



THE CABINET OFFICE
NEW SOUTH WALES

The Honourable M R Egan MLC
Treasurer
Minister for State Development
Vice-President of the Executive Council
Leader of the Government in the Upper House

0 1 APR 2004

Dear Mr Egan

Standing Committee on Social Issues

As requested by the letter from your Office of 16 September 2003, I am enclosing the Response to *Realising Potential: Final Report of the Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties* prepared by the above Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Wilkins', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Roger B Wilkins
Director-General

Cc: Minister Kelly

*Response to Realising Potential: Final Report of the Inquiry
into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties*
of the Standing Committee on Social Issues

The Cabinet Office, March 2004

Introduction

On 4 August 2000, the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues (the Committee) received the Terms of Reference for an inquiry into early intervention into learning difficulties during early childhood years. Jan Burnswoods, MLC, chaired the inquiry. The Terms of Reference required the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on early intervention into learning difficulties during the early childhood years (ages 0-8), including the following:

- The appropriate role of parents, government departments, non-government agencies and educational organisations in the development, delivery and evaluation of early intervention programs.
- The adequacy of roles and responsibilities and interagency cooperation around early intervention programs for learning difficulties in NSW.
- The ways in which early intervention practice in NSW might be informed by practice in other States of Australia and overseas, including evidence of the impact of early intervention on child protection, juvenile justice and intensive education programs.
- Research into world's best practice in developing effective strategies to increase awareness and responsibility for assisting families in parenting skills, identifying learning difficulties and early intervention.
- Maximising the effectiveness of assessment and early identification in ensuring improved learning outcomes from schooling for children experiencing learning difficulties.
- Support available to families and communities to enable them to be better able to assist their children with learning difficulties.
- Any other relevant matters.

The primary emphasis of the Inquiry was on the evaluation and development of programs for children with learning difficulties who with appropriate early intervention would be able to achieve age appropriate outcomes throughout their schooling.

The terms of reference were referred to the Committee by the Hon John Aquilina, MP, Minister for Education and Training, 4 August 2000 and re-referred by the Legislative Council on 24 June 2003.

Over 190 submissions were made to the Inquiry. Evidence was also taken from 36 witnesses including parents, academics and representatives of government and non-government agencies.

The inquiry revealed a broad consensus that the structures and systems designed to assist young people's learning in NSW were not working as well as they could. The focus on early childhood is in keeping with international and national directions such as *The Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1992) which recognises the cost effectiveness of prevention and early intervention and the need for co-ordinated efforts across programs, agencies and service delivery sectors.

The committee tabled an Issues Paper *Foundations for Learning: A New vision for New South Wales?* in March 2002. The Committee's first report for the inquiry into early intervention for children with learning difficulties was tabled in October 2002. The final report was tabled on 16 September 2003.

The Report makes 36 recommendations within the following key chapter headings:

- Finding solutions
- Early childhood health services
- Childcare and preschool services
- Supporting families
- School entry
- Teachers and Schools
- Specific Learning Difficulties
- Therapy Services
- Time to Act

The NSW Government welcomed the report and is implementing a number of recommendations.

In particular the Office of Children and Young People will conduct a review of the policy framework for the *Families First* strategy. The review will address a range of

issues arising since the strategy was announced, including the recommendations of the Report.

The Government is working to make service delivery more sensitive to the needs of children and their families.

While significant progress has been made in early intervention for children with learning difficulties, more can be achieved.

The Government will continue to make early intervention a priority for meeting the needs of children with learning difficulties in NSW. Peak Aboriginal organisations will be consulted in the development of strategies.

Response to recommendations

Chapter 1 Finding Solutions

Recommendation 1

The Government should convene an Early Childhood Summit in 2004 to consider how to improve coordination funding and structures for services that maximise the wellbeing and development of children and families in New South Wales. The Summit should involve all the key State and Commonwealth agencies involved in health, children's services, education and disability services, along with peak bodies, academics, non-government providers and parents.

Area services of *Families First* are showing that the *Families First* strategy is improving co-ordination for services that maximise the wellbeing and development of children through linking services, planning and service development at local, regional and head office levels.

In addition, a working group of government and non-government agencies is reviewing the Early Childhood Intervention Coordination Program which aims to improve co-ordination of support to families with children with a disability from 0 to 6 years.

The Government will further consider the option of an Early Childhood Summit when a range of reviews in the area have been completed.

Chapter 2 Early Childhood Services

Recommendation 2

The NSW Minister for Health should approach his federal counterpart regarding the introduction of Enhanced Primary Care Medicare Item Numbers for 'complex' social conditions that require a multidisciplinary approach, such as children with learning difficulties.

The NSW Department of Health notes the inadequacy of the resourcing for non-GP professionals in multidisciplinary teams under the current EPC program.

Nevertheless, Enhanced Primary Care (EPC) streams of care have been introduced, and it is agreed that they would be enhanced by including education for general practice doctors, to help them understand learning difficulties. In addition there are additional options which the State will put to the Australian Government to provide for payments to allied health professionals.

Recommendation 3

The Departments of Education and Training and Health should explore the potential for broad implementation of the *Wrap Around Kids* program in primary schools in NSW.

As part of its future planning for schools, the Departments of Education and Training and Health will consider the potential for broad implementation of the *Wrap Around Kids* program in primary schools. They will also consider other models such as *Primary Connect*, a project which operates in conjunction with the Office of Children and Young People.

Recommendation 4

The Government should fund the expansion of *Families First* to provide sustained home visiting to 20 per cent of firstborn babies in families considered to be 'vulnerable' (Level 2 in NSW Health Home Visiting Guidelines).

The *Families First* strategy is a universal prevention and early support strategy aimed at helping parents give their children a good start in life. The strategy recognises that within the broader population, there are many vulnerable families who would benefit from sustained services such as home visiting.

The recommendation is consistent with the literature on brain development in the years 1 to 3 and evidence-based practice in working with vulnerable families. The research is clear that working with vulnerable parents and children as early as possible has enduring developmental benefits for the child transitioning to school and young adulthood. Home visitors can work with families over a period of time to assist parents to develop parenting skills and an understanding of early childhood development, so that the parents can provide adequate stimulation to their child at home. This is crucial for adequate brain development as well as physical and emotional development.

It is noted that effective home visiting programs have the capacity to significantly improve children's socialisation, health and behaviour. The Government has committed that by the end of 2004 every family with a new baby will be offered a free home visit from an early childhood nurse. Through these home visits the families can be linked to other formal and informal assistance where appropriate.

The implementation of NSW Government initiatives in early intervention will include a partnership approach in the Aboriginal communities, where a sustained home visiting program would be particularly beneficial.

Recommendation 5

The Government should sponsor research to elicit whether sustained home visiting can assist 'at risk' mothers (Level 3 in Health Home Visiting Guidelines) including those with opiate dependency, mental illness or in homes in which there is serious domestic violence.

Studies into the benefits of sustained home visiting with 'at risk' families (such as families with drug and alcohol dependency, domestic violence and mental illness) have involved small samples and their results are equivocal. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to suggest that this strategy may be of benefit and that further studies would be important.

As part of its Miller Community Solutions package, the Government is funding a sustained home visiting trial for vulnerable (Group 2) and 'at risk' (Group 3) families. This trial is being formally evaluated and will provide valuable information about the effectiveness of this strategy for both vulnerable and 'at risk' families. This study will inform the Government on the impacts for children and parents and help identify the factors that make for the success of these programs.

Some further research in this field is also proposed as part of ongoing program development for the new Department of Community Services's prevention and early intervention initiatives and through the evaluation of the *Families First* strategy.

Recommendation 6

The Government should conduct a trial of home visiting programs which utilise different categories of nurses or other occupational groups.

Literature and evidence-based practice indicate that it is important that the home visitors have excellent skills in early childhood development, in building empathy and trust with the family, in assessing the family's needs, and in making appropriate referrals.

In developing its responses to families at risk of abusing or neglecting their children, the Department of Community Services proposes to use nurses and other occupational groups as appropriate to local needs. The evaluation of new and on-going programs, including the Miller study mentioned above, will assist in ensuring the most effective and efficient approach is adopted. This information will add to the information from trials undertaken here and overseas.

Recommendation 7

The NSW Department of Health should conduct a review of the future role and function of Early Childhood Health Centres, in consultation with relevant government and non government agencies.

Recommendation 8

The Early Childhood Summit recommended in Chapter 1 should specifically address issues relating to future role and function of Early Childhood Health Centres.

As part of implementing a home visit by early childhood nurses for all babies in NSW as part of the *Families First* strategy, regional health authorities are reviewing the roles of Early Childhood Health Centres.

Chapter 3 Childcare and preschool services

Recommendation 9

The Early Childhood Summit recommended in Chapter 1 should specifically address the need to reform the funding of early childhood education and care services so as to enhance participation in early childhood education and care. Specifically the Summit should address:

- The costs and benefits of a system of universal preschool in New South Wales including the best way to ensure that children who most need formal early learning experiences receive it
- The role of the publicly-funded childcare sector and the most appropriate way to support this sector given the growth of private childcare services and the formal recognition of the interrelationship between care and education in early childhood education and care in New South Wales
- The role of the private childcare and preschool sector
- The trial of other flexible and/or integrated models of delivering children's services, such as Child and Family Health Centres
- The relationship between the Commonwealth, State and Local Governments regarding the funding and regulation of early childhood education and care services

It is noted that research findings clearly indicate better outcomes are achieved by allocating resources for the provision of good quality services for children right across the early years, rather than being solely allocated to a single year of age. Ensuring a collaborative and focussed approach to the early years is supported, and this includes greater clarity about the roles of each of the three tiers of government.

Preschools are recognised as one of the childcare services available in NSW. The Department of Community Services is working with the Australian Government in developing and implementing integrated models such as multi-purpose child and family centres. Further discussions with the Australian Government will be needed on the necessary elements of a modern children's services system and the funding and regulatory arrangements for such a system.

Under the *Education Act 1990*, the Department of Education and Training is responsible for the education of children of school-age. Nevertheless, the Department acknowledges the growing body of evidence that quality early child development programs can vastly improve learning, health and behaviour through schooling and later life. Through its participation in the *Families First* strategy, the Department works with other government and non-government agencies and communities to support young children and families.

Recommendation 10

The Government should fund new early childhood education and care places in high needs areas for preschool aged children who currently have no access to existing children's services.

Research shows that access to high quality childcare is one of the most effective support strategies for vulnerable children and families. The Department of Community Services funding for preschools includes \$13.7 million per annum to low income earners to increase affordability of preschools. This includes support for families in high need areas such as Western Sydney and the far North Coast.

There is a place for other models. Under *Families First* service models such as supported play groups and Schools as Community Centres play a role in high needs communities of linking up families and linking such families to other services and supports that assist the healthy development of their children.

While the Department of Education and Training has no legislative responsibility for the education and care of children below school-age, it provides 129 prior to school services. These are 79 preschools, 46 early intervention classes and four nursery hearing classes. An additional 21 Departmental preschools will be established by 2005 in areas of disadvantage.

These services will target families who do not access other services. The Department also provides 20 childcare centres through TAFE NSW.

Recommendation 11

The Government should enhance funding for state funded services to promote access to children's services for children with a disability, children from a non-English speaking background, Aboriginal children and those with challenging behaviours.

NSW families have a wide range of options for early childhood education and care programs. Early childhood intervention services are provided in ways which vary to meet the needs of children with a disability who may access support from mainstream and specialist settings.

DADHC provides more than \$12 million per annum for early intervention services for children aged 0 to 6 years provided by non-government providers. Other NSW and

Australian Government agencies provide programs supporting the inclusion of children with a disability across the range of mainstream children's services. The Early Childhood Intervention Coordination Program, led by DADHC, supports NSW and Australian government and non-government agencies at the state and local levels to exchange information and coordinate early childhood intervention services.

The need for collaboration between the NSW and Australian Governments in supporting access for children with a disability to children's services is noted.

The Department of Community Services administers the Supporting Children with Additional Needs funding scheme, providing children's service providers with resources to assist children with additional needs to have equal access with all children to quality services. This includes children with disabilities, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal children and those with challenging behaviours. There is \$10.6 million per annum for the Scheme.

While the Department of Education and Training has no legislative responsibility for the education and care of children below school-age, the Department has established 11 preschools in Aboriginal communities since 1992. Each of these preschools is staffed with teachers qualified in early childhood education and with an Aboriginal Education Assistant.

The preschools provide educational opportunities for children in Aboriginal communities who would otherwise have little or no access to preschool education. Seven of the 21 new Departmental preschools to be established by 2005 are in communities with significant numbers of Aboriginal children.

Recommendation 12

The Minister for Community Services should ensure the implementation of the new Children's Services Regulation, which provides for a staff: child ratio of 1:4 for children under two years of age.

Action to finalise this Regulation is under consideration.

Chapter 4 Supporting families ways to assist learning difficulties support groups

Recommendation 13

In consultation with relevant stakeholders, the Government should develop a comprehensive and coordinated strategy for family support to address:

- The role and responsibilities of family support services in relation to the delivery of services for families with children with learning difficulties
- Funding requirements for government and non-government family support services for families with children with learning difficulties
- The role of flexible models of child and family support proposed by the joint Commonwealth/State Child and Family Service project.

and

Recommendation 14

The New South Wales Government should review the funding to learning difficulties support groups and consult with groups with a view to establishing a Statewide learning difficulties advocacy organisation.

The role of this body could include:

- The provision of advice and support to families
- Professional development for professionals working with children with learning difficulties
- The dissemination of best practice in early intervention and support for children with learning difficulties
- Funding and support to local parent groups
- Advocacy and lobbying activities to ensure adequate services are in place to assist children with learning difficulties.

The role that family support services play in assisting families in the early years, including the development of parenting skills and peer support to vulnerable families is noted.

Under *Families First*, the Government has expanded the number of family support services to work with families before problems become acute.

The Department of Community Services has been working with the Family Support Services Association to better understand the work performed by family support services and how they can be more effectively involved in prevention and early intervention strategies. The Association has provided feedback to Department of

Community Services on policy and implementation issues for the Department's new prevention and early intervention initiatives.

Under the *Families First* strategy agencies are assisted to work together to make sure families receive the support they need in a timely manner. These supports include drug and alcohol services, respite care, family support, disability services, counsellors, mental health services, paediatricians and special educators.

The Department of Education and Training supports families with young children with disabilities and learning difficulties through the *Early Learning Program* and the *Guidelines: Transition to school for young people with special learning needs*. These resources assist schools, families, early childhood centres and other agencies to work together to achieve a smooth transition to school for children with disabilities or significant difficulties in learning and behaviour.

The Department provides annual funding to family support services for children experiencing difficulties in learning through the *Grants in Aid Program*. It also supports learning difficulties organisations through the use of school facilities for administration, help lines and tutoring centres, free of charge.

The Department's former *Learning Difficulties Reference Group* and *Low Support Needs Advisory Group* have played a key role in ensuring that adequate services are in place to assist children experiencing difficulties in learning in government schools. In 2004, the Department will establish a *Learning Assistance Advisory Group* to fulfil this function.

Chapter 5 School Entry

Recommendation 15

The Department of Education and Training should monitor trends in the age of students on entry to Kindergarten and the extent to which the entry of age-eligible children from different regional and socio-economic backgrounds is being deferred.

The Department of Education and Training does not collect data on the age of students on entry to kindergarten in its census of students. The Department will consider how it could address this recommendation through existing information sources.

Recommendation 16

The Department of Education and Training should ensure teaching staff in NSW primary schools are well informed of the current research regarding the impact of delayed entry to Kindergarten, especially for children from less advantaged backgrounds.

The Office of Children and Young People, together with the Departments of Education and Training, Community Services, Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Health and Housing have identified the need to explore these matters more fully. The need to develop and disseminate appropriate information for families and staff of school and of prior-to-school services will be considered within the context of this work.

Recommendation 17

The Department of Education and Training should convene a cross agency working party to develop guidelines concerning the sharing of information between schools and early childhood settings. As part of its brief, the working party would also develop:

- Guidelines to ensure that the collection, transfer or storage of this information does not breach relevant privacy legislation
- Strategies to encourage private childcare and pre-school providers to participate in information sharing
- Ways to fund release time so that teachers are able to meet with early childhood teachers in prior to school settings.

The Department of Education and Training has formed a *Transition to School Advisory Committee* to provide expert advice on developing information that will support schools, prior-to-school services and families on matters relating to the transition to school. The Committee includes NSW government agencies, Health and the Department of Community Services, as well as the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, the NSW Primary Principals' Association and early childhood services providers. Research-based information has been drafted including advice about developing links and sharing information between the school and local prior-to-school services. Information packages will be prepared for distribution to families, schools and prior-to school services.

The Department of Education and Training has developed guidelines which comply with privacy legislation and Privacy Bulletins to provide information to staff regarding the *Privacy and Personal Information Act 1998*. These provide safeguards on the release of information held by government agencies and imposes obligations on agencies in storage, use and dissemination of personal information.

In 2004, schools may use funds provided through the *Learning Assistance Program* for students experiencing difficulties in learning, to release teachers to meet with early childhood teachers in prior-to-school settings where this is a priority.

Chapter 6 Teachers and Schools

Recommendation 18

The Department of Education and Training should require all new teachers in primary schools to have completed a component of early childhood development and pedagogy in their training.

Recommendation 19

The Department of Education and Training should investigate ways to increase the proportion of teachers with early childhood training assigned to Kindergarten to Year 2 classes, through both pre-service and in-service training.

Early childhood is typically described in the research as encompassing the period from birth up to eight years of age. This means that knowledge of early childhood development and pedagogy is particularly relevant for teachers of children during the first three years of school.

To satisfy the Department of Education and Training's qualification requirements for teaching in primary schools graduates need to have completed either an approved three or four year primary teacher education award (e.g. Bachelor of Education) or an undergraduate degree containing appropriate content studies, plus at least a one year postgraduate primary teacher education award (e.g. Diploma in Education).

The Department differentiates between graduates of early childhood teacher education programs and graduates of primary (K-6) teacher education programs by providing different teacher accreditation upon employment. Graduates of early childhood teacher education programs are eligible to be accredited to teach from preschool to Year 2. Graduates of primary (K-6) teacher education programs are eligible to teach across K-6. Schools describe the nature of their vacant teaching positions in terms of teacher accreditation, and any areas of expertise and may specify whether they require a teacher of preschool, K-2, K-6 or Years 3-6.

The Department requires all new primary teacher education graduates to have completed methodology studies for teaching across the NSW Board of Studies primary syllabuses. As syllabus outcomes are arranged in stages from Early Stage 1 (relating to Kindergarten) to Stage 3 (relating to Years 5-6) it is expected that primary teacher education students develop an understanding of the breadth of primary syllabuses.

The Department does not currently require preservice K-6 teacher education programs to include early childhood methodology studies although many of these programs include studies covering the physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth and development of primary age students.

The Department is currently developing amended employment requirements for all teachers in schools that include compulsory preservice teacher education studies in a number of areas. This does not currently include compulsory studies in early childhood.

Recommendation 20

Standards for primary graduate teachers and guidelines for teacher education course endorsement, required by the proposed NSW Institute of Teachers, should include an element of specialised preparation in the area of early childhood education.

The current draft professional teaching standards being developed by the Interim Committee for a NSW Institute of Teachers, includes an expectation of knowledge of the specific physical, social and intellectual developmental characteristics of the age group(s) of students concerned, including the early years of schooling.

The Interim Committee has developed draft teacher education course endorsement guidelines.

Recommendation 21

The Department of Education and Training should conduct an evaluation of the role and effectiveness of learning support teams, with a view to expanding their role in assisting children with Learning Difficulties.

Learning support teams in government schools already work to assist students with learning difficulties. School learning support teams consider the type and level of support students with learning difficulties require, provide advice and assistance in schools and regularly review student progress.

In addition, Assistant Principals Learning Assistance work with school learning support teams to further assist teachers and students experiencing difficulties in learning.

Further work will be undertaken in 2004, to strengthen the role of learning support teams in schools, especially through the newly developed *Learning Assistance Program*.

Recommendation 22

The Department of Education and Training should establish a working party to consider the merits and feasibility of a comprehensive screening and assessment system on entry to Kindergarten.

The Department of Education and Training does not currently implement a state wide, mandatory system of screening and assessment on entry to Kindergarten.

However, a number of research-based resources and programs that have been developed in collaboration with directorates across the Department and with universities, other educator sectors and agencies are currently available to assist teachers to assess students, identify those who may be experiencing difficulties, and employ teaching strategies for the full range of students' needs.

In keeping with the Department's *Principles of Assessment and Reporting in NSW Schools (1996)*, all resources that support teachers with assessment and teaching are required to link to the syllabus in each particular Key Learning Area. This enables teachers to provide explicit and systematic teaching which will support students' progress towards achievement of syllabus outcomes appropriate for their stage of learning.

Resources and programs which assist teachers in assessing and teaching students in the early years of school include the *Starting with Assessment* materials, *Observation survey of early literacy achievement (Clay, 2002)*, *Schedules for Early Number Assessment (SENA)*, *Get Skilled: Get Active, A Partnership Encouraging Effective Learning (APEEL)* and the *Early Learning Program*.

In 2001-2002, at the request of the Deputy Director-General (Schools) an Early Assessment Working Group was formed with representation from relevant directorates to review the range of assessments in literacy and numeracy (Kindergarten to Year 2) currently used in Departmental schools and to advise on the most appropriate assessments to assist schools to identify students K-2 who need further support.

The Early Assessment Working Group recommended using existing initiatives including the *Early Literacy Initiative*, *Count Me In Too*, *Consistency of Teacher*

Judgement and Starting with Assessment as a basis for an expanded, coordinated professional development support strategy to assist all classroom teachers in the implementation of outcomes based assessment and teaching strategies for students in the early years of schooling.

Should the Department pursue the recommendation to consider the merits and feasibility of a comprehensive screening and assessment system on entry to Kindergarten, it would consider this in the context of the Department's current policy on assessment and reporting. Consideration should also be given to the evaluation report on outcomes, assessment and reporting in government schools, *Time for Teaching, Time for Learning* (2003) by Professor Ken Eltis.

Recommendation 23

The New South Wales Government should provide funding to extend the Reading Recovery Program in NSW public schools to allow for greater coverage of schools and for a greater proportion of students in particular schools as needed.

The document *Quality early learning: Labor's plan for before school and primary education*, released in March 2003 states the Government's commitment to maintaining *Reading Recovery*.

In 2004, *Reading Recovery* is being delivered by 920 teachers in 837 schools and reaching approximately 7,500 Year 1 students.

Recommendation 24

The Department of Education and Training should ensure that all Support Teachers Learning Difficulties are adequately trained to work with children with Learning Difficulties.

The newly developed, \$105 million *Learning Assistance Program*, supports students enrolled in regular classes K-12 who are experiencing difficulties in basic areas of learning. The *Learning Assistance Program* will address this issue.

In 2004 there are 1,357 Support Teachers Learning Assistance (STLAs), formerly Support Teachers Learning Difficulties (STLDs), employed in the 10 regions across the state. In addition, \$8.5 million will be allocated annually to schools for the three year

period 2004-2006 to further assist schools to work with children experiencing difficulties in learning.

Assistant Principals Learning Assistance are members of regional learning assistance support teams and provide professional support to STLAs. A training program, *Making a Difference*, is provided each year in school education areas where STLAs have been newly appointed. Additional training modules are regularly developed for use in network meetings throughout the school year.

Under the *Learning Assistance Program*, further training and development support materials will be developed to reflect the Department's focus on quality teaching, state literacy and numeracy targets, recent research in beginning literacy and models of support. Early identification and intervention for students with language difficulties in particular will be a major focus of the training and development materials.

New professional development materials, which focus on assisting students who need additional support, have been developed through the *Literacy and Numeracy Follow Up Program*. These were distributed to all primary schools in 2003 with modules focusing on reading.

Through the *Learning Assistance Program*, additional training modules will be developed to assist teachers, including STLAs, with a focus on spelling, writing talking and listening, mathematics and technology. These will be used in regional professional development networks and with schools.

Recommendation 25

The Department of Education and Training should monitor the impact of reducing class sizes on students with learning difficulties, including their access to specialist programs and support.

The NSW Government announced its commitment to reduce class sizes in Kindergarten to Year 2 classes to a state wide average of:

- 20 students in Kindergarten classes;
- 22 students in Year 1 classes; and
- 24 students in Year 2 classes.

Approximately 1,500 extra teachers will be needed to achieve these aims.

New funding of \$329 million over four years is to be provided for the class size reduction program. This includes additional capital funding of \$107 million over four years and \$222 million in new recurrent expenditure over the same period.

On 17 April 2003, the Class Size Reduction Unit was established within the Department to implement this plan. This Unit is also responsible for the continuing annual audit of class sizes.

A *Class Size Advisory Committee* has also been established and is meeting regularly. It includes representation from the NSW Teachers Federation, the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW and the Primary Principals' Association.

The pilot of reduced class sizes in 63 schools commenced in 2003 will inform the broader class size reduction program.

The Disability Programs Directorate is providing advice to the Class Size Reduction Unit to include students with learning difficulties in the class size reduction program evaluation.

Chapter 7 Specific Learning Difficulties

Recommendation 26

The Minister for Education and Training should convene a working party comprising relevant experts in learning disorders, parents and specialist teachers to examine the needs of children with specific Learning Difficulties in NSW Primary Schools including:

- ways to maximise the early identification of children with specific learning difficulties
- appropriate options including special programs for such children
- the resource implications of enhanced provision of early intervention for children with specific Learning Difficulties.

The Department of Education and Training has a Learning Difficulties Reference Group in place. The Reference Group includes representatives from the Department, the NSW Teachers' Federation, the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales, the Learning Difficulties Coalition, NSW Primary Principals Association, NSW Secondary Principals' Association Learning Links, the Australian Association of Special Education and SPELD NSW.

The role of the Reference Group is to:

- monitor the implementation of changes and outcomes of learning difficulties services
- monitor the implementation of initiatives for students with learning difficulties
- make representations for future changes to learning difficulties services
- monitor the effectiveness of support for students with significant learning difficulties
- review procedures for determining the needs basis for allocations for both primary and secondary schools.

In 2000, the Learning Difficulties Reference Group conducted a review of procedures for determining the needs basis for allocations of support teachers learning difficulties for primary and secondary schools.

The reference group strongly supported early identification and early intervention at the point of need, which were seen as the key considerations underpinning the provision of learning difficulties services.

In response to the *Vinson inquiry into education in NSW* and the *Review of support for students with low support needs* (Parkins, 2002), a Low Support Needs Advisory Group was established in 2003 to strengthen support for students with mild intellectual disabilities, language disorders and learning difficulties. This group had representation from key community groups, principals' organisations and unions.

The Low Support Needs Advisory Group put forward a proposal for a *Learning Assistance Program* that focussed on supporting students experiencing difficulties in learning. This includes students with learning difficulties, mild intellectual disabilities and language disorders who are enrolled in regular classes. This non-categorical approach will address the concerns raised in the *Inquiry into Early Intervention for children with learning difficulties* regarding the labelling of students too early in their school life (p.57).

The *Learning Assistance Program* will place increased emphasis on transition into school, early identification of students at risk, early intervention K-2, improved literacy and numeracy outcomes and increased participation in regular class programs for students. STLAs and the assistant principals learning assistance (APLAs) will support teachers to make adjustments to class programs and teaching and learning experiences to ensure all students have access to the curriculum.

A Learning Assistance Advisory Group will be established in 2004 to oversee the implementation of the *Learning Assistance Program* and to monitor the progress of the initiatives generated through the program as they are put into place in schools. Representatives should include those on the Learning Difficulties Reference Group with the inclusion of a representative from Family Advocacy.

Recommendation 27

The New South Wales Minister for Health should approach his federal counterpart to request that the National Health and Medical Research Council undertake a comprehensive review of treatments for children with specific learning difficulties, the results to be published in an accessible format to assist parents to make decisions about their children's treatment.

This recommendation is supported and the review should consider the cultural appropriateness of interventions and the presentation format should be culturally appropriate.

Chapter 8 Therapy Services

Recommendation 28

NSW Health should take specific steps to fulfil its responsibility as the primary funder and provider of therapy services for children with or at risk of learning difficulties.

Recommendation 29

NSW Health should, in liaison with the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Community Services and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, develop a comprehensive strategy for the planning and provision of therapy for children. The strategy should:

- Promote adequate, effective and consistent service delivery across the range of children who require therapy, in every area of the State
- Clearly define the target group for each Department and ensure that this target group is consistently applied across the State
- Ensure that a process is in place to ensure that responsibility to provide therapy is allocated for each child who is referred for therapy.

Recommendation 30

In keeping with its role as the primary provider of therapy services for children with learning difficulties, NSW Health should develop a strategy to ensure that children with more complex needs who are unable to access early intervention services receive coordinated and holistic support.

It is noted that there are a number of funders and providers of therapy services, government and non-government.

The development of a joint framework would clarify roles and responsibilities of the different agencies involved and enable the provision of more accessible services for families. This could also include options for further developing therapeutic childcare services in NSW for vulnerable families and could consider the services provided through funding under the *Families First* strategy.

Such a strategy would also cover support for children with more complex needs who are unable to access early intervention services and would target therapy services to Aboriginal children in rural and remote areas.

Strategic planning should include specialist consultation and support for the staff involved in providing early childhood programs and clarification of assessment and referral pathways so that children are appropriately referred. This is particularly important given therapy workforce supply and retention issues.

In addition to the recommended partners, other partners would be involved, including general practitioners and the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, in developing a strategy. The strategy should include training for Aboriginal Child Care and Aboriginal Health workers to provide therapy services in schools and through Child and Family Health Centres in rural and remote areas.

Recommendation 31

NSW Health and the Department of Education and Training, Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Department of Community Services and Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services should move urgently to develop a joint framework for the provision of therapy services in schools and early childhood services across the State, including the use of consultative and team based models. This joint framework should include:

- The most effective interagency arrangements to engage therapists to work in schools and early childhood services
- The necessary infrastructure and other mechanisms to ensure professional support for these therapists
- The most appropriate strategies to ensure effective planning and collaboration at the regional level.

and

Recommendation 32

To address the undersupply of therapists for children in New South Wales, NSW Health should:

- Undertake a comprehensive needs analysis of the levels of speech pathology and occupational therapy positions required to provide both clinical therapy services and systemic delivery of therapy services in schools and early childhood settings
- Develop targets for numbers of therapists per head of population for each Area Health Service, with equity weightings
- Allocate sufficient funding to ensure these positions are filled.

and

Recommendation 33

In developing a comprehensive approach to the provision of therapy services for children across the State, NSW Health and other relevant agencies should develop and implement systemic measures to ensure that adequate levels of therapy are available in all rural and remote areas.

and

Recommendation 34

In order to identify the most effective models of therapy and guide future investment, NSW Health should establish an evaluation strategy for the range of therapy services for children.

The need to improve cross-agency coordination has been identified as a priority by the Senior Officer Group involving the Departments of Health, Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Community Services and Education and Training.

Chapter 9 Time to act

Recommendation 35

The NSW Government should clarify the scope and objectives of the *Families First* strategy within the broader prevention and early intervention services in New South Wales.

The policy framework for *Families First* is being reviewed during 2004. This issue will be considered during the review.

Recommendation 36

The NSW Government should establish an annual Early Learning Award, to be presented by the Premier, as a means of rewarding and fostering excellence in services or programs to assist children with or at risk of learning difficulties.

The value of rewarding achievements in the community sector and fostering excellence in services or programs to assist children with or at risk of early learning difficulties is recognised.

A range of parameters around an award, including excellence in Aboriginal early intervention services, will be further considered.

Currently in special education, the Premier offers four scholarships to special education teachers through the Premier's Teacher Scholarship program. The Premier's Special Education Teacher Scholarships of \$10,000 each were introduced in 2002 and are offered to special education teachers from NSW schools or TAFE to study aspects of teaching relevant to students with disabilities, learning or behavioural difficulties.

Applicants for a Premier's Special Education Teacher Scholarship are not required to specify the nature of the special education or the age group of the students on which the scholarships are based. The scholarships are awarded on merit and are assessed on a proposal devised by the teacher. In their current form, Premier's Special Education Teacher Scholarships do not satisfy the Recommendation 36 from *Realising Potential-Final Report of the Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties*.