

# Changing Schools in Changing Times

*Stabilising and sustaining change in communities experiencing adverse conditions*



## Project overview

In June 2004, the Commonwealth announced a major research grant to support schools serving communities with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The project titled *Changing Schools in Changing Times* is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0454879), in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Training, Griffith University, Queensland and the University of Technology, Sydney. This three year project has a total budget of over \$575,000.

### The central issue

One of the most enduring issues in education is how to sustain improvements that support student learning and teacher professional learning in communities that experience severe social dislocation and educational disadvantage. From the schools' perspective, the challenges are considerable: high teacher turnover, a high proportion of beginning teachers and first-time leaders, high student mobility and an increasing numbers of students with special needs. These difficulties are compounded when local communities experience long-term unemployment, shrinking social safety nets and other indicators of adversity. Faced with these challenges, it is little wonder that teachers struggle with a pattern of student disengagement indicated by reduced levels of school retention, high absenteeism and low levels of achievement.

How is it possible, in such difficult situations, for principals, teachers and parents to develop and sustain the types of change that will improve the level of student engagement and the quality of their learning, as well as the quality of teacher professional learning?

The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (the Productive Pedagogies research) showed that teachers who make a difference create classroom environments where there is a strong focus on learning and a pervasive sense of purpose and students are involved in intellectually challenging work through explorations of deep knowledge and activities that are transparently connected to the world beyond the classroom.

The *Changing Schools in Changing Times* project also recognises the centrality of learning in school change. The research team works collaboratively with principals and senior executive, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers to strengthen professional learning to improve the learning outcomes for students.

### Who are we?

The research team consists of four academics, three officers from the NSW DET and one full-time doctoral student:

- Dr Debra Hayes is the leader of the team. She was a core member of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study and is an Associate Professor at Griffith University in Queensland. Her role is to co-ordinate the overall project and facilitate communication between the participants and research partners. Her research interests primarily relate to achieving more equitable outcomes from schooling for young people who benefit least from education by

working with school-based educators to understand and improve how schools operate and function.

- Dr Ken Johnston was a member of the Inquiry panel that conducted the *Public Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW*. He is a Chief Investigator and Honorary Fellow at UTS.
- Dr Kitty te Riele is a Chief Investigator and lectures in educational philosophy, sociology and professional ethics at UTS. Her research interest is in relation to education policy and practice for students marginalised from formal schooling through social, financial, cultural or personal circumstances.
- Dr Narelle Carey is Principal Research Associate at Griffith University. She has worked as teacher educator principally in Australia but also in the US and UK universities.
- Rani Lewis-Jones is Manager, Priority Schools and Equity Co-ordination in NSW DET
- Chris Murray is Leader, Priority Schools Programs in NSW DET.
- Kristal Morris is the AECG Education Officer within the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate. This role is a joint position between NSW DET and NSW AECG (Aboriginal Education Consultative Group). Kristal is part of the Aboriginal Education Review Team and is currently working on the Schools in Partnership Initiative with 10 schools across the state.
- Ishbel Murray is recipient of Australian Postgraduate Award with Industry for doctoral studies.

### **What do we want to do?**

In collaboration with research participants, our purpose is to describe and document the efforts of school leaders and teachers in the four participating schools to develop and sustain improvements in student and teacher learning. While change in schools takes on many forms and may focus on features such as structures, processes, curriculum etc, we are interested in the pedagogical nature of change.

In high schools, we conceptualise change that supports improvements in learning as operating on three levels – the school, the faculty and classroom. Our aim is to work with staff at each of these levels to frame and give shape to what are often disparate and fragmented activities within schools and classrooms. Our hope is that by aligning learning across these pedagogical sites we can support a process that builds coherence and purpose within the school community directed towards improving the learning outcomes of students who benefit least from education.

It is important to emphasise that we are bringing to the school an approach to thinking about whole school change that foregrounds learning rather than a set of prescriptions that can be uniformly applied from one school to another. While all four schools are committed to improvement, their particular needs, available resources and the concerns of their school communities will shape the approach they take.

### **How will we go about it?**

As researchers, our task is to describe, document and analyse the process of change as it happens. We will use a variety of methods to obtain the information, these will include classrooms observations, interviews and focus groups, as well as records of meetings to plan and monitor the change process, indicators of student and professional learning, and social and economic data to map the community profile. We propose visiting each school at regular intervals throughout 2005-7. The length of the visit will vary depending on the method being used.

An Aboriginal member of the research team will communicate with Aboriginal students and parents, and conduct interviews and focus groups with them.

We have established a project reference group made up of representatives of key stakeholder groups. This group meets three to four times a year so stakeholder groups can provide advice to the project team as well as to ensure stakeholder groups are informed about the progress of the project.

Individuals may choose not to participate in the research.

### **How will the schools benefit?**

The goal of this research is to concentrate the efforts of the schools and research partners on improving the educational outcomes of students who traditionally under-achieve and under-participate in schooling. Participating schools will have continuous access over the three years of the project to educational researchers, departmental officers and professional development consultants who specialise in whole school reform within socially disadvantaged contexts. They will also be able to access teacher release days (6 days each in year 1, 9 in year 2 and 6 in year 3), and receive a contribution towards hospitality expenses.

### **What are the schools expected to contribute?**

The participating schools are expected to sustain a commitment to whole school reform. Perhaps the only variation from normal practice is that being involved in the research means that the schools include the research partners in ongoing collaboration, dialogue and negotiation about the direction and shape of this process. It is anticipated that professional learning will be a core part of the reform process. However, the nature and scale of this will be largely determined by the resources available within the schools' operational and equity based funding.

### **Can I find out what schools are involved?**

The identities of all participants and schools will not be revealed to ensure their privacy. Hence we will refer to schools in the study as South Western High, Eastern High, Western High and Country High. Within each school, we will also ensure that the content of interviews, meetings and focus groups are treated as confidential. Permission will be sought from relevant participants for publication and reporting purposes. In such cases, participants will have the opportunity to clarify, correct and expand upon the findings and pseudonyms will be used.

### **Who else is doing this kind of research?**

Within Australia, Professor Marie Brennan is leading a team of researchers at the University of South Australia <http://www.unisa.edu.au/cs/plc/rpin/index.html>. In the UK, Paul Clarke is the Director of the program titled Improving the Quality for All in Education (IQEA) <http://www.iqea.com/> and the National College for School Leadership is also working on similar questions <http://www.ncsl.org.uk/>.

### **How can I find out more about the project?**

Contact either of the partner organisations supporting the research:

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