures remain stable as far as practical in the short to medium-term. Substantial modification of measures on a continuous basis will ultimately affect baseline data and impact adversely on the ability of the Department and schools to subsequently measure changes in performance effectively.

**4.10** The Department has introduced a set of performance indicators as part of the Accountability Framework, common to all government schools, which are used to measure system and individual school performance. The indicators, which are linked to the key goals for schools, set out in the school charter, and ultimately with improvements in student learning outcomes, are required to be presented in an annual report in the form of achievement measures. The achievement measures required under each of the key goals include:

- *Student learning achievements:* statements about the level of student learning achievements under the Curriculum and Standards Framework and the Victorian Certificate of Education for Years 11 and 12 and retention levels of students;
- *Curriculum:* time allocated to each of the 8 key learning areas, participation of boys and girls in secondary school curriculum and parent views of the quality of curriculum delivery;



- *Environment*: student attendance, parent views of the school environment and accident data;
- *Accountability*: parent perceptions of student reports, and student enrolments and student exit and destination data;
- *Management*: professional development undertaken by staff, views of staff on the quality of school management systems and frequency of non-certificated staff absence; and
- *Resources*: statement of annual financial result and the school's total receipts and expenditure.

**4.11** The goals included in the school charter are also directed at measuring equity and access for priority groups including students of non-English speaking background, students with disabilities and Koorie students.

**4.12** The departmental broad goals of school education reflect the common and agreed national goals for schooling established under a 1989 agreement between the Australian, State and Territory Governments.

**Specific performance measures established by the Department**

**4.13** Audit examined the performance measures relating to the 6 key goals for schools, which are required to be reported in the annual report of each school, with a view to assessing their usefulness in terms of measuring school and system performance. Data to support a number of the measures are derived from teacher and parent opinion surveys which are discussed separately in this Part of the Report.

*Student learning achievements*

**4.14** Student learning achievements for the compulsory years of schooling, Prep to Year 10, are primarily measured by schools through assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework. For Year 11 and 12 students, learning achievements are measured through assessments under the Victorian Certificate of Education and, from 1998, course availability and completion rates for vocational education and training programs in schools.

**4.15** Commencing in 1996, for the first time, the Department required schools to report against the Curriculum and Standards Framework on the achievements of students from Prep to Year 10 in English and Mathematics, 2 of the 8 key learning areas.

**4.16** Information on student achievements is designed to assist the Department in formulating benchmarks, which are discussed in detail later in this Part of the Report.

**4.17** Although this measure is considered by audit to be relevant and appropriate, the data supporting assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework are not yet fully reliable. Specifically, as these assessments of student learning achievements constitute a new process for teachers, it is understandable that such assessments are not at this stage consistently applied or interpreted across and within schools.



**4.18** This view is consistent with earlier research, in 1995, commissioned by the Board of Studies. The research report, *Responses to the Curriculum and Standards Framework: An illuminative analysis*, which was released in 1996, concluded that “teacher assessments of student learning achievements against the Curriculum and Standards Framework levels were subjective and possibly inconsistent [unreliable], and warned that using this data to judge system-level performance was not desirable.”



*Curriculum and Standards Framework material developed by the Board of Studies to assist teachers.*

**4.19** Recent evidence gathered by audit through school interviews during May and June 1997 identified that, 2 years after the Board of Studies research, almost half of the principals and approximately 28 per cent of self-assessment panels indicated there was still a lack of confidence in assessing student learning achievements against the Curriculum and Standards Framework.

**4.20** Specialist advice provided to audit drew attention to research by the Australian Council for Educational Research which identified inconsistencies in teacher assessments of student learning achievements against the Curriculum and Standards Framework. The subsequent work by the Council for the *National School English Literacy Survey* (1997) showed that, with extensive training, teachers could provide assessments that are comparable across schools.



**4.21** Specialist advice also indicated that care should be taken when comparing results from the Victorian Certificate of Education. Comparisons of results across schools in subjects other than English, which is taken by virtually all students, are not straightforward because schools' enrolment policies influence the kinds of students taking each subject. Comparisons across subject areas are also problematic because of enrolment differences. Some subjects are taken by high performing groups of students and others by those that are less gifted.

*Assessing the reliability of student achievement data*

**4.22** Comparisons of student learning achievements by primary schools using the Curriculum and Standards Framework and the Learning Assessment Project results provide some evidence of consistency in interpretation and application of the Curriculum and Standards Framework across and within schools.

**4.23** Such comparisons are limited as the Learning Assessment Project does not test all of the 8 key learning areas in any one year nor does it test all year levels of students. Audit recognises the enormity of the task of measuring all areas and that this represents an important starting point from which assessments will need to be progressively extended to cover all key learning areas.

**4.24** At this stage, a reliable testing instrument equivalent to the Learning Assessment Project is not available to check on the reasonableness of Year 7 to 10 Curriculum and Standards Framework assessments of student learning. The Department envisages such a testing instrument will be in place in schools in 1998. Until a reliable testing instrument for Years 7 and 10 is developed, the Department will not have assurance, in audit opinion, that teacher assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework are reasonable.

**4.25** The Department advised audit that it is actively working with the Board of Studies to assist schools in using Learning Assessment Project results to assess the reliability of student assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework. This comparison is particularly critical, in audit's view, as it will provide schools with some evidence of whether they are using the Curriculum and Standards Framework in a consistent manner.

**4.26** Specialist advice provided to audit indicated that comparisons conducted by the Office of Review showed that students' results on tests used in the Learning Assessment Project were more widely spread across the distribution range than they were in teacher assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework. Teachers report performances closer to what the Curriculum and Standards Framework sets as the common expectations for students in a particular Year level than do the Learning Assessment Project results. It is not possible to compare the results from the 2 sources, as opposed to the spread of results, since the Office of Review has compared the December 1996 school assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework of students in Years 2 and 4 with the March 1997 test results under the Learning Assessment Project of students in Years 3 and 5.



**4.27** Audit considers the Department needs to re-assess whether the use of equivalent sets of data is essential when comparing results of student assessments against the Curriculum and Standards Framework and testing under the Learning Assessment Project to produce valid and reliable results.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*Reporting student achievements in the Accountability Framework has moved as rapidly as possible. The Curriculum and Standards Framework was first introduced to schools in March 1995. It was necessary for this framework to be in place before a school performance assessment regime could be developed. School annual reports contained student achievement data using the Curriculum and Standards Framework for the first time in 1996. This establishes base line information against which time series analysis can be undertaken in future years.*

*Triennial school reviews have for the first time considered student achievement data using the Curriculum and Standards Framework in 1997. Schools acknowledge that greater familiarity with the Curriculum and Standards Framework will further improve teacher assessments of student progress.*

**Curriculum**

**4.28** Schools are required to report on the following 3 measures developed by the Department to monitor the effectiveness of curriculum provision by schools:

- time allocated to each of the 8 key learning areas;
- participation of boys and girls in secondary school curriculum; and
- parent perceptions of the quality of curriculum delivery as indicated in responses to survey questions on the quality of teaching and academic rigour. (refer later paragraphs on parent opinion survey).

**4.29** Although the more time spent by schools in any of the 8 key learning areas is likely to impact positively on student learning, the total amount of time available in the school week is essentially fixed. An increase in one area is necessarily traded off against a decrease in another area. Specialist advice provided to audit indicated that the time allocation measure is currently unreliable in the case of primary schools since they generally regard their curriculum as integrated in that it does not focus on specific components of the 8 key learning areas at separate times. In this circumstance, primary schools tend simply to report time allocations in line with those recommended by the Department. Secondary schools, on the other hand, build their time allocations into their time tables.

**4.30** This problem was raised by one-fifth (21 per cent) of primary schools interviewed by audit. Audit considers that a solution may be to have primary schools undertake a more detailed survey of actual time allocations within a particular period of say 2 weeks to a month, by having teachers keep a diary of activities classified by a key learning area.

**4.31** Participation of boys and girls in secondary school curriculum is a useful measure as it can provide valuable information on equity and access matters, in addition to subsequently balancing any such inequities through revised policies and programs.

School environment

**4.32** Student attendance and accidents, and parent views on the school environment (refer later paragraphs on parent opinion survey) are used for assessing the school’s performance in ensuring both the physical and emotional safety of students.

**4.33** While these measures may provide some indication of the safety of a school’s environment, audit considers the measures need to be more broadly focused. For example, the point at which the level of student absences or accidents impacts negatively on student learning has not been identified by the Department.

**4.34** Specialist advice provided to audit suggests that while investigating the correlation between the measures of a safe school environment and student achievement is worthwhile, it is unlikely that the link between the 2 will be very high.

**4.35** Audit considers that there are other more important factors that impact on a safe school environment, such as the level of student harassment, the potential for student access to drugs, rates of suicide in the school, or the physical condition of school buildings and facilities. Consideration could be given to obtaining the perceptions of students on school safety through a survey.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*Parents have a right to expect that their children will be educated in a safe and secure environment. The level of student accidents is thus a measure of safety that all schools must monitor. Clearly the link between student attendance and student achievement is that students must be at school if they are to learn and achieve. From 1998 a student survey will be progressively introduced into the monitoring regimes of all schools.*

Accountability

**4.36** Accountability relates to the school’s performance in informing parents about the educational progress of students and in identifying its success in equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary for successful transition to further study or the workplace. Three measures are used by the Department for this purpose namely:

- parent perception of the value of student reports (refer later paragraphs on parent opinion survey);
- enrolments; and
- student exit and destination data.

**4.37** The measure for enrolments is critical for planning purposes and in assisting assessments of school efficiency such as identifying student staff ratios, staff expenditure per student and capital expenditure per student.



**4.38** The destinations of students who leave school from the end of Year 10 or onwards is a measure utilised only by secondary schools. Audit considers this measure is relevant and appropriate provided the information collected is accurate and current. During school interviews, audit found that in fact over 90 per cent of schools did not update their information in this area. Audit was advised by the Department that in an attempt to ensure that student exit data was accurate, schools will now be requested to collect this data at the end of the school year rather than in August.

*Management*

**4.39** Three measures are utilised to assess the school’s management systems and its organisational health;

- professional development undertaken by teachers;
- teacher views (refer later paragraphs on teacher opinion survey) on the quality of management systems in the school; and
- rates of non-certificated teacher sick leave.

**4.40** Information on the level of teacher professional development activity does not, in audit view, constitute a valid measure since it counts only time spent in professional development away from school ignoring mentoring and a whole variety of school-based activities. It also gives no indication of the impact on professional practice or student learning. Audit considers it would not be appropriate for the Department to specify the type and volume of study which it thinks would be conducive to enhancing teacher professional practice, since that kind of decision has been devolved to schools to enable them to take account of their own particular needs. Schools’ reports on professional development could include, not only the amount of time spent on the activity, but also the form, content or impact of the activity on teacher practice as assessed by the school.

**4.41** Monitoring non-certificated sick leave of teachers is not considered by audit to be particularly useful unless supplemented with certificated sick leave and other types of classroom absences to provide a more comprehensive picture of type and reasons for leave. The Department would also need to identify the level at which staff absence from classroom teaching duties adversely impacts on student learning outcomes.

**□ RESPONSE** *provided by Secretary, Department of Education*

*From 1998 the Staff Opinion survey will monitor teacher opinion of the impact of professional development.*

*The monitoring of non certificated sick leave is regarded as a secondary indicator of school morale. The CASES Management Information System (CMIS) provides schools with reports that display both certificated and non certificated leave.*

*Resources*

**4.42** As an interim measure, until the Department completes further research on how best to report school financial data, a summary of the schools receipts, payments and carried forward cash balances is used to indicate the efficient and effective use of resources.

## Teacher and parent opinions

**4.43** The Department initiated 2 important opinion surveys to collect information in respect of certain measures relating to school management and school performance (covered in preceding paragraphs). Audit considers the introduction of teacher and parent surveys is a good initiative as they have the potential to provide useful information from those responsible for providing educational services and the consumers of those services. The Department has developed extensive guidelines and survey instruments to assist schools to conduct these annual surveys of the 2 key stakeholder groups.

**4.44** Although both teacher and parent survey instruments assist in the collection of qualitative data, the Department has not demonstrated a clear link between survey results and ultimately, improvements in student learning outcomes.

**4.45** Other factors known as confounding variables may influence survey responses, e.g. the time when the survey is administered, resourcing issues faced by the school or the results of teacher performance assessment could affect the response given by the teacher or parent and in turn the validity of the survey results.

### *Teacher opinion survey*

**4.46** The teacher opinion survey, known as the *School Organisational Health Survey* was first introduced in 1994. The survey aims to obtain teacher views of the organisational health of the school in relation to:

- satisfaction with the work environment;
- morale;
- shared values in teaching and learning;
- leadership support provided by the principal; and
- the sharing of professional ideas.

**4.47** Anonymity of responses is seen by the Department as integral to obtaining open and honest responses from teachers. In this regard, the *Staff Opinion User Guide*, issued to schools by the Department recognises this potential problem for small schools and offers a workable alternative suggesting these schools use the survey instrument as a basis for discussion with teachers.

**4.48** Given that teacher opinions are benchmarked, allowing schools to use other alternative techniques would pose problems in terms of consistency or comparability of data. The Department acknowledges that to date it has been difficult to establish benchmarks for small schools in relation to teacher opinions.

**4.49** Audit considers that the teacher opinion survey instrument, developed by Dr Peter Hart, University of Melbourne, has a sound theoretical base and is user friendly. The aggregated results of the teacher opinion surveys conducted by schools are benchmarked by the Department with the aim of measuring a range of items including changes in levels of morale as indicators of effective school management.



**4.50** The survey instrument does not measure the negative aspects of stress, that is distress. Audit considers this would be a useful additional indicator of organisational health as a person's morale is independent of their level of stress. Specifically, a high morale does not necessarily mean a low level of stress.

*□ RESPONSE provided by Secretary, Department of Education*

*The full staff survey instrument has a scale to measure stress. This survey is available in all schools. The Department will monitor the level of its use during 1998 and review its effectiveness as a possible measure in this area.*

*Parent opinion survey*

**4.51** The parent opinion survey seeks views on the:

- quality of teaching in the school;
- academic rigour in the school's curriculum;
- quality of the school's reporting of its progress;
- overall management of the school's environment; and
- school's responsiveness to parents as its clients and the level of general satisfaction with the school.

**4.52** The parent survey was introduced into schools by the Department in March 1995 and is conducted annually using a representative sample of parents.

**4.53** Audit considers that although the parent survey instrument, developed by the Department, is a well validated structure covering a range of aspects concerning school performance, it assumes parents have a wide knowledge of the complexity of teaching and learning. In this regard, audit is not convinced parents would necessarily be in a position to provide meaningful responses to statements seeking to assess the academic rigour or quality of teaching within their school. For example, for a parent to be able to realistically respond to a statement asking whether their child's teachers are committed and enthusiastic in their approach to teaching would, in audit opinion, require them to observe the performance of teachers in the classroom on a regular basis.

**4.54** School data gathered by audit identified that surveys were generally administered by office staff who had no formal training in conducting such surveys. In audit opinion, the use of such staff has the potential to adversely impact on the quality of survey results in terms of accuracy and reliability of data gathered. In addition, audit considers checks and balances, such as rotation of responsibilities of officers involved in administering surveys and independent cross-checking, need to be put in place by schools. Schools also need to ensure that the Department's instructions detailed in the *Parent Opinion User Guide* are adhered to by those staff responsible for administering surveys and that the data gathered and analysed is entered into the computer accurately.

**4.55** The Department does not develop either statewide or *like-school* benchmarks from the parent survey data as there is no assurance that the survey questions would be understood in the same way by parents in different schools. Audit considers it would be useful if the Department developed specific strategies to improve parental understanding of survey questions.



**4.56** The Department should give consideration to developing and administering a statewide parent opinion survey, which facilitates benchmarking, and provides data for monitoring any changes in parent satisfaction levels in relation to school performance. To avoid potential duplication of effort and cost, the survey should be designed to provide information which would be of benefit to individual schools removing the requirement for schools to conduct their own surveys.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The Department's parent opinion survey does not assume parents have a detailed knowledge of the academic rigour or quality of teaching in a school. These terms are not used in the survey questionnaire. Specific questions are related to parent perceptions about such things as the degree to which teachers are able to motivate and challenge their children. These questions are then combined into scores indicating the perceptions of parents about the teaching and learning programs in the school.*

*The Department believes the value of the parent opinion survey is its usefulness to the local school. A statewide survey would not provide any benefits and feedback to each school. It is possible to derive a clear indication of the perceptions parents have of government schools generally through analysis of a representative sample of individual school parent opinion survey results.*

**Longitudinal survey of principals**

**4.57** The Department, in conjunction with the Victorian Primary and Secondary Principals Associations and Melbourne University, initiated a study (*Co-operative Research Project*) involving a series of 6 surveys over 5 years commencing in 1993. The purpose of the study was to monitor the perceptions of school principals, primarily on their level of confidence in the attainment of a range of objectives pertaining to the *Schools of the Future* program, including:

- any benefits that have been realised to date, encompassing overall benefits of the Schools of the Future;
- improvements in areas of the school charter;
- professional development for teachers;
- full staffing flexibility and workforce planning;
- school global budget;
- the Accountability Framework; and
- the Curriculum and Standards Framework.

**4.58** The results of the most recent survey, conducted during 1996, and published in March 1997, indicated that “principals were generally satisfied with the various measures required to be presented in the school annual report”. The highest level of satisfaction was for those items associated with financial data and the lowest satisfaction for items relating to student learning.





**4.59** Measures with high levels of expressed satisfaction included professional development, student exit and destination data, parent opinion survey and participation rates of secondary students in the curriculum. Those measures with which principals expressed low levels of satisfaction were enrolment data, staff attendance, accident data and curriculum time allocations.

**Measuring the non-academic aspects of school performance**

**4.60** Under a 1989 agreement between the Australian, State and Territory Governments, the respective Ministers responsible for schooling formulated 10 common and agreed national goals for schooling in Australia which were to form the basis of the specific objectives of each State and Territory education system. These broad-ranging goals cover both academic and non-academic aspects of student learning, including cultural and social development, student wellbeing, the development of good citizenship, and work preparedness.

**4.61** Audit considers that while it is appropriate that the Department has commenced with the academic aspects of learning in assessing school performance, attention should also be given to the full range of goals of school education, including welfare, social and cultural development. The Department has not yet developed performance indicators to measure the achievement of these equally important aspects of school education.

**4.62** Results from school interviews conducted by audit identified that some principals considered the current reporting requirements did not adequately address the non-academic aspects of learning. This view was also evident in the results of the *Cooperative Research Project (6th survey)*, with principals expressing a low level of confidence in the capacity of their school to report on unique aspects of school activities not covered by the annual report guidelines.

**4.63** Audit considers that most of these non-academic aspects could be assessed as a learning achievement against the Curriculum and Standards Framework, such as through a *study of society* learning area, as is the case in the Western Australian education system. However, given that this approach is limited in that it predominantly measures academic skills, it would also be appropriate, in audit opinion, to encourage schools to report to both the Department and their school community in a narrative form.

**4.64** To obtain a system view of these aspects of learning, the Department would need to aggregate, analyse and interpret such information at a system-level.

**4.65** Assessments made of school performance should also guard against placing too much emphasis on those indicators of school activities which can be readily measured. Such emphasis results in goal displacement if the school concentrates on the more easily measurable indicators of its operations to the detriment of equally or more important goals.



**4.66** While recognising the complexities of measuring the less quantifiable aspects of learning in such areas as cultural learning, student welfare and work preparedness, audit considers that the Accountability Framework needs to be expanded to include these aspects. Until they are measured, reporting on school and system performance will, to this extent, be limited. The Department could initially work with a selection of schools to identify and develop appropriate indicators specific to these areas of learning for use in all schools within the State.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The Audit finding does not take into account the way in which schools in their charters set goals related to:*

- *the expected level of student achievement;*
- *provision of curriculum;*
- *welfare of students; and*
- *management of staff.*

*The performance measures in the annual report and triennial review monitor the achievement of these goals.*

*Parent perception, student attendance, retention, accidents and destination data all indicate the success of schools in meeting the broader goals of schooling. These measures are designed in combination with school based measures to indicate the broader achievements of students and schools.*

*The Department believes that student achievement in the key learning areas of English and Mathematics is a necessary and essential component in understanding school performance and that other measures complement and reinforce this measure.*

*The trialling of a student survey during 1998 will also assist in monitoring both academic and non academic aspects of schooling.*

**Additional performance measures for schools**

**4.67** Given that scope exists to improve some of the existing performance measures, audit considers the inclusion of certain other measures would provide a more comprehensive view of school performance in the context of the objectives established for the *Schools of the Future* program.



**4.68** With this in mind, additional performance measures for schools could include:

- *Efficiency measures (unit costing on an accrual basis):* From a strategic viewpoint, in developing the policy objectives for the *Schools of the Future* program or subsequent related programs, the Department should consider whether the concept of efficiency needs to be built into the program objectives and Accountability Framework. In this context it is important to assess school efficiency by identifying, for example, the unit cost of service delivery such as teacher/student ratios, teacher expenditure per student and capital expenditure per student. Efficiency information could be substantially enhanced if it was based on an accrual rather than cash basis of accounting as the former system reports operating costs more accurately. Audit acknowledges the introduction of accrual-based accounting would present a substantial challenge for the Department and individual schools and therefore should be viewed as an essential long-term goal;
- *Teacher performance:* Current research on school effectiveness undertaken by Melbourne University as part of the on-going *Quality Schools Research Project*, funded by the Department, has concluded that teachers are the most important factor in improving student learning outcomes. The Department should, in conjunction with the relevant teacher representative bodies and schools, explore avenues for developing and utilising meaningful information on teacher performance;
- *Analysis of data on learning achievements correlated with other performance measures such as student absenteeism and accident data:* As stated earlier in this Part of the Report, schools should consider analysing student achievement data against other performance measures to identify the level at which student absences or accidents adversely impacts on student learning; and
- *Analysis of qualitative data concerning a range of areas including socio-cultural aspects of learning, student welfare, wellbeing and self-esteem:* The Department could work with a selection of schools to identify and develop appropriate measures specific to these non-academic areas of learning for use by all schools within the State.

**4.69** As part of the ongoing development of the Accountability Framework, the relevance and appropriateness of the school performance indicators described above should be regularly evaluated and revised where appropriate, particularly in relation to their link with the key objective of improving student learning outcomes.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The Office of Review has consistently sought feedback from schools on the measurement of performance. The Guidelines for School Annual Reports have been updated for 1998 following extensive consultation. School performance measures are subject to ongoing trialling, revision and improvement. A student survey and a more comprehensive staff opinion survey have been provided to all schools for 1998.*

*In considering the introduction of new performance measures, the Department will monitor the usefulness of proposed measures and their potential impact on the workload of schools.*

**Benchmarking performance across schools**

*Developing benchmarks*

**4.70** In addition to the range of performance measures developed to assist in assessing school performance, the Department is progressively formulating benchmarks to complement each of these measures. Benchmarks are formulated using aggregated data presented in school annual reports and effectively represent the average statewide school performance for the particular performance measure.



*Benchmark information kit issued to schools by the Department of Education.*

**4.71** The development of benchmarks fulfils several important functions in performance monitoring and improvement and enables:

- the Department to monitor the performance of government schools over time to identify and target support requirements and programs efficiently;
- schools to identify their current levels of performance; and
- schools to plan and implement improvement strategies based on an understanding of comparative strengths and weaknesses.

**4.72** As benchmarking becomes more sophisticated, the Department envisages it will enable schools to undertake comparisons of current and past performance and with other government schools in the State and their performance relative to schools with similar population characteristics. The Department expects that both national and international benchmarks will be available in the near future.



**4.73** To date the Department has developed 4 sets of benchmarks namely, student achievement for Prep to Year 10, student achievement for Years 11 and 12, student retention rates for Years 11 and 12, and school management, including teacher views, student absences and accidents.

**4.74** Although audit recognises the achievements of the Department in developing and implementing a benchmarking framework, areas where further improvements can be made are detailed below:

- Some schools interviewed by audit reported having to use benchmarks which were based on 1995 data. It is important that benchmarks are current as outdated benchmarks influence the reliability of assessment of both school and system performance;
- Specialist advice provided to audit indicated benchmarks should be developed through statewide representative samples of schools, including *like-school* groupings (refer later paragraphs in this Part of the Report) to provide a reliable basis for schools to compare their performance;
- To date, the Department has developed and made available Statewide, *like school* and school achievement benchmarks in some components of Mathematics and English. According to the Department, benchmarks in all other key learning areas will be developed some time in the future. Audit specialist advice suggests that it would be useful to expand the range of key learning areas on which schools report, in line with the Learning Assessment Project which tests English and Mathematics each year and one other on a cyclical basis. The testing of Science was introduced in 1996;
- To date there is insufficient system-level longitudinal data as the existing benchmarks only reflect the statewide average, or *like-school* average, rather than best practice or performance improvement targets. Because the existing benchmark data only represents a statewide average, according to the audit specialist it would be better described as baseline data rather than a benchmark. Baseline data provides the Department with a point of comparison to monitor any changes in school performance over time; and
- Statewide and *like-school* retention rate benchmarks for Years 11 to 12 may be based on inaccurate student numbers given that adjustments are not made for students migrating into or out of Victoria. Audit considers that, until a more accurate method of recording student enrolment numbers is developed, retention rate benchmarks will not be accurate.

**4.75** Since the introduction of performance measures under the Accountability Framework in 1994, trend analyses data is now emerging. Comparisons of schools undertaken by the Department using existing benchmarks has already demonstrated the benefits that can flow to individual schools through performance comparisons with other schools. However, due to doubts surrounding the reliability of some of the data used to establish the benchmarks, such comparisons should be interpreted with a degree of caution.

*Defining like-school groupings*

**4.76** The Department has developed a concept of *like-schools* which defines and groups those schools whose populations exhibit similar characteristics enabling such schools to compare their performance with other similar schools by using benchmarks. Data relating to student learning achievements is presented by the Department in 9 categories of schools according to socio-economic and language composition of the school's population.

**4.77** Criteria for defining *like-school* groupings are based on the student learning index which was developed in 1994 by the Department, primarily for supplementing resources to students identified as being *at risk*. *Like-school* groupings are primarily based on 2 criteria, namely the proportion of students receiving the *Educational Maintenance Allowance*, a government subsidy for parents with low incomes, and the proportion of students speaking a *language other than English* at home.

**4.78** In audit opinion, the use of *like-school* groupings is a positive initiative introduced by the Department as it has the potential to provide a more accurate and robust basis for comparing school performance. Audit considers that the existing criteria for defining *like-school* groupings could be expanded as the full spectrum of educational needs such as culture and values of individual schools, parental educational background, family structure, origins and history of the school are not covered in the definition. This view is supported by the majority of schools interviewed by audit.

**4.79** While recognising it may not be practical or cost-effective to gather most of this additional information, audit considers the inclusion of information on parental educational background would improve the *like-school* grouping criteria.

**4.80** The Department advised audit that it recognises that the *like-school* groupings criteria can be further enhanced. In this regard it intends to test parent occupation and family structure in terms of increasing the criteria used.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The Benchmarks 96 series of publications using a like-school framework has been widely accepted by schools in Victoria and has sparked significant interest from a large number of other school systems. The use of Education Maintenance Allowance and Non English Speaking Backgrounds of students have proven to be robust indicators for the purpose of differentiating school population characteristics.*

*The like-school framework will be further developed so that the performance of groups and cohorts of students can be monitored over a period of time*

*The Department believes that the method of presenting data to schools used in the Benchmark 96 series does establish school performance standards and encourages individual schools to set challenging targets.*

**Measuring the contribution schools make to student learning**

*Estimating the value-added*

**4.81** National and international educational research literature examined by audit consistently acknowledged that measuring student learning outcomes and in turn the effectiveness of a school is an extremely difficult and complex task. Although the area has been researched internationally for over 30 years, to date the education community has not formulated definitive conclusions or reached general agreement on the best method of measuring learning outcomes.

**4.82** One approach adopted for measuring the effectiveness of government schools in the United Kingdom and in some parts of the United States of America involves measuring a school’s direct contribution to student learning. There are proposals to use the approach in New South Wales. This approach is commonly known as value-adding.

**4.83** The concept of value-added is defined as the unique contribution of the school to students’ learning. Estimating value-added involves removing that component of student learning that can be attributed to factors other than the school, such as a student’s socio-economic background, intelligence level and home environment.

**4.84** The overwhelming consensus in the literature examined by audit is that calculation of value-added is complex but critical in assessing the actual value education adds to student learning.

*Developments in measuring value-added in Victoria*

**4.85** In audit opinion, comparisons of school performance on the basis of the achievement levels of their students, as is the case under the Accountability Framework, are not fully reliable because factors external to the school such as socio-economic and demographic factors, peer group influences or intelligence level of a student can also influence learning achievements. For example, a student with high intelligence may achieve high levels of learning irrespective of the quality of the school environment. Comparisons of school performance on the basis of student academic achievements are only reliable when valid baseline data relating to the student’s learning capabilities at the point of entry into a school are available and value-added estimates are accurately calculated.

**4.86** Although many schools interviewed by audit recognised the benefits of measuring value-added, audit acknowledges that at this point in time neither sufficient data nor adequate testing tools are available for the Department and schools to reliably measure value-added.



**4.87** Audit understands that in primary schools it may be possible to compare the Year 3 Learning Assessment Project test results (representing prior learning achievements) with Year 5 results (representing current achievements) as a means of measuring value-added. The equivalent secondary school test known as the Victorian Secondary Assessment Monitor, now intended to be introduced in secondary schools from 1998 following deferment in May 1997, could be compared with Victorian Certificate of Education results for the same purpose. However, these methods will only be effective if the Learning Assessment Project and Victorian Secondary Assessment Monitor are recognised by educators as reliable and valid measurement tools. It also requires confounding factors impacting on student achievements, such as their home environment, socio-economic background and intelligence levels to be disentangled from the assessment of the value a school has actually added to a student's learning.



*Calculating value-added will assist in measuring the direct contribution schools make to student learning.*

**4.88** While the Department has attempted to address estimates of value-added through the *like-school* benchmarks, as discussed in earlier paragraphs, audit considers the *like-school* criteria could be expanded to enhance the reliability of comparisons of school performance using such benchmarks.





**4.89** The University of Melbourne has attempted to estimate the value-added by schools to student learning using General Achievement Test scores (an instrument to test student achievements against the Victorian Certificate of Education curriculum) as a measure of a student’s prior learning status and Victorian Certificate of Education examination results as a measure of their current learning capabilities. The difficulty, in audit opinion, is that the primary purpose of the General Achievement Test, administered in Year 12, is to identify potentially biased school estimates of student achievement on Common Assessment Tasks rather than as a tool for measuring achievement prior to commencing Years 11 and 12 to establish a basis for estimating value-added during Years 11 and 12.

**4.90** Value-added estimates using data derived through the General Achievement Test to facilitate comparisons of school performance, conducted by Melbourne University, are not disseminated to schools. Audit specialist advice indicated that there was considerable public discussion about the problems associated with using results obtained through the General Achievement Test to estimate value-added.

**4.91** While audit acknowledges the high cost and technically complex nature of measuring value-added, the Department should continue its research into the introduction of value-added concepts. It may be appropriate to implement trialling in a selection of schools to separate various key factors influencing student learning beginning with, for example, student intelligence. When the Department is satisfied with the trial results consideration should be given to progressively integrating value-added measures into the Accountability Framework. When implemented the Department will be in a stronger position to conclude with confidence on the performance of individual schools and the system as a whole in terms of their direct impact on student learning achievements.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*Education systems throughout the world are investigating the most appropriate ways of assessing the value schools add to student learning. It seems unlikely that any one single measure will meet this requirement. The Department’s benchmarking framework using like-school performance, statewide and past performance enables each school to assess the value it adds within its local context.*

*The full implementation of Learning Assessment Project, Victorian Secondary Assessment Monitor, the proposed screening of Prep students to assess literacy and numeracy readiness and national benchmarks proposed as part of the National Literacy Strategy will provide further opportunities for schools to assess the value they add to their students learning. The Department will continue to explore value added concepts over the next few years.*

**ASSESSING STATEWIDE PERFORMANCE**

**4.92** An effective accountability mechanism should assist in determining whether the primary and secondary school system and individual schools are efficient and effective. Specifically, the mechanism should cover the use of inputs such as human, physical, and financial resources; outputs produced such as the number of students who successfully complete each year’s schooling and outcomes achieved such as improved student learning. Moreover, measuring effectiveness needs to go hand in hand with measuring efficiency as there is no point improving student learning if it is achieved using an excessive level of resources.

**Uniform performance measures recommended by the Productivity Commission**

**4.93** In attempting to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of education service delivery by all Australian States and Territories, the Productivity Commission (formerly Industry Commission), in its report titled *Report on Government Services Provision, 1997*, concluded that there was only limited comparable information for jurisdictions to facilitate the assessment of performance of government school systems.

**4.94** The Commission recommended a framework, built around efficiency and effectiveness measures, to be adopted by all states and territories for the collection of comparable data in the future. These measures included:

- *“learning outcomes (State-specific learning outcomes and nationally-comparable student learning outcomes);*
- *social and other outcomes (graduate destinations, attitude surveys, wellbeing of students);*
- *equity/access (learning outcomes for priority groups, social and other outcomes for priority groups); and*
- *input per output unit (staff/student ratios, staff expenditure per student, and capital expenditure per student).”*

**4.95** The Department advised audit that it had not yet formalised its approach to reporting on the overall performance of the government education system. In this regard, audit understands that the Department intends to include in its 1997-98 annual report aggregated information on the school performance measures currently reported by each school but excluding student learning achievement data. Consideration should be given by the Department to reporting against the measures recommended by the Productivity Commission, including the key measure of student learning achievements.

**4.96** Similarly, the Department will need to determine how aggregated school data collected on these measures will be utilised in departmental strategic planning processes and as a means for facilitating continuous improvement in student learning outcomes.

**Statewide performance measures**

**4.97** Given that Victoria is required to report on the common and agreed national goals for schooling, as are all other States and Territories, audit considers that it would be both desirable and useful, as discussed in earlier paragraphs, that any reporting framework at the system-level include both effectiveness and efficiency measures, as it would allow national and state comparisons of performance.

**4.98** With this in mind, performance indicators used for assessing school performance discussed in earlier paragraphs could also be utilised in assessing system performance. These measures are in line with those recommended by the Productivity Commission. Audit considers that additional indicators for assessing system performance could include:

- *Retention*: provides information on the extent to which students complete post-compulsory schooling by gender, by age group, by priority groups, including students with disabilities, and students of non-English speaking backgrounds;
- *Participation (enrolments)*: provides information on the number of students enrolled in both compulsory and post-compulsory schooling, by age group, gender and by priority groupings;
- *Equity*: provides information on the numbers of students identified in the 6 priority groups accessing school education; and
- *Stakeholder satisfaction-parents, employers and tertiary institutes*: providing information on their satisfaction with the quality of school leavers, who have entered the workforce or commenced further study.

**National benchmarking**

**4.99** Following a recent in-principle agreement in September 1997 between Ministers of all states and territories responsible for school education, a 10 point literacy strategy will be implemented from 1998 in an attempt to improve national literacy standards of students in government schools. As part of this initiative, states and territories will be required to conduct full population testing of students from a range of year levels on their literacy levels. This is likely to provide additional information in the form of state and national benchmarks which will assist each state and territory to assess its performance.

**4.100** As previously stated, the majority of Years 3 and 5 primary students in Victorian government schools are already tested (from 1995) under the Learning Assessment Project and similar testing is intended to be introduced for secondary students in Years 9 and 10. In these circumstances the Department is well placed to minimise the potential duplication of effort and cost in complying with the new literacy testing agreement.

# **Part 5**

## **Triennial school review**



**OVERVIEW**

**5.1** Information gathered through the triennial school review is pivotal in contributing to improvements in school performance and subsequently student learning outcomes. The triennial review is conducted by schools at the end of the 3 year charter period and involves school self-assessment, independent verification of this assessment by an external reviewer and development of a new 3 year charter.

**5.2** The strategy adopted by the Department of working closely with a group of volunteer schools to pilot the triennial review process towards the end of 1996 is strongly supported by audit as it enabled school concerns, which included its time consuming nature and the need for more training and support, to be identified with the Department at an early stage.

**5.3** The magnitude of the process and the commitment of the Department can be seen by its engagement of 10 companies to conduct a total of 1 700 external reviews over a period of 3 years at a cost of \$1.8 million. Staff of the companies identified to undertake the reviews were provided with training by the Department to prepare them for the tasks involved. Audit found that the majority of schools were satisfied with the performance of their external reviewer who verified their self-assessment although some schools also considered there was scope for improvement. Audit concurs with the views of those schools which felt that reviewers need to have a full understanding of the particular school environment, including the local context that they are examining, in order to be in a sound position to properly evaluate the school's assessment of its performance or offer constructive comments to address identified problem areas.

**5.4** While virtually all schools interviewed by audit indicated that the triennial review process had been a positive initiative in terms of providing directions in developing their new charter, they agreed that formal checks and balances had not been put in place in their school to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the performance data. This shortcoming was compounded as the work of the external reviewer did not include substantiation of this data. Given that the school performance data is used by the Department, which includes the compilation of statewide benchmarks for individual schools to compare their performance, increased checks are needed to ensure the accuracy and completeness of this data.

**5.5** The majority of schools also expressed overall satisfaction with the triennial review in terms of providing accurate and meaningful information for the Department but qualified their assessment primarily due to concerns with reliability of the performance data.

**5.6** Until all schools exhibit a degree of confidence in the basis upon which they are to be assessed, and the external review process is substantially strengthened to include a more robust examination of school data, the Accountability Framework is less likely to deliver the benefits anticipated by the Department, especially in relation to assisting in improving student learning outcomes.

## INTRODUCTION

**5.7** The final stage in the Accountability Framework involves the conduct of a triennial school review, at the completion of the 3 year charter period, to systematically assess the school's performance against its stated goals and the Department of Education's policy objectives, both of which are described in the school charter.

**5.8** The triennial review process involves 3 separate phases, namely:

- a school's self-assessment of its performance;
- independent verification of the self-assessment by an external reviewer appointed by the Department; and
- development of a new charter containing school goals based upon the results of the self-assessment and current departmental policies.

**5.9** Self-assessments are aimed at identifying the achievements of the school, any emerging trends in its performance, including strengths and weaknesses, and actions required to address any deficiencies in school performance. They are to be undertaken by a self-assessment panel which must comprise the principal and school council president or his or her nominee, and other members determined by the principal but typically the assistant principal and curriculum coordinator, using data presented in the school's annual reports over the 3 years.



*School self-assessment panels comprise the principal and school council president and other members determined by the principal.*



**5.10** Schools also have access to other performance data in the form of benchmarks developed by the Department's Office of Review. These benchmarks enable a school to compare its level of performance relative to other schools. Some of this data is made available by the Office through the Department's key management information system, known as the *Computerised Administration System Environment for Schools*, which links schools with the Department. This system was implemented in 1995 with the aim of providing schools with a standardised computer system primarily to streamline school administrative tasks, including the collection and analysis of school performance data.

**5.11** An effective review process, comprising an internal self-assessment stage, followed by a rigorous external review, is integral to ensuring that data gathered for subsequent assessment of school performance is accurate, complete and reliable.

**PILOTING THE TRIENNIAL SCHOOL REVIEW**

**5.12** It is important that any new system or required school procedure is adequately trialled and refined before full implementation. The Department recognised the importance of such trials by piloting the triennial school review, towards the end of 1996, in a group of schools which volunteered to participate in the trial. The pilot covered the 3 separate phases of the review.

**5.13** Before the Department had completed a report of its evaluation of the triennial review pilot in June 1997, at least a further half of Intake 1 schools had already embarked on the review in their school at the direction of the Department.

**5.14** The Department's report of the triennial review pilot, *The School Review Pilot Program: An Evaluation*, June 1997 stated that suggestions provided by schools had either been acted on or incorporated into the Department's school review program for 1997. Nevertheless audit found that, almost 6 months after the pilot was completed, many of these concerns had not been addressed. In this regard some schools:

- considered that the triennial review was too time consuming;
- claimed it was difficult to complete the review within the required timeframe;
- believed it was necessary to streamline the process, for example, making report formats available on computer diskette and standardising data collection forms;
- thought training and support should be provided to self-assessment panels, including school council presidents, to assist them with data gathering and interpretation; and
- considered improvements to information technology and software were urgently needed.

**5.15** Audit considered the Department's decision to initiate trialling of triennial reviews in a small group of schools was soundly based. The Department is now progressively addressing the issues which were raised in the evaluation of the trial with a view to improving all aspects of the triennial review program.

**EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEWS**

**Engagement of external reviewers by the Department**

**5.16** An effective tender selection process ensures that appropriately skilled personnel are engaged at a reasonable cost to carry out the external review function of school performance.

**5.17** For the first cycle of external school reviews the Department has allocated a total of \$1.8 million. In January 1997, 10 companies were engaged by the Department to undertake a total of 1 700 school reviews over a period of 3 years. Five of these companies have been engaged on a 2 year contract with an optional third year and the other 5 on a 1 year contract with an additional 2 year extension pending satisfactory performance. Each company has nominated a team leader to take responsibility for the reviews allocated to the company.

**5.18** In relation to the skills and expertise of the reviewers engaged by the Department, audit identified that while most reviewers clearly had appropriate professional backgrounds, as former teachers or principals, few other than team leaders have strong skills and expertise in evaluation. Audit was advised by the Department that, in this regard, only the team leader was required to demonstrate compliance with this selection criteria and that this person was responsible for ensuring reviews undertaken by the company met these requirements.

**5.19** Audit examination of the tender selection process followed by the Department in engaging the external reviewers, including tender submissions and the report of the tender selection panel, indicated that the process had been properly conducted by the Department.

**5.20** It is important that the Department regularly monitors the costs of the external review program as well as the performance of external reviewers with a view to ensuring the process is cost-effective.

**Accreditation training**

**5.21** In order to prepare the reviewers engaged by the Department for the tasks involved in undertaking school reviews, all reviewers participated in a 3 day training course conducted by the Department in January 1997. This training, which utilised a workshop and case study format, provided the reviewers with information on a range of matters, including the Accountability Framework, the Curriculum and Standards Framework and the triennial school review. Participants completing the training course were accredited by the Department, signifying they possessed the skills and knowledge to conduct external reviews of schools.





**5.22** In addition to the training course, the Department has developed guidelines for external reviewers to assist in conducting a school review. In audit opinion, the set of guiding questions compiled for external reviewers to examine school self-assessment reports provide only basic and simplistic advice and do not demonstrate clearly how data is to be interpreted or judgements made. Specifically the guidelines do not provide assistance in assessing whether the school performance is good, bad or otherwise.



*Guidelines developed by the Department to assist external reviewers.*

**5.23** Audit considers that the guidelines need to be enhanced as part of the Department’s continuous improvement program by specifying expected standards of school performance, targets and examples of best practice to assist reviewers in making meaningful assessments of school performance, particularly in relation to whether the school has achieved an acceptable level of student learning outcomes.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The Guidelines for External Verification represent only one part of the advice provided to school reviewers. The recently revised school self assessment guidelines contain a specific set of guiding questions for each data set. The comprehensive series of benchmarking booklets allow schools and reviewers to make judgements about the relative performance of schools and of the levels of student achievement.*

**Performance of external school reviewers**

**5.24** In examining the performance of external reviewers, audit gathered data through interviews with school principals and the school self-assessment panels which identified that:

- Most principals (90 per cent) considered the performance of the external reviewer assigned to their school was satisfactory, including just over half (54 per cent) who assessed it as highly satisfactory. Typical comments by principals supporting their assessments included that the reviewer was excellent, professional, highly competent, conducted the review in a timely manner, understood the culture of the school, was credible, possessed the necessary technical skills and that the person had a good understanding of the school’s needs. A quarter of these same principals also indicated there was scope for improvement commenting, for example, that they were not sure of the reviewer’s role, the person needed better technical skills, lacked interpersonal or communication skills, did not have a good grasp of the school’s needs or environment and that the person needed to challenge more rigorously school performance data;
- A small number of principals that were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (7 per cent) with the reviewer offered comments such as the person lacked current primary or secondary school experience, the school did not gain any new knowledge or the reviewer understood their problems;
- Only 3 per cent of principals indicated they were not satisfied with the reviewer commenting that the person lacked knowledge of primary schools and needed a wider range of skills to offer constructive comments and that the person lacked skills in statistical analysis;
- Just over three-quarters of self-assessment panels (76 per cent) expressed satisfaction with the performance of the external reviewer, including a quarter (26 per cent) who indicated high levels of satisfaction. These self-assessment panels supported their views with comments such as the person was knowledgeable, skilled and exhibited good rapport. Some of these same self-assessment panels (12 per cent) qualified their assessment indicating, for example, that the person had poor presentation, and communication skills; and
- The remaining self-assessment panels (24 per cent) were dissatisfied with the external reviewer commenting, for example, that the person did not add much to the process or lacked experience in or an understanding of their school’s environment.

**5.25** A high level of satisfaction with the external reviewers undertaking the first triennial review is acknowledged. The views expressed by some schools suggested that reviewers and their skills could have been, in some instances, better matched to the type of school assigned to that reviewer. Audit considers it is important reviewers have a full understanding of the particular school environment, including the local context that they are examining, to be in a sound position to properly evaluate the school’s assessment of its performance or offer constructive comments to address identified problem areas.



**5.26** Audit understands the Department is currently addressing this issue particularly in relation to the reviewer’s understanding of the school environment.

**5.27** Comments provided by schools reflect the first experience of the new external review requirements and obviously need to be viewed in this context.

**SCHOOL COMMENTS ON TRIENNIAL REVIEWS**

**Use of review data**

**5.28** Information gathered through the triennial review process is pivotal in assisting with improvements in school performance and subsequently student learning outcomes.

**5.29** School interviews conducted by audit with principals indicated that data gathered through the review process was used by their school in developing its new charter primarily through identifying:

- priorities and action plans to address deficiencies in student learning;
- the school’s strengths and weaknesses; and
- recommendations for inclusion in the new school charter.

**5.30** Virtually all schools agreed that the triennial review had been a positive initiative in terms of providing directions in developing their new charter (93 per cent of principals, including 48 per cent who thought the review was highly satisfactory, and 92 per cent of self-assessment panels). Comments by these schools ranged from useful to excellent with widespread consensus that the review clearly identified new priorities or highlighted areas in which the school needed to improve or confirmed what was known. A small number of these schools (less than 10 per cent) qualified their comments expressing concerns such as they were still learning how to analyse and interpret the data but felt obliged to pursue the Department’s priorities ahead of their own, that the process did not add anything new and was very time consuming.

**5.31** Schools which expressed dissatisfaction commented that the external reviewer did not challenge the school’s assessment and the triennial review process was not necessary because the school already knew what it wanted to achieve.

**5.32** Although two-thirds of principals (65 per cent) interviewed by audit understood that the data gathered through the review process in their school was used by the Department to develop benchmarks, thus enabling a school to compare its performance in a range of areas against equivalent statewide performance, one-third of principals (34 per cent) indicated they were unaware of how the data was to be used by the Department.



**5.33** While audit recognises the Department has issued benchmarking publications and guidelines and correspondence acknowledging receipt of school annual reports, the apparent lack of awareness by a third of principals regarding the use made of school performance data should be viewed by the Department with some concern. The Department needs to reassess the effectiveness of existing strategies for communicating to schools on the importance of and use made by the Department of school performance data.

**Checks and balances**

**5.34** Although schools evaluated the performance data collected and analysed during the review phase for reasonableness, the majority of principals and self-assessment panels interviewed by audit agreed that formal checks and balances had not been put in place in their school to ensure that the data was accurate and complete. Similarly, the work of the external reviewer did not include substantiation of any school performance data.

**5.35** Given that the school data is used by the Department to compile statewide benchmarks for individual schools to compare their own performance, in audit opinion, greater assurance is needed on the completeness and accuracy of data compiled by schools. Unless this is achieved, such comparisons may be flawed. The Department should consider extending the role of the external reviewer for this purpose as well considering the implementation by individual schools of a formalised system of internal control in relation to the preparation of performance data. This could include segregation or rotation of duties in relation to staff responsible for collecting data and random verification of source data using a risk-based approach. While audit is mindful that this would add to the total cost of the program, it is important that the Department, assess the potential risk of mis-statements of information and determine the level of substantiation of performance data needed to be undertaken by external reviewers to ensure its completeness and accuracy.

**5.36** Furthermore, as achievement of school charter goals, including implementation of the Accountability Framework, is linked to a principal’s performance pay, audit considers principals may be tempted to overstate the performance of their school. Data gathered by audit, in this regard, through school interviews identified that principals were more positive than self-assessment panels about their school’s performance in implementing the Accountability Framework. Accordingly, the need for external reviewers to be appropriately skilled in rigorous analysis of school data is, in audit view, even more important.

**Volume of data**

**5.37** In relation to the volume of data that the school was required to collect for the self-assessment review, audit found that:

- over half (55 per cent) of the principals interviewed by audit assessed the volume as “*about right*” but qualified this by stating they were not sure that all the data was relevant, that the process was time consuming and that the Department’s key management information system was problematic;
- just over one-third (35 per cent) of principals who rated the volume as “*too much*” questioned the quantity of data required, the amount of time taken to collect the data and its relevance; and
- the remaining principals (10 per cent) stated that the volume of data was “*too little*”.

**5.38** In relation to the school self-assessment panels interviewed by audit, it was found that:

- just under one-third (32 per cent) considered the volume of data was sufficient but qualified their comments expressing a range of concerns, in particular, the time taken to collect data and the limitations of such data;
- a further one-quarter (26 per cent) of self-assessment panels also stated that the volume was “*about right*”;
- one quarter (25 per cent) of self-assessment panels did not have a view on the volume of data at this point in time;
- the main concerns of self-assessment panels which considered that the volume of data was too much (13 per cent) included doubts over both the validity or relevance of the data and the benefits of the process; and
- most of the remaining self-assessment panels (4 per cent) considered more data needed to be collected. These schools either added their own measures along with those required by the Department or had concerns about the measures themselves.

**5.39** While more than half of principals and self-assessment panels expressed the view that the volume of data to be collected in the review process was about right or sufficient, audit also identified that a large a number of both groups, (90 per cent of principals and 40 per cent of self-assessment panels), expressed a range of concerns.

**5.40** Audit recognises that as the Accountability Framework is a new concept for schools, it may be difficult for principals and self-assessment panels to comment realistically on the volume of data required at this early stage, especially given that a high percentage of them are unaware what use is made of the information by the Department.

**5.41** The Department needs to avoid schools perceiving the task to be too onerous by encouraging them to make greater use of specific purpose information technology developed by the Department to record and compile data and to expand the standardisation for data collection formats. Improvements in the reliability of the key school management information system would also help in this regard.

**School satisfaction with triennial review**

**5.42** Audit sought the views of principals and self-assessment panels on their experiences with the school triennial review to gain an insight into the effectiveness of the process in its first cycle of operation.

**5.43** In terms of providing accurate and meaningful information for the Department, the majority of principals (86 per cent) expressed satisfaction with the triennial review. The main reason given for the high level of satisfaction was that the review produced objective data which could be used as a mechanism for planning improvements in such areas as curriculum and teaching strategies. However, included in the majority group were 74 per cent of principals who qualified their assessment commenting, for example, that they had some concerns regarding the accuracy of the results from assessments of student achievements against the Curriculum and Standards Framework, parent and staff survey data and the validity of some achievement measures such as a summary of professional development activities undertaken by staff and student absences.

**5.44** Self-assessment panels were less satisfied than principals with the triennial review. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of self-assessment panels expressed satisfaction but qualified this assessment with comments including the Department’s key management information system had problems such as not producing data when required or in a suitable format and uncertainty as to how the performance data would be used by the Department.

**5.45** Other comments expressed by these self-assessment panels, if viewed positively by the Department could result in more accurate and meaningful data in future years, included:

- the lack of reliability of the Curriculum and Standards Framework data;
- the unreliability of the benchmarking process;
- the need to assess data over time through the analysis of trend data;
- questioning the purpose of the staff survey and the fact that responses of staff to the survey could be influenced by a myriad of factors;
- school access to benchmarking data was difficult;
- the definition of measures in the school self-assessment guidelines such as professional development hours and staff and student absences was not clear;
- concerns with the validity of the parent survey instrument; and
- the Accountability Framework could be enhanced to assist in measuring the welfare, social or cultural aspects of a student’s education.

**5.46** The remaining one-third (34 per cent) of self-assessment panels expressed concerns with the data, for example, some data was considered meaningless and the achievement measures, other than the academic achievements of students, did not cover other important aspects of school activity such as the social and cultural development of students.



**5.47** Although most principals, and to a lesser degree self-assessment panels, expressed satisfaction with the triennial review, it was clear both groups had reservations about the accuracy and meaningfulness of the performance data they were required to collect. While the accuracy of Curriculum and Standards Framework data will improve over time as teachers become more adept in understanding with assessments, as previously commented by audit, the Department needs to continually reassess the usefulness of the existing achievement measures as part of its commitment to a program of continuous improvement.

**5.48** It is extremely important that the Department addresses avenues for enhancing school performance data, in conjunction with encouraging schools to use data in a constructive way to assist in improving student learning outcomes.

**5.49** Furthermore, until all schools exhibit a degree of confidence in the basis upon which they are to be assessed, the Accountability Framework is less likely to deliver the benefits anticipated by the Department.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The school review program provides the capacity to report on performance levels of schools in a systematic manner for the first time in Victoria. It provides the capacity to establish directions for improvement in every school based on a realistic assessment of current strengths and weaknesses.*

*No other State in Australia and very few places in the world currently have such a comprehensive school review process in place.*

*The Department has already put in place improvements to assist understanding of the performance measures for all participants in the school accountability processes. Revised Guidelines for School Annual Reports and Guidelines for School Self-Assessment use focus questions to assist with analysis of performance and with development of recommendations for improvement. These guidelines have been developed as the result of extensive consultation and feedback from schools.*

*A document specifically targeted for school councils is in preparation and will be available in 1998.*

# **Part 6**

## **Implementing accountability**





**OVERVIEW**

**6.1** The Accountability Framework has presented schools with a range of challenges including the need to quickly develop skills in measuring performance.

**6.2** Audit found that most schools interviewed did not gain a full understanding of the purpose of the Framework until they had completed the first 3 year cycle. It was also evident that while the broad elements of the Framework were clearly defined, some of the detailed aspects, such as the information to be included in school annual reports, were still subject to refinement, as part of the Department’s continuous improvement cycle.

**6.3** Guidelines developed by the Department were generally considered by schools to be satisfactory although scope still exists to improve their usefulness, for example, performance targets and benchmarks reflecting best practice need to be incorporated into the self-assessment guidelines. Schools would also benefit from the provision of more hands-on training and support.

**6.4** A high proportion of principals considered the dominant source of assistance in implementing the Framework emanated from networking with their colleagues. Audit was surprised to find that this source was rated by principals ahead of the assistance provided by departmental officers who are fully trained in and possess an intricate knowledge of the Framework.

**6.5** Implementing the Framework has presented resource implications for schools primarily in terms of the time consuming nature of the process and the requirement to manage the program using existing resource allocations.

**6.6** Audit also found that neither the Department nor individual schools had established formal mechanisms to monitor the volume of financial and physical resources used by schools in meeting the accountability requirements to the Department and the local school community. Moreover, mechanisms to monitor the cost-effectiveness of implementing the Framework have not been established. Audit considers that it is important both the Department and schools continually monitor the impact of the Framework on school resources subsequent to its implementation particularly in terms of its cost-effectiveness.

**6.7** Notwithstanding that the Framework presented schools with new demands and challenges, the vast majority considered they had satisfactorily met their obligations which, in audit view, suggests schools had accepted and recognised the potential benefits of the Framework.



**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The Department considers the following improvements can be demonstrated as a result of the implementation of the Framework:*

- *all schools establish goals and monitor their achievement in the core areas of school operations;*
- *collection and analysis of data sets are now part of the ongoing work of schools;*
- *in the second round of charters emphasis in goals and priorities has moved towards standards of student achievement (outcomes) in addition to curriculum provision (inputs);*
- *all schools, for the first time in 1996, reported levels of achievement for all year levels to their communities;*
- *school annual reports and school reviews have provided information on the performance of schools to both local communities and at a statewide level; and*
- *school charters have led to clearer articulation of and greater commitment to school goals amongst teachers, students and parents.*

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>
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**6.8** The introduction of the Accountability Framework by the Department has presented schools with a range of challenges, potentially requiring a complete change of direction and culture. It has required schools to rapidly develop in-house skills and expertise in data collection, analysis and interpretation, in addition to expertise in conducting and analysing stakeholder surveys. Enhanced accountability requirements have also necessitated the generation of relatively new and substantially increased volumes of information not previously produced by schools. In addition, schools have had to quickly familiarise themselves with new management information systems.

**6.9** At the same time, as outlined in Part 2 of the Report, schools were faced with a range of education reforms including increased autonomy to schools for decision making, a series of major reorganisations, revised funding arrangements, a rationalisation of teacher numbers and the introduction of a new curriculum assessment and reporting structure.

**6.10** In such a climate of unprecedented change, it was important for the Department to provide schools with a clear understanding of its expectations of them, together with appropriate assistance and support to meet these challenges.

**DEVELOPING THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK**

**6.11** The development of the Accountability Framework, which was principally aimed at providing a mechanism to assist schools improve student learning outcomes, was based on 2 main sources, namely international research literature detailing characteristics of effective schools and total quality management. Both these philosophies aim to improve organisational management by focusing on:

- the quality of leadership;
- the importance of shared values and goal congruence;
- high expectations of performance;
- operating procedures which are known, understood and consistently applied by staff;
- responsiveness to local contexts; and
- an interactive relationship with clients.

**6.12** While the Department does not presume this set of characteristics will in itself produce desirable outcomes of high quality, it considers that the use of such characteristics constitutes a suitable method for assessing organisations as it provides a framework for thinking about past performance and identifying future improvements that may be necessary.

**6.13** In order to test certain concepts and processes associated with the development of the Framework, the Department should be complimented for working closely with a sample of primary and secondary schools during 1994 and 1995.

**6.14** As indicated previously in Part 4 of this Report, the Department is to be commended, for initiating the concept of the Accountability Framework, in line with world-wide practice, where school self-management requires increased accountability. Indeed, within a relatively short period, the Department has developed and put in place the Framework, comprising school charters and annual reports, in the entire 1 700 government schools located throughout the State to support the *Schools of the Future* program. At June 1997, 300 schools had completed or were in the process of completing their first triennial review and by December 1999 all schools will have completed a 3 year cycle under the Framework.

**Conceptual basis**

**6.15** Conceptually the Accountability Framework is seen by the Department as an accountability mechanism and a performance or improvement monitor. Audit considers there has been an over-emphasis on accountability at the expense of evaluation for the purpose of continuous improvement. At this point in time, the Department still needs to set targets and collect trend data against which individual schools can assess their performance.

**6.16** Audit has been advised by the Department that it is presently working towards strengthening the evaluative element of the Framework by providing increased guidance to schools on the analysis and interpretation of school data for the purpose of continuous improvement.

**Continuous refinement to the Accountability Framework**

**6.17** Audit identified that target dates for completion of detailed aspects of the Accountability Framework, to complement the staged introduction of schools into the *Schools of the Future* program, had not been set by the Department. For example, guidelines for assisting schools to prepare annual reports were still subject to refinement at the time schools were required to prepare annual reports. Although around 800 schools were due to complete annual reports for the year ended 31 December 1994, revised draft guidelines for this purpose were not issued by the Department until June 1995.

**6.18** During audit interviews with school principals and self-assessment panels, it became evident that various aspects of the Framework were still subject to testing and refinement subsequent to its implementation. For example, guidelines developed by the Department to assist schools to implement the Framework have been periodically redrafted and performance measures and benchmarks either developed or refined.

**6.19** While recognising the urgency of introducing the Framework into schools as soon as possible to complement their increased autonomy under self-management, the development and refinement of the Framework are seen by the Department as part of an ongoing and dynamic process.

**6.20** Audit acknowledges that the key features of the Framework have remained stable and that its continuous improvement is necessary. In audit opinion, the Department needs to be mindful that excessive change on a frequent basis has the potential to create difficulties for schools and the Department itself in making meaningful assessments of performance with any degree of confidence. Improvements over time will also be difficult to assess if baseline and trend data for the key performance measures are not collected. Continual change would also necessitate the provision of a higher level of support and guidance to schools.

**Communicating accountability to schools**

*Initial understanding of accountability*

**6.21** Schools have always been required to be accountable to the Department, parents and the community in relation to the use of human and financial resources and teaching programs. However, the degree of formality and rigour in the data gathered and evaluations of school performance in outcome terms, now required under the Framework, is relatively new for schools.

**6.22** Through the school charter, schools are required to formally describe what they expect to achieve in terms of improving the learning achievements of students. The annual report requires schools to inform the school community of their achievements against expected goals. As mentioned previously, at the end of the 3 year charter period, schools are required to conduct a self assessment review of their achievements against those goals, which is subsequently independently verified.



**6.23** Given that the ultimate aim of the Framework is to assist in improving student learning outcomes and schools are expected to play the key role in this regard, audit considers that for schools to successfully implement the Framework, it is important that they are fully cognisant of the Department’s expectations. With this in mind, audit sought to ascertain from schools their understanding of the dual role of the Framework, namely for reporting on school performance and evaluating school performance in the context of a continuous improvement cycle, at the time they were first introduced to the concept through training sessions conducted by the Department.

**6.24** Separate discussions with school principals and school self-assessment panels revealed that the concept of accountability under the Framework in terms of reporting and evaluating had not been clearly communicated to schools by the Department. Specifically, the school interview process undertaken by audit, indicated that:

- Most principals (78 per cent), in broad terms, understood accountability involved reporting to the Department, including one-third who understood it to be primarily centred around the requirement to produce a school charter;
- More than half of the self-assessment panels considered that from the outset of the process they had an initial understanding of the concept of accountability as communicated by the Department, although nearly half of these stated that their understanding of the concept was broad rather than specific; and
- For the remaining principals (22 per cent) and self-assessment panels (46 per cent) the concept of accountability within the context of the Framework had not been clearly communicated by the Department from the outset of the process. Around half of these self-assessment panels understood accountability involved increased reporting to the school community or responsibility for financial expenditure.

*Level of understanding subsequent to implementation*

**6.25** Audit interviews with schools sought to assess the understanding of principals and self-assessment panels with the dual role of the Framework subsequent to completion of the first 3 year cycle. Analysis of the school interview data revealed that:

- More than two-thirds of school principals (69 per cent) and a similar proportion of self-assessment panels (67 per cent) believed that their understanding of the term accountability within the context of the Framework had changed after having implemented various aspects of the Framework. Comments from these principals included that when they became familiar with the performance data they found it very valuable. Almost half of this group commented that participation in the full cycle had left them with a greater understanding of accountability which resulted in the collection of better quality information. Other comments included that schools were more focused on their objectives and in a stronger position to measure student performance; and



- For the remaining principals (31 per cent) and self-assessment panels (33 per cent) their understanding of the term accountability had not changed from their initial understanding subsequent to the implementation of the Framework. These respondents indicated that, while the specific processes involved may not have been fully understood at the outset, their understanding of the purpose had remained constant.

**6.26** Principals and self-assessment panels should have a clear understanding of the Framework requirements to facilitate their successful implementation in schools.

**6.27** Given the results of audit interviews which indicated that most schools did not gain a full understanding of the dual role of the Framework until implementation was completed in their school and that as at July 1997, around 1 200 schools were yet to complete their first 3 year cycle, the Department needs to re-assess its approach to communicating the concept of accountability to schools.

<b>GUIDANCE, TRAINING AND SUPPORT TO SCHOOLS</b>
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**6.28** In addition to training and support, a range of booklets in the form of guidelines produced by the Department covering developing school charters, preparing annual reports, conducting parent and staff surveys and undertaking school self-assessments, were provided to schools to assist with the implementation of the Accountability Framework. Support from the Department was also aimed at ensuring data gathered by schools to facilitate performance assessments of both individual schools and the State system as a whole were valid and reliable.



*Examples of guidelines developed by the Department (Office of Review) to assist schools implement the Accountability Framework.*

**School satisfaction with guidelines**

**6.29** Around half of the principals interviewed by audit were satisfied with the range of guidelines produced by the Department for assisting schools in the development of accountability procedures.

**6.30** Approximately one-third of principals indicated they were only partly satisfied with the guidelines. Although some were of the view that the guidelines were clear or easy to read and helped them perform the required tasks, the most common complaint of principals, which should be of some concern to the Department, was the frequency of changes made to guidelines or delays by the Department in updating documents.

**6.31** While three-quarters of self-assessment panels interviewed by audit found the guidelines to generally be of assistance, more than half qualified their assessment with comments such as the documents contained jargon which presumed panel members already had a high level of knowledge, notwithstanding they may have been a first time user, future releases need to be more timely, guidelines were continually changed and the Department did not provide sufficient assistance with the interpretation of school triennial review data.

**6.32** Audit acknowledges that schools were generally satisfied with the guidelines and that updating is necessary in the context of continuous improvement. Nevertheless, the comments suggest scope exists for the Department to improve the assistance provided to schools, particularly through a more timely process of revision and subsequent distribution of updated guidelines.



**6.33** In addition, audit found that neither the guidelines nor other documents relating to the Accountability Framework, developed and issued by the Department provided an indication of any actions that might need to be initiated by the Department or taken if a school's performance is deemed to be inadequate.

**6.34** Accountability implies the presentation of information to stakeholders about achievements. While this is a legitimate purpose, those in receipt of this information, principally the Department, need to clearly outline how it is intended to be used. In the case of principals interviewed by audit, around one-third indicated that they did not know how the information collected by schools was used by the Department.

### **Guidance dealing with developing a school charter**

**6.35** In order to facilitate consistent application and interpretation of guidelines by schools, it is important that proper testing for accuracy and precision occurs before guidelines are issued to schools. In this regard audit felt it was appropriate that the Department consulted schools in trialling the draft school charter guidelines as part of their development.

**6.36** The fact that the Framework was not clearly described until the charter guidelines were issued in March 1997 in final format, well after many schools had implemented the Framework, is an indication, in audit view, of planning occurring at a pace not conducive to effective implementation.

### **School annual report guidelines**

**6.37** Given the importance of school annual report guidelines in assisting schools to collect quality performance information, the Department is to be commended for commissioning an independent body, the Australian Council for Educational Research, to evaluate the guidelines. These guidelines were prepared by the Department in draft format, and issued to schools in August 1994 by surveying a sample of schools and then again in June 1996 subsequent to their application by schools. This process provided valuable input in refining and enhancing the contents of the guidelines.

**6.38** The review by the Australian Council for Educational Research found that 78 per cent of respondents participating in the 1996 evaluation considered the guidelines were straight forward, coherent and logical. However, these respondents also indicated they needed further guidance and clarification of what constitutes professional development, student attendance, and more specific advice on the Curriculum and Standards Framework assessments and on a simplified process for modifying priorities and goals.

**6.39** The Department advised audit that some of the shortcomings which is in its annual report guidelines were addressed in the October 1997 review soon to be issued to schools.

### **Guidelines for school self-assessment**

**6.40** The Self-Assessment Guidelines are pivotal to the quality of performance data compiled by schools for triennial review purposes and subsequent decision making in terms of accuracy, completeness, reliability and validity and later, analysis and interpretation of that data.





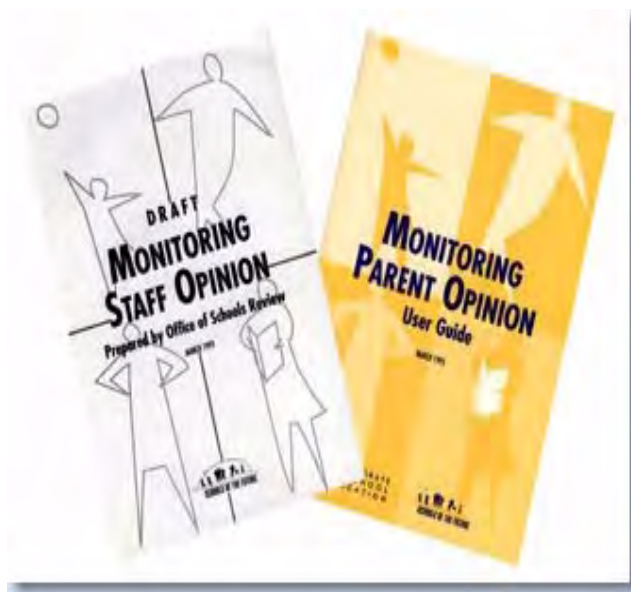
**6.41** While the document provides clear guidance for presenting and analysing data, audit considers several aspects of the guidelines could be improved in that:

- The guidelines suffer from not having a strong evaluative basis as a framework in that:
  - targets are not specified nor best practice described to guide schools to make meaningful assessments of school performance, particularly in relation to student learning outcomes. As a result, audit considers that at this point in time there is an over-emphasis on the accountability feature of the Framework. The emphasis on accountability is contrary to the direction proposed by the Department at the time of the performance audit of school reorganisations undertaken in 1995. During this audit the Department indicated that the “Schools of the Future Accountability Framework is designed to provide evaluative data on the important factors necessary for objectively assessing the quality of school education”;
  - more examples are needed in the guidelines of problems or data that depict poor performance and how to address it;
  - examples of how to make judgements on the analysis and interpretation of data were deficient as they lacked evaluative comments such as whether the results were good, bad or otherwise; and
  - it is not clear from the examples given how recommendations to address shortcomings in performance follow from the conclusions reached. Specifically, retrospective evaluative review information will not in itself provide direction about how to proceed in the future. This limitation should be made clear in the document circulated to schools;
- Some measures, such as non-certificated sick leave of teachers and accidents at school, are of secondary importance to the major goals of a school; and
- The relative importance of the various aspects of school operations required to be reported upon is not evident, for example, is poor performance in relation to students learning achievements more significant than good or poor performance in respect of teacher or parent opinion surveys?

**6.42** The Department advised audit that it has now addressed some of the shortcomings in its school self-assessment guidelines which were revised in October 1997 and are soon to be issued to schools.

**Teacher and parent opinion user guides**

**6.43** The opinion user guides are designed to assist schools conduct surveys of teachers and parents.



*Opinion user guides developed by the Department (Office of Review).*

**6.44** Audit examination of the guidelines indicated there were a number of areas where improvements could be made, including:

- Parents need to have confidence that their responses remain anonymous, not just confidential, if they are expected to provide open and forthright opinions when responding to surveys. This assurance should be clearly stated in the guidelines;
- While overall the instructions to schools on how to formulate a random sample of parents are adequate, further guidance is necessary for small schools. This issue was repeatedly raised as a key concern for small schools during audit interviews; and
- Many principals and self-assessment panels indicated guidance on achieving the most desired response rate when conducting surveys needed to be expanded in light of the extensive time and resources often needed to achieve the required response rate.

**6.45** Given the important role the user guides play as instructional documents in assisting schools undertake teacher and parent surveys, audit considers schools would benefit immediately from the Department addressing these matters.

### **School satisfaction with training and support**

**6.46** In the course of implementing the Framework, schools were also provided with significant assistance in the form of information sessions, technical training on specific aspects of the Framework, access to departmental field officers and peer support groups. Responsibility for delivering training and providing other assistance rests with the Office of Review and Regional Principal Consultants (formerly district liaison principals).



**6.47** As part of the school interview program, audit sought to ascertain the views of principals and self-assessment panels on the extent to which the training and support provided via the Department assisted in developing accountability procedures within schools in accordance with the Framework. The results of these interviews are detailed in the following paragraphs.

*Satisfaction with Office of Review*

**6.48** Audit found that principals had mixed views on the value of training and support and guidance received from the Office of Review.

**6.49** In relation to training, just over half of the principals interviewed by audit considered that training received from the Office was assessed as between “*little and some assistance*”.

**6.50** On the other hand, one-third of principals considered that the level of training provided by the Office was assessed as between “*quite a deal of assistance and major assistance*” commenting, for example, that information sessions facilitated interaction with other schools and they were helpful or valuable.

**6.51** In relation to support and guidance provided by the Office, principals were marginally more satisfied than dissatisfied. Fifty-five per cent expressed satisfaction and offered comments such as Office staff led them through the process step by step, staff were accessible and responsive and helped interpret the performance data.

**6.52** The remaining 45 per cent rated the support and guidance provided by the Office as between “*little and some assistance*”. Some of these principals commented that they did not require assistance or did not feel supported.

**6.53** In audit opinion, the results suggest that in terms of future assistance to schools, the level of training, support and guidance emanating from the Office of Review could be enhanced through the provision of more practical training in the application of the Framework.

*Assistance from Regional Principal Consultants*

**6.54** Around 82 per cent of principals interviewed by audit considered that they had received between “*little and some assistance*”, in the form of training, from Regional Principal Consultants to help their school develop accountability procedures under the Framework. The principals considered for example that the assistance was superficial and questioned whether such regional officers had the appropriate expertise and experience to provide help.

**6.55** The balance indicated they were generally very satisfied.

**6.56** Principals were equally critical of the support and guidance provided by Regional Principal Consultants with 77 per cent indicating for example, that no help was provided by these officers and that they were too far removed from the process.



**6.57** The comments of principals clearly indicate that, from their perspective, the level of training, support and guidance in developing accountability procedures under the Framework provided to them by Regional Principal Consultants in their ongoing role as field officers could have been substantially improved. Audit considers that in terms of future support to schools these officers should play a more active role.

**Use made of available assistance**

**6.58** Audit sought to ascertain from principals whether there had been other sources of training or advice, other than that provided by the Office of Review which assisted their school in developing the accountability procedures under the Framework. Audit also sought to ascertain which form of assistance, that is from the Office of Review or other sources, was most beneficial. Information on the most beneficial assistance received was also sought from self-assessment panels. Analysis of responses revealed that:

- Around 60 per cent of principals considered that, apart from the Office of Review, the dominant source of assistance in developing accountability procedures was through networking of principals facilitated through collegiate support groups. The most dominant sources nominated by the remaining principals were regional meetings and self help;
- The most beneficial forms of assistance nominated by principals were the Office of Review, including the documentation produced by the Office (47 per cent) and collegiate support groups (36 per cent); and
- From the perspective of self-assessment panels, the most beneficial forms of assistance were collegiate support groups (38 per cent) and self help (22 per cent) and the Office of Review (16 per cent).

**6.59** The high value placed on collegiate support by principals in implementing the Framework was also identified through the *Co-operative Research Project* (6th survey, 1997), described in Part 4 of this Report.

**6.60** As the architect and driver of the Framework, the Department needs to provide schools with a high level of support and training in implementing the *Framework* commensurate with its role and responsibility. In this regard, audit considers that, while collegiate support is an acceptable conduit for assisting schools to implement the Framework, heavy reliance on this medium is undesirable if it is not supplemented with close support from departmental officers specifically trained for that purpose. The Department should be concerned that only one-third of principals assessed the Office of Review as the most beneficial source of assistance.

**6.61** Given the perceptions of schools as outlined above, audit considers the Department needs to increase the level of assistance it currently provides to schools to implement the Framework by, for example, participating in collegiate support groups.



**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*It is not surprising that principal colleagues are a most important source of support for their fellow principals. The Department has consciously targeted collegiate groups of principals as a major means of assisting schools to implement the Accountability Framework.*

**Need for further training for school self-assessment panels**

**6.62** A high proportion of self-assessment panels interviewed by audit considered that they needed more training in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. It was especially the case with school council representatives who are required to participate on self-assessment panels, notwithstanding they had little involvement in day to day data gathering and interpretation tasks performed by the panel.

**6.63** Given that important decisions relating to both school and system performance will be based on data compiled by self-assessment panels and that the quality of such data will significantly depend on the skills and expertise of panel members, it is important that appropriate training and support be provided to these personnel by the Department.

**RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS**

**6.64** It is important that any major initiative put in place by government agencies is monitored in terms of cost, time and whether key objectives are met. In the case of the Accountability Framework, monitoring of these factors should be conducted by both individual schools and the Department.

**6.65** Audit found that, to date, formal mechanisms to monitor the volume of financial and physical resources, consumed by schools in meeting the accountability requirements, had not been established by the Department and individual schools. In addition, neither the Department nor individual schools have formally assessed the cost-effectiveness of implementing the Framework.

**6.66** In order to gain an insight into the resource implications for schools in implementing the Framework, the views of principals and self-assessment panels were sought.

**6.67** Audit found that, from the perspective of schools, implementing the Framework had given rise to resource implications of varying degrees, primarily in terms of the time consuming nature of the process. Moreover, it was an additional task that had to be managed using existing resources.

**6.68** Details of audit findings are as follows:

- Four out of every 10 principals and two-thirds of self-assessment panels stated that compiling the required documentation was a time consuming process. These panels also indicated the task adversely impacted on resources and little support was provided from the Department;



- Three out of every 10 principals indicated that, as the Department’s management information system, used to compile some of the required data was unreliable, prone to system failures and unable in many instances to generate the required data, increasing the demands on school resources;
- A quarter of the principals cited a combination of factors which impacted adversely on how their schools managed the process, namely a lack of skills, problems with the management information system and the time consuming nature of the task; and
- A quarter of the self-assessment panels stated that the task was managed primarily through team work or having staff designated specifically to completing accountability related tasks.

**6.69** Results from the *Cooperative Research Project*, identified that principals had concerns with the time required to be devoted to the *Schools of the Future* program which included implementation of the Accountability Framework. Specifically, over a 4 year period, principals reported continually increasing work loads and that they were higher than expected. Principals also reported experiencing high levels of stress.

**6.70** While the relative lack of familiarity of schools with the Framework and associated steep learning curve contributed to school concerns regarding the time consuming nature of the process, it is important the Department continually monitors how schools are coping with meeting the Framework requirements, in addition to identifying opportunities for eliminating inappropriate data or enhancing the reliability of support information systems.

**6.71** Moreover, in the current climate of competing priorities and limited resources, audit considers it would be prudent for the Department and individual schools to monitor the cost-effectiveness of implementing the Framework.

**□ RESPONSE** provided by Secretary, Department of Education

*The Department believes that the Accountability Framework has lower costs overall on a per school basis than do comparable accountability systems in other countries and states.*

<b>MEETING ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIREMENTS</b>
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**6.72** Notwithstanding the magnitude of changes and unprecedented new challenges faced by schools in meeting the requirements associated with of the Accountability Framework, the audit revealed that most schools were satisfied with their performance in relation to meeting their obligations to both the Department and the school community. These obligations included the preparation of school charters, annual reports and the conduct of triennial reviews.

**6.73** The results of interviews conducted by audit with principals and self-assessment panels addressing this issue are detailed in the following paragraphs.

**Meeting the needs of the Department**

**6.74** Almost all school principals and self-assessment panels were satisfied with their school’s performance in regard to meeting the requirements associated with the Accountability Framework. It was pleasing to find that a prevalent response from principals was that they had produced all documents required by the Department such as the school charter, annual report and self-assessment report within the specified timeframe.

**6.75** In relation to those self-assessment panels which expressed satisfaction with their performance in meeting the accountability requirements, around half qualified their assessments by citing, for example, there was room for improvement, the process of implementing the Framework involved a learning curve or the accountability process was time consuming or stressful.

**6.76** Given that self-assessment panels were largely responsible for the ongoing data gathering and analysis associated with the Framework, in audit opinion, they were in a better position than the principals to give a more realistic view of their school’s performance.

**Obligations to school community**

**6.77** Over three-quarters of all principals interviewed expressed high levels of satisfaction with their performance in relation to meeting their obligations to the school community required under the Accountability Framework. However, in audit opinion it was extremely disappointing that the majority of principals expressed the view that parents were not interested in the overall performance of the school or did not understand the data because of its complexity.

**6.78** The Department should be encouraged by the positive views of the vast majority of schools that, notwithstanding the demands and challenges they faced, the Framework requirements were satisfactorily met. It should also give the Department confidence that schools accept and recognise the potential benefits of the Framework.

# **Part 7**

## **Impacts of implementing the Accountability Framework**





## **OVERVIEW**

**7.1** The Department of Education envisaged that the key elements of the Accountability Framework would form an integrated planning, development and reporting package that would allow schools to both monitor and improve their performance, primarily in relation to student learning outcomes. The Framework was also expected to improve school reporting and planning and assist in identifying deficiencies in curricula and teaching strategies.

**7.2** In assessing the impact of the Framework at this point in time, in terms of expected improvements, audit was cognisant that the Framework is a significantly new concept for schools and less than one-third of schools had completed the final phase of the Framework's 3 year cycle.

**7.3** From the perspective of schools interviewed by audit:

- Around one-third indicated the Framework had contributed to some improvement in student learning, although the majority of schools considered that to date it was difficult to assess;
- Most considered the quality of reporting to both the Department and the school community had improved, although a high proportion of schools expressed reservations regarding the level of community interest in school reports. The majority of parents interviewed by audit were also satisfied with school reports in terms of informing them about what is taught and how the school runs, although most had not perceived any change over the past 2 years;
- The majority considered the quality of planning in their school had improved; and
- Around half considered there has been some improvements in curricula and teaching strategies as the Framework had provided a focus for teaching programs or highlighted areas which still needed improvement such as professional development for teachers.

**7.4** Based on the above views audit considers that in a relatively short period of time, the implementation of the Accountability Framework has had a positive impact on school planning and reporting school performance to the Department and school council, and to a lesser extent on curricula and teaching strategies. However, in terms of promoting the concept of continuous improvement it is important the Department undertake ongoing monitoring of the Framework with the view to ensuring the intended objectives are ultimately achieved.

**INTRODUCTION**

**7.5** It is essential that government entities monitor their policies and programs and compare their performance against expected outcomes. Such monitoring contributes to increased public accountability and provides critical information relevant to future policy formulation and decision-making, and ultimately improvements in service delivery.

**7.6** In the case of the Accountability Framework, the Department has undertaken some evaluation of various features of the Framework, primarily the preparation and content of school annual reports and the conduct of triennial school reviews. The *Cooperative Research Project*, (6th survey, 1997) discussed in detail in Part 4 of this Report, has also provided a source of information on the experiences of schools implementing the Framework.

**7.7** Although cognisant the Framework was a relatively new concept for schools and that less than one-third had completed their first 3 year cycle under the Framework at the time of conducting the audit, it was seen as important that audit seek feedback from schools on its impact subsequent to implementation.

**7.8** Accordingly, as part of the school interview program, audit invited principals and self-assessment panels to comment upon the extent to which, in their opinion, the quality of learning outcomes for students, school reporting, school planning, and curricula and teaching strategies had improved at their school subsequent to implementation of the Framework. Audit also surveyed a representative sample of parents to obtain their comments on the impact of the Framework on school reporting to parents.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS**

**7.9** The Department envisaged that the key elements of the Accountability Framework, namely the school charter, annual reports and triennial reviews would form an integrated planning, development and reporting package that would allow schools to monitor and improve their performance. The process followed by each school involved specifying what it aimed to achieve, assessing how it performed against these aims and then determining what now needs to be reflected in future objectives in terms of improving student learning outcomes.

**7.10** As outlined in the following paragraphs, school interview data gathered by audit indicated that schools had difficulty, at that point in time, in assessing the Framework's impact on student learning outcomes, specifically in terms of assisting schools assess the effectiveness of the curriculum and teachers in promoting student learning.

**Views of principals and self-assessment panels**

**7.11** Although half of the principals interviewed by audit considered that there was “*little or no improvement*” in student learning, the majority expressed the view that it was too early to make an assessment. A similar proportion of self-assessment panels also expressed uncertainty in this regard. Other views expressed by principals and self-assessment panels were that it was the quality of teachers that made a difference and the Framework impacted significantly on school management but not on student learning.

**7.12** While 22 per cent of principals believed the Framework had improved student learning outcomes, some held the view that it was too early to tell or the Framework had no impact on teaching strategies. Around one-third of self-assessment panels also thought the Framework had led to some improvement. A large number of these principals and self-assessment panels stated that implementing the Framework has had a positive impact on improving teaching programs and strategies or that teachers were now more clearly focused on improving student learning outcomes.

**7.13** Around 20 per cent of principals were undecided in relation to whether the Framework had assisted in improving student learning, citing reasons such as action to improve student learning had already been initiated or that any improvements to student learning were more likely to be due to other factors such as implementation of the Curriculum and Standards Framework.

**7.14** As the Accountability Framework is a significantly new concept for schools and there are many factors which can contribute to improvements in student learning, audit acknowledges that, at this point in time, schools are unable to accurately assess the extent to which, if any, the Framework has assisted in measuring school performance and in turn improved student learning outcomes. However, as this outcome is a key objective of the Framework, it is important that the Department carefully monitors the concerns of schools.



*Improved student learning outcomes is a key objective of the Accountability Framework.*

**Research on improving student learning**

**7.15** Perceptions of principals in respect of the impact of the *Schools of the Future* reforms on improving student learning have been detailed in the series of longitudinal surveys of principals (*Co-operative Research Project*). The results of the most recent survey, conducted in 1996, suggested that, after a period of 5 years, principals were still uncertain of the extent to which the *Schools of the Future* program, including the Framework, had impacted on student learning outcomes.

**7.16** In addition, a separate research paper published in the journal *Leading and Managing*, Volume 2, Number 3, 1996), titled *The self-managing school: miracle or myth*, concluded that the argument that school self-management, covering all aspects of the *Schools of the Future* program, including the Framework, improves student outcomes relies at best upon opinions rather than hard evidence of causality. In other words, factors which directly impact on improving student learning have not been clearly identified. The paper concludes by stating that the evidence supporting the case for the positive effect of self-management on student learning outcomes is yet to be proved.

**7.17** Given that a key aim of implementing the Framework is to provide accurate and reliable data to assist in improving student learning outcomes, it is imperative, in audit opinion, that the Department undertake on-going monitoring of the Framework with a view to ensuring the intended outcomes are ultimately achieved.

**SCHOOL REPORTING**

**7.18** An important goal of the Accountability Framework is to provide both the Department and the school community with key information, on an annual basis, of the progress made by schools towards achieving the respective goals and priorities specified in their charter. It also aims to establish a record of the school’s performance over a 3 year period which forms the basis for reviewing the school’s achievements at the end of the charter period.

**7.19** For this purpose, the Department has developed guidelines, described earlier in Part 6 of the Report, which outline a range of information schools are required to include in their annual reports. This information covers aspects such as student learning achievements, staff and parent perceptions of the school environment and the school’s financial position. Any goals and priorities unique to a particular school specified in a school’s charter, which are not covered in the guidelines, are also expected to be included in the school’s annual report.

**7.20** In addition to preparing an annual report, schools may elect to compile a summary report specifically for their respective school community. Although the format and style is discretionary, the Department expects the summary document to include information on progress towards the achievement of goals and priorities specified in the school’s charter and on student learning achievements. The summary may also include other achievements and activities of the various groups, such as the school council and parent committees, which also play a role in the operations of the school.

**7.21** As outlined in the following paragraphs, the results of audit interviews with schools and parents indicated these stakeholders were generally supportive of the Department’s initiative in that most of them considered improvements in relation to the volume and type of information had been made in this area.

**Audit survey of parents**

**7.22** A market research firm, Quadrant Research Services (Vic.) Pty Ltd, was commissioned by audit to undertake a telephone survey of parents to assess their satisfaction with the type and usefulness of information provided by the school on its performance in educating students. Around 900 parents were selected at random covering all 76 schools included in the audit sample.

**7.23** A summary of the survey results is outlined below.

- The overwhelming majority (93 per cent) of parents declared themselves to be satisfied with the way their school informs them about its performance, specifically, what is taught and how the school runs. This result was similar across the primary, secondary and special school sectors and for metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools;
- Explanations offered by parents for their satisfaction included that they were kept well informed, school newsletters were good, information was available on request and the principal /staff were helpful and accessible. The small proportion of parents who expressed dissatisfaction were mainly concerned they were not fully informed on all school activities.



- Information on school performance in terms of what is taught and how the school is run is communicated to parents primarily through a newsletter (99 per cent), information nights (96 per cent) and an annual report or summary (62 per cent). Other methods included parent group meetings (11 per cent), contact with teacher (8 per cent), open nights (7 per cent), letters or notices (6 per cent) and local newspaper/external reports (5 per cent);
- When parents were asked, in comparison to 2 years ago, if the information they received was now *better, the same or worse*, 35 per cent of respondents considered it was *better*, 62 per cent thought it was the *same*. These results were similar across each school sector and for metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools; and
- Those parents who noticed reporting had improved indicated that more information is now communicated and that reports and newsletters are more informative or detailed than previously. A small number of these parents considered scope existed for further improvement. Most of the parents who noticed reporting had remained the same did not elaborate on this assessment while some thought it was still as good as before.

**7.24** Given that two-thirds of parents had not noticed any change over the past 2 years in the information they received from schools and that schools had expressed reservations regarding the level of community interest in their reports, audit considers the benefits the Department expected to flow to parents in terms of better reporting of school performance through the annual reporting process have not yet been fully realised. Accordingly, schools, in conjunction with the Department, should endeavour to ascertain from parents the form and content of school performance data they preferred as failure to do so may result in the production of inappropriate information.

**Views of principals and self-assessment panels**

**7.25** Analysis of information derived from interviews with schools identified that principals were divided as to whether the advent of the Accountability Framework had improved the quality of reporting to parents. Self-assessment panels were more convinced that improvements had been derived with two thirds sharing this view. Positive comments made by principals and self-assessment panels included views such as the school was now reporting more objective information and that there was more and better information on student learning achievements and school performance.

**7.26** In contrast, principals and self-assessment panels offered comments such as parents were not interested in the Framework, parents did not understand the data, there was no difference from what was previously provided, that there was just more or different information and parents were not happy with the format of reporting under the Curriculum and Standards Framework.

**7.27** In audit opinion, the Department should be concerned that half the school principals were not convinced that the Accountability Framework had contributed to improved reporting of school performance to parents.

**Reporting to school councils**

**7.28** School councils, comprising school and parent representatives, are a key stakeholder in the government school education sector and also play an integral management role in the operations of schools. As such, information reported to school councils should be accurate, reliable and meaningful.



*School councils comprise school and parent representatives, and in some cases, student representatives.*

**7.29** Analysis of information derived from audit interviews with schools identified that:

- Half of the principals considered that implementing the Accountability Framework had a very positive impact on the quality of reporting to the school council including 20 per cent who thought there had been a major improvement. Comments supporting this assessment included that the information provided was more detailed, better focussed and more objective;
- It was disturbing that a third of the principals considered the Framework had only minimal or no impact on reporting. These principals commented, for example, that annual reports had always been prepared, the council had never been interested in this type of information and the data was too technical; and



- Most self-assessment panels also considered the quality of reporting to school councils had improved through the provision of more information. For example, it improved the quality and volume of data, there was more comprehensive or detailed or relevant data and the data provided more scope for monitoring school performance. Importantly, one-third of this group of self-assessment panels qualified their assessment with comments such as council members needed training to interpret the data, the benefits had not been seen, the volume was too great and the requirements had dramatically increased the workload of teachers.

**7.30** In view of the concerns of more than a third of self-assessment panels regarding the capability of school council members to understand performance data, audit considers the situation needs to be monitored by the Department as it could be counter productive to the assessment process. The Department needs to consider assisting schools in the provision of ongoing training for school council members to assist in this regard.

### Reporting to Department of Education

**7.31** Although schools have a legislative requirement under the *Education Act 1958* to prepare an annual report, prior to the introduction in June 1995 of specific guidelines under the Accountability Framework, individual schools had discretion in relation to the format and contents of these reports. The Department envisaged that introducing minimum standards of reporting would improve the quality and usefulness of information reported by schools.

**7.32** Analysis of data collected through school interviews indicated that:

- Three-quarters of principals considered the Framework had a very positive impact on the quality of reporting to the Department indicating, for example, that the data was more focused, comprehensive, objective, or consistent;
- Approximately 20 per cent of principals considered there was minimal or no improvement. This group of principals commented, for example, that not all educational achievements can be translated into data, the process was more formal and that they were not sure the information gathered was relevant;
- Six out of every 10 self-assessment panels also supported the changes to school reporting under the Framework primarily because reporting to the Department was virtually non-existent in the past, more information was now provided, and that the data was more specific and focused on school performance; and
- The remaining self-assessment panels were more guarded about the impact of the Framework. These self-assessment panels commented, for example, that reporting was more formalised and detailed but they were not sure if it would make a difference to learning outcomes or that it addressed all aspects of general education, that they were unsure or did not know if the expected benefits would flow and schools were required to produce too much data.





**7.33** Audit considers the high level of support by schools in relation to the new reporting requirements under the Framework reinforces the direction now taken by the Department for more formalised and objective reporting of school performance. Nevertheless the Department needs to be cognisant of opposing views in any refinement process.

**7.34** The results of school interviews conducted by audit are similar to those identified in the *Cooperative Research Project* (6th survey), discussed in Part 4 of this Report. This survey identified that, from 1995 to 1996, there had been a slight increase in the level of confidence reported by principals in relation to the expected improvements in reporting as a result of introducing new reporting requirements.

**SCHOOL PLANNING**

**7.35** The Accountability Framework provides a mechanism through which key performance data is collected to assist schools improve their planning processes by targeting aspects of school performance requiring improvement.

**7.36** Most schools interviewed by audit attributed improvements in the quality of school planning to having implemented the Framework.

**Views of principals and self-assessment panels**

**7.37** Analysis of school interview data identified that around three quarters of principals and a similar proportion of self-assessment panels believed that the quality of school planning had improved since implementing the Framework. Half of these principals and self-assessment panels cited reasons such as planning was now more focused, or better coordinated, more formalised or more comprehensive and objective.

**7.38** For the majority of schools the results suggest that, to date, the Department has made sound progress towards improving the quality of school planning through schools having implemented the Framework.

**CURRICULA AND TEACHING STRATEGIES**

**7.39** Data collected by schools through the review process of the Accountability Framework can assist them in identifying apparent deficiencies in curricula and teaching strategies. Such data could identify, for example, the need to improve literacy levels of low performing students or further enhance the performance of high achieving students.

**Views of principals and self-assessment panels**

- 7.40** Analysis of data collected through school interviews indicated that:
- Four in every 10 principals and one-third of self-assessment panels believed there had been improvements in curricula at their school resulting from implementing the Framework. According to these principals and self-assessment panels, the Framework provided, for example, a focus for teaching programs or highlighted areas which needed improvement such as professional development for teachers. Half of these principals also indicated that other factors, such as the Curriculum and Standards Framework, had more impact on the quality of curricula;



- One-third of principals and a similar proportion of self-assessment panels believed that implementing the Accountability Framework had no impact on the quality of curricula, citing other factors such as teacher skills or the Curriculum and Standards Framework as more likely to contribute to improvements in this area. More than double the self-assessment panels in metropolitan schools than in country schools believed this to be the case; and
- The remaining principals and self-assessment panels were undecided in relation to whether improvements in curricula resulted from implementing the Accountability Framework. These principals indicated that there were factors, other than the Framework such as the Curriculum and Standards Framework, which contributed to improvements in the quality of curricula. Self-assessment panels, on the other hand, cited reasons such as it was too early to tell, or that their schools were always looking at ways of improving curricula.

**7.41** Regardless of the assessment made by principals of the impact of the Accountability Framework on curricula, they all held the same view namely, that factors other than the Framework, such as the Curriculum and Standards Framework or improvements in teaching, had a greater impact on the quality of curricula and teaching strategies.

**7.42** Audit understands that, while the Curriculum and Standards Framework provides an overall structure in the 8 key learning areas to be followed by schools, it is not prescriptive. Within this overall structure, schools are required to develop the specific details of the curriculum assisted by specific course materials developed and issued by the Department.

**7.43** Audit acknowledges that as the Accountability Framework is a relatively new development, it will take some time for schools to become adept at using the data gathered through the accountability process to assist in curricula development. However, given the common view of all principals that factors other than the Framework, such as the Curriculum and Standards Framework or improvements in teaching, had a greater impact on the quality of curricula, the Department needs to address this matter with the view to reinforcing with principals the potential benefits of the Framework to assist in curriculum development.

# Previous Special Reports of the Auditor-General since 1990

<i>Report number and title</i>	<i>Date issued</i>
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<b>14</b> Accommodation Management	October 1990
<b>15</b> Met Ticket	November 1990
<b>16</b> Fire Protection	April 1992
<b>17</b> Integrated Education for Children with Disabilities	May 1992
<b>18</b> Bayside Development	May 1992
<b>19</b> Salinity	March 1993
<b>20</b> National Tennis Centre Trust / Zoological Board of Victoria	April 1993
<b>21</b> Visiting Medical Officer Arrangements	April 1993
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<b>42</b> Protecting Victoria's Children: The role of the Children's Court	Not tabled
<b>43</b> Protecting Victoria's Children: The role of the Department of Human Services	June 1996
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<b>48</b> Major civic projects: Work in progress	April 1997
<b>49</b> Metropolitan Ambulance Service: Contractual and outsourcing practices	April 1997
<b>50</b> Metropolitan Ambulance Service: Fulfilling a vital community need	November 1997
<b>51</b> Victorian Rural Ambulance Services: Fulfilling a vital community need	November 1997