Our Young Learners: giving them the best possible start

An Education Strategy for the Early Years from Kindergarten to Year 4, 2006-2009
Introduction

We are committed to providing the best possible start for the children of NSW.

The early years of schooling are a critical period for the establishment and development of the skills, knowledge, behaviours, values and attitudes that provide the foundations for lifelong learning and sustained personal wellbeing. These early years build on the experiences children have had prior to beginning school.

Young learners are aged from four and a half years to ten years. They span the first five years of schooling from Kindergarten to Year 4 (K-4).

Young children are eager to learn. We must continue to nurture the curiosity they bring to learning, focus on building confidence and ensuring success, and help instil in our young learners a strong love of learning.

We will provide secure, positive and stimulating learning environments that cater for each child’s abilities and foster high expectations. At the same time we will seek to develop in our young learners an independence of mind and sound work habits, a positive sense of self and a deep respect for others. We will model the values we seek for our students.

We will keep lifting the achievements of our young learners by continuing to provide the highest quality curriculum. The NSW primary curriculum is recognised nationally, due to the results being achieved by our young learners. Raising the standards even higher in the critical areas of Literacy and Numeracy is one of the key priorities of this strategy.

Quality teaching and close partnerships between schools and parents, underpinned by the highest of expectations, will support each student to experience a successful educational journey through the early years of schooling.
A profile of the K-4 learners

Our young learners come from diverse home, cultural and linguistic backgrounds where parents and carers have been their first teachers. They enter school with a valuable range of prior to school experiences, skills, abilities and knowledge.

These early years of schooling are a time of rapid physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth. As children progress through these early years they gain more independence as learners and benefit from learning strategies that meet their individual needs. They develop a broader range of social skills and become more aware of the world in which they live.

These young learners, more than ever before, engage with information and communication technologies as powerful learning tools within and outside their classrooms. They are interested in and quickly become adept at applying new technologies.

Children engage with their learning by questioning, exploring, investigating, analysing, innovating and interacting. We will support this by providing instruction in all aspects of the curriculum, using evidence-based teaching methods, and by working in partnership with parents to help their children learn.
The reduction in class sizes in Kindergarten to Year 2 $603 million has been provided for approximately 1,500 new teaching positions and $107 million has been provided for new classrooms. By 2007, classes will be reduced to a statewide average of 20 in Kindergarten, 22 in Year 1, and 24 in Year 2.

New preschools
Twenty-one new preschools were established in 2005 at a cost of $18 million. Eleven of these preschools are designated within Aboriginal communities. There are now 100 preschools within the Department of Education and Training providing prior to school education programs for approximately 4,500 children.

Preschool Investment and Reform Plan
An additional $77.2 million over 2006 – 2010 is being provided to strengthen and expand the community-based preschool sector in NSW by 10,500 places.

Reading Recovery
This highly successful program provides targeted literacy support for students who are experiencing difficulties with literacy after one year of school. More than 8,000 students are supported each year in over 800 schools. There are over 900 Reading Recovery teachers who receive training and support from 30 regional tutors. Early Literacy Learning at Home and School workshops assist Aboriginal support staff and communities to support students’ progress in this program.

Count Me In Too
This program provides teachers with specialised training in how children learn mathematics by focusing on strategies children use in solving mathematics tasks. The Count Me In Too Indigenous program provides additional information for teachers to work with Aboriginal families in promoting learning of mathematics.

Aboriginal Early Language Development Program
This is a program in 24 schools to develop the language and literacy skills of Aboriginal students in the early years of schooling. An Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher helps these schools with specialist resources.

Literacy on Track
Trained K-4 Literacy Facilitators target professional development for teachers in needy schools to help them improve the literacy outcomes for K-4 students.

NSW Government Families First Strategy
Since 1998, more than $193 million has been provided for a whole of Government prevention and early intervention strategy to improve outcomes for children aged 0 to 8 and their families. School-based interagency programs facilitate connections between families, schools and agencies to better prepare children for school.

Early intervention classes
There are 46 early intervention classes building on the critical early specialist services to assist families of young children with special learning needs in their transition into school.

In addition, our investments which have focused on major change to benefit all students are also benefiting young learners, including:

- $36 million annually provided directly to schools for teacher professional development.
- $134 million is being provided for the next three years annually to schools through the Learning Assistance Program to provide strengthened support to students in regular classes who are experiencing difficulties in learning.
- More than $36 million is provided in targeted programs for Priority Schools to support students in the State’s most disadvantaged communities.
- Over 660 additional teachers’ aides are being employed through the Government’s Special Education Initiative 2005 – 2007 to ensure that every special class is staffed with a teacher and teacher’s aide, doubling the adult to student ratio.

- $70 million is allocated annually through the Funding Support Program to assist schools to support students in regular classes where their disability impacts on their learning.

- Comprehensive response to the Report, *Time to Teach Time to Learn* resulting in the development of a range of programs to improve teaching and learning in primary schools:
  - *Getting the Balance Right* is a guide for primary teachers to help them manage the implementation of the primary curriculum and improve reporting to parents
  - *Connecting Outcomes Groups (COGs)* is a comprehensive set of materials to support primary teachers to plan, program and assess across all key learning areas
  - *Foundation Statements* have been developed by the Board of Studies, in collaboration with the Department, to assist primary teachers to prioritise what needs to be taught in primary schools.

- **Schools in Partnership**
The Schools in Partnership (SIP) program is part of the $65 million in targeted funding to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in public schools. The SIP initiative is supporting targeted schools with high numbers of Aboriginal students to develop innovative ways to improve the educational achievements of Aboriginal students in partnership with Aboriginal communities and other government agencies.

- **The State’s Literacy and Numeracy Plans are being supported with $616 million** over the next four years.

- **The NSW Institute of Teachers has been established** to accredit teachers against professional standards, including literacy instruction and classroom and behaviour management.

- **$75 million to increase access to education options through the use of technology**, including the use of satellite technology for distance education and the availability of online courses and resources. Recurrent funding has been allocated over the next four years for the provision of email and a range of e-services for students and teachers.

These Government initiatives and programs have been informed by an unprecedented level of consultation with the community of NSW about the kind of education system that educators, parents and the community believe will best serve children now and in the future.

The results of two of the most recent consultations are contained in:

- *The Report of the Consultation on Future Directions for Public Education and Training: One Size Doesn’t Fit All*, which involved feedback from over 28,000 people across the State

- *The Aboriginal Education Review Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyma Yaarr Guurulaw Yirringin.gurray Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future*, which was conducted in partnership with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and involved extensive consultation with 4,000 members of Aboriginal communities, staff, community and government agencies and other education providers.

As a result of these consultations, significant improvements have already been made. This Strategy will build on these improvements.
The Next Phase – 2006 -2009

This Early Years Strategy has three goals:

1. Learning confidently
2. Growing strongly
3. Strengthening connections

These goals focus on strengthening the academic and social foundations on which children’s lives are built as they move successfully through their schooling. The NSW Government is committed to providing a better future for all our children by building these foundations higher and stronger.

Confidence enables young learners to aim higher. Children build confidence in their own abilities and strengths when they are encouraged to achieve their best and their successes are acknowledged.

Teachers in NSW have a critical role in helping young students to realise their potential. Our teachers have the highest expectations for our young learners and will provide challenging, stimulating and enjoyable learning opportunities that meet the individual needs of each student.

Research indicates that the quality of classroom teaching, positive relationships and confidence are the things that make the most difference in the early years of a child’s learning.

We will work with parents and the community to create school communities which provide stimulating and responsive learning environments so that children learn and grow strongly.

Strengthening partnerships with parents and school communities in the context of a rapidly changing local and global world is very important. Such partnerships provide children with the kind of stability, support and security to develop confidence and an eagerness for learning. This in turn will foster successful transitions from home to school and will encourage high achievement.

The focus of this Strategy is on the individual child. We will help children engage with their learning in the Early Years. We will ensure the effectiveness of early intervention strategies, and assist them in their transition from prior to school settings.
The main actions flowing from these goals are designed to:

- strengthen partnerships between schools, parents and the community to support students’ social and academic development
- identify the individual child’s learning and support needs in order to build on their prior to school experiences and give them the very best start to their learning
- continue to improve literacy and numeracy standards through the implementation of the State Literacy and Numeracy Plans
- increase and support student and teacher access to technologies to enhance teaching and learning
- support and implement innovative and flexible school structures which better respond to local needs to maximise student learning
- work collaboratively within public education to identify and promote effective K-4 teaching and enhance quality teaching and assessment in the early years of schooling
- support the implementation of the Board of Studies Foundation Statements to ensure young learners experience the rigour and richness of the NSW curriculum.
Strong literacy and numeracy skills are critical to success in the Early Years and are best achieved in a focussed learning environment.

Challenging and creative learning programs help students to develop critical foundational knowledge, skills, understanding and values.

Our teachers will continue to use quality teaching approaches that extend and challenge our youngest students.

Key Actions

Building strong foundations

We will build on the prior learning and experiences of each child to establish a foundation for success across all Key Learning Areas (KLAs), with a particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy.

We will:

- work collaboratively with the NSW Department of Community Services to further expand opportunities for use of school sites for community based children’s services as part of the NSW Government Pre-School Investment and Reform Strategy
- assist teachers to make more consistent judgements about student achievement, monitor the progress and achievement of each young learner in order to inform the direction of teaching and learning
- provide a balanced teaching and learning program across the KLAs with particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills
- develop professional learning materials for K-4 teachers and school leaders based on research that identifies highly effective quality teaching practices which improve teaching and learning
- support an ICT focus for our young learners and identify emerging technologies which open up access to knowledge for all students
- report to parents regularly, and at least twice a year provide formal information about their child’s learning, development and commitment which reflects the teacher’s individual attention and in-depth knowledge of each child
- continue to improve transition programs from prior to school settings into Kindergarten to meet the particular needs of young learners and their families
- develop curriculum support materials for prior to school education programs in collaboration with the Department of Community Services
- undertake research to identify the impact of prior to school learning experiences on the learning outcomes of early years’ students.
Stimulating creativity and curiosity

Children have a natural eagerness to learn. It is important that we develop their creativity, nurture their curiosity and capitalise on their fascination with technology. Young learners in our public schools will be given every opportunity to achieve their best.

We will:

- provide learning opportunities which encourage students to use their imagination and to investigate and actively explore their environment
- extend the ability of young learners to solve problems creatively by applying specific thinking skills appropriate to each task
- increase the use of different technologies as tools to stimulate inquiry and innovation and to broaden children’s understanding of the complex world in which they live
- strengthen our approach to science and technology teaching through the review of science in the K-6 syllabus undertaken by the Board of Studies and promote excellence in the teaching of science.
2.0 Growing strongly

School environments where children know they are both cared for, and cared about, make a significant difference to their academic engagement, achievement and wellbeing.

Research shows that respect and positive relationships between teachers and students lead to students being better engaged with their learning.

We will work together with parents and communities to create schools that are inclusive and which put the wellbeing of each child at the centre of all decisions.

Key Actions

Nurturing student wellbeing
The quality and type of support for each young child must address individual needs as well as provide safe and nurturing learning environments.

We are committed to nurturing, supporting, extending and inspiring every child.

We will:

- promote the health, wellbeing and resilience of young learners to ensure that they can learn at their best
- regularly review our student support programs to ensure they are relevant to student needs and respond to the increasing complexity and challenges of our society
- promote opportunities for students to develop the physical skills and balanced life style habits that will enable them to lead and maintain healthy and active lives.

Building character
These are critical years in which a child’s character is shaped and we acknowledge the primary role of the family in shaping this character. We also recognise the school’s role in modelling and imparting core social values.

We will:

- explicitly teach positive social and behaviour skills through curriculum and pastoral care programs
- model and teach the values of public education. These values are: integrity, excellence, respect, responsibility, cooperation, participation, care, fairness and democracy
- enhance opportunities in the Early Years for student leadership and participation in their school, local and wider communities
- develop resources to support teachers to provide age-appropriate creative and performance opportunities for students
- develop in children respect for themselves and others
- promote and practise cross-cultural understanding in order to develop respect and community harmony.
Meeting individual needs

Every child is unique with individual talents and abilities.

We will:

- build on our existing programs for assessing and diagnosing what each child knows and can do when they begin Kindergarten
- increase the capacity of schools to match effective early intervention strategies with identified student needs
- identify and promote support structures and programs to maintain the learning and engagement of students considered to be at risk in their learning
- support innovative approaches and flexible school structures to maximise student achievement and lift standards, particularly for Aboriginal students
- continue to support children who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds including continuing to support the English language needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners
- promote inclusion and strengthen support for students with additional educational needs, such as gifted students or students with a disability.
Effective partnerships with parents, communities and other agencies will better support the needs of our young learners. Productive external partnerships enrich student learning and strengthen social fabric.

It is important to foster stronger and more productive communication between home and school, including embracing the breadth of expertise and ideas that parents offer to the school.

The increasing use of new technologies will provide students and teachers with greater flexibility in how and where learning occurs. It will also provide opportunities for improving communication with parents and in developing learning communities.

We are committed to working together to strengthen all connections and relationships that support young learners. In making this commitment, we will help foster wellbeing and high academic achievement for each child.

Key Actions

Highly connected relationships

We will build positive relationships with parents and strong working relationships with the broader community and other agencies to support young learners effectively.

We will:

- promote effective communication and strengthen the links between prior to school settings and schools to improve the transition to school
- enhance partnerships with parents and local communities through effective communication and by providing opportunities for participation in schools. This will include specific strategies to address the needs of Aboriginal communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, low socio-economic status communities, rural communities and other equity groups
- strengthen partnerships with the parents and carers of students with disabilities and students with difficulties in learning and behaviour.
Highly connected networks

Each public school is both unique and part of an extensively linked regional and state-wide school network.

Schools form partnerships with other schools, external agencies and organisations to better support student learning. Schools also connect in virtual ways.

We will further develop networks of schools to give students greater access to a broader range of resources and support.

Teachers will have access to a wider range of professional learning and resources.

Parents will be able to access up to date information about education for young learners.

We will:

- develop communities of schools to increase opportunities for academic partnerships and networking between schools
- develop partnerships between schools and universities and with professional associations to promote quality teaching
- continue to expand the online content available on the Teaching and Learning Exchange (TaLe [http://www.tale.edu.au](http://www.tale.edu.au)) that is relevant to students’ learning. We will support teachers to access and use these materials
- increase the use of secure online access to information and resources and provide collaborative online learning tools for early years’ students
- expand teachers’ networks by extending online professional learning courses and professional learning communities
- continue to expand and promote the Parents’ Portal on TaLe with particular reference to the Early Years.
Every minute the world we live in changes. For young learners the rate of change is greater than ever before. How schools respond to these changes is the key to successful learning in the early years of schooling.

Our approach needs to take account of the diverse backgrounds and environments of our young learners, the impact of technology and the connected global environment. It needs to acknowledge the significance of family and community in a child’s education and that every child is unique. This requires flexibility, creative problem solving, expert knowledge, quality teaching practice, understanding and innovation.

This Early Years Strategy will help position public schools in NSW to provide the best possible start for our young learners now and in the years ahead.