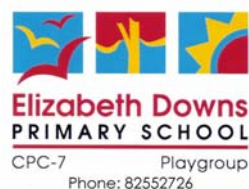


F a m i l y

W e l l b e i n g

***The Family Learning Network:
an Evaluation***



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CONTENTS

List of Tables.....	3
List of Figures.....	3
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction.....	9
Section 1: Background.....	11
1.1 The aims of the Family Learning Network.....	12
1.2 The evaluation.....	13
Section 2: Literature Review.....	15
Section 3: Parents.....	17
3.1 Focus groups with parents.....	17
3.2 Parents' views about raising children in Elizabeth.....	18
3.3 Safety.....	19
3.4 Programs and support services for children and families.....	20
3.5 Education for parents.....	21
3.6 Response to Family Learning Network objectives.....	21
Section 4: Students.....	23
4.1 Focus groups with students.....	23
4.2 The physical environment.....	24
4.3 Feelings about coming to school.....	26
4.4 Feelings about the classroom and the curriculum.....	28
4.5 What students knew about the Family Learning Network.....	28
4.6 Wider community impacts.....	30
Section 5: Data Presentation & Analysis.....	31
5.1 Student behaviour summary.....	32
5.2 School attendance summary.....	40
5.3 Student achievement.....	43

Section 6: Teachers	51
6.1 Methodology	51
6.2 Barriers and challenges.....	51
6.3 Services to improve student participation in learning and school life.....	55
6.4 Teachers’ perceptions of the potential of the Family Learning Network	56
6.5 Teachers’ knowledge of the Family Learning Network	60
 Section 7: Advocacy Initiatives.....	 61
 Summary.....	 63
 Recommendations.....	 65
 References	 69
 Appendixes	 73
Appendix A: Domains	73
Appendix B: Family Learning Network Organisational Structure	74

List of Tables

Table 1	Student enrolment: School total and year levels, 2006.....	32
Table 2	Percentage of students who achieved national benchmark standards in the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests.	43
Table 3	Teacher participation in research in each school.....	51

List of Figures

Figure 1	Number of reported instances of behavioural infractions by type, for Schools 1, 2, and 3 occurring during the 2006 school year.....	32
Figure 2	Reported number of behaviours for which consequences were applied across each year level, 2006.....	33
Figure 3	Percentage of reported consequences applied to behavioural incidents per year level, 2006	34
Figure 4	Number of reported behavioural incidents by type and consequence applied, 2006	35
Figure 5	Number of consequences applied to behavioural incidents by year level, 2006	38
Figure 6	Number of reported student absences by year level, term 2, 2006.....	40
Figure 7	Number of absence types reported for each year level, term 2, 2006.....	41
Figure 8	Year 3 literacy and numeracy test mean scores, 2007	44
Figure 9	Year 5 literacy and numeracy test mean scores, 2007	45
Figure 10	Year 7 literacy and numeracy test mean scores, 2007	46
Figure 11	Percentage of Year 3 students in each skill band for the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests.....	47
Figure 12	Percentage of Year 5 students in each skill band for the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests.....	48
Figure 13	Percentage of Year 7 students in each skill band for the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests.....	49

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. *School–community partnerships generate positive outcomes for students*

The results of the literature review support the model adopted by the Family Learning Network. School–community partnerships can positively influence outcomes in student attendance, achievement, resilience, behaviour and attitude. They have been shown to facilitate more effective service delivery, and impact positively on parents and families in the domains of education, employment, information dissemination and community links.

2. *Parents ‘proud to be Elizabethan’*

Focus groups with parents sought information about what it was like to raise children in the area. Parents spoke positively about the natural environment, their roots in Elizabeth, supportive friendship networks and the way people pulled together in times of crisis. They challenged negative media representations of Elizabeth as inaccurate and unfair. Parents praised the schools as caring and safe places for their children and as places where they too received support. Parents identified education as important for their children and themselves and some were engaged in further education.

3. *Parent concerns*

Parents expressed serious concerns about child safety outside the school and the lack of opportunity for their children to engage in accessible, safe and affordable leisure and recreational activities. Sport was mentioned by all groups, followed by activities such as art, dance and theatre. Poor public transport was identified as a barrier to attending programs. Parents drew attention to economic hardships that they, or people they knew, were experiencing. They also pointed to the lack of services for families who are struggling. While they understood the need for the strategies put in place to ensure student safety and security at school, parents were concerned that those strategies often acted as barriers to their participation in school life.

4. *Students positive about school*

Focus groups were conducted with Year 4 students across the three primary schools using photo-elicitation methodology. Student responses paralleled that of the parents in that they expressed positive views about school generally but were also concerned about safety. They indicated that they enjoyed school for the programs and learning and the outdoor spaces for play. However, they noted that rules and regulations designed to ensure their safety in the schoolyard were not always observed and at times they had been bullied or hurt by other children. Like their parents, they identified dangers in the community, such as in local shopping centres, and noted that care had to be taken in these settings.

5. *Behaviour problems and non-attendance start early for some students*

The analysis of school data supported the concerns expressed by teachers and parents. The analysis indicated that there are high levels of consequated problem behaviour across all three schools. There were differences in the patterns of that behaviour and the way schools responded; that is, schools responded to the same behaviour in different ways. Attendance data showed a markedly high level of absences in Year 7; however, problems to do with behaviour and non-attendance begin as early as Years 1 and 2 for some students, and are maintained at a high level thereafter.

6. *Poverty linked to poor student participation and outcomes*

Teachers responded to the focus group questions through the lens of their professional responsibilities and day-to-day experiences in the school. They discussed the impact of poverty on families, linking poverty to poor housing conditions which made homework and study difficult for some students. They highlighted the way poverty led to lack of access to the specialist services children needed, inadequate clothing, poor nutrition, and the ability of students to participate in school excursions. Profiles of student achievement on benchmark tests place the schools below the mean for all schools in the state.

7. *Disrupted family life*

Teachers identified unstable relationships, domestic violence and alcohol and other drug problems as factors affecting some children. They indicated that, if left unresolved, these things led to disruptions in family life and underpinned the social and emotional difficulties experienced by some students, including lack of energy, poor concentration, exhaustion and absenteeism. Teachers commented that in some families there was a culture clash between home and school and children were caught between differing expectations of language and behaviour.

8. *Lack of services, programs and community facilities*

Teachers agreed with parents that there was a lack of services, programs, community facilities and poor public transport in the area. Like parents, they pointed to the need for better opportunities for children. They indicated that a concerted effort was required to address alcohol and other drug problems in the community.

9. *Support for the Family Learning Network*

There was good support from parents, students and teachers for the activities and the potential of the Family Learning Network. The combination of community capacity building with coordination of crisis intervention and provision of group and individual programs was seen as a good model; however, the importance of adequate personnel to extend the reach of the Network and the need to maintain the Network and its programs over time were seen as essential to making a real difference.

10. Complexity of issues

The Family Learning Network records reflect the concerns raised by parents, students and teachers about the complexity of issues facing families and the need for advocacy and policy change initiatives. One-to-one counselling and the group programs conducted through the Network dealt with a range of issues. To resolve these concerns social workers and school counsellors are required to work with a variety of community agencies.

11. A coordinated effort

The combination of methods used in the evaluation has consistently drawn attention to the need for a sustained and coordinated effort to address the complex issues affecting families and student achievement at a number of levels. These include, but are not limited to: proactive work to build community capacity to provide positive programs for children and families and to address housing problems; financial support; alcohol and other drug issues; domestic violence; child abuse; and legal concerns.

INTRODUCTION

The Family Learning Network was established in Elizabeth, South Australia, in July 2006 to enhance the health and wellbeing of families and promote student achievement through collaboration across three primary schools and a community youth service. The Network seeks to do this in two ways: through better service coordination for families during times of crisis; and by building community capacity to promote wellbeing and prevent problems before they arise. In August 2006 the Family Learning Network and the School of Education at Flinders University commenced discussions about forming a partnership to evaluate the effectiveness of the Network. After consideration of the key issues and areas of priority, a three-stage evaluation was proposed. Stage One of the evaluation was funded through the Flinders Collaborative Research Grant Scheme (FCRGS) and is the subject of this report.

The research design mirrors the philosophy and empowerment practices of the Family Learning Network. It is innovative, cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary in its approach. It foregrounds the voices of parents, students, teachers and other professionals working in the Family Learning Network schools and in the Northern Area Community & Youth Services (NACYS) Inc. It juxtaposes those voices against school data on student attendance, behaviour and achievement and the records kept by the Family Learning Network on the programs and individual counselling sessions conducted during 2006–2007. The methodology used has shown how the issues revealed through earlier studies and data collections are experienced in the lives of families and the people who work with them. It has also revealed the issues that persist over time requiring policy attention. The collaboration between Flinders University and the Family Learning Network in conducting Stage One of the evaluation has generated a number of recommendations for the future directions and policy work of the Family Learning Network.

Section 1

BACKGROUND

The Family Learning Network is made up of the Northern Area Community & Youth Services (NACYS) Inc., Elizabeth Downs Primary School (EDPS), Elizabeth Park Primary School (EPPS) and Elizabeth East Primary School (EEPS). Elizabeth is a suburb in the northern extent of Adelaide, South Australia and forms part of the City of Playford. Elizabeth was established in 1955 as a master planned satellite town by the South Australian Housing Trust on 3000 acres (12km²) of rural land between the older towns of Salisbury and Smithfield. In the 1950s and 60s, migrants (especially English) were encouraged to settle in Elizabeth and its suburbs. The majority of the population therefore is of Anglo-Celtic descent. There is a significant proportion of Aboriginal peoples living in the area and a small number of people from a range of cultural backgrounds who have come to Australia as refugees or migrants. Elizabeth is made up of a number of residential suburbs, each configured as a local community around a small shopping centre. There is also a larger shopping precinct in Elizabeth itself.

Elizabeth is designated by the ABS Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) as one of the most disadvantaged in South Australia in relation to income, housing, access to services, school retention and participation, self-reported health status, life expectancy, and child abuse (Hetzl et al, 2004). This disadvantage is reflected in schools in the area, which report high numbers of students with learning difficulties, poor attendance rates and low academic achievement. The impact of disadvantage on families was investigated in 2005–2006 by an Australian Research Council project entitled *Families at risk: the effects of chronic and multiple disadvantage* (Slee, 2006). This research documented the effects of chronic and multiple disadvantage on families with young children in the lowest socio-economic status Census collection districts of metropolitan Adelaide, including Elizabeth. It examined multiple concepts such as social determinants of health and wellbeing, individual (parent and child) functioning, social support and cohesion, and service use, concluding that life for the majority of the parents and young children interviewed was 'under resourced, stressful and isolated, and interventions are required that open up pathways out of disadvantaged life situations' and that, "A paradigm shift is required so that unequal outcomes for families and children are seen as social injustices, rather than products of individual dysfunction and deficit." (Slee, 2006, p. 49).

The Family Learning Network was inspired by the findings of the *Families at risk* report and the need to take action to address these issues. Recognising that they lacked the capacity and resources required to counteract the numerous barriers to learning experienced by many of their students, the principals at Elizabeth Downs, Elizabeth Park and Elizabeth East Primary Schools formed a collaboration with NACYS to deliver a whole-of-family support and learning program with a primary focus on educational achievement. Through this collaboration they sought to improve service delivery, advocate for change and implement community development strategies to address the disadvantage experienced by many families living in the area. The Family Learning Network adopted a social justice approach, endeavouring to address entrenched problems through community capacity building to promote positive community life, while at the same time providing immediate and coordinated support for families in crisis.

1.1

The aims of the Family Learning Network

1. To improve service delivery and address the social and environmental factors that impact negatively on the wellbeing of families, the Family Learning Network identified five objectives: To maximise opportunities for children to achieve their potential in education, personal and social development.
2. To assist families to identify and ameliorate barrier issues to their children's educational pathways.
3. To provide families with increased access to family capacity building options including: crisis care, counselling, training and education.
4. To foster family and broader community support and information dissemination networks.
5. To further develop the integrated and interagency / intersectoral approach to service delivery.

A collaborative service model designed to deliver whole-of-family support with a primary focus on educational achievement was adopted. The model is based on the principle that "in the absence of reasonable levels of physical, emotional and social wellbeing, children experience an increased likelihood of significant challenge in their educational pathway. Underpinning this assertion is the principle that ameliorating such challenge is problematic when undertaken by disconnected service [providers] or when implemented in isolation to the family." (Family Learning Network Evaluation Report, July–Dec 2006 p. 2). The directions and activities of the Family Learning Network and the advocacy issues to be addressed are determined by both the individual and collective needs and issues of participating families at each of the three schools. Intervention and assessment services are carried out accompanied by capacity building initiatives. These two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive and there is an interaction in which the pattern of concerns that emerge in crisis intervention provides indicators of policy issues that need to be addressed through advocacy and social change at the broader level.

The Family Learning Network has identified four areas of key importance: family relationships, the environment, health and mental wellbeing, and education (Appendix A). These areas form the domains under which services and programs are classified and capacity building is carried out. There are different definitions and understandings of the term 'community capacity building'. For example Smith et al (2001, p. 33) define community capacity building as "the degree to which a community can develop, implement and sustain actions which allow it to exert greater control over its physical, social, economic and cultural environments." The Family Learning Network uses the term 'capacity building' in this spirit. Nonetheless, there is also a suggestion that, where the issues of concern are beyond the community's capacity to address, the Network would act as an advocate to facilitate policy change.

Each school has an independent area designated for the delivery of multiple services. Of these services, the schools provide child and education focused services and activities including an after school care program and extra-curricular activities program,

and parental education and engagement in school programs. NACYS, in conjunction with other service providers, offers whole-of-family services. The Family Learning Network has forged links with and works closely with a number of agencies and service providers, including Housing SA, Families SA and Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). These relationships are key to both the framework of the model and the success of the Network. It is anticipated that, over time, the Network will become inclusive of a range of service providers.

1.2 *The evaluation*

In August 2006 the Family Learning Network approached the School of Education to discuss the possibility of a collaboration to evaluate the work of the Network which would begin its first full year of implementation in 2007. A three-stage evaluation was proposed by the researchers. Stage One (2007) would establish baseline data to form the basis of the following two years and highlight issues the Network needs to address to achieve its goals. Stage Two (2008) would consist of a formative evaluation of the Network's progress in implementing its proposed program, extending its partnership base and addressing the designated advocacy areas. Stage Three (2009) would replicate Stage One with the aim of determining the difference the Network has made and its progress toward achieving its stated objectives.

An innovative multi-disciplinary approach was proposed for Stage One of the evaluation with the intention of creating a conversation across the key stakeholders in the Network—parents, students, teachers, school counsellors and NACYS workers—and an investigation of the interstices between what the social health research and school data on student behaviour and achievement reveal and how parents, students, teachers and NACYS workers see their lives and work within this.

It was also intended that Stage One of the evaluation would provide direction for the Network about where its resources might be directed as it develops its future programs, and policy makers about the changes required to address the issues confronting families and student achievement in the Elizabeth area. This approach was accepted by the Family Learning Network and funding was received from the Flinders Collaborative Research Grant Scheme (FCRGS) to proceed with Stage One of the evaluation.

The aims of Stage One of the research are:

1. To collect baseline data during the Family Learning Network's first full year of operation using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.
2. To describe the attendance, behaviour and academic profile of students at the three Network schools.
3. To establish the views of parents, students and teachers about family and school life in the area, its strengths and challenges.
4. To ascertain parent, student and teacher views about the collaborative service model developed by the Family Learning Network and its potential to make a difference.
5. To determine areas in which social policy change and capacity building are required.

In order to realise these aims, data was derived from a number of sources. Focus groups were conducted with parents to ascertain their views about raising children in Elizabeth generally and the Family Learning Network specifically. Photo-elicitation methodology was used with Year 4 students in the three Family Learning Network schools to illuminate student experiences of school life. Data collected routinely by schools on student attendance, behaviour and academic profile were analysed to provide a baseline measurement of student engagement and achievement. A modified focus group, 'Pieces of the Jigsaw', elicited teachers' views about school life, the issues for families and students and the potential of the Family Learning Network to promote student achievement and address the negative impact of social and economic disadvantage faced by many families. The records kept by the Family Learning Network on individual counselling and group programs were analysed to identify key issues that persisted over time that required advocacy and policy work. Finally, consistent themes that emerged throughout these data sources have been identified and recommendations made to assist the Family Learning Network in setting directions for its future work.

Section 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review investigated the published academic literature on partnerships between schools and community centres, the types of collaborations that exist, the impact of the social determinants of health on communities, and health promoting schools. These were considered the central areas of interest for this research.

There is a wealth of evidence that indicates that school–community partnerships do positively influence outcomes for students, showing increases in attendance rates, decreases in cases of recurrent absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Blank et al, 2003 cited in Warren, 2005; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Martinez et al, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Mastro et al, 2006; Sheldon, 2007), improvements in educational success (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Blank et al, 2003 cited in Warren, 2005; Sheldon, 2005; Mastro et al, 2006), resilience, behaviour and attitude.

Collaborative partnerships can also provide more effective service delivery for students and their families. The literature has also identified that partnerships between school and community are essential in enabling students to achieve the best life outcomes, addressing both academic and non-academic (i.e. social, emotional and physical) learning barriers (Poole, 1997; Royal & Rossi, 1997; Sanders, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Dryfoos, 2003; Foss et al, 2003; Tett et al, 2003; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Gonzalez, 2004; Martinez et al, 2004; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Hayes & Chodkiewicz, 2005; Sanders, 2005 cited in Hong, 2006; Sheldon, 2005; Tett, 2005; Warren, 2005; Anderson-Butcher et al, 2006, Cohen et al, 2006; Hong, 2006; Mastro et al, 2006; Sheldon, 2007).

Research from Australia, the UK and the USA has indicated that these partnerships are particularly advantageous for schools in low socio-economic, socially excluded communities, to aid in addressing social and educational inequalities. Schools alone lack the capacity and resources needed to both educate and counteract the numerous barriers to learning experienced by many socially disadvantaged students. Partnerships with parents, families and communities can provide needed resources, support and assistance to schools to help address the complexity of student needs (Sanders, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Dryfoos, 2003; Foss et al, 2003; Tett et al, 2003; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Gonzalez, 2004; Martinez et al, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Tett, 2005; Warren, 2005; Cohen et al, 2006; Mastro et al, 2006). They have been shown to be protective for students, promoting positive mental health and helping to alleviate environmental learning and social barriers, thus enhancing academic and social competencies.

School–community partnerships can also have a positive impact on parents and families, providing support, educational workshops, employment assistance, information and community links. Such partnerships have also been shown to increase parent and family engagement with the school, improve social capital, and reduce social isolation.

Collaborative school–community partnerships can also be an effective medium to advocate for policy change addressing the greater needs of low socio-economic communities that impact on student health, wellbeing and learning abilities (Warren, 2005; Cohen et al, 2006).

School–community partnerships are an essential component of the Health Promoting School (HPS) model (Marshall et al, 2000; Rissel & Rowling, 2000; Stewart et al, 2000; Manchester, 2004).

School–community collaborative models use a ‘bottom up’ approach, undertaking interventions determined by the target community’s identification of issues/needs; are committed to a ‘shared vision’ of partnership goals and outcomes; use a whole-school approach (shared ownership and commitment from school staff, and effective leadership); and have sustainable long term strategies and ongoing funding (Tett et al, 2003; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Bagley et al, 2004; Gonzalez, 2004; Manchester, 2004; Tett, 2005; Anderson-Butcher et al, 2006; Cohen et al, 2006; Lucey & Maurana, 2007).

The transformative value of health education and promotion through the use of critical pedagogical approaches within schools is suggested (Simpson & Freeman, 2004) as beneficial to those seeking to understand the complexity of health promotion issues from the perspective of children and adolescents.

There is therefore strong evidence to support the assertion that collaborative service models can increase social capital within the school community and impact on student engagement, academic results and social and emotional fortification. The literature also supports the value of health promotion teams within schools (Weare, 2000) which can develop a tailored approach to health promotion for a particular school (Leurs et al, 2005; Allensworth, 1987; St Leger, 1999).

Section 3

PARENTS

3.1 Focus groups with parents

The focus groups sought to explore parents' views about raising children in Elizabeth, the benefits and the challenges they faced and the potential of the Family Learning Network to make a difference to children and families. Five focus groups were conducted during school hours at the three Network primary schools between July and October 2007. Twenty-eight parents participated; four in School 1, ten in School 2, ten in School 3 and four in the focus group with Aboriginal parents and parents with Aboriginal. All of those who responded to the invitation to participate in a focus group were women. It may be the case, as suggested by one participant, that the school-home relationship is seen by many families as the primary responsibility of mothers or female carers. However, it is also likely that a different strategy is required to elicit the views of fathers, for example focus groups held in the evening after working hours.

In order to obtain the views of a cross-section of parents, the profile of focus group participants varied across schools. School 1 participants were involved in the Family Learning Network. School 2 participants were members of the School Council or had other leadership responsibilities in the school. School 3 participants were drawn from across the school and were invited to participate by the school counsellor. A focus group with Aboriginal parents and/or parents with Aboriginal children was conducted in School 2 and co-facilitated by the Aboriginal Education Officer.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary, so the views expressed are those of parents who were engaged enough with the school and/or the Family Learning Network to respond to the request to participate. It is not suggested that they reflect the views of all parents. Nonetheless, there was a degree of consistency in the information generated across the focus groups which suggests that the good things reported about the community and the concerns identified are likely to be relevant to many parents living in the area.

A three-stage process was used in the parent focus groups. Participants were asked to respond to the question 'What is it like raising children in Elizabeth?' They did this in the first instance by selecting and talking about photos which represented aspects of life in general and family life in particular, and expanding on and adding to the themes derived from the photos. They then brainstormed and prioritised ideas about the actions that could be taken to enhance the positive aspects of life in Elizabeth and address the negatives. Finally parents responded to a question about the potential of a group like the Family Learning Network to make a difference to the lives of families and scholastic achievement of students.

3.2

Parents' views about raising children in Elizabeth

Parents indicated that time with family is central to their lives and Elizabeth provides many opportunities for this. Sport was identified by all groups as a central activity which contributed to community building:

'the boys play football and they do barrack for their local area football team...'

'my kids all play sport which gives them a sense of community, get out there and meet lots of people...and have fun.'

Parents also referred to the fireworks and Australia Day celebrations sponsored by the Council as examples of community activities they enjoyed with their children.

'at Craigmore...they have fireworks and the kids love it and I think that's a good part of Elizabeth, you know like they do something positive for the community and everybody has a good time.'

'We can all go (on Australia Day) and have a good time and in a sense we're all equal on that day (because it's a free event).'

Parents described the natural environment in Elizabeth as a positive aspect of their community. In particular they noted the abundance of parks and outdoor spaces where they could take children to play. They were concerned about and challenged the negative image of Elizabeth promulgated in the media.

'Elizabeth's reputation is wrong.'

'Is this like the Bronx of Adelaide? No Way! But that's the conception.'

'It seems to be news, and everything else focuses on northern when they mention the bad things (that) happen.'

Some parents had grown up in the community and were 'proud of being an Elizabethan'. They described their community as multicultural and accepting of diversity.

'we live in such a multicultural area. They go to a multicultural school. Everywhere you go there are people of different races and nationalities and all of that sort of thing...'

Prominent in the discussions of the positive aspects of life was the role of schools. All focus groups commented on this, seeing the school and the programs it provides for children and parents as a positive aspect of life in Elizabeth. Schools were described as good and secure places to send children, one where parents too could get support when they needed it.

'School security is good, a safe environment. They deal with issues. Most of the parents are friendly. Encourage them (children) in their learning.'

'My son's got a lot of help from being in this school...It's been really positive, the help I've received.'

'There's a real mix...I mean it's not all doom and gloom around here. It's a pretty good school. It's a school community.'

'More comfortable at the school than [other welfare agencies].'

The level of security required at the school was described by one parent group as a problem. While the parents valued the security and the importance of feeling that their children were safe, they commented that the level of security required was often a barrier to parent participation in the school.

'you get the feeling you're not welcome because of the security restrictions—was different in the past. Easier to come in and help with things like reading. Teachers are desperate for help but because parents have to sit through training and have police checks, it puts people off. Kids need to be safe, so it's happening in all schools. People want security but it's also a barrier.'

They also referred to the guidelines about child protection and that they had to be careful about physical contact with children.

'he latches right on to me and he's not allowed to do that and it's hard.'

'and when they're bawling their eyes out you're not allowed...that may be why it's (volunteering) scaring some people.'

3.3 Safety

Embedded within the positive aspects of life in Elizabeth was a key major concern: the lack of safety of many children in the community. Schools were seen as islands of security within an often hostile or uncertain environment where safety could not be taken for granted. This matter was raised and discussed at length. All parent focus groups expressed concern about child safety, both for their own children and those of others. There was a sense that the community was not as safe as it had been in the past.

'There's just so many sad neglected kids around and especially like working in the school environment...even us girls in the canteen see it to a certain degree and with the kids and yes it just gets me thinking society is just going down hill as far as no resources to help these kids.'

'...a lot of the people just sit back and watch other things happening...people just sit back and just watch things happen like distance themselves.'

'Don't like my daughter playing in the front yard. Back garden's OK. Who's living in the street a concern.'

'Trouble is trusting people these days.'

'I won't let my daughter walk to the shops on her own.'

Underpinning and related to community safety were concerns about allocation of Housing Trust homes in the school vicinity and the use of alcohol and other drugs. With regard to the former, the need to consider the location of schools when allocating tenants to Housing Trust properties was raised. Parents noted an incident in which one of the houses adjacent the school required police intervention, posing danger to the

children and causing the school to close down for a period of time. While they acknowledged that all people need places to live—that was not the issue—they believed that houses beside and near the school should be allocated to families with children. They further suggested that people going into the houses should be screened in some way to ensure the safety of children traveling to and from school. They felt that this should be a matter of Housing Trust policy.

Alcohol and other drug use was also a safety concern. With regard to alcohol, one participant noted:

‘with that (alcohol) comes the crime and the violence and the anger...If you put that aside then the violence and the anger might subside too.’

They also expressed concern about drug use in the area and felt intimidated when encountering groups of people they believed to be drug users.

3.4 Programs and support services for children and families

‘all the kids that are just left by the wayside by the system because the staffing is not there, the money is not there.’

‘Those kids are the ones that are missing out.’

The abundance of clubs for children was noted by one focus group; however, in others the lack of free and accessible activities for children was commented on. Two main obstacles to children’s participation were identified: the cost of activities, which put them out of reach of many families; and poor public transport which made it difficult for children to participate if their parents didn’t have cars and, even if they did, the cost of petrol was often a barrier.

‘I find it hard to get my children to sport and things. That might help a lot of other single moms and the kids have something to look forward to and then that gives them a positive sort of outlook on everything and not everything is doom and gloom because they can’t afford or can’t get there. What about minibus services to take kids to sport? The netball team have trouble with that kind of thing—transportation. Not having a car during the day...’

‘I’ve got the car but no petrol!’

‘there’s nothing affordable for family; not a whole lot of indoor stuff for this type of weather.’

All parent focus groups agreed that there was a need for more free or low-cost, readily accessible and safe activities for children and young people such as junior sports, dance, youth programs, theatre and a variety of things to do. While some of these activities already exist, often costs are seen to be too high.

Along with the need for programs, parents also discussed the long waiting lists for services. Three months was reported as an average waiting list for counselling services and longer (nine months) if the matter wasn’t considered urgent.

3.5 Education for parents

Parents talked about the importance of education for themselves. They wanted ‘opportunities to learn’ and argued for study support for parents. They noted that the government grant for study was a good thing but that it’s only available to people over 25 who didn’t complete Year 12. They particularly valued options for study from home.

Parents indicated that a course for parents—‘we’ve brought this up before’—would be useful ‘to teach us what our kids are learning so we can help with homework’. They felt that teaching is different from when they went to school and wanted to know more about the curriculum.

‘Education for us helps us teach our kids.’

‘it makes you feel so stupid (not knowing about their children’s school work).’

Parents also identified a need for more training around hygiene (prevention of ‘school sores’ and head lice) and nutrition, which were issues for some children.

When asked to identify and prioritise action that might be taken to promote positive community wellbeing and address some of the issues, free or low-cost, accessible community activities for children was top of the list. The collated results of the five focus groups revealed the following priorities in order of importance to parents.

1. Free or low-cost safe accessible community activities for children.
2. Education for parents.
3. Funding for services and support for families.
4. Safety including addressing drug and alcohol issues.
5. Improved public transport.
6. Housing Trust allocation policy.

3.6 Response to Family Learning Network objectives

Many parents had not heard of the Family Learning Network; however, their response to the concept was positive. The only caveat was whether the resources of the Network were substantial enough to reach the high number of families who needed services and support.

‘I think that would be really good.’

‘My son has been in some classes. Need to have those outcomes achieved on a bigger scale, therefore having a stronger community.’

‘The Network needs to ‘stretch their arms out a little bigger.’

Parents who participated in Network programs were enthusiastic with comments like:

‘someone to listen to problems and refer you to where you can get help.’

They highlighted the value of 'communities working together to manage it' and making 'use of, build on what is already in the community'. This raises the possibility that if parent education programs are designed they might focus, in part, on building capacity for community development.

Section 4

STUDENTS

4.1 *Focus groups with students*

The purpose of this component of the research is to make visible children's views about the current situation in their school and what might be better, and to inform both the evaluation and the ongoing development of the Family Learning Network.

Data was collected from Year 4 students in each of the three Network primary schools between July and October 2007 using photo-elicitation methodology combined with semi-structured interviews. The groups of students in this study were small in number—no more than eight in any of the groups.

The research method used in this section to evaluate the Family Learning Network project from the students' perspective, is photo-elicitation, sometimes described as photo-language or visual narrative. This uses photographs as a method of gathering information from research participants. The photographs act as 'triggers' to elucidate responses. Following up the students' responses with further questions is also proposed and was documented as part of the ethics approval process.

At each of the three schools students from Year 6/7 classes or from the Student Representative Council identified areas within their schools—both inside the buildings, in classrooms, and outside in the yard—that were safe and unsafe, places where they felt happy and had fun, where children played and enjoyed their learning, or felt sad and lonely, or places where they had to go when they were being punished. This included places near to the school where they may feel safe and those where they may feel unsafe. These locations were recorded on paper and with a digital camera. These records were used later as the basis for a professional photographer to photograph the identified locations. These photographs were developed in colour and made into postcard size.

Students from Year 3/4 in each of the schools were invited to participate in the research project. In each of the classrooms an explanation was provided about what the evaluation project was trying to 'find out' and how this would be done and students were invited to participate. The students were advised that parent or caregiver consent was required for them to participate in the research project and a form would be sent home the following Monday. Most were keen to help with the investigation. Two children in different schools asked whether it would cost them any money to participate!

When the students had been given consent to participate in the research, the data collection began. At the beginning of the data collection session photographs were placed out on the table where students were seated. The students chose one or more photographs that they wanted to talk about in relation to their experiences at school. They were encouraged to think about the safe and unsafe places, where they felt happy, where they learned important things, and where they went with their friends.

Responses were followed up through questioning as part of a semi-structured interview. The students were also asked to talk about any other places in the school that were not in the photographs that they wanted to discuss.

The student perspective of schooling and the Family Learning Network

To describe what students reported about their experience as learners in the three northern area schools their responses have been grouped into a number of themes.

From this initial look at the data we will make some general observations and specify where different school approaches have had significantly different outcomes, from the students' perspective.

4.2 *The physical environment*

Students commented on the physical environment and its impact on their safety and their learning.

One of the first comments made related to an oval area and how, 'it's a really wide space and I think it's important for our learning because we can run around lots and get fit'. This was supported by a fellow student who had earlier commented on the need for more recess time to allow students to get fit. 'We get to get more, we get to be fit'. The issue of making the play areas safe is a challenge for schools. The oval spaces at all of the schools are extensive and present a number of challenges. One child enjoyed the openness of the space: 'The oval is a nice place to be, people can do cart wheels and hand stands and sometimes they can play football and soccer and you could just lie down on the grass and look at the sky, maybe clouds could change into animals sometimes'. she commented. Several other students enjoyed the opportunity to be away from other children, saying: 'The back of the oval. We get to play in the sandpit and we get to play games' and 'We get to play in around trees. Normally, and me and 'K' play at the back of the oval'.

One child noted: 'The oval's not a safe place because they have short gates and people go over them.' Other access issues raised were: 'People from outside of the school come into the school grounds as a short cut to the shop. They go through the thing and then go through primary. It's unsafe. They can kill you'. Another child commented: 'As well, there was two high school people were like, two weeks ago, and we were playing around and they were talking about to take us and they were high school people. I didn't feel safe'.

Several children commented on the hardness of an asphalt area and the accidents they had received when playing. Other comments about the playground related to emotional pain experienced on the playground: 'I think we need to have some more teachers, because some people actually bully on the playground, because I've actually been bullied a lot'. From another: 'On the playground a lot of people get bullied like, somebody else has said, and it really gets them upset and then they get them hurt and everything, and it really hurts their feelings'.

There was acknowledgment that the schools had policies and practices in place to address this. The physical spots or lined areas marked on the asphalt were discussed as places where those who did not follow the rules were placed in an effort to keep people safe.

There was a range of views about the success of these strategies. One student said: 'Well in the school we should have proper areas for, so we should write on the ground, "no kicking on the concrete, go onto the oval", something like that, and if you don't do that you could get a focus spot, or a take home. If you do it three times you can get a take home, and if you get a take home, then you won't be able to kick on the oval, and if you kick on the oval then you won't get anything like that and we should have some good proper things and we should just try to make the area nice and safe'.

In another location a student discussed the yard markings and general student behaviour in the schoolyard: 'Well the spots are different colours now, and we should just keep them blue so we know which ones to stay on. And some spots can be pink and some can be yellow, so we could just do around the yard instead, just blue spots that's it. That means that's being bad, and you're not being nice. Not being nice and you're hurting people and you swear at them, so we should try to make them people behave properly and that, and we should just make it blue and make people nicer and that. Because it was people didn't be nice and that, and they were being mean and they all mean different things'.

The stairs were another area of a school that was discussed as a safety issue. A number of students commented that there were some markings to indicate the appropriate way of moving on the stairs, and that their teacher had designated monitors to assist in the orderly and safe use of the stairs. This seemed to be supported by the students' comments:

'The stairs, we need them because, we couldn't get up if there was no stairs and we need the rails in case someone falls off.'

'Yep, this is when you go up, and that's the side when you go down.'

'I think we should have teachers standing at the bottom and the top because it's not safe on the rails because a friend that I know he actually slides down the rails.'

'Yes, because, yes, a lot of people that I know slide down the stairs and it's really bad for them because if they fall they're going to hurt themselves and it really would hurt them.'

'Our class, my, my class has ... monitors and if other classes don't have any, I think they should so, people in the class don't fiddle around and play on the steps so they don't hurt themselves.'

Schools are challenged by the need for surveillance of the school environment. Allowing access for the wider community to pass through the oval area and the school grounds is a way of building a relationship with the community, but this can be a problem for the students and their families and their perceptions of safety at school.

4.3

Feelings about coming to school

The feelings generated during discussions were generally positive about the schooling experience. One student said: 'I think it's a good place because you get to learn and take little breaks'. When asked about feeling safe at school, one child responded: 'Yes, sometimes'. When asked about the things that aren't safe about school, he said: 'People. People teasing, hurting, and usually teasing me and hurting me'.

Another girl said on a number of occasions during the interview, 'I love school'. When asked, 'Do you think it's safe?' she replied, 'Yes, I do. Sometimes'. The social skills of students and their ability to cooperate with others was seen also a concern of one student who said: 'And last year there was this kid called X and we were trying to look after him and showing him around the school and once we got back to the line I was trying to tell him something, but he turned around and punched me right in the nose'. This child was quite philosophical about the event he/she described. Other children discussed the unsafe behaviour of Child X at the local shops.

School values were mentioned by one child who discussed them on several occasions during the interview in reference to how she had learnt to cope with a range of issues that affected her learning and safety at school. At another site a child said: 'Well we've got five vows for the whole entire school and they are care, respect, three vows, care, respect and responsibility and we have those vows because it's safe, it's like sharing and they care for people because they have to be nice and if they don't be nice then they go somewhere naughty, like to the office'.

Q: I see the keys to success up here and the success gardens, all about them, can you tell me a little bit about the keys to success, what it's about?

C: *Getting along with other people and you have to share other things.*

Q: Right, okay, and what else do you need to know?

C: *Organisation means that, before like, before school you get all your school stuff ready.*

Q: Right, okay, what can you tell me?

C: *Confidence is keep trying your hardest, and even if something comes that you're scared to do, keep doing it until you know how to do it, keep practising.*

Q: Excellent, okay, that's great, and what else?

C: *Resilience is bouncing back, when you're getting teased by someone you bounce back from it, you ignore it, you seek help or tell a friend.*

One child went on to say: 'My mum used to be a school teacher at a different school, and she always talks about the keys to the success—Yeah, but, the thing that she always liked out of the keys was persistence of having a go, and when, every time I got upset, she told me to use the resilience key and then she said because I needed to bounce back and then something went wrong, I didn't like my writing, so she told me to use my persistence to have a go'. Learning about the Keys to Success was also mentioned as an

activity which occurred at the Family Learning program which students had attended and they discussed the Success Garden.

Q: Why's it called the success garden?

C: *Because it's – It's got all the keys of success ... around it, ...for success and you look after people and that's where the tables, and they drew chessboards around it.*

Linking the learning of social skills to a place in the schoolyard where these ideals are also displayed has reminded students about looking after others.

Issues about walking to school and using the surrounding area were raised. Students when asked about whether it is safe walking to school had a range of responses. One said, 'Yep', another said, 'I used to' and 'I do and I am going to tomorrow.' Further comments were made about their safety concerns when walking to school. Students talked of unsafe behaviour they observed when walking to school. 'Once when I was walking to school, I saw two boys running across the road' and another observed, 'I walk with my sister and my two brothers, but one of my brothers, he always runs and gets to school before us, like he goes in front of us'.

Other problems were observed when people were dropping off students at school. One student said: 'Once my mum went, when we were going to school, on the way to school, my mum, there were these two kids, a big boy and a little girl, and they were, they were just about to walk along and my mum was just about to go, because she was allowed to go, and the kids they just ran along, when my mum was just about to go, and they could have got ran over. And my mum said, like, 'cause the big boy, he let the little girl run across, and the boy he was heaps older than the girl, and yeah.' The movement of people and vehicles around the schools was raised several times by the students along with the perception of safety when inside the school. The height of fences and walls were seen as too low allowing people into the school too easily. One said: 'As well as it's dangerous, because there's a pathway here, and people can walk down it and take you as well'.

Access to school sites by people who are not part of the immediate school community was raised as a safety concern. This was addressed earlier with regard to the physical environment. Further to this, the photographs of the shopping centres and neighbourhood parks raised a number of comments from the students.

There appears to be a level of understanding about what the school values are trying to engender within the student population, and for some students explicit opportunities to practise these are important. Developing programs which encourage students to walk or ride to school appear to be needed along with creating greater awareness from all community members about the need for heightened road safety behaviour around the school environment.

4.4 *Feelings about the classroom and the curriculum*

When students were asked to discuss their learning in the classroom and, in particular, what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy about their schoolwork, an expected diversity of responses was given. One student spoke about the work being sometimes easy and sometimes hard. In response to this another said: 'I think it depends what sort of worksheets you get, if it's hard you can get help from the teacher'. A child then said: 'It's easy, but it's also boring'. The next student described her difficulty with the schoolwork and another student agreed that the amount of work required each week was considerable. A comment by one student that whether the work was easy or hard was dependent on what it was, adds insight—her favourite subject was literacy.

The behaviour of other students in the class was seen as being a factor which impacted on access to some of the curriculum options. The Music Room was not available very often, 'because the kids in our class are naughty -Yeah, and also in the class. They call out. And harass each other. And they mess up everything, and they like use different instruments that they aren't supposed to be using in there. It makes us feel sad because, it makes me feel sad because we can't go in there much'.

The need for greater opportunities for fitness and sport as part of the curriculum was also mentioned. The fitness activities offered were not highly regarded by one student: 'It's not good for fitness when you play fitness around here, because all you have to do for fitness around here is throw the ball and you have to hit the mural, and that's not exercise or anything'. Another said: 'And I think there should be more sports. So like there can be, like, more sports so then like people get more fit, and all that, like on the oval'.

Areas set up around the school for learning, such as computer rooms and breakout areas, were described positively and seen as places which assisted with learning.

4.5 *What students knew about the Family Learning Network*

The Family Learning Network experiences were delivered slightly differently at each site. However, comments that the children made were similar across sites. Many students were not aware of the Family Learning Network and this is to be expected as some had not participated directly in programs delivered through this partnership.

Those who had participated in programs described the activities that they were involved in as fun and helpful to them in learning, although they did not always understand that what they were doing was 'learning'. 'Well the kids that mainly get yard cards and they have bad tempers, they go into the whatsit called?' 'Family learning circle, that's what they called it when I was in it last year. And you do stuff with this teacher and Miss X'.

Another student said: 'I've done it on Mondays after lunch.'

Q: And what did you learn?

C: *I don't think you learnt anything, you just done like activities and that, and we made snacks and made a surprise in there, because I broke my arm.*

A student remembered going to the Family Learning Circle and said: 'I did this year, last term. This year last term, I made a poster about the things that I'd done and we always do it Wednesday after lunch and the last day, it was a meeting'.

Q: And do you think it's helping you with your learning?

C: *Yeah.*

The inclusion of family members in this aspect of the child's learning was noted by some of the students. 'In the family learning circles, your mum, dad or nana comes with you and helps you and that.' 'And play the board games that you made.' Another noted, 'No, my mum never got to come. Because Student x's mum, Student x was my friend, his Mum, yeah, she played the board game with me and Student x.

In another of the school sites the Family Learning Network developed a focus on students' learning. Here again a student found difficulty in understanding that they were learning in this setting. He said: 'I only went there for a year and then I stopped'.

Q: Okay, what did you learn when you were there, can you remember?

C: *Nothing.*

Q: You didn't learn anything, you just went there and didn't learn anything? Oh.

C: *They were just cutting, ...doing games and stuff.*

A male student recalled that the Family Learning Network program at the school had helped him with a specific problem. He said: 'I've been in the anger management'.

Q: And did that help?

C: *Yeah.*

Q: What did you learn?

C: *Not to get angry.*

Q: Uhuh, what do you say to yourself to stop getting angry?

C: *Put my hands in my pocket and count to 10 and then bounce back.*

The fun element was also highlighted with this group. One student said: 'When I go to the group on Thursday, we, every time we sit down, we usually go and have some fun, we like playing chess and stuff, so, it's pretty fun where we go to'.

At another site the Family Learning Network was referred to as the Family Learning Centre due to the building being called by that name. A child when asked, 'Oh, and what do you know about the family learning centre?' replied, 'It teaches lots of younger kids that can't go to kindy and stuff, and it teaches them to be nicer'. Later during the interview when asked specifically about their experiences with the Family Learning Centre, students described similar situations. One said: 'Yeah, and I also came with my little brother because he just started kindy and we came in here after school'.

Q: With mum or?

C: *With dad and mum, and we had a little family day in here.*

The different approaches that each school has taken with this intervention have resulted in differing outcomes for the students and their families. The impact of these programs is unclear but individual student responses to the programs indicate that they have enjoyed the experiences offered in the programs and developed relationships with other adults and students in a relaxed and safe environment.

4.6 *Wider community impacts*

Each of the groups mentioned issues about safety in the wider community, in relation to coming to and going from school along with descriptions of issues they saw in relation to access to the schoolyard by members of the wider community. These have been discussed earlier.

Some other comments were related to photographs taken of the nearby shopping centre and local parks. The local parks were seen as places where the children felt safe if they were with friends or family members such as brothers. The shops were seen by one group of students as being a safe place and one where a good selection of services were available, especially take-away foods. At another site, the local shopping centre was described as a place where a number of violent incidents had occurred and they did not feel safe there. A student said, 'The shop ain't safe because I had X chase me with pocket knife just around there'. Another child said, 'No, but, when people, like, it's not safe, because this was like on a weekend, on Friday after school, I was going to my cousins, cause they live in Elizabeth North, and I was getting something to eat on the way and X chased me with a pocket knife all around there and other people take pocket knives and some weapons like shankers and all that'. Another said, 'Yeah, I've had a whole bunch of people beat me up at the shop'.

Section 5

DATA PRESENTATION & ANALYSIS

There is evidence to suggest that partnerships between schools and community positively influence outcomes for students. Effects such as increases in attendance rates (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Martinez et al, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Mastro et al, 2006; Sheldon, 2007), improvements in educational success (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Sheldon, 2005; Mastro et al, 2006), resilience and behaviour have been documented. These outcomes all have the potential to provide further educational opportunities and quality of life for students experiencing disadvantage.

A major aim of the Family Learning Network is to maximise opportunities for children to achieve their potential in education, personal and social development. It was therefore important to present current data related to this aim in an attempt to visually represent a baseline measurement of student engagement and achievement.

Student attendance and behaviour data were collated from schools' internal data management systems. All data were recorded by schools on a daily basis as part of the state education system's monitoring and reporting procedures. These data were extracted from existing data sets compiled by schools. School-wide attendance data were collated and reported for term 2, 2006. School-wide behavioural consequences reported by year level were extracted and reported for the academic year 2006 and school-wide frequency of consequences reported within behavioural categories were reported for the academic year 2006. Academic year 2006 data were presented as these data were available at the time of the data collection period of the project. Where consistent data from all schools were not available in 2007, 2006 data were used to represent a baseline measure.

Literacy and numeracy (LaN) state-wide assessments were selected to represent the current academic achievement of students in Years 3, 5, and 7. The 2007 LaN test scores were selected as they allowed comparison with the state-wide average and the extent to which students achieved minimum national benchmark standards in numeracy and literacy. In addition, these data were consistent measures of achievement used across the three schools and were readily available to the research team. Project budgetary constraints did not allow for additional measurement tools to be created for consistent measurement across schools. In presenting these data the research team is cognisant of the controversy about the introduction of these tests nationally and debates about their usefulness, particularly with groups of children experiencing high levels of disadvantage.

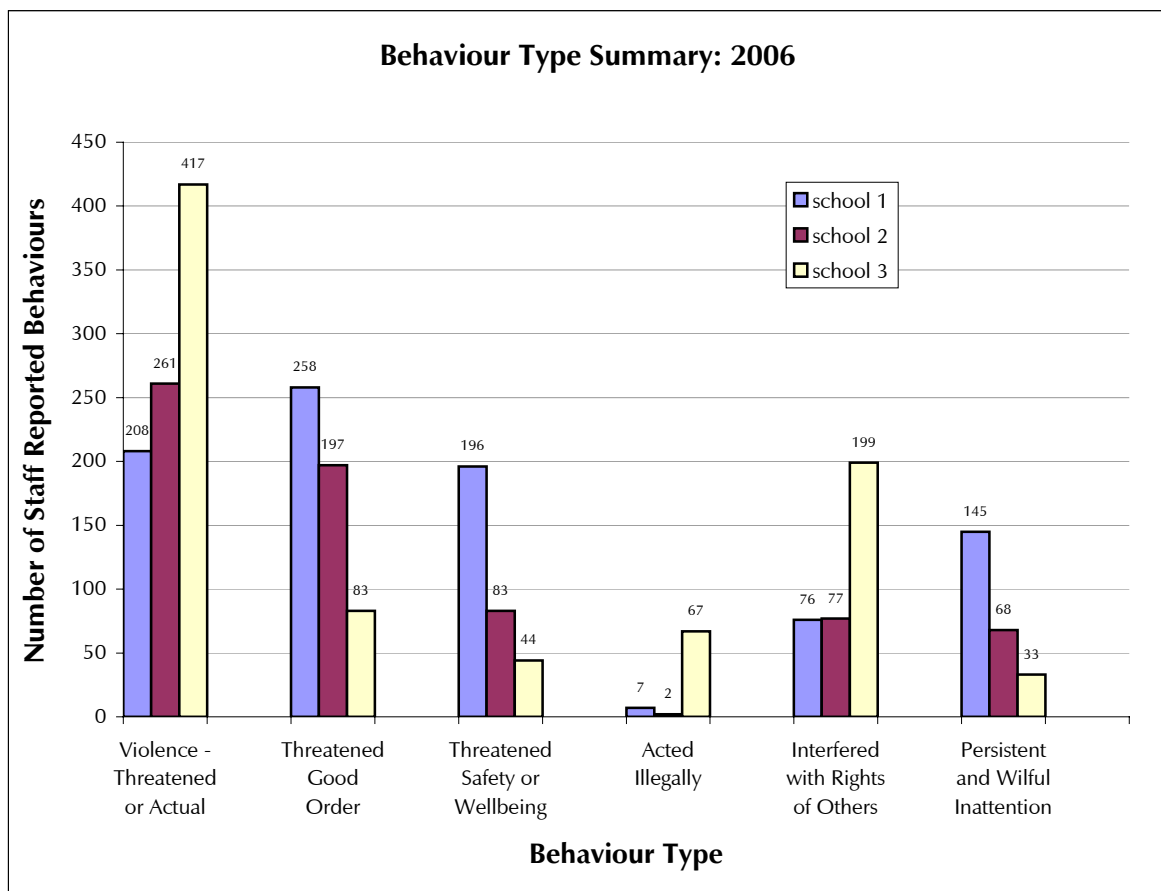
The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 to 13 provide a visual representation of baseline measures related to the second aim of the research project; to describe the attendance, behaviour and academic profile of students in the Network schools.

Table 1 Student enrolment: School total and year levels, 2006

Student Enrolment, 2006			
Year Level	School 1	School 2	School 3
Reception	50	49	45
Year 1	25	37	32
Year 2	24	32	27
Year 3	30	37	33
Year 4	21	48	17
Year 5	35	35	33
Year 6	38	38	32
Year 7	22	41	32
Total	245	317	284

5.1 School behaviour summary

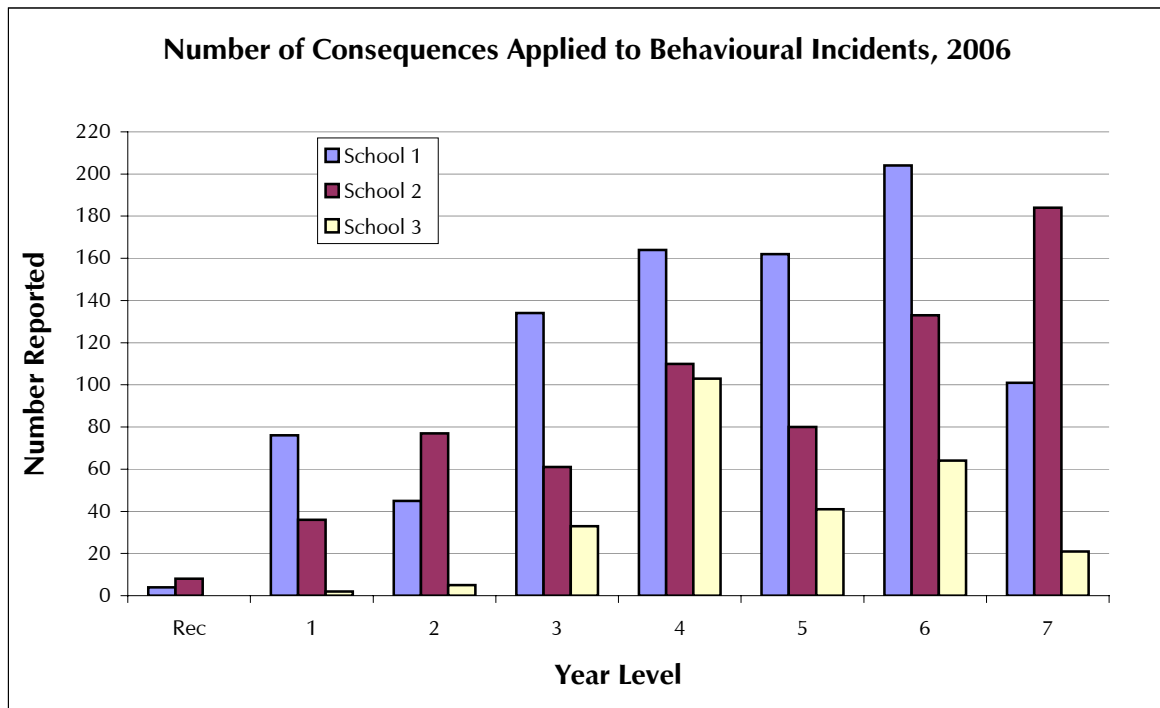
Figure 1 Number of reported instances of behavioural infractions by type, for Schools 1, 2, and 3 occurring during the 2006 school year



- > Schools 2 and 3 reported the highest number of behavioural incidents in the violence category.
- > School 3 reported the highest number of violent incidents overall in comparison to Schools 1 and 2.
- > School 1 reported the highest number of incidents in the 'Threatened Good Order, Threatened Safety and Persistent and Wilful Inattention' categories.
- > Generally the greatest number of behavioural incidents cluster around the first two categories of incidents (violence and threatened good order), with the exception of School 3 indicating a higher level of interference with the rights of others.

Note: Definition of the above categories of behaviour are not provided by the Department of Education & Children's Services. Individual schools determine incidents which may best fit into each behaviour type.

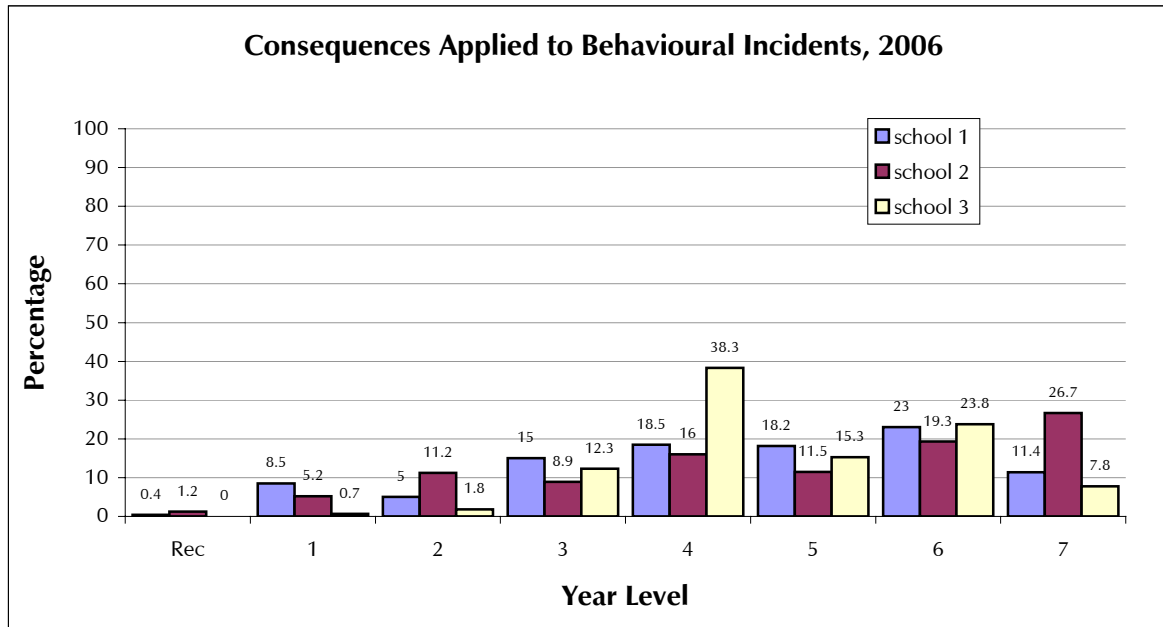
Figure 2 *Reported number of behaviours for which consequences were applied across each year level, 2006*



- > Obvious trend is an increase of applied consequences to behavioural incidents with year level or age of students. The exception is Year 7 for School 1, indicating a substantial decrease in applied consequences. It should be noted that these data depend on staff records. These data could indicate actual decreases or inconsistencies with data collection.
- > Overall, School 1 reported a greater number of applied consequences to behavioural incidents with the exception of Year 7. It may be necessary to investigate Year 7 data.

- > School 3 reported substantially lower frequencies of consequences applied to behavioural incidents. This may be due to differences in recording consequences applied to behavioural incidents. Frequencies appear to be high for Year 4 compared to other grades and may need further investigation.

Figure 3 Percentage of reported consequences applied to behavioural incidents per year level, 2006



- > Figure 3 presents similar patterns indicated in Figure 2.
- > Lower percentages of behavioural consequences were applied in reception and begin increasing in Years 1 and 2.
- > The highest percentage of behavioural consequences were applied in Years 6, 7, and 4 respectively for Schools 1, 2, and 3.
- > This may indicate a higher proportion of behavioural incidents in the upper primary years, or incidents that school staff are more likely to report or record consequences, or that the type of behaviour differs such that staff see the need to apply and report on consequences to behavioural incidents.
- > It should be noted that School 3 has reported a substantially higher percentage of consequences in Year 4 compared to Schools 1 and 2. Year 4 data may require further investigation.
- > Schools 1 and 3 report substantially lower percentages of consequences in Year 7 (less than Year 3). These data may also require further investigation to determine whether there may be a relationship with decreased attendance and/or inconsistency with data collection.

Figure 4 Number of reported behavioural incidents by type and consequence applied, 2006

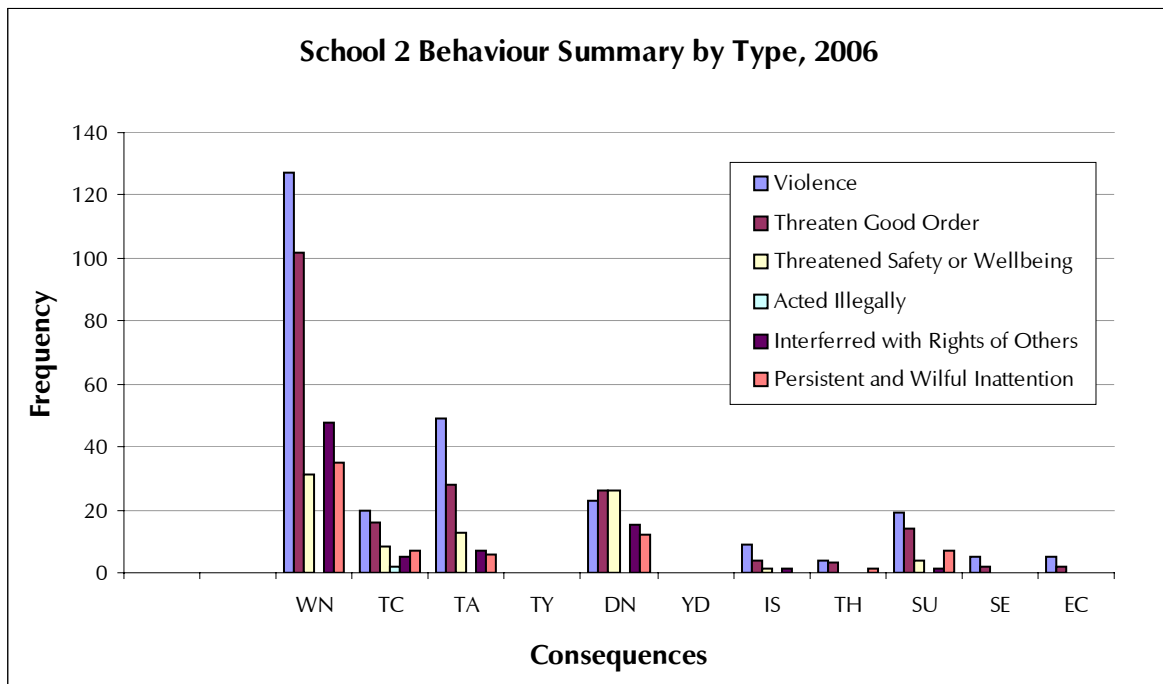
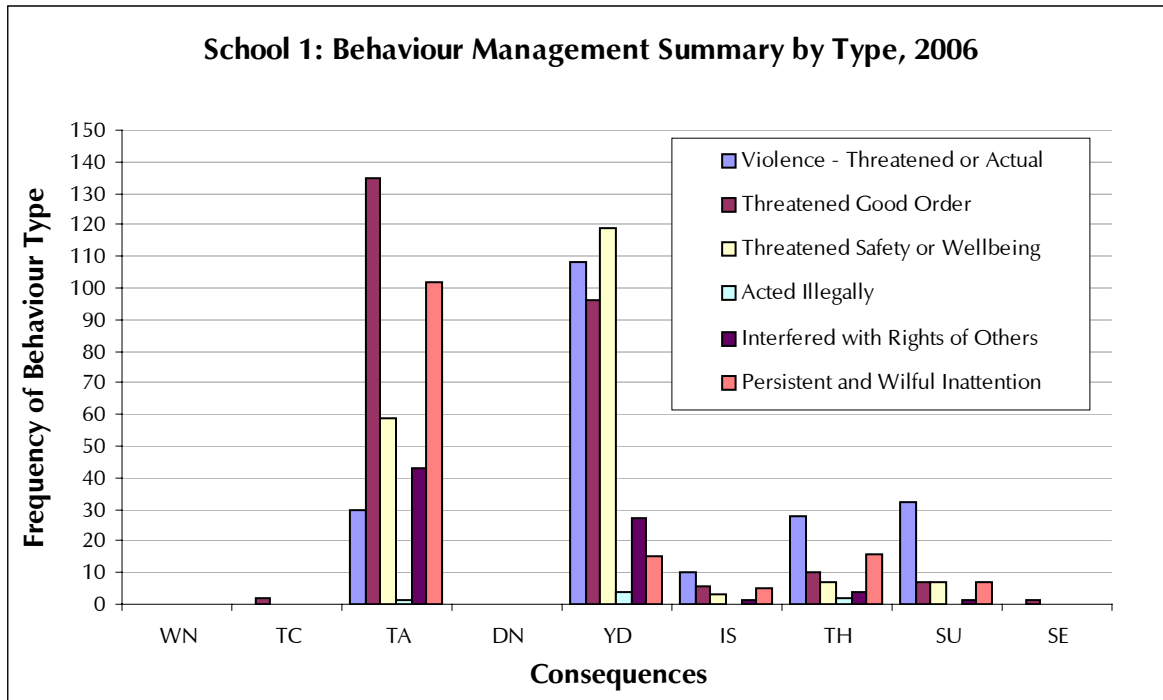
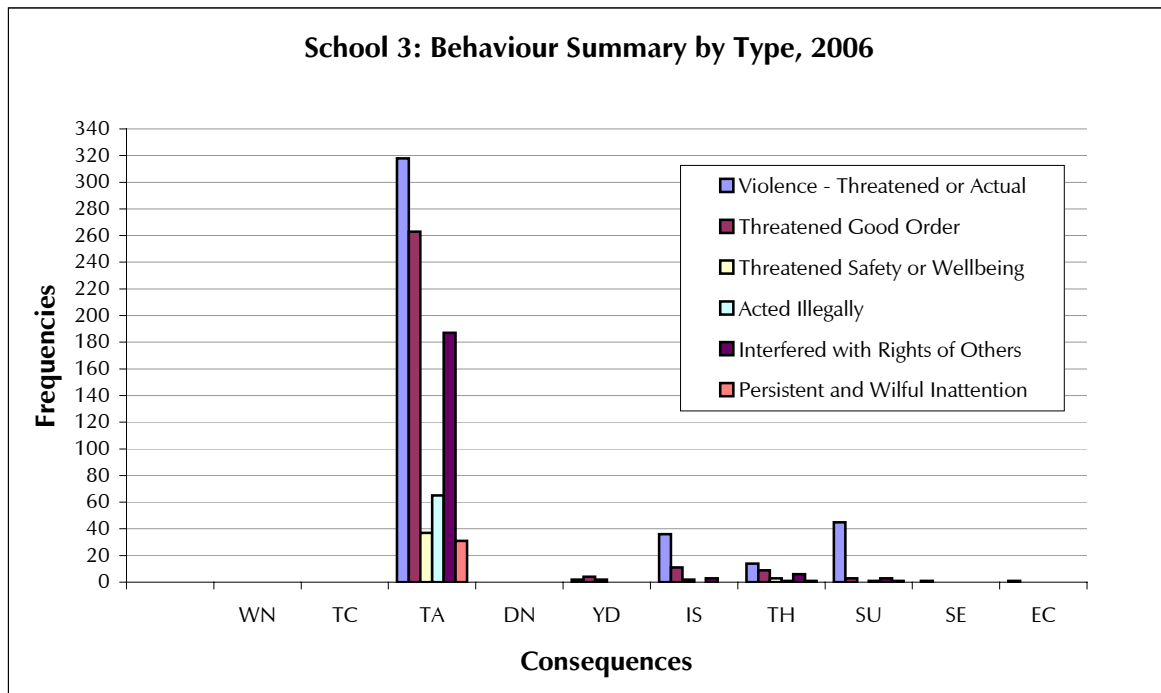


Figure 4 Number of reported behavioural incidents by type and consequence applied, 2006 (continued)



Note: WN= Warning, TC= Time out classroom, TA=Time out admin, YD= Yard Duty, IS= Internal suspension, TH= Take home, DN=Detention, SU= Suspension SE= Suspension pending exclusion, EC= Exclusion

School 1:

- > A substantial number of behavioural incidents were consequated with time out at an administrative level. These may be described as office discipline referrals and removal from the classroom to an administrative area.
- > Time out administration and yard duty were by far the most frequently used consequences, with a high frequency for the range of most common behaviours. There were no detentions and few classroom time outs reported.
- > Persistent and wilful inattention appeared to be most often consequated with time out in administrative areas.
- > The yard duty consequence was also applied at high levels across behavioural categories, particularly in the areas of a) violence, b) threatened good order and c) threatened safety and wellbeing. This may indicate a high level of behavioural incidents occurring in the schoolyard/play areas.
- > Take homes and suspensions were largely due to violence or threatening violence.
- > Few behaviours consequated with time out in the classroom.
- > No warnings—perhaps school did not use or report the use of this consequence.

School 2:

- > The highest frequency of consequences across behavioural categories was a warning.
- > Time out admin or office discipline occurred at higher frequencies than other consequences (except warnings). However, this consequence was applied at a much lower frequency than School 1.
- > Time out in the classroom was reported across all behavioural categories; however, it was reported at higher frequencies than school 1.
- > Detention was reported as a consequence frequently used across behavioural categories. School 1, however, did not report detention as a consequence used with behavioural incidents. The two areas of behaviour where consequences were applied most often were in the violence and threatened good order categories.
- > Persistent and wilful inattention appeared to be consequated at a much lower frequency than violence and threatened good order.

School 3:

- > No reported warnings, time out in the classroom, or detention. This could be due to no data collected for these types of consequences and/or different discipline policy procedures for School 3.
- > The highest number of reported consequences were time out administration (office) across all behavioural categories. These are reported at a very high frequency, particularly for the violence and threatened good order categories.
- > Violence was most frequently consequated followed by threatened good order and interfering with the rights of others.
- > Very few imposed exclusions compared to School 2.

General comments:

These data indicate different patterns of consequences applied to behavioural incidents across schools. These differences may be explained by variations in school discipline policy procedures and/or inconsistencies with data collection between schools. The differences in approach to delivering consequences for similar incidents might be a topic for discussion among schools.

Figure 5 Number of consequences applied to behavioural incidents by year level, 2006

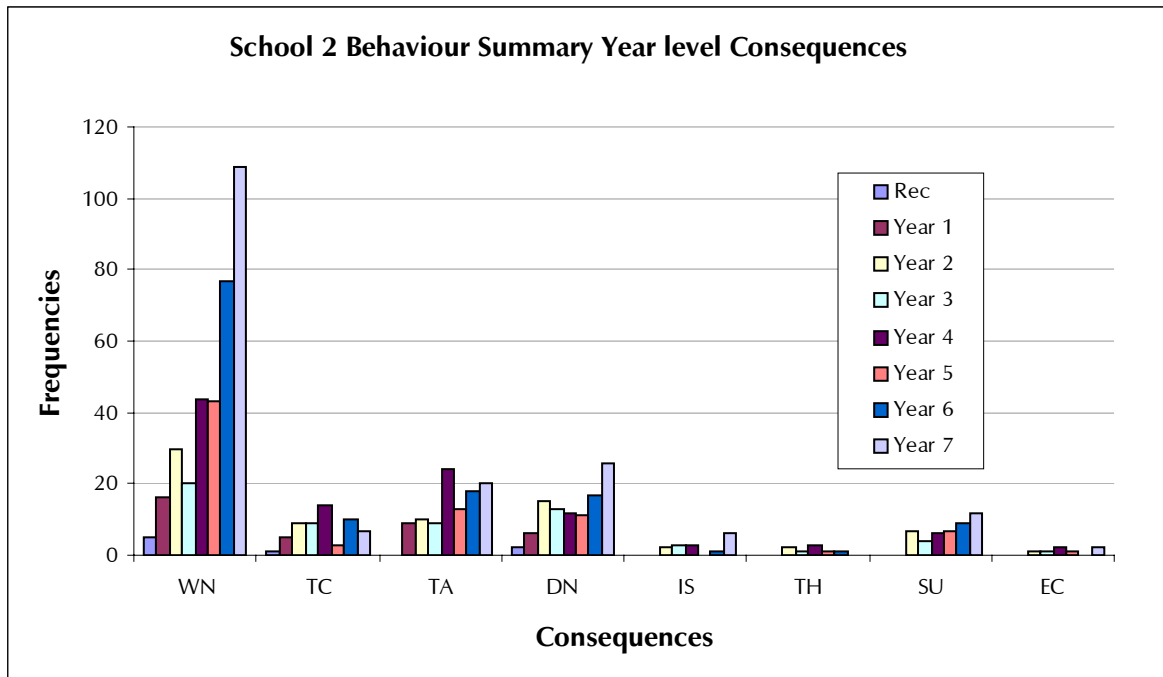
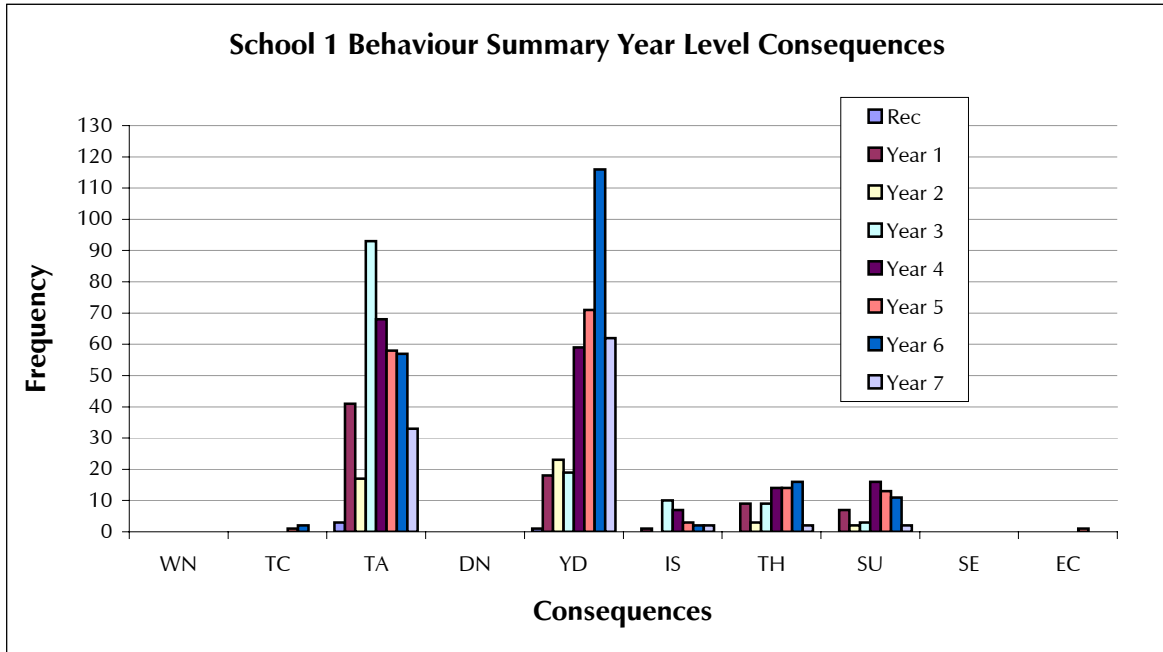
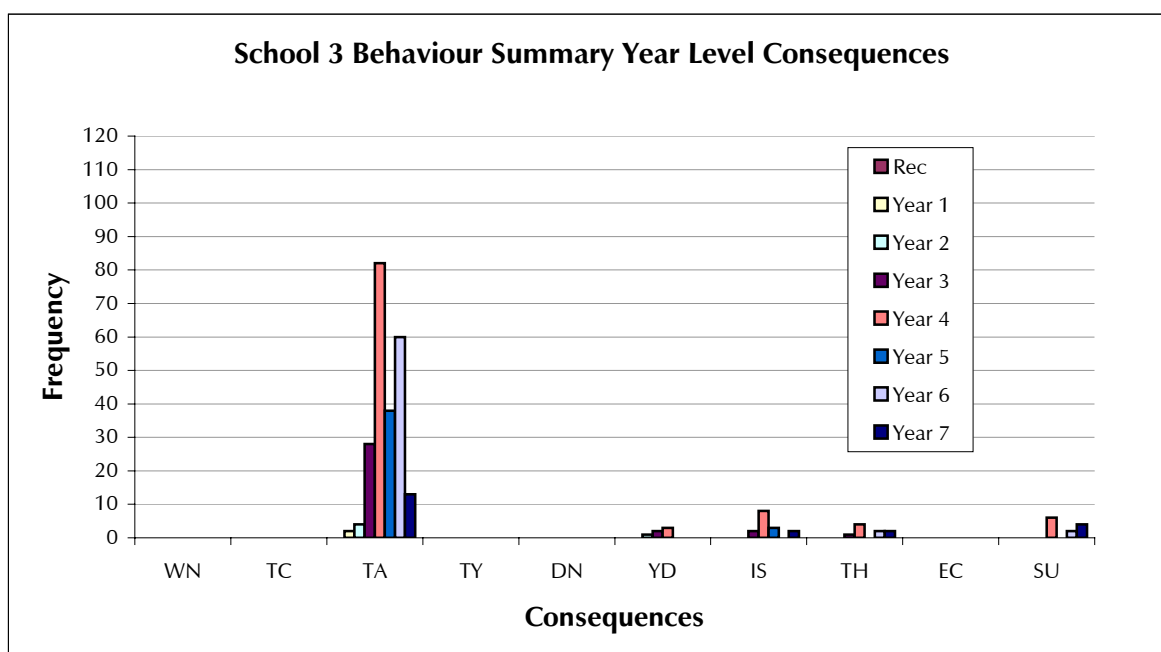


Figure 5 Number of consequences applied to behavioural incidents by year level, 2006
(continued)



School 1:

- > The majority of behavioural incidents were consequated with time out admin and yard duty.
- > Time out admin is most often used in Year 3 and then declines. Yard duty increases until Year 6.
- > Interesting to note that Year 7 levels are reported at lower frequencies than some earlier years. It may be necessary to investigate records for Year 7 and which teacher(s) did the majority of reporting and/or applied consequences for Year 7.

School 2:

- > Generally, the frequency of consequences applied to behavioural incidents increases with age/year level. This can be seen with warnings, time out in administration, detention and to a lesser extent suspension.
- > Although low levels of consequences are applied beginning in reception (e.g. warnings and time out in the classroom), consequences are applied across all categories beginning at Year 2 (including IS, TH, SU and EC).
- > Highest frequency of consequences is demonstrated in the warning, detention, time out administration and time out in the classroom categories.

School 3:

- > The frequency of consequences applied to behavioural incidents is highest in Year 4.
- > Consequences appear to be limited to a few categories and substantially higher in the time out admin category when compared to School 2.

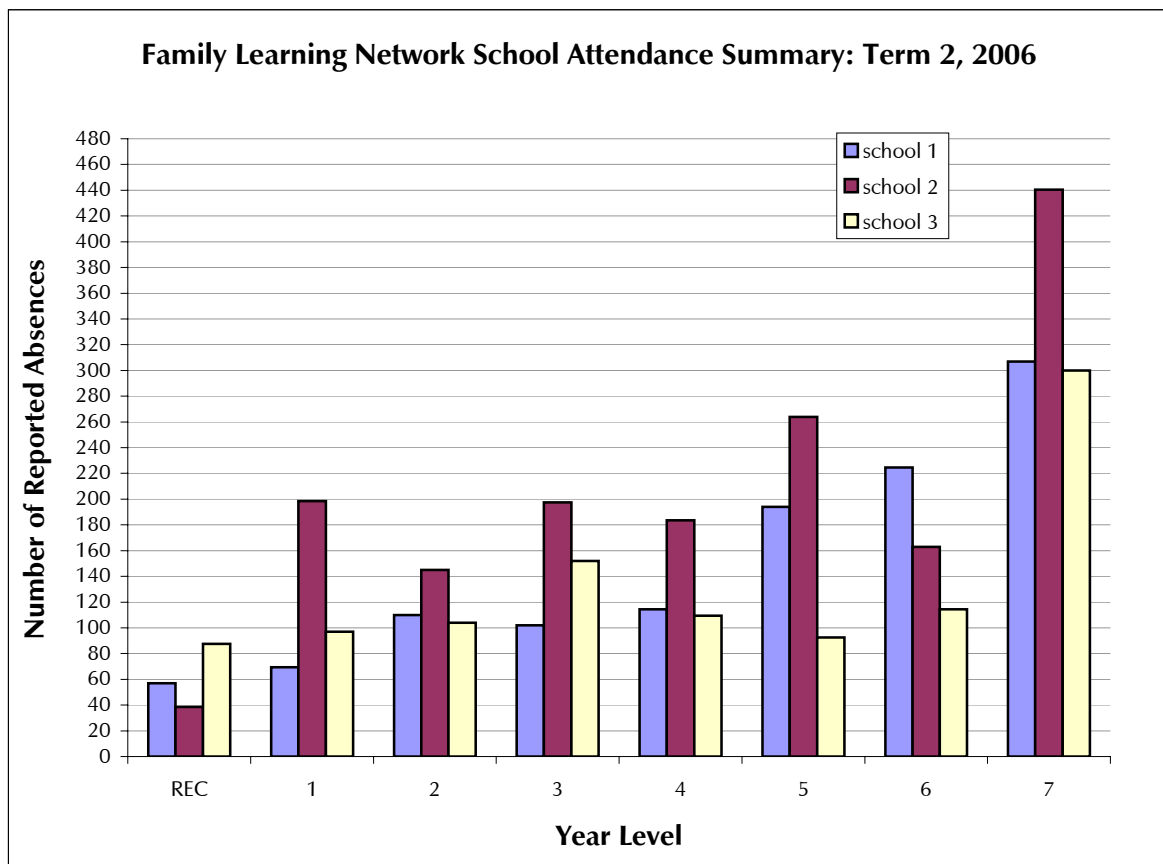
- > School 3 may not be using some categories of consequences in their school discipline program and/or may not be recording these consequences (e.g. time out in the classroom).

General comments:

Consequences begin to be applied as early as reception and frequencies across types of consequences applied increase notably beginning in Years 1 or 2. Response to procedures for data collection and behaviour management most likely differ between schools.

5.2 School attendance summary

Figure 6 Number of reported student absences by year level, term 2, 2006



- > There is a similar pattern across the three schools with an increasing trend in absences with age/year level.
- > School 2 reported higher levels of absenteeism than Schools 1 and 3.
- > Reported absences at the Year 7 level are markedly higher for School 2.
- > Absenteeism appears substantially higher for Year 7 than Year 6 across the three schools. It could be that the higher frequency of absenteeism in Year 7 is related to decreased behavioural incidents at that year level.
- > Note that these data may be affected by an individual student with poor attendance in any year level.

Figure 7 Number of absence types reported for each year level, term 2, 2006

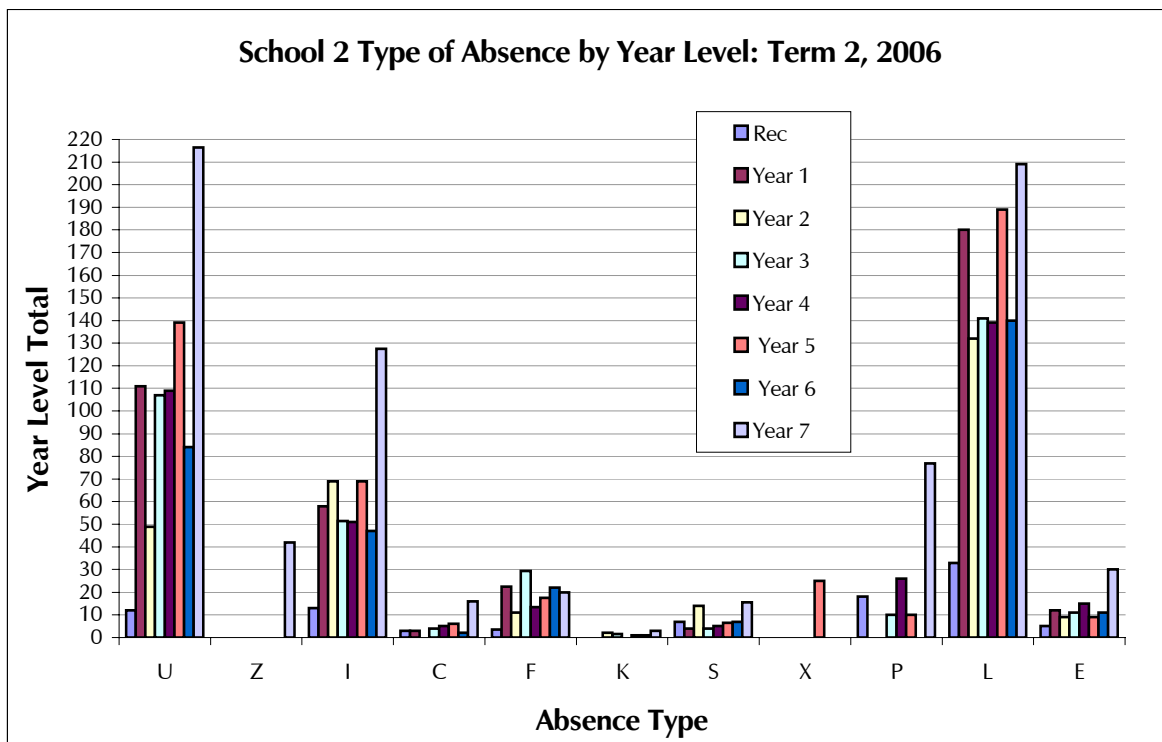
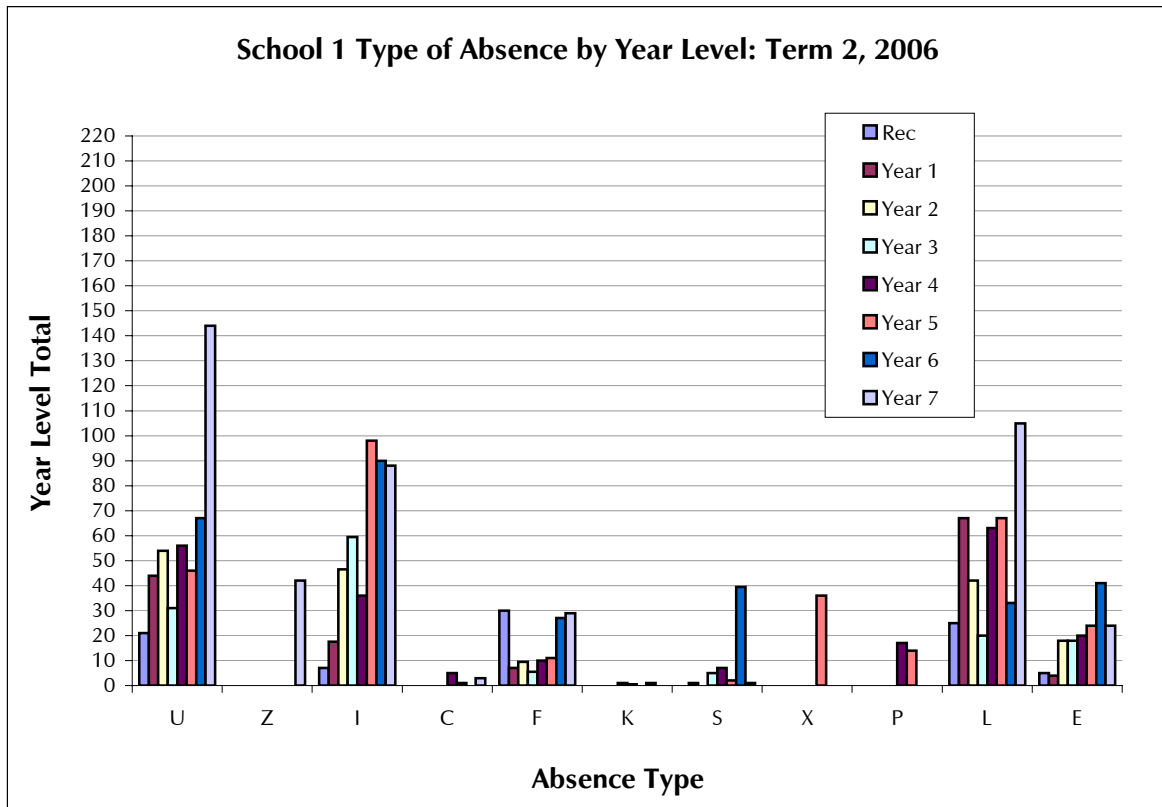
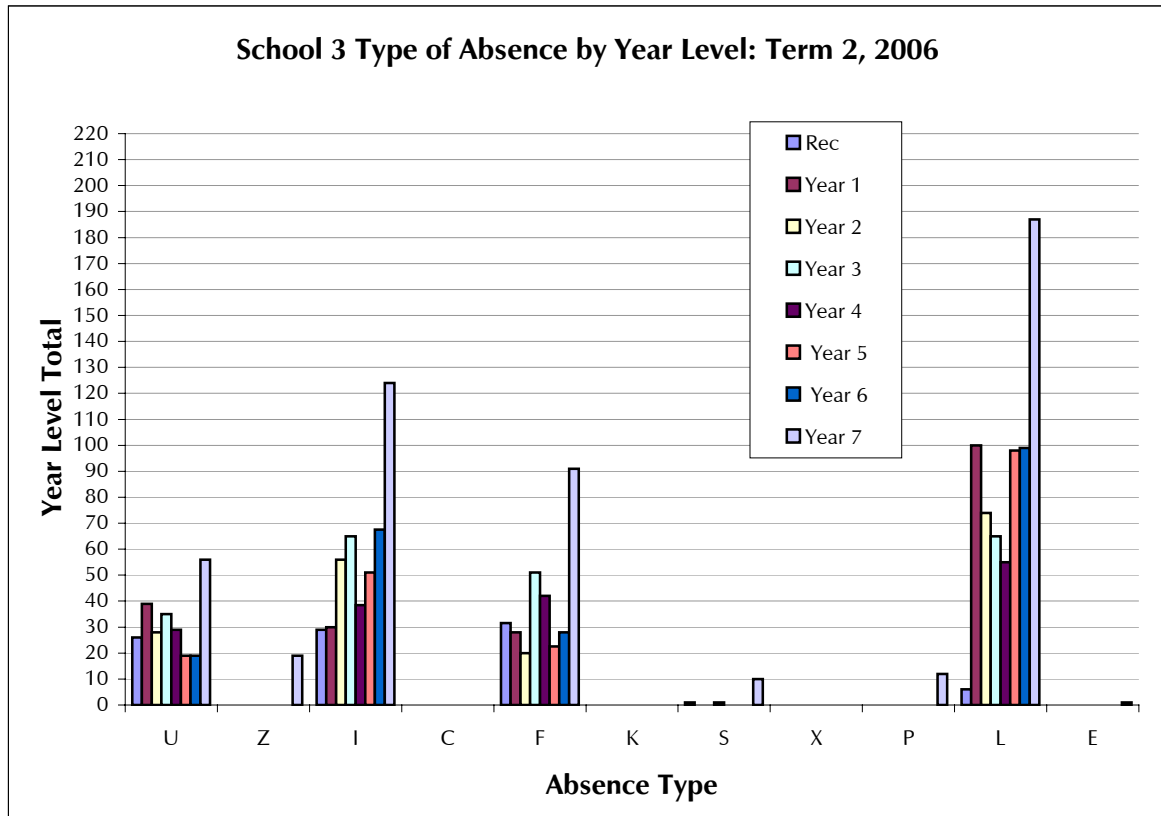


Figure 7 Number of absence types reported for each year level, term 2, 2006
(continued)



Note: U= unexplained, Z= follow up, I= ill without certificate, C= ill with certificate, K= sent home for disciplinary reasons, S= suspension, X= exclusion, P= alternate programs on exclusion, L= late, E= exemption, F= family/social

- > All schools indicate the highest level of reported absences occurring in the unexplained, ill without certificate and late categories.
- > Very high frequency of absences for Year 7 across schools, particularly in the unexplained, ill without certificate and late categories.
- > School 2 indicates very high levels of absences compared to Schools 1 and 3. Unexplained absences and lateness are high for most grades in School 2.
- > Note that School 2 has the highest total enrolment and Year 7 enrolment.
- > These data could also be reported as a percentage of type of absence for each year level.

5.3 *Student achievement*

The profiles for student achievement on benchmark tests across the schools indicate that mean achievement levels across the tested year levels are generally below the state means for both literacy and numeracy. The details of these profiles are shown in Table 2 and Figures 8 to 13.

Table 2 *Percentage of students who achieved national benchmark standards in the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests*

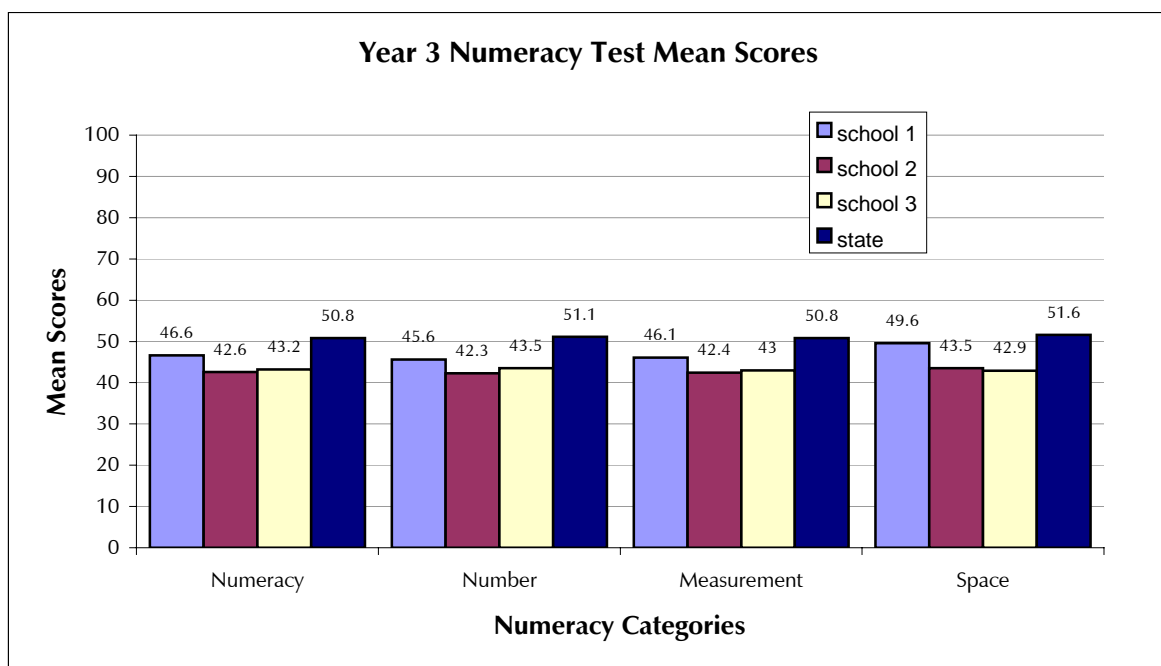
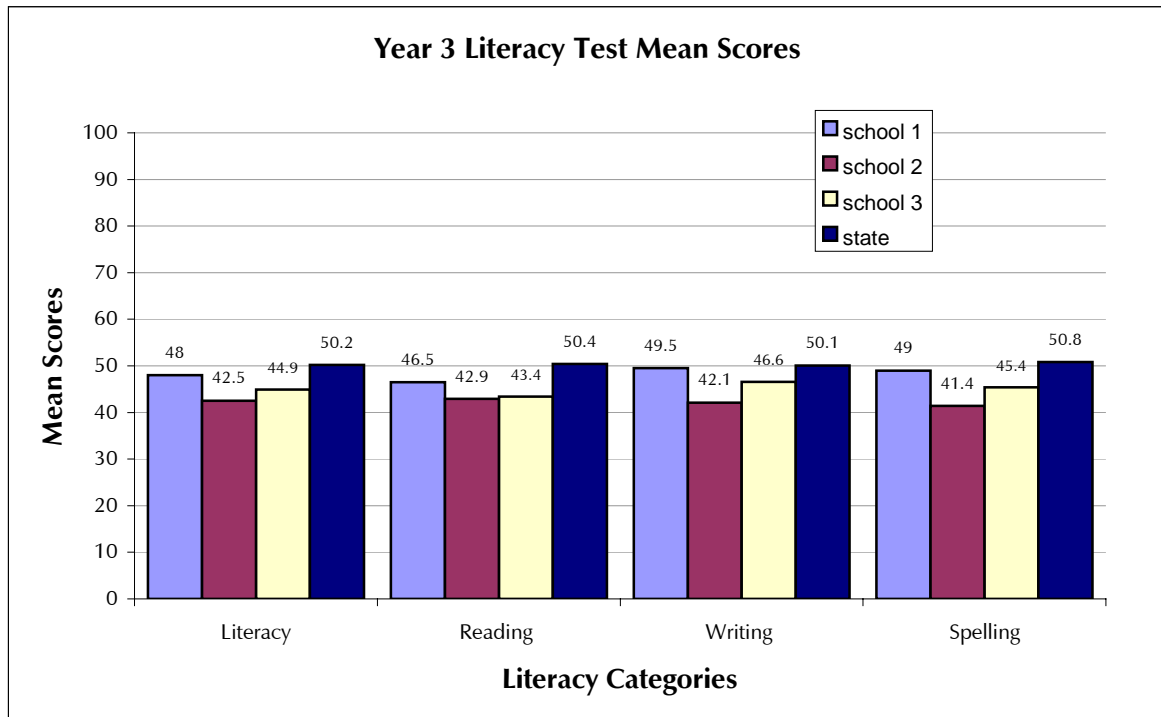
	Reading	Writing	Numeracy
Year 3			
School 1	70%	67%	79%
School 2	50%	32%	43%
School 3	45%	52%	55%
Year 5			
School 1	55%	62%	31%
School 2	74%	82%	68%
School 3	64%	62%	64%
Year 7			
School 1	81%	76%	47%
School 2	81%	70%	54%
School 3	75%	60%	39%

Note. The national benchmarks are the minimum acceptable standard for a year level in reading, writing and numeracy.

- > Approximately one-third of Year 3 students are not achieving the national benchmarks in reading and writing for School 1. The performance is improved slightly for numeracy with just over one-fifth not achieving the benchmark standard.
- > Approximately half of the students in Year 3 at School 3 are not achieving the national benchmarks in reading, writing or numeracy. School 2 has similar results for reading and numeracy however almost two thirds of students are not achieving benchmark standards for writing in year 3.
- > In Year 5 there is slightly better achievement in reading and writing; however, there is a substantial increase in the proportion of students who do not achieve numeracy benchmarks for School 1. School 2 results indicate substantial increases in the proportion of students achieving benchmark standards in year 5 across reading and numeracy, and writing in particular.

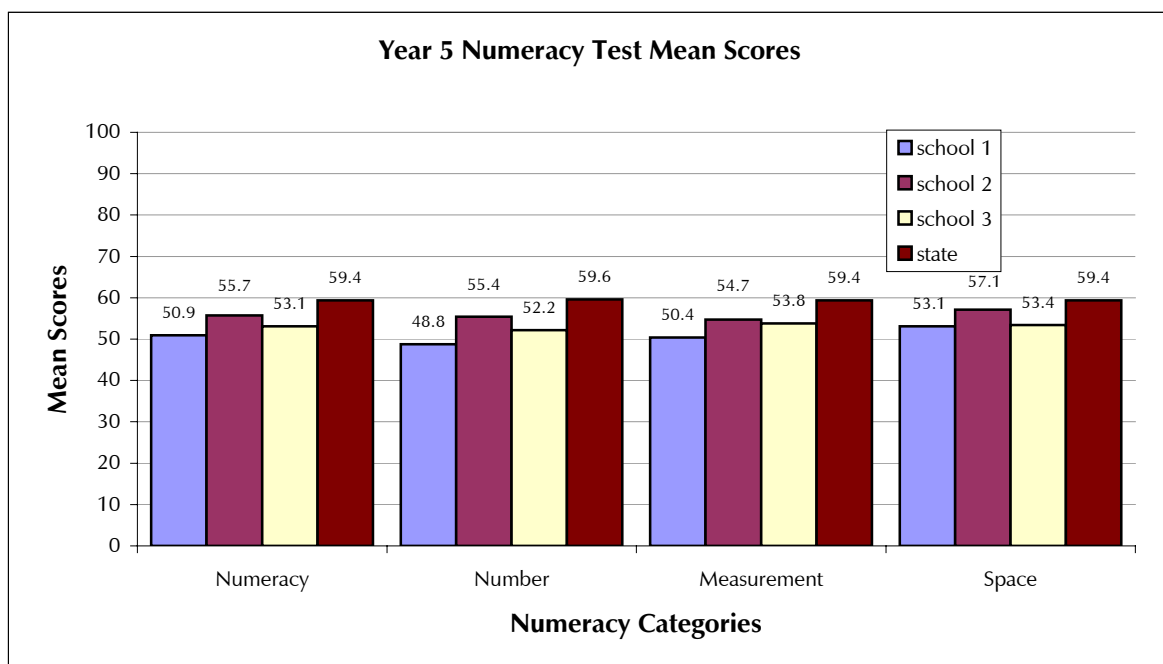
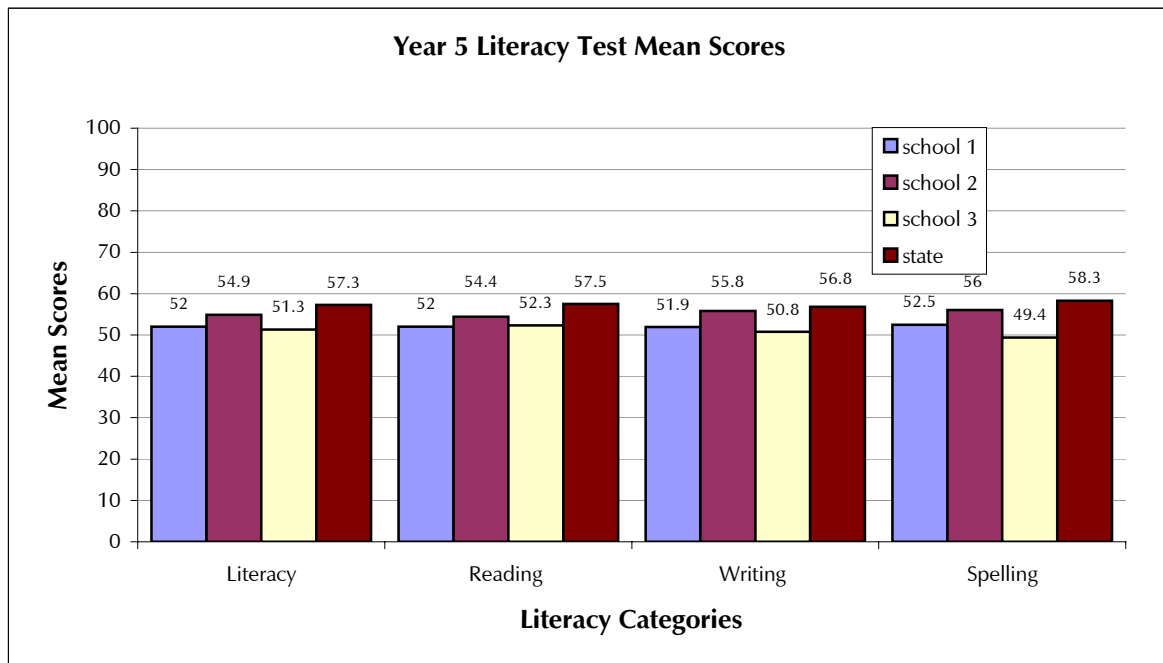
- > Year 7 students at School 1 have the lowest proportion of students not achieving benchmarks in reading and writing; however, over half of the students did not achieve numeracy benchmarks.
- > School 3 Year 7 students achieve better results for reading and writing; however, the proportion of students not achieving benchmarks in numeracy increases further.
- > Numeracy is of major concern, particularly in the upper grades.

Figure 8 Year 3 literacy and numeracy test mean scores, 2007



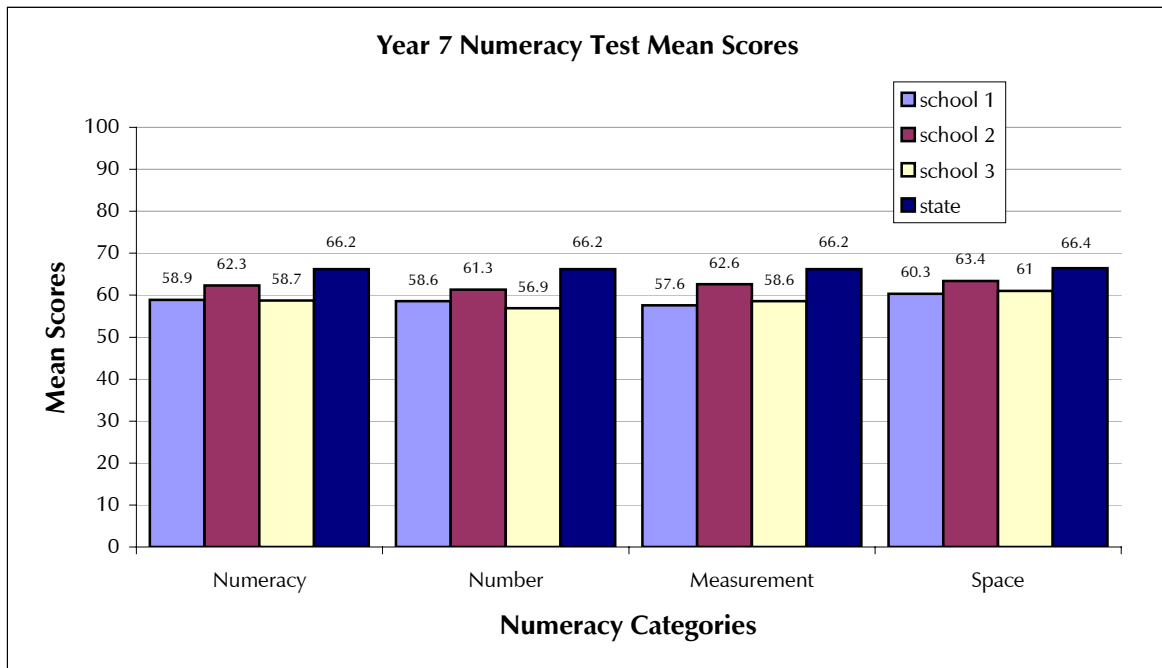
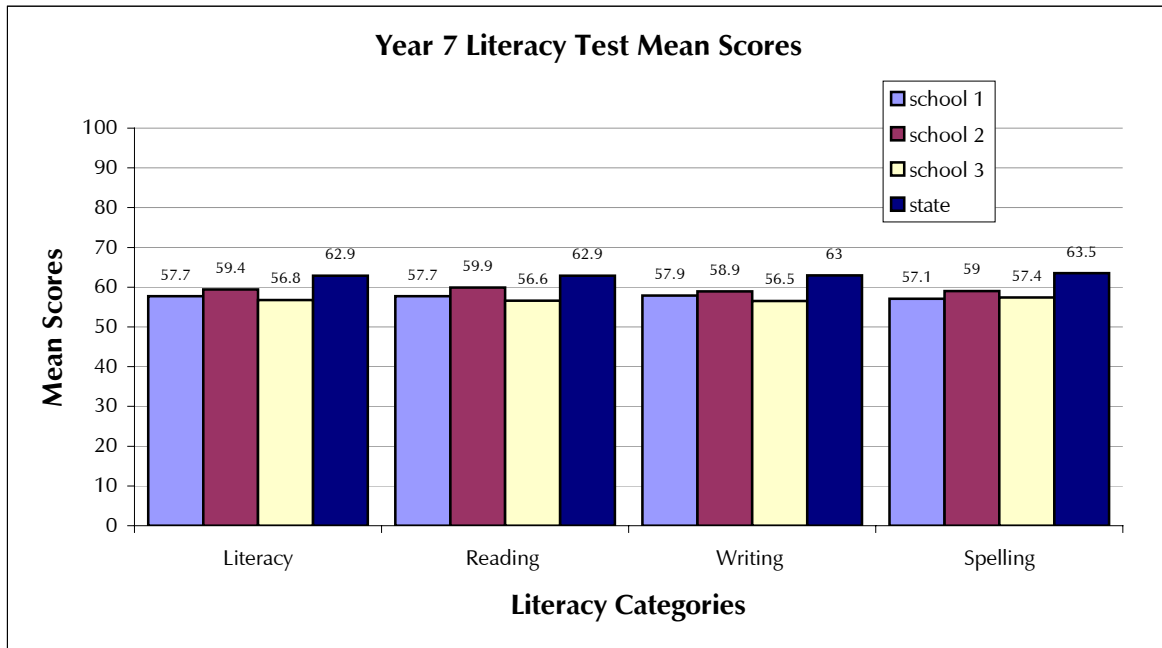
- > All three schools reported averages below the state average test scores in all categories of literacy and numeracy.
- > School 1 test scores were closest to the state average in both literacy and numeracy test categories, achieving the highest scores across test categories.
- > Schools 2 and 3 achieved similar average test scores in all categories with School 3 Year 3 students achieving slightly higher than School 2 in all categories except space.

Figure 9 Year 5 literacy and numeracy test mean scores, 2007



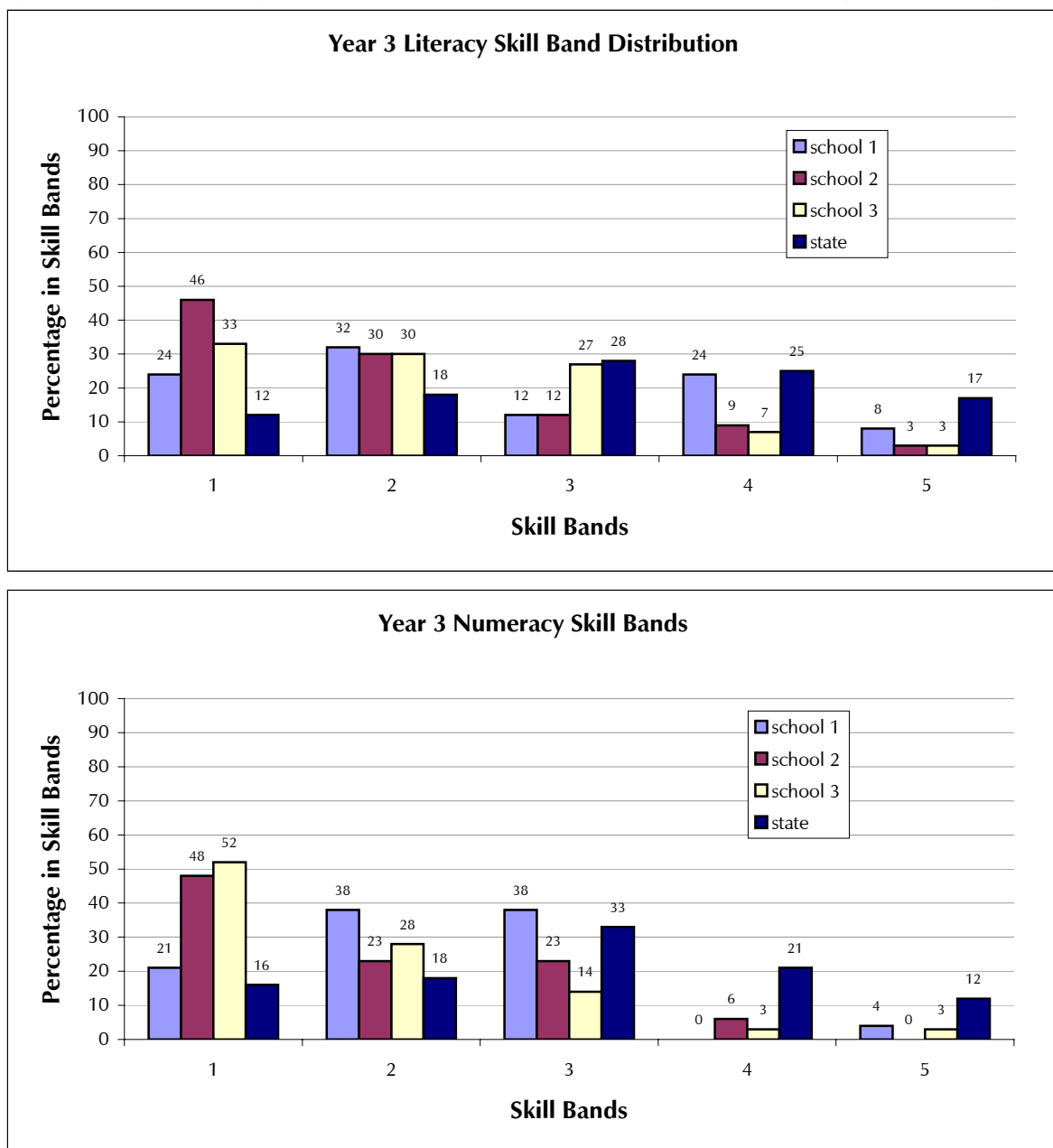
- > For Year 5, all three schools reported averages below the state average test scores across both literacy and numeracy categories.
- > School 2 average test scores for Year 5 were closest to the state average across both literacy and numeracy categories.
- > School 2 Year 5 achieved the highest average test scores across all categories of literacy and numeracy.
- > Schools 1 and 3 reported similar literacy and numeracy scores in Year 5. School 1 achieved slightly higher scores in literacy and School 3 achieved slightly higher scores in numeracy.

Figure 10 Year 7 literacy and numeracy test mean scores, 2007



- > For Year 7, all three schools reported averages below the state average test scores across both literacy and numeracy categories. This pattern is stable throughout Years 3, 5, and 7.
- > School 2 maintains the higher average scores (i.e. closest to state average test scores) in Year 7 for both literacy and numeracy tests.
- > Schools 1 and 3 continue to report similar average test scores with School 1 reporting slightly higher average scores than School 3 across all categories except the measurement category.
- > Year 7 average scores were higher for numeracy than literacy for all three schools, including the state average score.

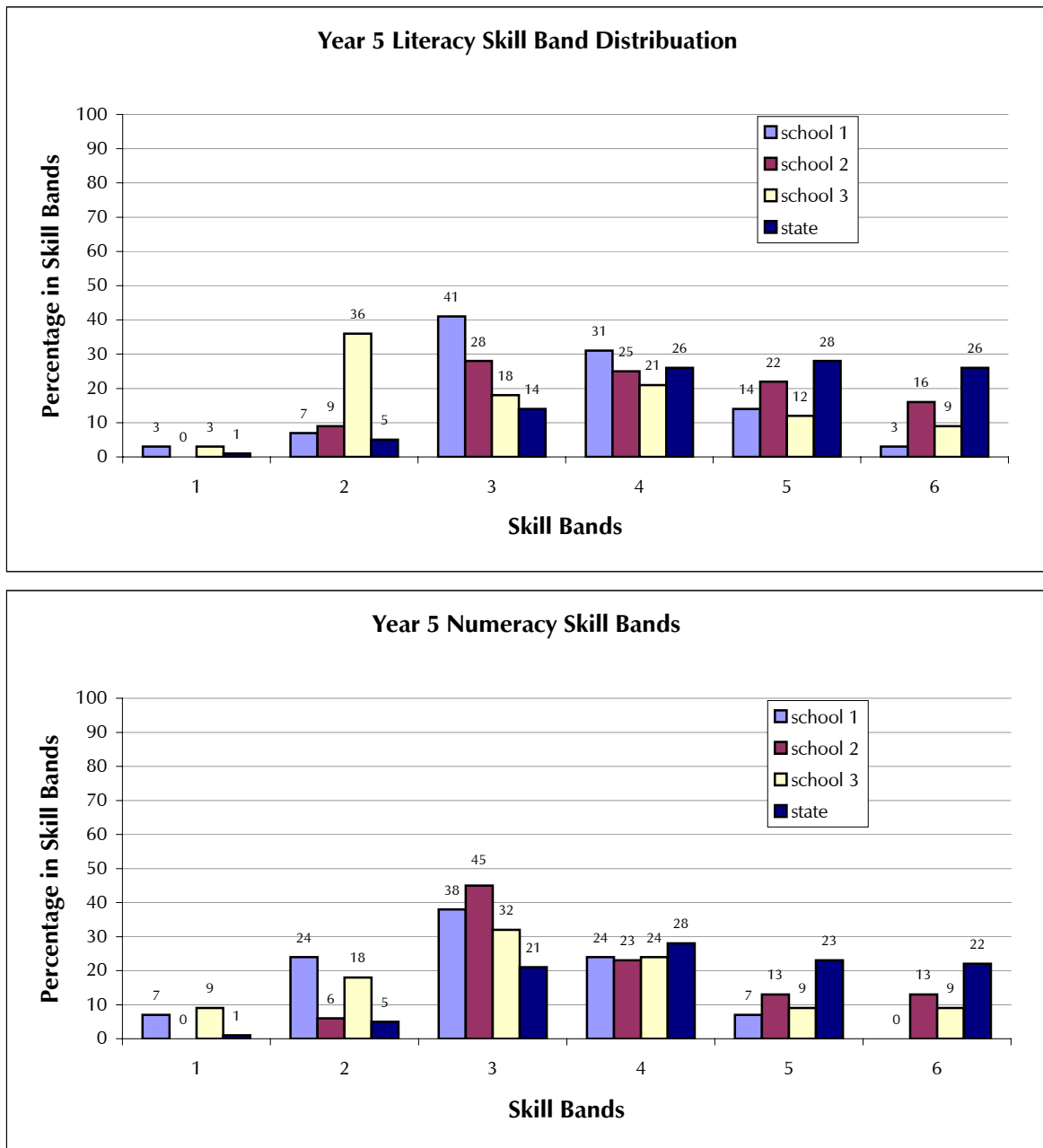
Figure 11 Percentage of Year 3 students in each skill band for the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests



Note. 1 = lowest, 5 = highest.

- > The distribution indicates that the highest proportion of Year 3 students in the state, achieved scores within skill bands 3 and 4 for both literacy and numeracy.
- > Schools 1, 2 and 3 have a higher proportion of Year 3 students whose scores fell within skill bands 1 and 2 for literacy with a lower proportion of scores in the higher skill bands, particularly in numeracy.

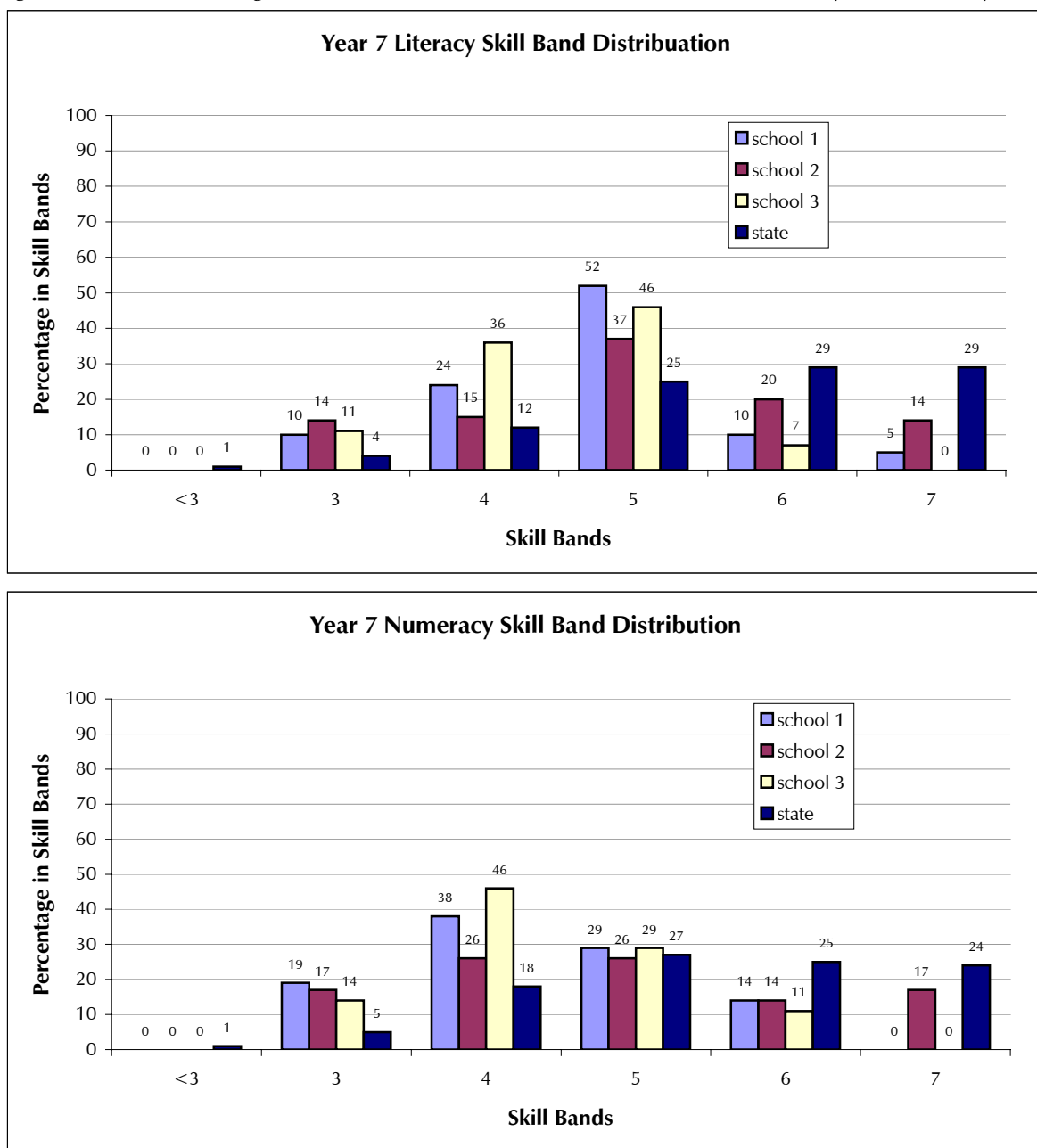
Figure 12 Percentage of Year 5 students in each skill band for the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests



Note. 1 = highest, 6 = lowest

- > The state distribution pattern indicates that a greater proportion of Year 5 student scores fell within skill bands 4, 5 and 6.
- > Schools 1 and 3 patterns of distribution indicate that the largest proportion of student scores fell within skill bands 3 and 4 for School 1, skill bands 3, 4, and 5 for school 2, and 2, 3 and 4 for School 3 in literacy.
- > In literacy, Schools 1 and 3 student scores are largely distributed in bands 2, 3, and 4 whereas state scores are distributed across bands 3, 4, 5, and 6 with a higher proportion of students scoring in the higher skill bands. School 2 however, indicates a higher proportion distributed across skill bands 5 and 6 compared to schools 1 and 2, although still lower than state-wide proportions.

Figure 13 Percentage of Year 7 students in each skill band for the 2007 literacy and numeracy tests



Note: Skill bands 1 and 2 are combined (< 3) = lowest, 7 = highest

- > Year 7 distribution demonstrates a similar pattern to that of Years 3 and 5 with a higher proportion of Schools 1, 2 and 3 test scores falling within the lower skill bands compared to the state distribution of test scores.
- > For literacy, the majority of scores fell within skill bands 4 and 5 for Schools 1 (76%) and 3 (73%) whereas School 2 literacy scores are distributed more evenly across skill bands 3 to 7 with 57% of scores within bands 5 and 6. The majority of state scores are distributed across skill bands 5, 6 and 7 (83%).
- > For numeracy, the majority of scores for Schools 1 (67%) and 3 (75%) fall within skill bands 4 and 5, whereas School 2 scores are distributed more evenly across skill bands 3 to 7 with 52% of scores falling within bands 4 and 5. The state majority is largely distributed across skill bands 5, 6, and 7 (76%).
- > Generally, in comparison to the state scores, Schools 1 and 2 show higher proportions in the lower skill bands and lower proportions in the high skill bands. School 3 scores are more evenly distributed across skill bands compared to both schools 1 and 2 and state scores.

Section 6

TEACHERS

6.1 Methodology

The aim of this component of the research was to investigate teachers' perceptions of the Family Learning Network through an extended focus group methodology entitled 'jigsaw'. This approach was designed to elicit views, facilitate brainstorming, and encourage in-depth discussion of the areas under review in relation to:

- > children achieving academically
- > family support for personal, family and life skill development
- > student engagement with their personal, social and educational pathways
- > services delivered within the school setting

The focus groups were conducted between June and October 2007. While staffing numbers varied at each school, all teachers from the three participating schools were invited to attend both focus group sessions. Data collection took place during staff meetings to enable the broadest possible participation. A high proportion of teachers attended, although numbers varied slightly between sessions. The data presented in Table 3 shows teacher participation rates in data collection in each school.

Table 3 *Teacher participation in research in each school*

Schools	Staff (FTE)	% participation
School 1	18	90–95%
School 2	25	95–100%
School 3	18	95–100%

The data collected from teachers focused on two areas: their perceptions of the current situation in relation to barriers to learning and participation in school life, and their views of the potential of the work of the Family Learning Network. From the teachers' perspective, the students they were most concerned about experienced trauma, poverty, social disadvantage, family difficulties and conflict between school and family values. The teachers' perceptions strongly indicated that the social environment and social health factors had a significant impact on the ability of some students to participate in school life. Their views are reflected in the work of Slee and Murray-Harvey (2007), Weare (2000) and Leurs et al, (2005). While teachers' views are significant to student learning, the literature shows that in some cases they can also undermine student achievement.

6.2 Barriers and challenges

The teachers perceived that barriers to student learning and participation in school life included poverty, disrupted family life, domestic violence, the social environment, health, family and community attitudes and values, language and cultural barriers, peer

pressure and lack of community services and facilities, such as transport, which in turn impacted on attendance, behaviour, identity, and emotional stability. The teachers believed that some students in the area had many challenges to overcome. These included isolation as a result of transport costs, substance abuse, violence and adult mental health issues. Of particular concern was the inconsistent attendance of some students that they considered was linked to parents' attitudes towards education, their lack of vision for their children's future and family issues. They considered that students needed to gain inspiration and overcome the negativity and lack of priority given to learning in their home.

Agreement existed among teachers from all three schools regarding the impact of poverty on student participation and learning outcomes. Students were reported to attend school wearing inadequate, inappropriate clothing and footwear, and at times to arrive hungry. In addition, poverty was perceived to impede access to specialist learning support services and funds for excursions.

Transience, moving house frequently and not having the opportunity to establish relationships, disrupted family life, violence within the family, overcrowded homes and lack of support at a system level were also perceived by teachers as challenges some students had to confront. In addition they pointed out that unstable family relationships, domestic violence and drug and alcohol problems impacted on students' participation and learning. Inter-family feuds, which at times carried over into the schoolyard, were also believed to absorb students, adding a further barrier to their schooling. Children who are tired or distracted by issues at home often live in an environment where learning is not valued, where poor living facilities make homework and study difficult and where limited support exists from parents for their education.

Teachers discussed identity problems which impacted on friendships and learning opportunities and led to some children experiencing feelings of not belonging, particularly when disruptions to family life were a regular occurrence. They referred to changing family structures (some children lived with caregivers, others had responsibilities over and above expectations for their age e.g. carers, looking after siblings), custody problems, lack of organisation, poor routines, poverty and social disadvantage, love and affection shown in different ways and children being left to their own devices to lead a day-to-day type of existence. Teachers questioned how some students maintained their resilience in the face of a home environment in which they experience violence, bullying and abuse, and were exposed to unacceptable gender models, racism and lack of acceptance of diversity.

A major challenge for some students as perceived by teachers was to break the 'current cycle they are in' and to have the 'opportunity for further study'. Generally teachers perceived that in many cases there was too much of a gap between school and home in relation to values and also the language used. They commented that students were 'not given permission to be successful by their families' and explained that when home values are not compatible with school values children have to deal with conflicting messages resulting in them not taking responsibility for their actions and blaming others. They believed that 'children's behaviour is communicating what is happening in their lives' and 'this clash of values can result in bullying etc'.

Parents' lack of motivation to ensure attendance, encourage learning, and support homework was seen by teachers to create hurdles for children to even consider further study as an option. This, they claimed, was not helped by the level of education of previous generations in their family, uneducated, illiterate parents (whose experiences in school reflected a lack of success), and families who did not value education and provided counter productive advice and lack of support for completing homework. Issues such as power struggles between families and revenge being brought into the school, 'learned generational hopelessness' and exposure to drug and alcohol abuse were also seen as barriers students needed to overcome.

The teachers emphasised the impact of neglect, lack of medical attention, sleep deficiency, inadequate nutrition, poor physical fitness, hygiene and obesity on participation in school life.

They emphasised that 'tired grumpy children don't learn'. The effect of poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, and low immune systems was highlighted again and again by the teachers and they stressed that the impact on participation in school life was obvious by students' lack of energy, poor concentration, absenteeism and lack of resilience. They stated that stamina is affected through lack of nutrition and sleep with the result that energy is not sustained, and 'children fall to pieces when challenged, and when something goes wrong, they 'catastrophise' their thinking and choose to withdraw and blame others', which the teachers link to anxiety and depression. Poor health was linked to poor parenting skills, diet, and financial difficulties.

Cultural barriers and language added to difficulties in learning and participation, according to the teachers. It emerged from the data that 'children's native language is not the language of the privileged, i.e. is not accepted by teachers or children from other environments'. They explained that some children hear and use 'local language' at home and in the community and the language used at school was sometimes difficult for them to interpret and use.

A small proportion of children came to school with emotional baggage and a lack of life experiences, which made learning more difficult. Trauma was perceived to be significant and this presented as anger, sadness and depression. The teachers explained that as a result of trauma and violence in the home some children had difficulties in settling down at school, feeling safe and learning. These children, they claimed, were unable to deal with their emotions and their tendency to 'react first and think second' needed to be under control in order to minimise distraction to learning. They perceived these problems as resulting from emotional stress, abuse, low self-esteem brought on by domestic violence, and drug and alcohol problems.

Differing views were expressed by the teachers regarding barriers and challenges with which children had to deal. For example, concern was expressed by one group of teachers that 'the school was creating environments where students can't succeed', where there was 'non-acceptance based on teacher values, where some staff still have unreal expectations (low/high)', and 'a punishment of blame and shame mentality, which results in power struggles'.

Peer pressure was perceived by teachers as a challenge to some students. They explained that peers confronted students if they were seen to be 'breaking the mould'. A fear of persecution and bullying existed and they were 'always thinking that someone is having a go at them'. From the teachers' perspective, these students lived under the tag 'I live in Elizabeth'.

Some children were disruptive, threatened teachers, engaged in bullying and harassment. Teachers believed that a lack of respect and poor behaviour had a ripple effect across the class. The teachers noted that some students were 'drug and alcohol babies' whose behaviour needed managing.

Teachers also reflected on the impact of the community environment. They described the lack of community facilities (organisation and clubs), high birth rate and low employment, vandalism, conflict, drug dependence and because of financial difficulties the lack of opportunities for families to access outside groups. Issues of violence in the community and between families which could erupt in the school yard, and poor social skills in both the community and in the families, impacted on students' participation in school life, according to their teachers, with the result that these children had difficulties in cooperating and sharing, and resistance to participating in school life was evident. These views are supported by Freebody & Ludwig (1998, p.23) who state that "the 'ways of being' of some students were obstacles to successful teaching and learning – obstacles for which the school was depicted as making compensations, but which it could not be expected to overcome in most cases".

A complex community where differing values existed, and respect and social skills were not always obvious, was a challenge teachers believed the students faced. They elaborated that drugs, abuse, poverty, neglect, broken families, lack of respect, transience, and community polarisation caused by families feuding added to this complexity.

The transition from primary to high school is a challenge students will face in the future. The teachers questioned what support the students would receive in order to cope with issues and with a different way of learning.

The challenge of future employment was also raised. Teachers were concerned that employment in the area would prove to be difficult and they recognised many young people would not be prepared to move away from Elizabeth.

Some teachers described Elizabeth as 'the most disadvantaged suburb of Australia' and strongly agreed that 'breaking down the stereotype of Elizabeth' was essential. They agreed that students need to broaden their outlook, develop the 'resilience to overcome the outside environment and take on values of care, respect and responsibility', be prepared to go it alone, aspire to and have a vision of what could be, deal with inappropriate role models, take risks, break the tradition of unemployment and see the value of education as a way out of poverty.

6.3

Services to improve student participation in learning and school life

The teachers believed that improved access to various support services would lead to improved student participation in learning and school life. They supported the development of stronger links to CAMHS, for families presenting with mental health issues. The current six plus months' waiting list was an obstacle to accessing services, however. Teachers also thought that stronger links to Anglicare, the Salvation Army, and the local council (Playford Community Fund) would be of value to students and their families.

Attendance was clearly a problem in all three participating schools. Discussion focused on the role of attendance officers and how improved attendance could be facilitated. One group went so far as to suggest that more attendance officers 'with clout' should be appointed.

Some teachers recommended 'putting pressure on parents...to ensure the children do attend school' in order to improve student participation in learning and school life. In addition, the teachers suggested that budgeting services through Centrelink would assist families to manage their finances better and this in turn would flow through to their children and lead to improvement in learning and participation.

Parenting courses/workshops to address issues such as 'diet, nutrition, sleep, health, hygiene, adequate appropriate clothing and footwear, literacy and numeracy, positive parenting, self-esteem and child protection' were suggested by the teachers. The idea of a 'food co-op' was also raised. Parent groups that focused on life skills, budgeting, adult literacy, cooking, legal aid and communication programs (for parents with English as a second language) and information technology were also recommended.

The teachers also recommended that structures be put in place for 'early intervention in hearing, speech, behaviour modification, sight, dental and vaccinations'. They considered that smaller class sizes, specialist teachers and programs to meet targeted group needs would lead to improved student learning and participation. They believed that waiting lists for services should be reduced, greater attention should be given to problems of mental health, and consideration should be given to respite care away from their families for targeted students.

To address the uniform and clothing problems of targeted students, the teachers suggested that to make students feel they belong, they could be provided with one shirt when starting school which parents could replace when needed. These shirts could be budgeted for in the school fees. Hats could also be included in the school fees and stay at school in the students' drawers. The teachers advocated for setting up a card exchange system where students could borrow a uniform for the day and return it before going home. The establishment of a second hand uniform shop was also suggested. The teachers proposed negotiating for children to earn school materials, hats, uniforms etc by community service. They also recommended a reduction in school fees if parents attend parenting courses (incentive) or if targeted students with a poor record of attendance attend every day (good attendance).

The special programs that teachers believed would lead to improved student participation in learning and school life included a breakfast club, a fruit program, cooking, music, early intervention, life skills (including appearance and hygiene), a homework club with teacher support and snacks provided, and an information technology program. Groups that they believed would assist the students in need included play groups, anger management groups, confidence building groups and active education (sports groups). They believed that increased parent involvement and participation in classes and in school would also assist students in their learning and participation.

The issue of 'kids having kids' was raised and discussed in the teacher focus groups. It was advocated that parenting courses and budgeting be focused on in high schools.

To ensure services were available to improve student participation in learning and school life, teachers stated that increased government spending at state and commonwealth levels was needed for schools with a high proportion of students experiencing disadvantage. Teachers' views on how attendance could be improved ranged from facilitating greater involvement of parents and providing special programs that would engage students to the suggestion by one focus group that attendance officers should 'actually take action' by imposing fines and taking court action. They also believed that more access to psychologists should be provided for some students, their parents and caregivers, and that transport schemes for excursions and taxi services/bus pick up should be organised for targeted students.

6.4 *Teachers' perceptions of the potential of the Family Learning Network*

A high degree of optimism was expressed by teachers regarding the potential of the Family Learning Network. Teachers from all three schools affirmed that the families and children they work with will benefit from the services it provides. They believed in the potential of the Family Learning Network to improve student attendance, engagement, social health, learning and achievement. They suggested that when students' basic needs are met they are more open to engagement in learning, and when their confidence, which impacts on their self-esteem and attitude towards learning, and willingness to take risks and attempt challenging tasks is addressed, they will achieve at school. In addition teachers stated that the Family Learning Network could increase student learning outcomes by 'empowering parents to value schooling, supporting parents with children's attendance issues and encouraging parent involvement in school programs'.

One focus group commented on the 'limitless potential' of the Family Learning Network. They believed that by educating parents about hygiene, life skills (budgeting, food preparation, cleanliness), behaviour, resilience, money, anger management, family issues and grief, families would have skills in providing a more structured and healthier environment at home and students would have a better chance to engage in learning and achieve at school. Teachers also indicated that as a result of the work of the Family Learning Network, the social emotional stability of students could be improved; parents' self-esteem may be increased leading to an increase in students' self-esteem.

Teachers saw that working with students in a much smaller group than is possible in the classroom setting has the potential to increase self-esteem, resilience, self-talk and group skills. These intense sessions that were operated by the Family Learning Network were seen to support children who showed reluctance/resistance to participate in larger groups. The increase in attendance on days students worked with the Family Learning Network indicated to teachers that it was making a difference.

The Family Learning Network was described as having the potential to improve family life—in other words to make it more settled when appropriate interaction between adults and children is modelled in the Family Learning Network setting. The teachers explained that opportunities for scaffolded learning experience in play, reading and art, where parents are mentored and supported in using positive comments and proactive behaviour management, have a flow-on effect on how students interact in the classroom and assist them to engage more effectively in the classroom learning program.

The teachers commented that ‘parents are encouraged and welcomed in a non-threatening environment to work alongside their children. This has huge potential if we target the right children—the ones we see with whom a difference can be made’. They went on to say that this had the flow-on effect of positive communication to the rest of the local community and as a result the school was seen as a caring school.

They saw the potential of the Family Learning Network to improve life skills, to develop parenting skills through preschool and playgroups and to involve students and their families in community projects. They perceived opportunities for students ‘to teach someone else, for example a PE game, set up a cooking group, write an invitation to a family to share a meal together’ and work on specific projects with others such as painting a mural or developing and maintaining a vegetable garden and working with a variety of groups, as supporting engagement in learning. They saw the potential for developing friendship groups of similar aged children, transition support, lunch time support for JP students and career education to assist parents to gain employment.

The teachers recognised the importance of family relationships and saw the Family Learning Network as the vehicle to build respect between children and adults, to provide knowledge to those parents who need help about other parenting models. They believed that it has the potential to impart to parents that in effective relationships differing points of view are valued, recognising that this may help them to converse with each other, provide an environment where they ‘feel happy and safe for a limited time’ and enable them to be engaged in or involved in activities. It also empowers parents, encourages them to value schooling, supports parents whose children have attendance issues, and encourages and values parent involvement in the school program. The Dads Group was highlighted with teachers commenting ‘dads need to feel they have a place in the school community’.

The participants agreed that NACYS had the potential over the long term to develop effective and continuing relationships between children and their families and develop closeness through positive feedback, changed behaviour and a different view of their world. In doing this, they recognised that it was important to maintain the capacity of the workers and suggested this could be done by linking with relevant agencies. They mentioned the difficulty of clashes of values, the possibility of parents being defensive and the need to establish whether the programs should be held during school time as some parents work at this time.

Teachers recognised the value of groups that focused on parenting skills, relationships, safe sex, drug use and food preparation. They acknowledged that the Family Learning Network organised activities that involved the whole family such as family fun nights, film nights, quiz nights, family excursions and twilight BBQs, all of which, they believed, impacted on family relationships. In addition, the teachers saw the merit in combining skills and like interests to establish more links and to improve the self-esteem of both parents and their children.

The teachers believed the Family Learning Network has the potential to develop an understanding by students of their families' situation and develop empathy for what their parents' situations are. They explained that some parents are only 'kids themselves' and the implications of this are huge. In these situations, role modelling is perceived to be an issue as the students' role models can be 'a single parent, several adults, or siblings'. The participants recognised the potential of the Family Learning Network to expose parents and students to other ways of doing things.

The Family Learning Network works with families on problem solving and grievance procedures. It was perceived that the Family Learning Network is able to connect with families, work with them on how to communicate with each other on a positive level and engage them in communicating to gain a common understanding.

Potential to impact on children's relationships with their families was also recognised in the language activities for ESL students and their families to assist them to keep communication lines open, the relationship building opportunities for parents and children, and the relationship and child/baby counselling that is available. The internet café was seen to skill families in information technology, after school activities engaged students, and financial advising assisted parents. These activities were perceived by teachers to have the potential to impact on family relationships. The challenge, according to the teachers, is to 'get parents in' and to ensure that funds are available to maintain these programs.

Potential was recognised for improved student engagement with peers through the provision of positive strategies for social interaction. Teachers stated that by providing support, such as financial assistance, students are able to participate in more activities, performances etc, and students who are supported are more likely to attend school regularly and, therefore, have more opportunities to interact socially. Potential was also identified in relation to after school activities ('making something and then playing together'), positive play groups, behaviour groups and boys groups, modelling and role playing in groups and social interaction as established by the Family Learning Network. Social experience, activities with small groups (e.g. shopping, visit a restaurant) and social education programs carried out in an open social environment, were also perceived as having the potential to improve student engagement in social interaction with peers. The teachers believed that 'more social contact provides more social experience and more understanding of how to behave in different situations with different people'. Role play and videos on social interaction were seen as teaching students social skills which they believed would assist them to engage with peers.

The teachers suggested ideas that the Family Learning Network could consider in relation to student engagement in social interaction. These included providing mentors for children with autism, developing a 'lap' program that focuses on games and puzzles, but not particularly literacy, establishing small groups of children to play Wise Dragons or Fantastic Friends, and building up confidence by having parents and children speaking at morning tea, and introducing themselves and their family to others. They also suggested having confident children and parents invite less confident parents and children along.

Resulting from the work of the Family Learning Network, teachers believed that family involvement in school might increase and a gradual change in culture could occur. They saw the Network as 'lifesaving' in relation to parenting and having the potential to prevent the family breakdown. They also believed that in strengthening links between families and the school, the Family Learning Network could improve student wellbeing. They stated: 'So for some students who have direct involvement, it will make a difference'.

Teachers commented on the 'huge potential through group work for students to find solutions to problems that affect their lives' and thus improve wellbeing and self-esteem. They noted that the Network provided one-on-one counselling and targeted the specific needs of individual children.

Earlier data indicated that education was not valued by all parents. The teachers agreed that the work of the Family Learning Network had the potential to highlight the value of education and help parents to 'willingly come to a 'safe' environment to network socially with other parents, and explore issues with older students'. The Family Learning Network was perceived to enable students to have a significant person in their lives to assist them to develop significant skills, identify issues and needs and to work towards improving relationships. It was also believed that mental health issues from reception up could be supported in this setting and that families could benefit more from this support than from that of a visiting psychologist.

The provision of an organised place was perceived to give direction and purpose to students. According to the teachers this is a 'kid space' that provides a forum for communication, that kids are part of and a place where students become aware of their own feelings and those of others, and learn how to handle what problems come their way. It was also viewed as an area where students see adults positively involved and interacting with the school.

The teachers were aware of the potential of the Family Learning Network to improve adults' self-esteem and believed that of children would follow. There was continual recognition of the opportunity it provided to expand life experiences, get parents out of their apathy and become more supportive and involved with their children in school and their personal life, to establish a social network with other parents, encourage participation and develop a sense of belonging.

They voiced concerns about challenges the Family Learning Network may have to deal with. These related to parents at risk who may not be prepared to participate, issues relating to divisions within the parent community, families who do not see the need to change and a lack of understanding of the full meaning of 'wellbeing' and survival.

6.5

Teachers' knowledge of the Family Learning Network

The teachers described the Family Learning Network model as a multi-agency approach with a focus on healthy active families. They stated it involves 'people working together', support to 'lots of families', access to services and the 'response to our stresses that are not necessarily education business'. The teachers affirmed that the Family Learning Network facilitated access to services from the Smith Family, Anglicare, and the Playford Council and maintained 'strong links with social workers'.

From the teachers' perspective the Family Learning Network offers programs to support students at risk, increase their engagement, address their social/emotional needs and improve student and family health and wellbeing. They noted that the programs include anger management, behaviour support, drug education, confidence building, self-esteem, problem solving, craft, cooking, maths and literacy. The teachers explained that students have an opportunity to sit and talk about issues.

The Network was perceived to break down barriers and preconceived ideas and 'override fear of schooling'. Through this program the teachers believed parents could get close to and become more involved with children and with student learning. The teachers observed that it was owned by its participants but driven by the school, thus forming another link between home and school and to social workers. It could fast track help for families and provide positive programs for students.

Overall, the teachers demonstrated a range of understandings of the work of the Family Learning Network. They recognised that programs were offered to improve attendance, skill families, strengthen the parent/school/Family Learning Network link, improve student engagement, point parents to where to go to get help, assist them to tap into hospital and other services and build up parent skills to help with employment.

Section 7

ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

Family Learning Network reports for July to December 2006 and January to June 2007 were analysed to determine the ongoing issues that the Network needs to focus on in its advocacy and community capacity building work. A meeting with Family Learning Network staff based at NACYS provided clarification and additional information about the way the Network undertook its advocacy role (Research notes: meeting held with NACYS Staff, September 13, 2007).

The advocacy work of the Family Learning Network is linked to the following three objectives of the project: to maximise opportunities for children to achieve their potential in education, personal and social development; to assist families to identify and ameliorate barrier issues to their child's educational pathways; and to provide families with increased access to 'family capacity building options' including crisis care, counselling, training and education. The Family Learning Network engages in three levels of advocacy:

Advocacy for social change where the Network addresses the social determinants of disadvantage through its contacts with the relevant government departments and community agencies, through established lobby groups and through participating families who will ultimately set the agenda for the project.

Advocacy for specific families, which occurs through crisis work, coordination of services and programs on a day-to-day level.

Advocacy for resource development and community capacity building. As the Network develops it will advocate and seek funding for programs that parents have identified as important in promoting positive health and wellbeing in the community.

The structure of Family Learning Network (Appendix B) mirrors these three levels of advocacy.

The Family Learning Network Management Committee (formerly the Steering Committee) is made up of the principals of the schools involved, the Chief Executive Officer of NACYS and, from mid-2007, a representative of the Smith Family.

The Operational Team is made up of the Family Learning Network social worker and community development worker, both of whom are based at NACYS, and the counsellors from participating schools.

The Community Team, which is made up of representatives of the Family Support Groups (FSGs) from each of the participating schools. The FSGs include parents, school counsellors and the Family Learning Network social worker and community development workers based at NACYS.

The Family Learning Network model is designed to facilitate the free flow of communication between all the three tiers in each direction. While it is the members of the steering committee who manage the operational team, it is from the grass roots level that advice is received concerning the needs and issues of families involved in the Family Learning Network, and the performance and direction of the Family Learning Network.

Family Learning Network reports reveal areas where advocacy and policy work are required. While the issues identified through these reports reflect the experiences of families using the individual counselling services and group programs of the Network, it could be surmised that all families are affected to some extent by the problem of poor public transport, and that violence and drug and alcohol use in some families has an impact on the rest of the school community and contributes to the notion expressed by some parents, that the community is not as safe as it used to be.

Many of the families using Network counselling and support services are dealing with several issues at once; that is, one family is likely to experience multiple problems which need to be addressed through service coordination. Most of those problems, such as housing and accommodation, poor public transport, low literacy levels, legal issues, alcohol and other drug problems, child protection and domestic and family violence, need to be addressed by a broad, integrated and cross-sectoral approach to policy development, building community infrastructure and provision of community-based services and programs. To this end the Family Learning Network has identified four domains that require advocacy and social and health policy responses as well as program and service provision: relationships; environment; mental health and wellbeing; and education. Stage One of the evaluation has confirmed that these are important areas for advocacy and capacity building work and should continue to be a focus for the Network.

A large number of the concerns dealt with by the Network fall into the mental health and wellbeing portfolio. For example, mental health issues (unspecified) were a recurrent concern in the Family Learning Network reports, as were grief and loss and past abuse. Further, many of the group programs conducted by the Network—anger management, self-esteem, confidence building and resilience—clearly come into a mental health and wellbeing rubric.

It may be that the inverse care law applies here. Developed by J.T. Hart in 1971, the inverse care law has been summarised in the following way: “The availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the need for it in the population served” (Watt, 2002, p. 252). This is reinforced by data from the South Australia Social Health Atlas which shows that, despite the higher level of health problems, the proportion of GPs per population is lower in Elizabeth than in suburbs with a higher socio-economic profile. It may also be the case that the same situation exists for mental health services and programs for children and families.

The ability of the Family Learning Network to undertake much of the proposed work is dependent on further developing links with community agencies and extending the Network to include such agencies, and on the development of health promoting policy and prevention programs and better coordination of service provision.

SUMMARY

The evaluation of Stage One of the Family Learning Network Evaluation has confirmed the findings of earlier data collections and research which found that many families living in the Elizabeth area experience multiple disadvantage and that this has an impact on student attendance, behaviour and achievement (Hetzl et al, 2004; Slee, 2006). The analysis of school data, Family Learning Network reports and the findings of the focus groups with parents and teachers demonstrate the links between poverty, social disadvantage and school achievement. Findings also show that the issues for many families are difficult to address by the school in isolation and require collaborative and cross-sectoral work at public policy and community levels. Recognition of this was one of the motivating factors in establishing the Family Learning Network and supports Slee's view that "A paradigm shift is needed so that unequal outcomes for families and children are seen as social injustices, rather than products of individual dysfunction and deficit." (Slee, 2006, p. 49).

This evaluation has highlighted the difficulties experienced by many families, but it has also shown positive things about life in Elizabeth. Parent and teacher focus groups both saw the negative reputation of Elizabeth promulgated by the media as problematic. In particular many parents who participated in the focus groups stated that they enjoyed the natural environment of Elizabeth and described strong connections with the area. They indicated that they have, use and value their personal networks and find spaces of comfort and support in difficult circumstances, the school being one of those. That the school was seen as a more comfortable place than some of the helping agencies suggests that parents do not see themselves as supplicants at the school but as people with a role to fulfil and a contribution to make, the school being a place where they can exercise agency. This may be quite different from how they feel when approaching community agencies for assistance and suggests that schools may be good places to co-locate services and programs for children and families.

Despite the many challenges and issues that need to be addressed, optimism was expressed by students, parents and teachers about the possibility for health promoting change and the potential of the Family Learning Network to make a difference to the lives of children, families and school achievement. The importance of education identified by parent and teacher focus groups, and parents' stated support for the work of the school and the Family Learning Network, suggest that there is a base on which to build and that parents have the potential to be an important resource to the Network and to the community, one which can be further developed through training and support.

There is much to be done, but it seems that the model is right and in its first full year of operation the Family Learning Network has succeeded in establishing a credible presence within the school communities in which it works. In determining future advocacy initiatives, the priorities established by the parent focus groups may be a good place to start. They are, in order of importance to parents: free, accessible community activities for children; education for parents; funding for more services and support for families; community safety, including addressing drug and alcohol issues; good public transport; and a review of Housing Trust policy to ensure that houses near the schools are allocated to families with children who attend the school. In fact the new programs being introduced by the Network in 2008 suggest that some of these ideas have already been taken up.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Development of the Family Learning Network

The Family Learning Network continues to develop its partnerships across and within the four domains identified in its initial planning documents with a view to extending its reach.

The Family Learning Network reviews its original planning documents and further develops and updates its priorities in light of the findings of this report.

The Family Learning Network continues to work with parents to establish priorities for action and to build on the inherent strengths of the community.

The operational team be expanded with the addition of some management and community representatives. In addition, teachers and students should be part of the team as both groups have made significant contributions to the development of these data-based recommendations.

Advocacy

The Family Learning Network advocates that Housing SA give priority in the allocation of properties adjacent or near schools to families with young children attending the school.

The Family Learning Network works with the relevant Government departments and non-Government agencies to address the need to increase mental health / mental health promotion services and programs for children and families experiencing difficulties.

The Family Learning Network advocates for the appropriate bodies to examine current transport policies and the potential for addressing the issues identified by parents and teachers about insufficient transport options in the area.

Community capacity building

The Family Learning Network works with relevant agencies and seeks funding for more safe and free or low-cost community programs for children and families to enhance the quality of family life and opportunities for children.

The Family Learning Network develops a comprehensive strategy with relevant agencies to support parent education, including the full range of education, from programs which support parents to further their own education to programs on school curriculum, parenting and nutrition and hygiene.

The Family Learning Network investigates the possibility of developing curriculum-based literacy and numeracy education programs for parents. This could assist parents to develop skills to assist their children with homework and provide additional support to struggling students at home. This recommendation is supported by parental requests for further education in the school curriculum.

Safety

There is a need for a continued emphasis on listening to the concerns of the students regarding areas within the schools where they do not feel safe (e.g. toilets, stairs, ovals and playgrounds) and to ensure that there is regular staff surveillance of these areas and opportunities for students to report their concerns. This may require enhanced staffing levels during recess times.

The Family Learning Network continues to work closely with the local police to ensure that the local community is safe, especially local shopping precincts, and areas close to schools.

The Family Learning Network further develops its links with alcohol and other drug agencies with a view to strengthening current prevention and treatment strategies and programs for parents with young children who are experiencing drug-related problems.

Family Learning Network Schools

Family Learning Network schools promote consistency in data collection across and particularly within schools. Clear definitions of behavioural categories and further staff development on recording procedures may assist with determining clear patterns of student behaviour.

Family Learning Network schools review their behaviour management policies to reduce the high levels of Time Out in Administration. All types of behaviour were applied with this consequence which may mean excessive time spent in the office, reducing counsellor time in other preventive programs.

Family Learning Network schools consider ways to address high levels of absenteeism, particularly in Year 7. Attendance programs or intervention beginning in the early years with an investigation into Year 7 attendance is recommended. Additional staff support may be required as suggested by teachers (attendance officer or counsellor).

The Family Learning Network seeks support for the development of programs for intensive intervention in literacy and numeracy for students whose scores fall within the lower skill bands across year levels using a 'response to intervention' model from the early years.

Numeracy in the upper grades is a major concern and is therefore recommended as a target area to be addressed by schools and the Family Learning Network.

Transition

That strong consideration be given to the issue of transition of students from primary to secondary school. Issues associated with transition have been identified in international research as impacting on school engagement and retention.

The Family Learning Network seeks support for further examination of the issues associated with transition as identified in the present study. In particular that consideration is given to practical ways to support students making transition.

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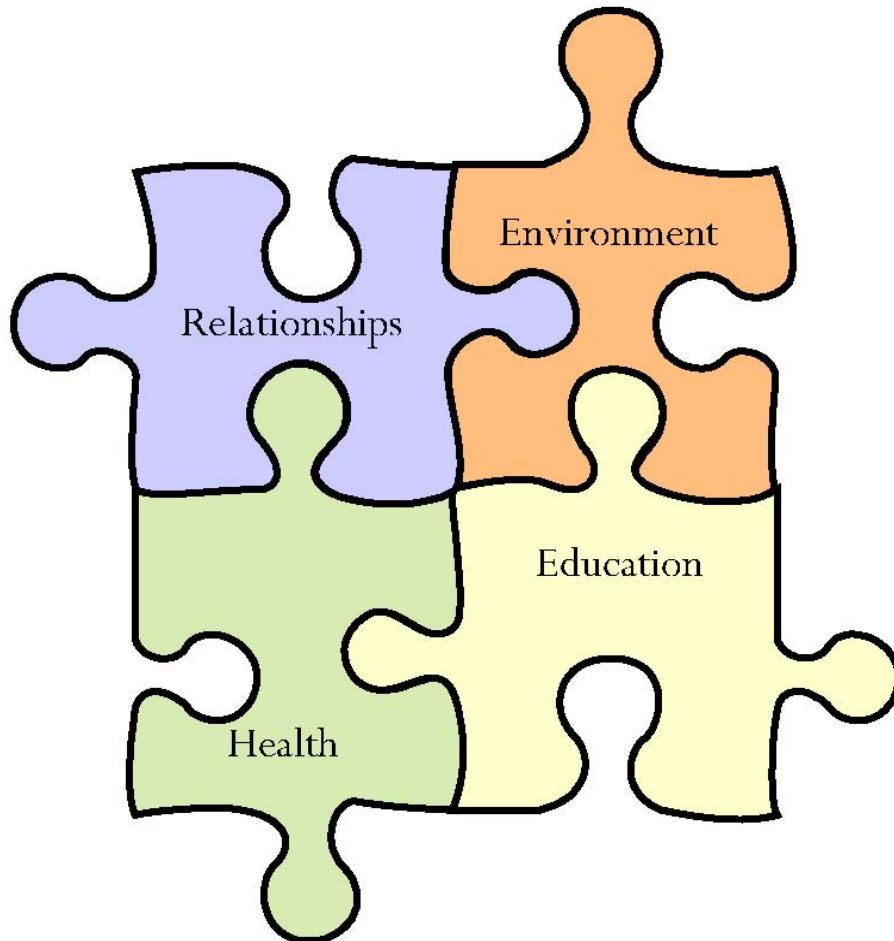
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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Domains



Appendix B: Family Learning Network Organisational Structure

