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Improving our Schools: Monitoring and Support

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Victorian Auditor-General's Office
Auditing in the Public Interest

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President
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Melbourne

The Hon. Jenny Lindell MP
Speaker
Legislative Assembly
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Melbourne

Dear Presiding Officers

Under the provisions of section 16AB of the *Audit Act 1994*, I transmit my report on
Improving our Schools: Monitoring and Support.

Yours faithfully



DDR PEARSON
Auditor-General

10 October 2007

Foreword

Victoria's young people are unlikely to achieve their potential without a quality school education. In some parts of the State, particularly northern and western Melbourne, there is a worrying concentration of schools performing poorly on key measures such as students' educational attainment, wellbeing, and transitions into employment and higher education.

Since 2003, the Victorian Government has provided targeted support to schools performing below expected levels in the form of diagnostic reviews, funding for improvement initiatives, and direct assistance by regional office staff.

This audit examined how effectively the central and regional offices of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development were identifying and supporting schools performing below expected levels.

The audit found that there was significant unmet demand for targeted support, and that the Department's efforts could be better directed to help the schools most in need. Some schools are in a downward performance spiral and all would benefit from a joined-up approach that reflects the wider needs of students and their families.

In some schools, there are early signs that targeted support is making a positive difference. The Department has established a useful evidence base to inform future targeted support. But there are still important data gaps, and some modes of support, such as student support services officers, need to be refocussed urgently.

Addressing school performance is difficult, and the schools that were the subject of the audit face a plethora of challenges. The changes recommended in this audit report should better position the schools and the Department to meet them.



DDR PEARSON
Auditor-General

10 October 2007

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1 Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

Education is central to the life prospects of every young person, and to our economic prosperity. Schools should provide all young people with the basic skills and knowledge they need to achieve their potential.

The *Blueprint for Government Schools* reform agenda, launched by the then Minister for Education and Training in 2003, was designed to address the significant variations in student performance in the Victorian government school system. As well as making available new school improvement opportunities to all schools, specific support initiatives were targeted at schools with student outcomes below expected levels.

The *Blueprint* also reformed the responsibilities and work of regional offices of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department). The *Blueprint* placed regions at the front-line of the effort to improve government schools and reduce the disparity in student outcomes across the system, including the high concentration of student outcomes below expected levels in some schools and some regions. The reform process is ongoing.

Since 1996, a range of information about student learning outcomes and school performance has been systematically collected. This information enables individual and system-wide school performance to be assessed and monitored. The *Blueprint* reforms broadened these data sets to encompass student engagement and wellbeing, and student transition and pathways outcomes.

Using a similar approach to that currently used by the Department to assess school performance, the audit retrospectively identified that in 1998, 128 government schools had student outcomes below expected levels. Thirty-one of these schools still had student outcomes below expected levels in 2005. The 128 schools generally faced, and some continue to confront, very challenging circumstances. These commonly include high proportions of students with additional needs, students from families with difficult financial circumstances, and declining enrolments.

The objective of the audit was to determine whether the Department's contribution to improving government schools with student outcomes below expected levels had been effective. The audit focused on how the Department's central and regional offices had identified, monitored and supported these schools since 1998. The audit fieldwork included:

- a questionnaire sent to the 128 schools (105 responded)
- visits to eight of the schools that responded to the questionnaire
- interviews and document reviews in three of the Department's nine regional offices and in its central office.

1.2 Overall conclusion

Since the launch of the *Blueprint* reforms in 2003, support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels is better targeted by the central and regional offices. This support is underpinned by a coherent framework centred on the *School Accountability and Improvement Framework* introduced in 2005. This framework has provided better support for schools in undertaking their four-yearly cycle of self-evaluation, review, planning and implementation. There is evidence that some targeted support initiatives are starting to have an impact.

Central and regional offices have significantly improved their approach to working with schools with student outcomes below expected levels. They have embarked on an evidence-based approach to deliver targeted support to many of the schools. Regional offices now provide priority attention to a selection of schools each year. The central and regional offices are working to continuously improve the assistance they provide.

In a relatively short period, considerable progress has been made in addressing school performance. However, more attention needs to be directed at some aspects of the support which constrain regional offices from providing the right support at the right time.

Capacity of regional offices to support schools

The *Blueprint* reforms gave regions a much greater level of responsibility for supporting schools with student outcomes below expected levels. These changes were not accompanied by an assessment of whether regional offices had the capacity to fulfil the new responsibilities.

Regions face the challenge of allocating their resources to supporting schools performing below expected levels, addressing the continuous improvement needs of schools performing at or above expected levels, as well as focusing on schools showing early warning signs of performance issues.

Despite the uneven distribution across regions of schools performing below expected levels, regional offices receive comparable recurrent funding, although some non-recurrent funding accommodates differing needs across regions.

Resourcing issues forced two regions to place a cut-off on the number of schools that could be provided with targeted support. In both regions, 60 schools were identified with issues of concern in 2007, while 28 and 34 schools, respectively, received targeted support. Of the schools that received targeted support, 13 and 15 schools, respectively, also received priority attention.

The *Blueprint* elevated the role and responsibilities of senior education officers (SEOs) within regions, describing them as key change agents. However, the capabilities and professional development needs of SEOs have only recently been assessed. The Department now needs to assess whether work allocations to SEOs, who are each responsible for around 40 schools, are appropriately matched to their capacity to effectively perform their role.

Regional offices fund student support services officers (SSSOs) who work with students with additional needs. Many schools performing below expected levels have higher proportions of students with a range of learning or developmental difficulties. This creates a critical demand for access to SSSOs. Information was not systematically collected on the level of demand, and relative priorities, to assist in allocating these important resources within and across regions. There have been no systemic changes to the type, number, distribution across schools and management of SSSOs since 2000.

The Department has recognised the need to further improve the capacity of regional offices and the effectiveness and efficiency of their work. Work is currently underway in a number of areas, including clarifying the role of regions, and increasing the authority and resource flexibility for regional directors.

Meeting unmet demand for targeted support

Schools receiving targeted support appreciated it, but the demand for this support outweighs the current capacity of two of the three regional offices examined to deliver the degree of support needed. Schools identified as needing targeted support are placed in a queue and some have to wait for a considerable period before receiving support. For example, at June 2006, all schools from the group of 31 that performed below expected levels in both 1998 and 2005 had participated in at least one of the *Blueprint* initiatives, but only 15 schools had received targeted support.

This unmet demand is likely to be exacerbated by the continuing decline in student numbers at some government schools.

Failure to initiate timely targeted support risks further deterioration in a school's performance. In that event, even greater levels of support would be required to arrest the decline.

Schools with student outcomes below expected levels can struggle to attract good leaders and teachers. As a result, they often need intensive support, sometimes at a very hands-on level, until significant improvements in leadership and teaching capacity are achieved. Although the sustainability of the Department's support is starting to be addressed, the central office needs to provide regional offices with greater certainty that the targeted funding needed by these schools will be sustained for at least two to three years.

Identifying schools that need targeted support

Improved processes have been established to identify schools with student outcomes below expected levels and those with issues of concern, and to then prioritise their need for targeted support. However, the audit found that the rationale used by regional offices to determine whether or not a school is targeted for support was not always documented. Better documentation and justification of decisions would improve the transparency and consistency of prioritisation.

A suite of clearly defined contextual and data-driven performance “triggers” and early warning signs for schools and regions across the State has not yet been developed. These “triggers” and indicators would improve the ability of regional offices to decide how and when to intervene to support schools.

Implementing improvement approaches

Although schools rated the *School Accountability and Improvement Framework* and the *Blueprint* opportunities highly, some schools need more help with planning and implementing their school improvement approach. While there was a sound evidence base underlying the *Blueprint* and subsequent targeted improvement initiatives, there is a need to clearly identify and share emerging knowledge about effective support and interventions between regions and with schools.

Measuring school improvement

The suite of measures of school performance has improved over time. There is a stronger focus on evaluating improvement initiatives, including targeted support to schools with student outcomes below expected levels. The Department is investigating how best to measure the extent to which government schools add value to their students' education, after taking into account other key influences on student achievement.

There is broad recognition that improving student outcomes is a long-term process and that it is important to measure the shorter-term progress schools make. Schools with student outcomes below expected levels are not yet adequately measuring the annual progress achieved through implementing their school improvement strategies. Schools are not always able to analyse the school data to the extent needed to identify problems and inform their strategic planning.

Improved guidance is required to help schools assess their performance, identify whether they are on the right path to improvement, and recognise their achievements. Improved measurement of school progress will also assist the Department to determine whether the investment in school improvement is having the desired effect.

1.3 Recommendations

Support framework

- To sharpen the focus of school improvement efforts and to achieve greater consistency across regions, the processes which identify schools for early intervention and targeted support be amended with a view to:
 - establishing clear criteria for performance triggers and indicators
 - clearly documenting the rationale for decisions (**Recommendation 4.1**).
- The Department investigate additional strategies to sustain support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels, including the feasibility of extending the provision of targeted funding and intensive regional office support for a period of at least two to three years (**Recommendation 4.2**).
- The Department identify and share knowledge across the government school system about the strengths, weaknesses and cost-effectiveness of the range of interventions used to support schools with student outcomes below expected levels (**Recommendation 4.3**).

Capacity of regional offices

- The allocation of human and financial resources across regions be reviewed, to determine whether these allocations:
 - appropriately take account of schools' support needs
 - enable regions to effectively fulfil their responsibilities for school improvement (**Recommendation 5.1**).
- The issue of students receiving timely access to relevant support services be addressed as part of the current review of the SSSOs resource (**Recommendation 5.2**).

Measuring school improvement

- Schools be provided with improved support to:
 - understand and use the school performance data to better inform their school improvement strategies
 - measure the incremental progress they make toward achieving improved student outcomes, particularly those schools with the greatest performance challenges (**Recommendation 6.1**).

RESPONSE provided by the Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department) welcomes the Auditor-General's report which has examined the complex issues involved in improving government schools.

The Victorian government school system is a diverse system with over 1 600 schools. Within this system, the Department is working to develop and implement a wide range of strategies and initiatives that improve the performance of every school, with more intensive and targeted support for schools where student outcomes are below expected levels.

The starting point is an expectation that every school can and should improve its performance over time.

The Department has reformed the responsibilities and work of regional offices to improve government schools and reduce the disparity in student outcomes across the system. At the same time, the Department has heightened expectations and development of the education workforce around its shared responsibility to improve the performance of all students.

The Department welcomes the Auditor-General's observation expressed during the course of the audit that the Department has moved a long way in supporting schools where student outcomes are below expected levels. The Department is especially pleased to note the report's findings that:

- since the launch of the Blueprint reforms in 2003, support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels is better targeted by the central and regional offices*
- development of the School Accountability and Improvement Framework has provided an underpinning coherent framework which has provided better support for schools in undertaking their cycle of self-evaluation, review, planning and implementation*
- targeted support initiatives are starting to have their intended effect*
- central and regional offices have significantly improved their approach to working with schools and are working to continuously improve the assistance they provide*
- regional offices now provide priority attention to a selection of schools each year*
- in a relatively short period, considerable progress has been made in addressing school performance.*

The Department's approach has also been recently endorsed at an international level:

- Richard Elmore, internationally acclaimed educationalist, has reported that Victoria is the place where he is learning most about the nature of the work of large scale school improvement*

RESPONSE provided by the Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development - continued

- *the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has advised that Victoria has been selected as one of three Improving School Leadership case study sites (along with Finland and the United Kingdom).*

These testimonies affirm the directions being taken by Victoria in school improvement and give endorsement to the investment being made in building the leadership capacity of Victoria's school workforce as part of improving overall school performance.

The Department recognises that while much has been done and learnt to date, there is always room for improvement.

The Department acknowledges the results of the audit are based on a reasonable sized sample of over 100 surveys from principals. The Department also notes that results and some of the conclusions drawn are based on a limited sample size of schools (n=eight) and regions (n=three) visited. The extent to which these can be relied upon to identify trends and patterns across the entire school system is not clear. As a result, many of the findings of the report are generalised in nature. The Department considers that some care should be taken in interpreting the findings of the audit to the extent they may not reflect the evidence, experience and views across the government school system.

Within the context of the above, the Department's response to each of the recommendations is outlined below.

Recommendation 4.1

The Department accepts this recommendation. The process by which schools may be identified for early intervention and provided with targeted support is subject to continual refinement and development. The Department considers the criteria for performance triggers and indicators is well established, however accepts the audit's findings that documenting the rationale for decisions could be strengthened across the system.

Recommendation 4.2

The Department accepts this recommendation. The Department has taken the steps necessary to assemble the resources required to extend the provision of targeted funding and regional office support.

Recommendation 4.3

The Department accepts this recommendation. The need to identify and share knowledge of good practice across the government school system is recognised. Development of the Department's Ultranet initiative will go a long way to providing the vehicle by which information and knowledge on the performance of the Victorian government school sector can be shared.

RESPONSE provided by the Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development - continued

Recommendation 5.1

The Department accepts this recommendation. Action is being taken to ensure that the human and financial resources are better targeted and align with the necessary strategies and responses in local school communities.

Recommendation 5.2

The Department accepts this recommendation. The Department has commissioned an independent review of the student support services officers (SSSOs) resource which is focusing on the benefits to students which can come from the support which SSSOs provide to schools at a systems level. An aim is to ensure all students receive timely access to relevant support services as required.

Recommendation 6.1

The Department accepts this recommendation. The support required in working with schools in understanding and using the school performance data to better inform their school improvement strategies is accepted as part of the continuous improvement agenda. The Department is linking the use of data with the investment it is making in developing leadership and workforce capability.

2 Background

2.1 Introduction

How well young people perform at school has a major impact on their self-esteem and future life chances. Education is also a major contributor to future economic prosperity and to social cohesion. Modelling by the Victorian Government suggests that increasing student attainment and participation in education will assist Victoria to overcome predicted labour and skills shortages associated with the ageing of the population and will provide financial benefits for the State.

In Victoria, around 540 000 young people (or two-thirds of school students) attend government schools. The State's 1 600 government schools face many challenges.

Compared with other states, Victorian government schools generally perform well in national literacy, writing and numeracy tests, and on school retention rates. Although a large proportion of schools provide high standards of education, there is a high concentration of poor outcomes in some schools and some regions.

Responsibility for improving student learning outcomes rests with schools and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department):

- schools take responsibility for the achievements of their students, the ongoing health and sustainability of their school, and equity and quality in their programs
- the Department's regional offices are responsible for the performance of the schools and for providing support and advice to schools
- the Department's central office is accountable for the overall performance of the government school system, and for providing policies and frameworks that assist regional offices and schools.

2.2 Victoria's approach to assessing school performance

Until 1994, it was difficult to assess student outcomes and school performance in Victoria due to an absence of frameworks and data. In 1994, the Government introduced an accountability framework to support the *Schools of the Future* program. The *Schools of the Future Accountability Framework* established three sets of indicators by which school performance could be monitored. The performance data provided information about school management, student achievement in English and Mathematics in Prep to Year 10, and student performance in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

The performance data have been collected since 1994 and published electronically since 1996 according to system-wide benchmarks. The data sets identify student performance on a state-wide basis and also according to “Like School Groups” (schools with similar student characteristics).

New performance measures have been developed to assist schools to monitor student achievement and overall school performance.

Although there have been a number of changes to the accountability framework since 1994, the critical elements have remained: the processes of school self-evaluation and external review, strategic planning, and annual reporting to the school community. These elements are now connected through a four-year planning and review cycle, and an annual cycle of implementation and reporting.

In 2005, a new *School Accountability and Improvement Framework* was established. The 2005 framework sharpened the focus on student outcomes in the key areas of student learning, student engagement and wellbeing, and student transitions and pathways. The framework acknowledged that school improvement was a collective responsibility.

School self-evaluation and review are key components of the *School Accountability and Improvement Framework*. Together, these processes help schools analyse current school performance and practice in order to develop appropriate improvement strategies. The strategies form the basis of school strategic plans.

Since 2004, schools have been required to undertake one of three different types of review over a four-year cycle to reflect their particular needs:

- **Negotiated reviews** are used for schools with student outcomes and other key indicators above expected levels. The school uses a “critical friend” to examine a specific area for improvement identified from the school self-evaluation
- **Continuous improvement reviews** are used for schools with satisfactory student outcomes and other key indicators, but where it has been determined that there is scope for improvement
- **Diagnostic reviews** are used for schools with some student outcomes and other key indicators below expected levels, or where the circumstances of the school are complex and require additional consulting time.

2.3 School performance in the Victorian government school system

2.3.1 Measures of student performance

The Department collects data on a wide range of student outcome performance measures for government schools (Figure 2A). The Department also uses annual surveys to collect information on student attitudes to school, staff organisational health and parent opinion. Together, these data sets assist schools to understand their strengths and to identify areas where performance needs to be improved. The data sets enable the Department's central and regional offices to monitor system-wide performance and to target improvement efforts.

Figure 2A
Student outcome performance measures used by the Department in 2006

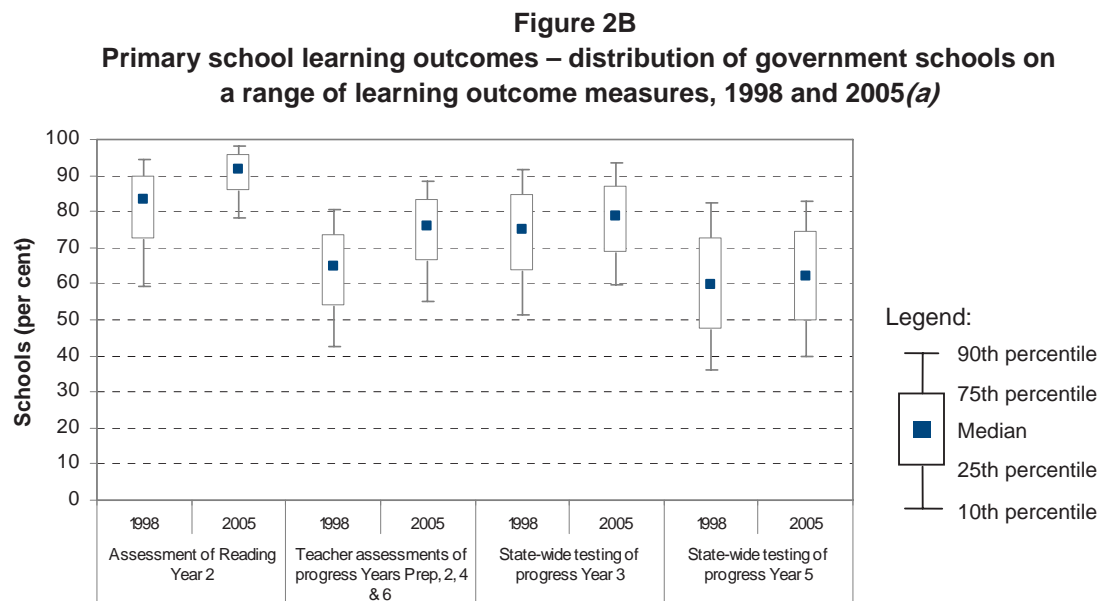
Student outcome data – primary schools	Student outcome data – secondary schools	Student outcome data – national
Assessment of reading for Years Prep-2	Teacher assessment against Victorian Essential Learning Standards in English and Mathematics, for Years 7-10	National benchmark data for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 by gender, language background other than English, indigenous status and geographic location
Teacher assessment of student progress in English and Mathematics against the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, for Years Prep-6	State-wide Achievement Improvement Monitor test data for English and Mathematics at Years 3 and 5	National testing of student achievement in Science (Year 6), Civics and ICT at Years 6 and 10 (every three years)
	Victorian Certificate of Education study scores	National testing of Mathematics and Science at Years 4 and 8 (every four years)
	Vocational Education and Training participation and completion	
	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning participation and completion	
Teacher assessment of student progress in the Program for Students with Disabilities	Teacher assessment of student progress in the Program for Students with Disabilities	
Student absence data	Student absence data	
	Apparent school retention data	
	Real school retention data	
	Exit destination data for Years 10-12	

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, using information from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

In Victoria, data on the number of schools with student outcomes at or above expected levels are published in *Budget Paper No 3 Service Delivery*. The data are based on the performance of government schools on a range of key data sets, including student achievement, student engagement and wellbeing, and student pathways and transitions.

2.3.2 System-wide performance of government schools, 1998-2005

Analysis of the data for the subset of performance measures described in Figure 2A used in 1998 showed that learning outcomes for primary school students improved between 1998 and 2005. This is shown in Figure 2B.



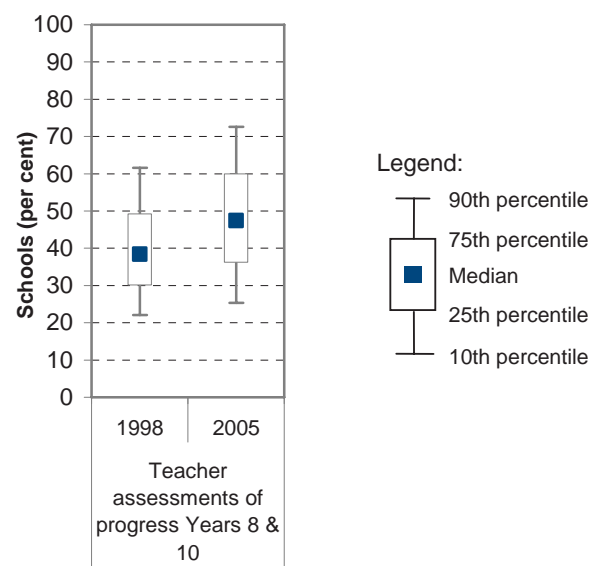
(a) The full description of each measure is provided in Appendix A.
Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

As Figure 2B shows, the median result across all schools increased for each of the measures over this period, and the gap between the lowest outcomes and the highest outcomes narrowed.

In contrast to the improvement in learning outcomes, the median number of absence days rose from 11 in 1998 to almost 13 in 2005 for primary students.

Analysis of the secondary school performance data for the subset of measures described in Figure 2A used in 1998 showed that student learning outcomes increased or remained stable between 1998 and 2005. This is shown in Figures 2C and 2D.

Figure 2C
Secondary school learning outcomes – distribution of government schools on the teacher assessment of student progress measure, 1998 and 2005 (a)

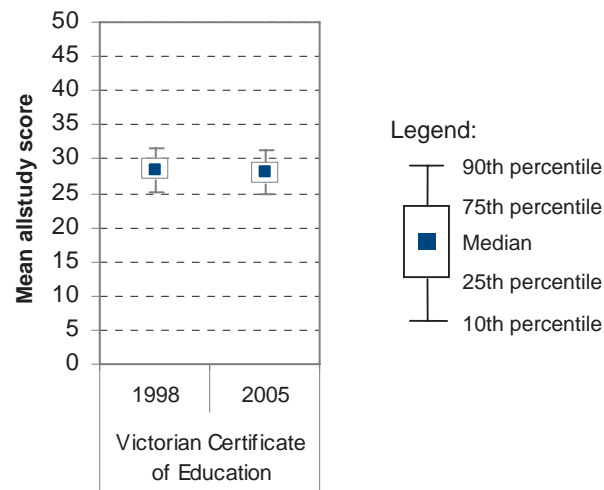


(a) The full description of the measure is provided in Appendix A.

Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

As Figure 2C shows, the median result across all schools for Years 8 and 10 English and Mathematics rose substantially between 1998 and 2005. However, in contrast to the primary student data, the distribution of results widened.

Figure 2D
Secondary school learning outcomes – distribution of government schools on the Victorian Certificate of Education allstudy measure, 1998 and 2005 (a)



(a) Further description of the measure is provided in Appendix A.

Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) student performance remained relatively stable between 1998 and 2005 as shown in Figure 2D. Each year, the mean study score for all students (government, Catholic, independent and adult) is fixed at 30 with a standard deviation of seven. An effect of the standardisation process is that for a change in the government school sector mean to show up, an opposite change in one or more of the other school sectors would be needed. The average VCE allstudy score for government school students in 1998 was 28.35, compared with 28.10 in 2005.

The average number of days absent per student rose between 1998 and 2005 for secondary students, from 15 days to 16 days.

2.4 Strategies to improve performance in government schools

Over the past decade, a number of major initiatives have been introduced in Victoria to improve school performance and student outcomes. These included programs targeting specific aspects of learning, such as literacy, Restart, Middle Years and Access to Excellence.

In 2003, the then Minister for Education and Training launched the reform package, *Blueprint for Government Schools*. This reform was designed to address performance issues, particularly the concentration of poor student learning outcomes in some schools and regions, and the variation in outcomes between schools with similar student populations. The *Blueprint* reform was underpinned by a range of initiatives available to all government schools, including some that are mandatory.

The framework for school improvement in Victorian government schools is based on the Effective Schools Model, which defines eight factors that are correlated with improved student outcomes (Figure 2E). The Department defines an effective school as “one in which students progress further than might be expected from consideration of its intake”. An effective school thus adds extra value in comparison with other schools serving similar intakes.

Figure 2E
Effective Schools Model



Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Recognising that around 50 to 60 per cent of the variation in student learning outcomes is attributable to teacher effects, a major focus for the *Blueprint* initiatives was on building the skills of the education workforce. The Department's research highlighted that the importance of school leadership is second only to the influence of classroom instruction on student learning. Consequently, initiatives to enhance the leadership skills and behaviours of educators in government schools were another focus.

The *Blueprint* identified recognising and responding to diverse student needs, along with continuously improving schools, as the other major priorities of the reform agenda. The Department has resourced a range of professional learning programs and opportunities aimed at improving student outcomes.

Following the *Blueprint*, funding was made available for initiatives targeted at improving student outcomes in schools with student outcomes below expected levels. Victoria is currently the only Australian jurisdiction to have done this.

2.5 This audit

The objective of the audit was to determine whether the Department's contribution to improving outcomes for students in government schools performing below expected levels had been effective. The audit focused on schools that were performing below expected levels in 1998. The schools were retrospectively identified using a similar approach to that currently used by the Department to assess school performance.

The audit was performed in accordance with the Australian auditing standards applicable to performance audits, and included tests and procedures sufficient to enable audit conclusions to be reached. The total cost was \$495 000. This cost includes staff time, overheads, expert advice and printing.

Further information on the conduct of the audit is detailed in Appendix A of this report.

3 Schools with student outcomes below expected levels

At a glance

Background

The Department collects student outcomes data that enable it to identify the relative performance of schools. The data cover student learning outcomes, student engagement and wellbeing, student transitions and pathways, as well as student, teacher and parent opinions of school performance.

The audit identified 128 schools that had student outcomes below expected levels on at least two of the measures in 1998. Using these same measures, 31 of the 128 schools were identified as having student outcomes below expected levels in 2005.

Key findings

- Most of the schools performing below expected levels in 1998 faced highly challenging circumstances. Most of the schools had:
 - a high proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds
 - a high proportion of educationally disadvantaged students
 - a large number of students from language backgrounds other than English
 - a high proportion of students with special learning needs or challenging behaviours
 - high levels of student absence and transience
 - declining enrolments.
- The schools were predominantly located in the Western Metropolitan, Southern Metropolitan and Northern Metropolitan education regions.
- Principals and teachers at the schools visited by audit were strongly committed to improving the outcomes of their students.
- Many schools considered that addressing student welfare and engagement was an essential precondition to improve teaching and student learning outcomes.

3.1 Introduction

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department) collects data on student learning outcomes (e.g. Assessment of Reading; progress against the Victorian Essential Learning Standards – VELS [formerly the Curriculum and Standards Framework], the Achievement Improvement Monitor [AIM], and the Victorian Certificate of Education [VCE]), student absences and student exits. Annual surveys collect information on student attitudes to school, staff organisational health, and parent opinion and satisfaction.

Because not all of these data sets were collected in 1998, audit used a modified set of performance measures to track the performance of schools between 1998 and 2005. Schools that scored below the 10th percentile cut-off on two or more of these measures were identified as those schools with student outcomes below expected levels. The measures are described in Appendix A.

Using this method, audit retrospectively identified 128 schools with student outcomes below expected levels in 1998 (106 primary, 17 secondary and five Prep – Year 12). The same method was used to identify whether any of the schools were still performing below expected levels in 2005. Thirty-one such schools were identified (22 primary, seven secondary and two Prep – Year 12), while four had closed or merged.

3.2 Schools with student outcomes below expected levels

Through a questionnaire, school visits and review of school documents, the audit examined the performance of the 128 schools. The general characteristics and the approaches the 128 schools had taken to improve student outcomes were also examined.

3.2.1 School performance

The measures on which the 128 schools were performing below expected levels (i.e. below the 10th percentile cut-off) in 1998 are shown in Figure 3A, primary schools and Figure 3B, secondary schools.

Figure 3A
Number and percentage of primary schools below expected levels by performance measure

Performance measure – Primary schools (a)	Schools	
	(no.)	(%)
Assessment of Reading (Year 2)	35	32
Teacher assessments of progress in English and Mathematics (Prep, Year 2, Year 4 and Year 6)	61	55
State-wide testing of progress in English and Mathematics (Year 3)	66	59
State-wide testing of progress in English and Mathematics (Year 5)	61	55
Student absence (Prep to Year 6)	58	52

(a) The full description of each measure is provided in Appendix A.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, based on data provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The data indicate that problems with student learning outcomes were more evident from the middle years of primary school, and that high student absence was an issue in over half of the schools. As indicated in Figure 3B, secondary schools showed a similar pattern to primary schools.

Figure 3B
Number and percentage of secondary schools below expected levels by performance measure

Performance measure – Secondary schools (a)	Schools	
	(no.)	(%)
Teacher assessments of progress in English and Mathematics (Years 8 and 10)	13	59
Victorian Certificate of Education	12	55
Student absence (Years 7 to 12)	12	55
Student exit destinations (Years 10 to 12)	5	23

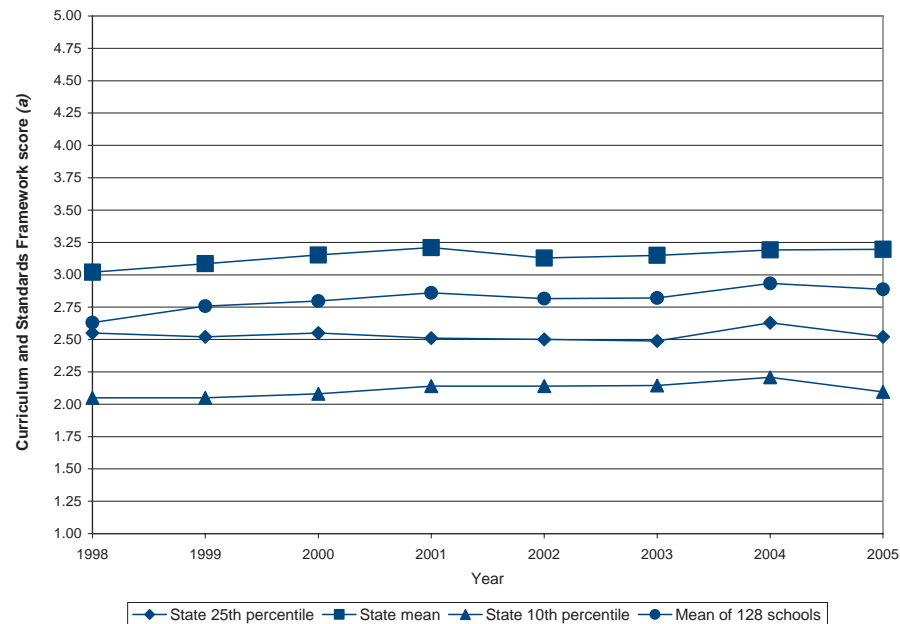
(a) The full description of each measure is provided in Appendix A.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, based on data provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

In 2005, only 31 of the 128 schools were identified as having student outcomes below expected levels. The audit found that, although the other 93 schools were no longer defined as performing below expected levels in 2005, around 50 per cent were still performing below the 25th percentile on one or more of the performance measures.

Audit also compared the results of the 128 schools since 1998 with the results across all government schools¹. The mean achievement across the 128 schools fell between the State mean and the 25th percentile, for all measures. To illustrate this, the mean Year 5 reading results from the state-wide testing for the primary schools performing below expected levels in 1998, compared with the results of all government schools, are shown in Figure 3C.

Figure 3C
Year 5 reading – State results (government primary schools) compared with the mean for the group of primary schools with student outcomes below expected levels in 1998



(a) Replaced by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards in 2006.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, based on data provided by Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Figure 3C shows that the mean performance for the 128 schools and the government schools improved slightly between 1998 and 2005. Figure 3C also shows that the mean level of achievement for Year 5 reading at the primary schools performing below expected levels in 1998 was approximately 12 months behind that for all government schools (an increase of 0.5 in the VELs scores corresponds to around one year's expected growth in learning).

¹ This could only be done for the state-wide testing of progress in English and Mathematics measures. Only Year 7 results were available for secondary schools, and only from 2001.

3.2.2 Characteristics of schools

The school visits undertaken for the audit and the audit questionnaire responses provided by principals revealed that many of the 128 schools faced highly challenging circumstances.

The schools commonly had a high proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. in one school, 80 per cent of students were receiving financial support through the Education Maintenance Allowance). Many schools had high proportions of students from language backgrounds other than English, single parent families and families with inter-generational unemployment.

Seventy per cent of the 128 schools were located in the Department's Northern Metropolitan Region, Southern Metropolitan Region and Western Metropolitan Region. The other six regions each had fewer than 10 per cent of the schools.

Schools performing below expected levels indicated they had a high proportion of students with learning or developmental difficulties. Many students started primary and secondary school behind the level of their peers on one or more dimensions, including poor English language skills, limited exposure to kindergarten, and a lack of social skills.

Declining enrolments was another characteristic of many of the schools responding to the questionnaire (39 per cent of all schools, and 50 per cent of those still below expected levels in 2005). Schools reported that this was due to both a decline in the number of school-aged children in the community, and competition from neighbouring schools (both government and non-government schools). The schools indicated that, once a school gains a poor reputation, it is often hard to increase enrolments or attract students with stronger academic abilities. Recent research has shown that school size has become strongly tied to the social composition and intake of schools, with schools serving the most disadvantaged populations in Melbourne having become predominantly small schools².

As well as tackling the fundamental educational disadvantage of many students, the schools performing below expected levels must address considerable social and welfare challenges. Many schools considered that addressing student welfare and engagement was an essential precondition to improving student learning outcomes.

Although many of the schools performing below expected levels face complex issues, they also have important strengths. Strengths identified by the audit included:

- committed and experienced staff
- a strong focus on caring for their students
- effective or improved student welfare management
- small class sizes.

² S Lamb, School Reform and Inequality in Urban Australia: A Case of Residualising the Poor, in R Teese, S Lamb and M Duru-Bellat (eds) *International Studies in Educational Inequality, Volume Three. Inequality: Educational Theory and Public Policy*, Springer, 2007, pp.1-38.

Individual or “niche” strengths were evident in special program areas such as music, outdoor education and involving students in youth networks.

The Department has identified that student characteristics, particularly socio-economic indicators, are very strong predictors of school performance. Schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged students and serving low socio-economic areas have a compounded disadvantage.

3.2.3 Actions required to improve performance

Audit gathered information from schools on the actions they considered needed to be taken and or in fact were being taken to improve performance.

Many schools identified addressing student welfare and engagement as an essential precondition to improve student learning outcomes. More than 60 per cent of the principals responding to the questionnaire identified student engagement as being extremely important for their current school strategic plan or charter. One principal likened an effective school to a three-legged stool: the first leg was to provide a safe, caring and supportive environment for students; the second leg was to provide a responsive and developing curriculum; and the third leg was to raise the expectations of students.

Schools commonly rated improving teaching and learning as critical to improve student outcomes. Over 60 per cent of questionnaire responses indicated that improving teaching was a key focus of the current school strategic plan or charter.

Almost 60 per cent of principals rated developing a shared vision and goals, focused on student outcomes, as extremely helpful for school improvement. Leadership teams within schools considered the school self-evaluation and review process, particularly diagnostic reviews, to be generally valuable for identifying where improvement efforts should be directed.

Audit found that the school principal has a key role in driving improvement. Audit saw a range of leadership approaches in the schools visited that appeared to be effective. In the more successful of the schools visited for the audit, principals had or were devolving responsibilities for various aspects of improvement, and positive leadership was exercised by key staff throughout the school as well as by the principal. The audit noted that principals have high demands placed on them through their diverse responsibilities. The result is a high workload for principals.

School councils also can play a prominent role in school performance improvement. Audit found that the degree to which school councils were involved in school improvement was varied. In some cases, the school council representatives we interviewed felt that their council was genuinely consulted on school improvement matters. Other representatives considered that their councils usually only “rubber stamped” decisions that had already been made. The principals and council representatives at some schools visited identified difficulties in attracting parents to join their school council.

3.2.4 Practices to improve performance

The audit found that schools employ a range of practices to improve student outcomes. Schools were active in many areas associated with the *Blueprint* reforms, including activities related to the introduction of the new VELs.

More than 80 per cent of principals responding to the audit questionnaire said that a high level of student absence was a critical contributor to performance difficulties. Most of the schools visited were working to improve student attendance together with engagement, welfare, behaviour and safety. Improvement actions commonly implemented included:

- actively monitoring attendance and following up absences
- appointing a student welfare coordinator
- using the extra funding received in the Student Resource Package to keep class sizes small and to improve facilities.

Several schools had tackled student welfare needs by establishing “breakfast clubs” to ensure that students did not come to class hungry. Schools were also working on strategies to encourage greater parental involvement in school activities, particularly among parents from different social and language backgrounds. Some schools indicated that, for many students, school is the most secure part of their lives.

Most schools were also involved in a range of activities to improve teaching practices and curriculum materials to better meet the learning needs of their students. Several schools had embarked on major change projects that involved clarifying the vision and goals for the school as a means of improving outcomes for students. Others had changed school organisational arrangements to better meet student needs for a safe and secure environment.

More than 80 per cent of principals responding to the questionnaire indicated that there was limited capacity to adequately support students with additional learning needs (e.g. by providing sufficient classroom help). Principals saw this limitation as a key contributor to schools’ performance difficulties. The schools visited were frustrated in their efforts to improve student learning outcomes because of long delays in receiving assistance from specialist support staff.

3.3 Conclusion

Using the method detailed in Appendix A, audit identified 128 schools as performing below expected levels in 1998. More than half of these schools were located in three metropolitan regions, including over one-quarter in one region, Northern Metropolitan.

By 2005, 93 of these schools (around 75 per cent) had made some improvement, although half still had one or more measures of student outcomes at or below the 25th percentile level of all government schools. Thirty-one schools were still performing below expected levels.

Schools with student outcomes below expected levels

Most of the schools with student outcomes below expected levels faced major challenges. These included having a high proportion of students with learning or developmental difficulties, a high proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and declining enrolments. Schools reported high levels of student absence, and considerable numbers of students with special needs and challenging behaviours. The demands made on the principals of these schools were considerable and varied.

Although the schools had many weaknesses they also had many strengths, foremost of which were committed and experienced staff, a strong focus on caring for their students, and effective or improved student welfare management.

Given the challenges faced by schools performing below expected levels, many of these schools require extensive and sustained support from the central and regional offices to help redress their performance issues.

4 Support framework for schools performing below expected levels

At a glance

Background

One of the major changes introduced through the *Blueprint for Government Schools* was to make school improvement a shared responsibility between schools and the central and regional offices of the Department. Within regions, directors and senior education officers were given the roles of leaders and change agents for school improvement.

The *Blueprint* made explicit the Department's responsibility to intervene directly in schools "demonstrably under-performing both in student outcomes, and on other indicators such as parent and student opinion".

Key findings

- Although processes both to identify schools with student outcomes below expected levels and to prioritise their need for targeted support have improved, regional offices need to apply the processes more systematically.
- There was no suite of common early warning signs to prompt intervention by regions.
- Schools with student outcomes below expected levels are now better supported through access to increased funding and targeted initiatives, and action is in train to improve the sustainability of targeted support for schools.
- The Department's regional offices are engaging more closely with schools to build their capacity to change practices, sustain whole-of-school improvement efforts, and support them through the school review, planning and implementation processes.

At a glance - *continued*

- There is scope to improve the support provided for schools with student outcomes below expected levels, particularly through regional offices:
 - developing a shared and realistic understanding of the possibilities for school improvement at the individual school level (with respect to the actions needed and the progress anticipated) and how best to support schools
 - applying consistent approaches to assessing school capacity to change and improve
 - providing greater certainty that targeted support will be available until changed practices become embedded.

Key recommendations

- 4.1 To sharpen the focus of school improvement efforts and to achieve greater consistency across regions, the processes which identify schools for early intervention and targeted support be amended with a view to:
 - establishing clear criteria for performance triggers and indicators
 - clearly documenting the rationale for decisions.
- 4.2 The Department investigate additional strategies to sustain support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels, including the feasibility of extending the provision of targeted funding and intensive regional office support for at least two to three years.
- 4.3 The Department identify and share knowledge across the government school system about the strengths, weaknesses and cost-effectiveness of the range of interventions used to support schools with student outcomes below expected levels.

4.1 Introduction

Prior to the introduction of the *Blueprint for Government Schools*, identifying issues of concern regarding school performance was largely the responsibility of the centrally managed school accountability and review processes. Regional offices were responsible for implementing improvement initiatives.

The *Blueprint* made school improvement a shared responsibility between schools and the central and regional offices of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department). Within regions, directors and senior education officers (SEOs) were given the key roles of leaders and change agents for school improvement.

The *Blueprint* established that:

- it was unreasonable to expect schools with student outcomes below expected levels to identify and solve their problems without external assistance
- a planned approach would be used to guide improvement in these schools, with identified responsibilities for schools, and the Department's central and regional offices.

The *Blueprint* made explicit the Department's responsibility to intervene directly in schools "demonstrably under-performing both in student outcomes, and on other indicators such as parent and student opinion". It committed the central and regional offices to making a range of interventions and support strategies available to schools.

4.2 Identifying schools in need of targeted support

In 2005, responsibility for identifying and prioritising schools for various forms of targeted support, including diagnostic review, moved from the central office to the regional offices. Each year, the central office provides the regional offices with performance information for all schools in each region. This information is considered by the regional offices alongside relevant contextual information in order to identify schools with issues of concern.

In addition to this process, school performance information is collated annually by the central office for those schools due to undergo their year of self-evaluation, review and planning (a four-year cycle). Performance is assessed against clearly defined performance criteria established by the central office in 2005 to identify the indicative review type for each school. Regional offices consider these data together with contextual information to determine the recommended type of review and its timing. All of this information is provided to the school principal.

Until recently, the prioritisation processes used by the Northern Metropolitan (NMR), Western Metropolitan (WMR) and Gippsland (GR) regional offices to determine which schools with issues of concern would receive targeted support were not always clear, and decisions were not always well documented. In NMR and WMR, there is still room for improvement in the prioritisation process, particularly with respect to recording decisions made and their rationale. At present, the process does not always facilitate consistent decision-making.

In the NMR, WMR and GR, schools identified for diagnostic review also usually received targeted support in that year. Additional schools identified for targeted support in the same year were those considered to have the most challenging circumstances (NMR and WMR) and those with performance issues that demonstrated a capacity to implement and sustain improvement (GR). In almost all cases, schools identified with issues of concern who were unsuccessful in receiving targeted support, continued to be monitored by the regional office.

Of the 19 schools from the group of 31 schools that still had student outcomes below expected levels in 2005, and were located in the regions audited, one school failed to be identified as having issues of concern until 2007. This indicates that the identification process was not systematic. The school was recently identified for targeted support following an increasing decline in its enrolments.

4.2.1 Performance triggers

The *Blueprint* identified that "clear and widely understood performance triggers" would underpin intervention in schools with student outcomes below expected levels.

Clear and widely understood performance triggers have been developed to indicate the type of review a school should receive (negotiated, continuous improvement or diagnostic). The diagnostic review is considered to be a form of "early intervention" because schools only need to perform below expected levels on two performance measures to highlight the potential need for a diagnostic review.

The central and regional office staff acknowledged that it was difficult to clearly define performance triggers for other forms of intervention. Some regions had developed their own early warning signs to look for in the centrally collected data however, there was no suite of common early warning signs or triggers for prompting intervention by regions.

The continuing need for performance triggers, as well as early warning signs, was identified in the Department's *School Improvement: A Theory of Action* (2007) paper and its 2006 evaluation of the Targeted School Improvement initiative. The evaluation highlighted the value of early intervention as it found that the cycle of declining enrolments, staff and student morale, student outcomes and reputation was very difficult to turn around once it had become entrenched.

4.2.2 Conclusion

Improved processes have been established to identify schools with student outcomes below expected levels and to prioritise their need for targeted support. However, regional offices need to apply systematic processes to ensure that schools needing support are identified in a timely manner. The rationale for whether or not a school is targeted for support should be documented to provide a baseline for future assessment and improve the transparency and consistency of prioritisation over time.

A clearly defined common suite of contextual and data-driven performance triggers and early warning signs for schools and regions across the State has not yet been developed. These triggers and indicators would improve the ability of regional offices to decide how and when to intervene to support schools.

Failure to initiate timely targeted support risks further deterioration in a school's performance. In that event even greater levels of support are required to arrest the decline. Addressing these issues should be a priority for the Department.

Recommendation

- 4.1 To sharpen the focus of school improvement efforts and to achieve greater consistency across regions, the processes which identify schools for early intervention and targeted support be amended with a view to:
- establishing clear criteria for performance triggers and indicators
 - clearly documenting the rationale for decisions.

4.3 Targeting support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels

The audit found that, following the *Blueprint* reforms, support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels is now better targeted in two important respects.

First, the Department has adopted a more strategic and streamlined approach toward school improvement, including:

- developing a strong evidence base for much of the work
- planning for current and future education needs in local areas and across regions
- applying the principles of continuous improvement, including increasing the emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives
- taking a whole-of-school focus to supporting school improvement
- looking at improving regional offices' own performance and development culture.

The schools that responded to the audit questionnaire, and those covered in the audit visits, identified several areas of the Department's support they perceived to be particularly positive. These included:

- regions adopting a partnership approach to supporting schools
- a greater emphasis on professional development
- promoting connections with other schools
- assistance with planning and access to funding.

Second, the current school improvement framework recognised that schools with student outcomes below expected levels needed targeted support. This need has been addressed, particularly in the areas of:

- providing targeted resourcing for school improvement activities
- building the capacity of schools to implement change and sustain improvement
- working more closely with schools to diagnose the problems and plan improvement activities through the accountability and improvement framework.

4.3.1 Targeted resourcing for school improvement activities

The Student Resource Package (SRP) is a mechanism for allocating funding to schools. In 2005, the Department changed the SRP to introduce a student-based funding formula. It also linked a significant component of equity funding to Student Family Occupation (an indicator of disadvantage), which had the effect of targeting this funding at a smaller number of schools.

The Department recently commenced an evaluation of the use of equity funding in schools to identify approaches that have the biggest impact on outcomes. This evidence base will be used to assist schools to develop effective approaches and timeframes for expected improvement. Audit supports this approach.

In recent years, the Department has responded to an identified need by providing a range of initiatives targeted at schools with student outcomes below expected levels (Figure 4A). Many of the 31 schools identified in the audit that had student outcomes below expected levels in 1998 and 2005 received support from these sources between 2004 and 2007.

Figure 4A
School improvement initiatives targeted at schools performing below expected levels

Initiative	Duration	Funding (\$'000)	Number of the 31 schools participating
Building Capacity for Improvement	2003-04 to 2008-09	755	2
Targeted School Improvement (TSI)	2003-04 to 2008-09	(a) 7 600	21
Community Catalyst	2005-06 to 2008-09	(b) 300	1
Grant to Regions	2006-07	360	(c)
Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Improving Schools (IDEAS)	2004-05 to 2007-08	(d) 853	4
Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP)	2005-06 to 2008-09	(a) 1 350	12
Differentiated Review Model – Diagnostic Reviews	2004-05 to 2008-09	954	16
Literacy Improvement Teams	2006-07 to 2008-09	11 653	16

(a) Funding for 2007-08 and 2008-09 is yet to be announced.

(b) Funding for 2008-09 is yet to be announced.

(c) This funding is used by regions to support a variety of interventions, including leadership development.

(d) Funding for 2007-08 is yet to be announced.

Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

In addition to the funding outlined in Figure 4A, regions use their discretionary funding to support schools with student outcomes below expected levels.

Regional offices allocate targeted funding to schools using a prioritisation process. The amount is based on consideration of the support required by the school to undertake its annual implementation plan.

The audit found that, although targeted funding was often allocated across a large number of schools, the amount was unlikely to meet their needs (e.g. some schools in significant need received only \$5 000 from the Targeted School Improvement initiative). This is now changing as regional offices focus on assisting fewer schools but with a larger funding allocation to provide more intensive support.

The audit found that some schools were identified with student outcomes below expected levels year after year, but did not receive targeted support commensurate with their need. As at June 2006, all schools from the group of 31 that performed below expected levels in both 1998 and 2005 had participated in at least one of the *Blueprint* initiatives. However, only 15 schools had been included in the Targeted School Improvement initiative. Of the 19 schools out of the group of 31 that were located in the regions audited (13 in NMR and six in WMR):

- three had a diagnostic review and received TSI and AGQTP funding
- one had a diagnostic review, received TSI funding and participated in the Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Improving Schools program
- five had a diagnostic review and received TSI funding
- one had a diagnostic review and received AGQTP funding
- two had a diagnostic review only
- three received TSI funding only.

The remaining four schools received support from system-wide improvement programs such as the Reading Recovery program, the Early Years Coordinator Training program, the Student Attendance program and the ESL teaching program, as well as through curriculum and teaching programs delivered by regions. Of these four schools:

- three were identified with issues of concern but not considered to be in as great a need as other schools in the region at different times over the period 1998 to 2005. Two were identified in either 2006 or 2007 as needing significant support – one in response to accelerated declining enrolments and one as a result of a new method for identifying schools with issues of concern, based on the Student Family Occupation index
- one was never formally identified as having issues of concern until 2007, when it was identified as needing significant support in response to accelerated declining enrolments.

Since 2006, each regional office has worked intensively with around 15 schools each year to support improvement. The 15 schools may include schools performing below expected levels or schools that have satisfactory student outcomes but should be performing better. The support to be provided by the regional office and the outcomes to be achieved by the school are commonly agreed through a Memorandum of Understanding which has a two or three-year duration.

Principals responding to the questionnaire and the schools visited that had received targeted support indicated that this support was valuable. Schools had used the support in different ways, reflecting the different issues they had focused on and the different strategic approaches they had adopted.

Sustainability of support

Key central office guidance developed for regional offices and schools acknowledges that school improvement usually requires a sustained approach over several years. The evaluation of the Targeted School Improvement initiative recommended that the schools in the initiative be supported and resourced for a minimum of three years to implement improvement strategies. Given the often shorter-term duration of targeted funding identified in Figure 4A, coupled with the 12-month timeframe (generally) for priority support from the regional offices, sustainability of support will be a critical factor affecting the capacity of schools performing below expected levels to achieve their improvement goals.

The Department has initiated action to improve the sustainability of its targeted support. Some schools that participated in the Targeted School Improvement initiative, or the AGQTP in 2006, are also being supported in 2007, including four of the 31 schools that were performing below expected levels in both 1998 and 2005.

The recently introduced Literacy Improvement Team initiative also seeks to address sustainability, by providing one-on-one training with teachers in the classroom. Training is also provided to another staff member who can, in turn, coach and train colleagues. As funding is assured over a number of years, regional offices have the flexibility to establish programs in schools that extend beyond the usual 12-month period. For example, NMR is providing this program to selected schools for two years.

4.3.2 Building the capacity of schools to implement change and sustain improvement

In recent years, there has been increased recognition in the education literature of the need for schools to address certain “pre-conditions” for improvement. These centre on building the school’s capacity to manage change and ensuring that subsequent changes to teaching and learning in the school achieve the desired impact.

The Department is seeking to address the preconditions for improvement. The *Blueprint* initiatives incorporated the following three Flagship strategies:

- building leadership capacity in schools (seven initiatives). Twenty of the 31 schools that still had student outcomes below expected levels in 2005 participated in these initiatives. Responses to the audit questionnaire indicated that principals rated this support highly
- building teaching capacity in schools (two initiatives). Twenty-six of the 31 schools had participated in these initiatives. An evaluation of the Teacher Professional Leave initiative (2004 and 2005) identified that over 2 000 teachers across the State had accessed the program, and that it had improved the content and the practice of classroom teaching. The specific impact on schools with student outcomes below expected levels was not identified

- creating a performance and development culture in schools to sustain change (one initiative, mandatory for all schools). Two of the 31 schools had received accreditation under this initiative while six others had expressed an interest in becoming accredited. The principals responding to the audit questionnaire who referred to this program were complimentary, generally indicating that it was a key improvement strategy for their schools.

Assessing the extent to which schools are able to implement change is a complex task. Audit found that some guidance about assessing schools' capacity to change was jointly developed between regional offices and the central office through the Effective Schools Model and the Effective Leaders Model. For leadership capacity, the central office had described the key attributes associated with different levels of leadership capability and had linked these to relevant leadership capacity building initiatives.

Audit found that the regional offices had developed different approaches to identify capacity issues in their schools. For example, GR this year put in place a framework for assessing all schools against documented criteria. GR had also identified seven improvement steps to describe the changes that schools need to address. WMR has developed a capacity building model that links the *Blueprint* Flagship strategies to five capacity focus areas. At the time of the audit, NMR had not documented its approach for assessing school capacity issues.

Regional offices are also placing greater emphasis on encouraging schools to work more closely with each other to enhance their capacity to improve performance. The schools visited for the audit were involved in a number of activities associated with this approach (e.g. a network for Vocational Education and Training teachers, clusters of schools undertaking Performance and Development Culture accreditation, principal collegiate groups). NMR is commencing a project to support school improvement by pairing schools performing below expected levels with high-performing schools.

The current focus of the Department is on introducing classroom-based approaches to improve teaching and learning. One example is the Literacy Improvement Team initiative, where coaches work one-on-one with teachers in the classroom. The Department has also established a Teacher and School Capacity Building Division.

4.3.3 Working more closely with schools to diagnose problems and plan improvement

Most principals responding to the audit questionnaire considered that help from central and regional offices during 2005 and 2006 was received when needed. The principals were largely very satisfied with the help provided, the knowledge and expertise of regional office staff, and opportunities to obtain assistance from them.

The *School Accountability and Improvement Framework* was also well regarded by the schools responding to the audit questionnaire. Progressive improvements to the *Framework* over the period 1998 to 2007 were evident in the self-evaluation, review and planning documents examined at the eight schools visited.

School self-evaluation, review and planning

With the introduction of the differential review process in 2004, regional office staff started working more closely to assist schools with the process of self-evaluation, review and planning for school improvement. School responses to the audit questionnaire indicated that this help was needed and appreciated. Over 75 per cent of principals responding agreed that the process helped identify and address strengths and weaknesses in school performance. The schools receiving the most assistance were usually those undergoing a diagnostic review – in 2006 there were three diagnostic reviews in GR, five in NMR and eight in WMR.

Audit found that the understanding and use of school data by principals and teachers is improving. However, some schools continued to have difficulties with using the school data to evaluate their performance and guide their improvement activities. This difficulty was corroborated by the three regional offices. A common example cited was a need for help to “unpack” the trend data in the annual School Level Report. Broader participation in the training opportunities in data interpretation and analysis currently available to principals and teachers needs to be further encouraged.

Principals responding to the questionnaire who were from schools that had undergone a diagnostic review were more positive about the benefits of the school self-evaluation, review and planning process. The four schools visited that had undertaken diagnostic reviews found the process confronting at first, but all appreciated the experience and its role as a catalyst for change.

Although review reports are required to include suggested improvement strategies for the school strategic plan, strategies prepared by the four schools were often very broadly stated. Consequently, the strategies were not always as useful as they might otherwise have been. Audit also noted that extra funding was provided for diagnostic reviews to purchase additional reviewer time. However, this support was not always sufficient to help schools translate the review recommendations into a set of achievable improvement strategies and actions.

Schools visited for the audit that had been through the strategic planning process all agreed that the focus on student outcomes made the plan clearer and more relevant. Schools and regional office staff highlighted the value of the annual implementation plan in translating the strategies into meaningful actions and enabling staff to identify their responsibilities.

Implementing improvement strategies

Sixty per cent of principals responding to the audit questionnaire identified that they had needed guidance on school improvement strategies in the previous two years. The area where principals identified the greatest gap between help needed and help received was the provision of information about funding programs and initiatives of relevance to the school’s goals. This was also one of the two aspects of support with which principals were least satisfied.

Several principals also expressed the need for more on-ground support, including more contact with the SEO.

NMR, WMR and GR told audit that defining school improvement (in terms of the actions needed and the progress anticipated) at the individual school level remains a challenge. These three regions identified that it was sometimes difficult to know when or how to intervene in a school.

To carry out their role, regional offices need a shared understanding and a common language about what school improvement involves and what it would mean in practice for individual schools, ranging from effective organisational models for schools, to effective teaching and learning practices. Although this has been a focus of the Department's work since 2004, it is an area that needs further development.

A lack of a shared understanding means there is a risk that schools will receive inconsistent messages about performance improvement, and will be unclear about what they are aiming for. The risk is increased by the greater emphasis on schools working together to support school improvement

Over 80 per cent of the 105 schools that responded to the questionnaire had participated in the Teacher Professional Development Program or Leadership Capacity Building initiatives; or had received targeted funding for specific curriculum program development. However, a concern raised by most schools and some regional office staff was the need to improve coordination and integration across the *Blueprint* initiatives to make it easier to select the most appropriate opportunities in the most helpful sequence.

Another concern raised by schools was the need to reduce the demands made on teachers by frequent new initiatives and administrative tasks from central and regional offices.

In a three-year period, one small primary school had its year of self-evaluation, review and planning, received Targeted School Improvement funding and participated in two leadership programs, induction and mentoring for new teachers, Performance and Development Culture accreditation, Principles of Learning and Teaching training, and Teacher Professional Leave. It was also required, as were all government schools, to implement the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards and the new report cards.

Audit noted that many of these initiatives are optional and that schools are responsible for balancing their participation in school improvement initiatives with non-school improvement related activities.

The Department has acknowledged the challenges faced by regional offices and schools associated with implementing improvement initiatives. Actions in train to address these challenges include:

- the Department's Ultranet project, which is intended to strengthen the shared understanding of regions and schools about how schools can achieve improved student outcomes

- the development of new guidance material to assist in selecting appropriate initiatives
- changes to address school concerns about the number and coordination of new initiatives. One change involved assigning responsibility for all *Blueprint* initiatives (except the Student Resource package, local administrative bureau and the Leading Schools Fund) to one central office unit
- the central office and regional directors working together to build a shared understanding of the role and key functions of regional offices. Audit agrees with the Department that this should be a strategic priority.

4.3.4 Supporting students with additional needs

Many schools performing below expected levels have higher proportions of students with additional needs i.e. learning or developmental difficulties. Staff at the schools visited indicated that many students had a learning or developmental difficulty in one or more of the following areas:

- physical health and wellbeing
- social skills and wellbeing
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive skills.

For these students, access to support services is critically linked to improved learning outcomes. “Students with additional needs” was rated by half of the principals responding to the audit questionnaire as extremely important in contributing to the school’s performance difficulties. Audit found that responding to the complexity of students’ additional needs was a challenge for most schools performing below expected levels.

Students with additional needs require access to a wide range of health and other professional student services. The student support services officers (SSSOs) provided by regional offices are the primary source of these services. The SSSOs include guidance officers, speech pathologists, psychologists and teachers.

Schools and regional offices provided examples of long delays in accessing SSSO services. Waiting lists for students needing to see a psychologist ranged from three weeks at one school to several months at another. Some small schools have found it difficult to obtain the financial resources necessary to provide appropriate levels of student support. The Department is currently reviewing the SSSO resource.

Audit found examples of innovative approaches by schools and regions to address students’ additional needs:

- one school established a special space for students who are autistic, shy or disabled
- one school gained access to an oral language specialist through employing the person in partnership with another school

- WMR used Multi-Intervention Resource Teams to bring a range of government and community agencies together to support individual students with significant needs
- GR used welfare officers to engage and support the families of potential students in the children's pre-school years.

4.3.5 Supporting schools needing substantial change

The Department's 2006 evaluation of the Targeted School Improvement initiative identified that schools performing below expected levels for long periods of time can have limited capacity to improve without a major intervention. The evaluation stated that such schools tended to be "characterised by factionalised and fragmented staff, weak leadership and management, poor student discipline, high levels of student absenteeism and a lack of a whole-of-school vision and focus."

The evaluation identified that, in such schools, more substantial or radical interventions can be warranted in order to break the cycle of diminishing expectations of teachers and students. Such interventions require a very considerable investment in enhancing leadership and teaching practices.

Audit found that schools and regional offices were still coming to terms with their new roles and responsibilities. At the regional level, staff were grappling with how best to support schools to improve. For some staff, there was a lack of clarity about what intervention mechanisms were available to regions.

Audit found that, while regional officers have a number of tools to assist them in engaging schools and providing support, the way in which the tools were applied varied within and between regions. These tools include:

- the framework for working with schools provided by the *School Accountability and Improvement Framework*
- tools to drive performance in the form of the annual implementation plan and principal performance and development plans
- guidance for assessing the support required such as the effective schools model and the effective leaders model.

In a small number of cases across the three regions audited, more direct forms of intervention had been used to resolve issues with school leadership or provide a catalyst for change. Regional office staff stated that the assessment of a principal's performance had rarely been sufficiently rigorous to make principals accountable for school performance or to terminate a principal's contract. The principal performance and development and principal selection processes were revised in 2006, but it was too early for audit to determine whether they were being applied with greater rigour by the regional offices.

The audit found that school improvement efforts could become constrained by the twin difficulties of moving uncooperative or underperforming teachers or principals, and attracting the best principals and teachers. The latter difficulty was raised as being more important by regional directors. The need to attract high performing teachers and principals to schools performing below expected levels is acknowledged in *Victoria's Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Outcomes* (2007).

School reorganisation

Schools with longstanding poor performance are more likely to be involved in a "regeneration project". Regeneration projects are developed by school communities to improve choices, pathways and educational outcomes for students through providing better:

- education and training opportunities
- learning pathways
- services and facilities.

These projects commonly involve a school or group of schools with declining enrolments, and may result in mergers, or linking some schools to others as feeder schools, or partnerships with other education providers. Regeneration projects form part of the Department's capital investment strategy, *Building Futures*, which was released in 2006.

In relation to regeneration projects, audit found that:

- one of the eight schools visited for the audit was involved in a regeneration project
- NMR has identified 16 schools that are, or may need to be, involved in regeneration projects
- at this early stage, regeneration projects appear to be a productive strategy for addressing the needs of schools with a history of student outcomes below expected levels and declining enrolments.

4.3.6 Conclusion

Following the *Blueprint* reforms, supporting schools that are performing below expected levels is now an important focus of the Department. A number of complementary support mechanisms, including targeted and system-wide initiatives, are now available for these schools. The Department is working to improve the support it provides.

There is a risk, however, that the success of these efforts will be hampered by a lack of shared understanding within and between regional offices and with schools about what is involved in school improvement and how regional offices can best support schools to improve.

Regional offices now work more closely to support schools through the school review, planning and implementation processes. They are also assisting schools to work together to support and strengthen school improvement across the government school system. However, schools performing below expected levels still need more on-ground support with planning and implementing improvement initiatives.

The sustainability of the support provided by the Department is of key concern. The schools with student outcomes below expected levels can struggle to attract good leaders and teachers. Consequently, they need intensive support, sometimes at a very hands-on level, until significant improvements in leadership and teaching capacity are achieved. The central office needs to provide regional offices with greater certainty that targeted funding will be available until changed practices become embedded, or that it will be available for a period of at least two to three years.

Even after years of performing below expected levels, some schools had not received targeted support. Although these schools were few in number, over prolonged periods this still represents a significant number of students who have missed out on the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Recommendations

- 4.2 The Department investigate additional strategies to sustain support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels, including the feasibility of extending the provision of targeted funding and intensive regional office support for at least two to three years.
 - 4.3 The Department identify and share knowledge across the government school system about the strengths, weaknesses and cost-effectiveness of the range of interventions used to support schools with student outcomes below expected levels.
-

5 Capacity of regional offices to support schools

At a glance

Background

Once schools performing below expected levels are identified, the extent to which regional offices are able to help schools improve is largely dependent on:

- the financial resources available to purchase the specific support needed by schools
- the capacity of regional staff to work with schools as needed.

Key findings

- In Northern Metropolitan Region and Western Metropolitan Region the number of schools needing targeted support in 2007 (around 60 in each region) exceeded the regional offices' capacity to provide targeted support (28 and 34 respectively).
- Despite the uneven distribution across regions of schools performing below expected levels, the Department's regional offices receive comparable recurrent funding. Some non-recurrent funding accommodates differing needs across regions.
- Regional offices audited have recently identified the capabilities and the training needs of their staff to meet the new responsibilities they assumed in 2003.
- The Department has not yet assessed whether there are sufficient numbers of senior education officers to ensure the success of the reforms.
- Most of the schools visited and the regions audited expressed concerns about inadequacies in the number or types of student support services officers (SSSOs) who were available, and the difficulties faced by schools in obtaining their services.
- Despite the identified importance of SSSOs to school performance, there have been no systemic changes to the type, number, distribution across schools and management of SSSOs since 2000.

Key recommendations

- 5.1 The allocation of human and financial resources across regions be reviewed to determine whether these allocations:
- appropriately take account of schools' support needs
 - enable regions to effectively fulfil their responsibilities for school improvement.
- 5.2 The issue of students receiving timely access to relevant support services be addressed as part of the current review of the SSSO resource.

5.1 Introduction

Since the introduction of the *Blueprint for Government Schools* in 2003, regional offices of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department) now have a much greater responsibility for school improvement, and specifically for supporting schools with student outcomes below expected levels.

Changing school culture and practices to improve outcomes for students is a challenging task. This is especially the case where schools face several complex issues concurrently, or where a school community does not realise the full extent of problems facing the school.

5.2 Support provided by regional offices

Once schools performing below expected levels are identified, the extent to which regions are able to help them to improve is largely dependent on the funding available to purchase the specific support needed by schools (financial resources) and the capacity of regional staff to work with schools as needed (human resources).

5.2.1 Funding to regional offices

Determining the most effective way to allocate resources across the regional offices is a perennial challenge. The change to regional office responsibilities resulting from the *Blueprint* reforms has again highlighted regional funding issues, especially in relation to how regions are able to carry out their school improvement role.

In 2007, the Department acknowledged (*Theory of Action*) that “the quantum of resources available to regional directors to intervene when they identify performance issues determines the extent of support they can provide and sustain. Given the level of demand and the obvious need, not all regions have the resources required to support sustainable interventions.” A similar need was previously identified by the Department in 2001 in its review of regional offices. That review recommended implementing a differential model for allocating resources to regions that reflected regional characteristics, including demography, socio-economic status and school performance. The recommendation was not adopted.

Two of the regions included in this audit, Northern Metropolitan (NMR) and Western Metropolitan (WMR), identified that in 2007 the number of schools needing targeted support (around 60 in each region) exceeded the region’s capacity to provide targeted support (28 and 34, respectively). Of the schools that received targeted support, 13 and 15 schools respectively also received priority attention.

Current resource levels forced the two regions to place a cut-off on the number of schools performing below expected levels that could be provided with targeted support. In determining the cut-off, the regions took account of their other responsibilities to support schools showing early warning signs of performance issues and to assist all schools in the region to improve.

Some measures have been put in place by the Department, and others are under consideration, to address regional office resourcing, including:

- using team-based approaches in regional offices to support the senior education officers (SEOs) and better harness skills across the office that are relevant to a particular school's needs
- making greater use of school networks and clusters (e.g. clusters of principals collectively developing their performance and development plans)
- reorganising regional office functions to relocate the administration of some aspects (e.g. human resources and finances) to the Department's central office and freeing up equivalent personnel resources for core regional office work, including school improvement
- reviewing the Schools for Innovation and Excellence initiative for the middle years of schooling and the student support services officer (SSSO) function.

Method of allocating funding

Schools with student outcomes below expected levels were distributed unevenly across the Department's regions in 1998 (Figure 5A).

Figure 5A
Distribution of schools with student outcomes below expected levels across regions in 1998

Region	Number of schools	Percentage of schools (a)
Northern Metropolitan	43	23
Southern Metropolitan	24	10
Western Metropolitan	22	17
Gippsland	9	6
Loddon Mallee	9	5
Hume	8	5
Barwon South Western	5	3
Grampians	5	4
Eastern Metropolitan	3	1
Total number	128	

(a) The number of schools performing below expected levels is expressed as a percentage of the total number of primary, secondary and Prep – Year 12 government schools in each region.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, using data from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The 1998 data were obtained retrospectively for the audit using a percentile cut-off method to identify the schools. In 2005, the Department commenced a new method for identifying schools with student outcomes below expected levels that uses an absolute cut-off method. The distribution of schools across the Department's regions in 2005 and 2006 is presented in Figure 5B.

Figure 5B
Distribution of schools with student outcomes below expected levels across regions in 2005 and 2006

Region	Number of schools (a) 2005	Percentage of schools (b) 2005	Number of schools (a) 2006	Percentage of schools (b) 2006
Northern Metropolitan	35	19	31	16
Southern Metropolitan	16	7	14	6
Western Metropolitan	30	22	20	15
Gippsland	13	9	10	7
Loddon Mallee	18	11	17	10
Hume	14	9	10	6
Barwon South Western	8	6	11	8
Grampians	10	8	6	5
Eastern Metropolitan	7	3	3	1
Total number	151		122	

(a) The numbers in this figure differ from the numbers reported in *Budget Paper No. 3 – Service Delivery*, as a different counting method was used to align with the method used to retrospectively identify the schools with student outcomes below expected levels in 1998.

(b) The number of schools performing below expected levels is expressed as a percentage of the total number of primary, secondary and Prep – Year 12 government schools in each region.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, using data from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Despite the uneven distribution of schools, the Department's regional offices receive comparable recurrent funding. Figure 5C shows the 2006-07 and 2007-08 administration budget (i.e. regional office running costs) and student support services budget (i.e. funding for the SSSOs) for the three regional offices covered in the audit.

Figure 5C
Regional administration and student support services budgets (\$'000) (a)

Budget	Gippsland	Western Metropolitan	Northern Metropolitan
Regional administration	(\$)	(\$)	(\$)
Base budget 2006-07	2 699.9	2 561.2	3 538.8
Base budget 2007-08	2 771.0	2 599.0	3 589.0
Regional Student Support Services			
Base budget 2006-07	3 714.8	5 507.8	7 882.5
Base budget 2007-08	3 782.1	5 607.0	8 025.0

(a) Budgets exclude all non-recurring program funds allocated to regional administration from central office.

Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Until 2003-04, resources were allocated to regions on a per student basis. The different amounts regions received per student reflected factors such as the number and geographical spread of schools in the region, but not student profile factors. In 2004-05, the allocation changed to a "base plus" concept. The base chosen was the 2003-04 per capita budget, and the "plus" accommodated any increases in employee award rates.

In contrast to the recurrent funding, some non-recurrent funding accommodates differing needs across regions. For example:

- from 2004 to 2006, 48 per cent of the diagnostic reviews conducted were in NMR and WMR. Diagnostic reviews account for approximately 10 per cent of all reviews across the system, and cost twice as much as continuous improvement reviews. Continuous improvement reviews are much more common, accounting for approximately 73 per cent of all reviews. In line with the higher number of diagnostic reviews, the two regions received approximately 50 per cent of the diagnostic review funding
- the central office provided an administration support grant for the Targeted School Improvement initiative to three regions (NMR, Southern Metropolitan Region and WMR) in recognition of the additional workload to support that initiative.

The Department advised that it intends to review the basis for allocating funding to its regions, including the potential for allocations to better reflect student needs and profiles.

5.2.2 Human resources in regional offices

While some regional staff work in the office, for example, to support the school accountability and improvement process, others, such as drug education officers, work directly with schools. The audit focused on two roles common to all regional offices, namely, SEOs (called deputy regional directors in Gippsland Region) and SSSOs.

Senior Education Officers

SEOs are the key resource for working with schools. Their role includes meeting with principals, assisting in the development and monitoring of a school's strategic and annual implementation plans, conducting principal performance reviews, and providing information and support relating to professional development and training for schools. Each region has four SEOs (except NMR, which has five) who each work with around 40 schools. Some regions also have school improvement officers (SIOs) who work with SEOs to implement school improvement initiatives and provide support to schools.

The *Blueprint* clearly articulated the shared responsibility that regional offices have for school improvement and the important role of SEOs as “key change agents dedicated to school improvement”. This role requires considerable leadership and change management skills to support schools with significant performance issues in the improvement process, and to intervene when expectations and goals are not being met.

The audit found that when the *Blueprint* was introduced, the Department did not assess whether SEOs had the required capabilities, or whether there were sufficient numbers of SEOs, to ensure the success of the reforms. SEOs were provided with a range of professional development opportunities, including:

- strategic leadership forums to enhance their understanding of the *Blueprint* changes and initiatives
- training in data analysis and interpretation
- international study tours
- coaching and mentoring.

Each of the regional offices we audited had recently identified the capabilities required by their staff and the training needed to address any identified gaps.

Although the role description for regional directors was re-written to reflect the changed responsibilities under the *Blueprint* reforms, there had not been any systemic description of the position or identification of key expertise required of SEOs. At the time of the audit, regional offices were starting to address this issue. For example, NMR recently developed an SEO induction program.

The audit found that regional offices and schools generally considered SEOs to be stretched in working with their 40 or so schools. This was especially the case in WMR and NMR where there are higher concentrations of schools with student outcomes below expected levels. Some additional support was provided to SEOs through reorganisations within regional offices (e.g. to create the new SIOs and community liaison officers). However, the Department had not assessed the capacity of SEOs to successfully work with the number of schools they had been allocated, including the impact on SEO workloads of differential levels of support required by each school.

Student support services officers

Students with additional needs are an important focus for many schools performing below expected levels. These students are one of the Department's priorities for 2005-2008. Schools performing below expected levels often rely heavily on the assistance provided by regional offices through the SSSOs for services such as guidance officers, speech pathologists and psychologists.

Each regional office distributes SSSO resources across its school networks according to the number of schools and students and the pattern of need. Regional directors delegate the management of the SSSO function to school networks where they work in local areas to meet the local needs of a network. A school or group of schools may also engage specialist support where they have a pressing need and the capacity to fund the cost of the service.

The schools visited and regions audited expressed concerns about the inadequate numbers and types of SSSOs, and the difficulties faced by schools in obtaining their services. Regional directors also identified difficulties in accounting for the application of resources by school networks. This was due to the different ways in which networks managed and reported on their SSSOs.

Despite the identified importance of SSSOs to school performance, there have been no systemic changes to the type, number, distribution across schools and management of SSSOs since 2000.

The Department is currently reviewing the SSSO resource, with the aim of giving regional directors authority and greater flexibility to apply resources where there is greatest need. Changes are anticipated for the 2008 school year.

5.2.3 Conclusion

Some regional offices lack the resources to support adequately schools performing below expected levels. In these regions, more schools are identified as requiring targeted support than can be supported. This results in some schools waiting for a considerable period of time to receive support.

Even for the schools that do receive targeted support, there is a risk that they will not receive the intensity or sustainability of support required. Regional offices face challenges in allocating their resources to fulfil their additional responsibilities to support any new schools identified as needing targeted support, and to support continuous improvement in all schools across their region.

Given that the Department acknowledged this issue as early as 2001, it needs to be promptly addressed. The Department needs greater certainty that, above all, the allocation of resources across and within regions effectively addresses their multiple responsibilities for school improvement. Similarly, the Department needs to:

- reassess whether the work allocations to SEOs are commensurate with their capacity to effectively perform their role
- establish whether SSSOs are being allocated appropriately.

Until these issues are addressed, some schools already performing below expected levels will slide further down the performance scale. Other schools performing at or above expected levels may not receive the support they need to prevent their performance from starting a downward slide or to improve their performance.

Recommendations

- 5.1 The allocation of human and financial resources across regions be reviewed to determine whether these allocations:
 - appropriately take account of schools' support needs
 - enable regions to effectively fulfil their responsibilities for school improvement.
 - 5.2 The issue of students receiving timely access to relevant support services be addressed as part of the current review of the SSSO resource.
-

6 Measuring school improvement

At a glance

Background

Since 1996, the Department has systematically collected a range of information about student outcomes and school performance. In 2005, the Department expanded its suite of performance measures to include an annual survey of students' perceptions and experiences in attending school. Parent opinion and teacher opinion surveys are also conducted annually.

Key findings

- Principals recognise the value of school performance data but need more help to use the information to its full potential.
- School achievement milestones used by some schools do not adequately measure progress toward improving student outcomes.
- The three regional offices audited did not specifically assess the success of their support for schools with student outcomes below expected levels.
- Better measures are needed for the value that schools add to their students' educational achievements, after accounting for other influences such as socio-economic factors.
- Recent changes to measuring school performance will enable the Department to start tracking its success in reducing the number of schools performing below expected levels.

Key recommendation

- 6.1 Schools be provided with improved support to:
- understand and use the school performance data to better inform their school improvement strategies
 - measure the incremental progress they make toward achieving improved student outcomes, particularly those schools with the greatest performance challenges.

6.1 Introduction

Substantial information exists about the performance of the government school system.

Since 1996, the Department has systematically collected a range of information about student outcomes and school performance. System-wide data about school management, student achievement in Mathematics and English from Prep to Year 10, as well as student achievement in the Victorian Certificate of Education, is published electronically each year.

In 2005, the Department expanded its suite of performance measures to include an annual survey of Year 5 to Year 12 students to assist schools in gaining an understanding of students' perceptions and experiences in attending school. Parent opinion and teacher opinion surveys are also conducted annually.

6.2 Measuring school improvement

School performance is measured by individual schools and the Department's central and regional offices. Performance data assist in assessing the success of improvement initiatives and support provided to schools.

6.2.1 Measuring incremental improvements

All schools receive an annual School Level Report (SLR) that presents their school's performance on the full range of centrally collected performance data. It compares the data with performance over the previous three to five years, along with the like school group and state benchmarks. The SLR data can assist schools to monitor progress against their goals, targets and improvement strategies.

The audit found that the Department needed to provide schools with more support to monitor their progress. Principals responding to the audit questionnaire indicated that they recognised the value of the SLR data, but needed more help so that they and their staff could understand the data and realise its full potential in their improvement strategies. The principals indicated that monitoring their progress was one of the two aspects of the Department's support they were least satisfied with.

One of the problems in measuring the success of school improvement strategies in individual schools is that improvements in student outcomes will not usually be evident in the first few years. The Department considers that improving student outcomes could take up to seven years. Given that improvements in student outcomes also need to be sustained, several years of data may be required to know this and to account for student cohort effects. Therefore, schools and the central and regional offices need to be able to measure and recognise the near-term changes and progress schools make towards improving student outcomes.

Some of the schools visited had purchased additional testing or data interpretation services to help fill gaps in their knowledge about student achievement.

The central office's guidance material, including the guidelines for annual implementation planning, provides examples of the types of measures that schools can use to chart progress toward improving student outcomes. Examples provided included "a 5 per cent increase in the 'quality of teaching' variable in the 2006 parent opinion survey" and "all teachers become confident with interpreting Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) data by end of Term 3".

The Department's 2006 evaluation of the school planning and reporting elements revealed that only around a quarter of the annual implementation plans reviewed described all the school's achievement milestones in sufficient detail to enable agreement about what had been achieved. The report stated that most plans contained one or more very general achievement milestones which were not measurable.

The achievement milestones in the annual implementation plans reviewed by audit largely reflected actions to be implemented, rather than the improvements anticipated from implementing those actions. The memoranda of understanding examined by audit generally contained better indicators of the improvements in teaching and learning that should result from the actions implemented.

Schools and regional offices examined in the audit identified a range of school improvement (progress) indicators which could be included in annual implementation plans. Examples included:

- suspensions/discipline problems/disruptions to classes (fewer)
- social skills of students (improved)
- school cohesion (increased) characterised, for example, by the level of aggression (reduced), interaction between students and between students and staff (friendlier).

These are all aspects of performance that are measured by the annual student, parent and teacher opinion surveys. However, it appears schools have not recognised their value for measuring progress. This again suggests that schools need more assistance to understand the data being collected, to develop relevant and informative milestones, and to measure annual progress.

As well as examining the annual data sets detailed in each school's SLR, the regional offices monitor the progress of each school each semester in achieving the milestones specified in their annual implementation plan, memoranda of understanding, and the principal's performance and development plan. Each regional office has a team that regularly discusses the progress of schools receiving priority attention. However, regions acknowledged the value of this monitoring is dependent on their ability to analyse the data. Regional office staff identified data analysis as an important area for professional development.

The Department's regional offices expressed mixed views about the adequacy of the current data sets. Some regional office staff considered that the available data provided enough measures of improvements made by schools en route to improving student learning outcomes (lead indicators include teacher survey results, student survey results and student attendance data). Others indicated a need for better measures of changed practice (as opposed to measures of action) that describe progress and are relevant to the school's annual implementation plan. Some regional office staff identified the need for a hierarchy of measures relating to the key stages of the improvement process.

School contribution to student achievement

Schools and the regional offices acknowledged a need for better measures of “value-added” (i.e. the value that a school adds to their students' educational achievements, after accounting for other influences on student achievements such as socio-economic factors and language background other than English). Recent research commissioned by the Department highlighted this need, especially in relation to identifying the level of performance improvement required of an individual school and assessing progress towards its achievement.

The development of the Like Schools Groups was an early attempt to address this issue by ensuring that measures of school performance took account of the impact of student characteristics on educational outcomes. The Department is investigating how the Student Family Occupation Index could be used to assist schools in identifying their contribution (or value-added) to student performance over time.

6.2.2 Impact of central and regional office support

Evaluations have been conducted or are planned for all *Blueprint* initiatives. Although the initiatives had only been in place for a relatively short time, initial indications were that they were largely on track to achieve their aims, although not in all schools.

The audit identified a number of examples of improvement in different aspects of central and regional office work. These included improvements to:

- the Targeted School Improvement initiative
- the *School Accountability and Improvement Framework*
- the *It's not OK to be away* program
- the Literacy Improvement Teams initiative which built on the successful elements of the Reading Recovery program.

Every two months, the regional offices provide an assessment to the central office of how well school improvement is being supported in each region. In addition, the Department's central office leadership team, which includes the regional directors, shares information on the progress of targeted schools and emerging examples of better practice fortnightly. Assessing the progress of schools performing below expected levels was not a focus of either process.

The three regional offices audited did not specifically assess the success of their work in schools with student outcomes performing below expected levels. Regions expressed the view that the effectiveness of their support to schools was evidenced through the school data, the results of the survey of principal satisfaction with regional office support, and occasional evaluations of specific initiatives developed or adopted to suit identified needs in the region.

The central office collects information on the proportion of schools performing at or above expected levels for inclusion in *Budget Paper No 3 Service Delivery*. In 2005, the Department moved to a system that identifies whether a school is performing at the “expected levels” of performance for a particular measure (such as Year 3 state-wide English testing results) based on an absolute value rather than as a proportion of all schools (for example, those schools below the 10 per cent cut-off). This change will enable the Department to start tracking its success in reducing the number of schools with student outcomes below expected levels in the government school system.

6.2.3 Conclusion

The Department’s suite of measures for assessing school performance has improved and there is now a stronger focus on evaluating the success of school improvement initiatives and targeted support for schools performing below expected levels.

Although a great deal is known about system-wide student outcomes, much less is known about the progress of particular sub-groups or about what impact various school improvement strategies are having at the individual school level. Even though there is broad recognition that improving student outcomes is a long-term process, schools are not yet adequately measuring the shorter-term progress they make before any improvement in outcomes becomes apparent.

Schools and regional offices need to further develop their ability to understand the school performance information and use it to inform strategic planning and measure progress. Addressing this gap in understanding will be crucial to identifying whether a school is on the right path to improvement and whether the associated investment is having the desired effect.

The Department has acknowledged, and is now addressing, the need to measure the value that a school adds to its students’ educational achievements after accounting for other influences, such as socio-economic factors and gender.

The impact that regional offices have in supporting different schools also needs to be measured so that the lessons learnt can be used to support continuous improvement across the government school system.

Recommendation

- 6.1 Schools be provided with improved support to:
- understand and use the school performance data to better inform their school improvement strategies
 - measure the incremental progress they make toward achieving improved student outcomes, particularly those schools with the greatest performance challenges.
-

Appendix A

Conduct of the audit

Audit objective

The objective of the audit was to determine whether the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (the Department) contribution to improving outcomes for students in government schools with student outcomes below expected levels had been effective. The audit assessed whether:

- the Department's central and regional offices adequately identify and monitor schools that are performing below expected levels
- central and regional offices effectively support schools performing below expected levels to improve.

Method

The government schools selected for the focus of the audit were those (both primary and secondary) that had student outcomes below expected levels in 1998, as identified for this audit. That is, each school fell below the 10th percentile cut-off score on two or more of the variables detailed in Figure A1. The set of measures used was similar to that used for reporting schools performing at or above expected levels in the current State Government budget papers. We chose 1998, as by then, schools were operating under the former *Schools of the Future* accountability framework and data had been collected for two years.

Using this method, audit identified 128 schools with student outcomes below expected levels in 1998 (106 primary, 17 secondary and five Prep – Year 12). The same method was used to identify whether any of the schools still had student outcomes below expected levels in 2005. Thirty-one schools were identified (22 primary, seven secondary and two Prep – Year 12), while four had closed or merged.

Figure A1
Measures of student outcomes used to identify schools
performing below expected levels in 1998

Area of performance	Measure
Primary school	
Assessment of Reading	Percentage of Year 2 students reading text level 20 with ≥ 90 per cent accuracy
Teacher assessments of progress in English and Mathematics	For Prep, Year 2, Year 4 and Year 6: Percentage of students Established or Above the expected Curriculum and Standards Framework level (a)
State-wide testing of progress in English and Mathematics	Percentage of Year 3 students achieving a C grade or above on the Achievement Improvement Monitor Percentage of Year 5 students achieving a C grade or above on the Achievement Improvement Monitor
Student absence	Prep - Year 6: Average days absence per student
Secondary school	
Teacher assessments of progress in English and Mathematics	For Year 8 and Year 10: Percentage of students Established or Above the expected Curriculum and Standards Framework level (a)
Victorian Certificate of Education	Victorian Certificate of Education mean allstudy score (b)
Student absence	Year 7 - 12: Average days absence per student
Student exit destinations	Year 10 - 12: Percentage unemployed

(a) The Curriculum and Standards Framework was replaced by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards in 2006. In the body of the report, the phrase “at or above expected levels” is used in place of “Established or Above the expected levels”.

(b) The mean allstudy score is the mean score of all Victorian Certificate of Education studies, for all government school students.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office, from information provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

Just on half of these schools were schools in Like School Group 9, that is schools with a high proportion of students from low socio-economic background (identified by more than 43 per cent of students in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance/Austudy) and for whom English is not the main language spoken at home.

Audit work in schools

Information on school improvement and the ways in which schools work with the Department on school improvement was gathered through a questionnaire sent to all 128 schools and through case studies of eight of those schools.

The web-based questionnaire was conducted in December 2006. The principals of 123 schools were invited to participate (one school was excused from participating because of its circumstances and four had closed or merged). One hundred and five schools returned a completed questionnaire (90 primary, 13 secondary and two Prep – Year 12 schools). The questionnaire asked about school performance, the support received from the Department's central and regional offices, and the value of the self-evaluation, review and strategic planning process for school improvement.

Eight schools that had completed the questionnaire were selected for case study. The schools were selected to meet the following criteria:

- an equal number of schools that were performing at or above expected levels in 2005 and those that were not
- schools were to be located in three of the Department's nine education regions (Northern Metropolitan, Western Metropolitan and Gippsland)
- both primary and secondary schools were to be included
- some schools that had undergone a diagnostic review were to be included
- some schools that had received Targeted School Improvement initiative funding were to be included.

The school documentation available since 1998 was reviewed for each school (i.e. School Level Reports, student attitude to school survey reports, school self-evaluation reports, school review reports, school charters/strategic plans, annual implementation plans and school annual reports). The audit team also spent a day visiting each school and interviewing the principal and any assistant principal(s); a range of teachers and support staff; and, where possible, a school council representative.

Audit work in central and regional offices

Three regional offices were selected as a focus for the audit: Gippsland Region, Northern Metropolitan Region and Western Metropolitan Region. The regions were selected to cover both metropolitan and rural areas, and to include some of the regions with the higher proportions of the 128 schools.

The audit work in the Department's regional and central offices involved interviews with a range of staff as well as document and data reviews. There were two main focus areas for this work:

- examining how the regional and central offices identify, monitor and support schools performing below expected levels to improve
- exploring the school findings further.

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Auditor-General's reports

Reports tabled during 2007-08

Report title	Date tabled
Program for Students with Disabilities: Program Accountability (2007-08:1)	September 2007
Improving our Schools: Monitoring and Support (2007-08:2)	October 2007
Management of Specific Purpose Funds by Public Health Services (2007-08:3)	October 2007

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