



Education &  
Communities

# Local Schools, Local Decisions

Report on the consultation



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# Introduction

In August 2011 the NSW Minister for Education the Hon Adrian Piccoli MP announced reforms to improve teaching and learning in NSW public schools by increasing the authority of local schools to make decisions about how they deliver education to students. The Minister proposed eleven reform outcomes (see overleaf) and requested that the Department of Education and Communities engage in consultation with the educational community to inform the development of next steps in February 2012.

This led to a large scale public consultation with principals, teachers, support staff, parents and the community to gather their ideas about how to implement these important educational reforms. This report represents the diverse views of contributors.

In addition to the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* consultation, a number of other sources of evidence will inform the development of next steps. These include:

- the School-Based Management Pilot undertaken in 47 schools, including the department's internal evaluation and an independent review of the pilot commissioned by the NSW Government and published on 3 November 2011 at <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/about-us/statistics-and-research/key-statistics-and-reports>
- the Commonwealth Government's *Empowering Local Schools* policy
- the Learning Management and Business Reform (LMBR) Program
- relevant research literature
- the Commonwealth Government's Review of School Funding chaired by David Gonski AC.

Background to the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* policy and the consultation process can be found in the Appendix at the end of this report.

# Local Schools, Local Decisions: Reform outcomes

1. Local decisions to improve teaching and learning are made by the school working with its local community.
2. The right decisions are made by people in schools and across the system, who are accountable to manage resources and deliver a quality education for all students.
3. Schools directly manage an increased percentage of the total education budget, including the budget for school-based staff.
4. Funding allocations to schools reflect the complexity of the school and its students.
5. Schools have the flexibility to respond to student needs by managing a single overall budget rather than many small program budgets.
6. The needs of students drive the mixture of staff, including teaching, leadership and support positions.
7. The culture of professional, quality teaching is enhanced because principals have increased local authority to make decisions about teacher performance, professional learning and program delivery.
8. Principal salary and classification are linked to school complexity, not just student numbers.
9. Schools have more authority to make local decisions about maintenance and purchasing, including the use of local tradespeople and businesses where they offer better value.
10. Schools have more opportunities to meet their local needs by working together and combining resources (eg curriculum delivery, shared facilities, staff) within communities of schools, and across our large network of schools.
11. Schools have reduced paperwork and red tape by reporting against their own school plans instead of a complex range of separate programs.

# Findings

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This section describes the findings of the qualitative analysis of all contributions to the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* consultation process. It lists common and notable suggestions for implementing the reform directions, and highlights risks and issues raised for consideration in developing next steps.

A range of views were received in response to each discussion question, from advocates of complete decentralisation, to advocates of complete centralisation. On the whole, contributors tended to seek a greater degree of local authority than is currently available within the NSW public school education system, although they frequently emphasised the value of operating within a system.

There were a variety of perspectives expressed on how best to achieve the eleven reform outcomes outlined by the Minister for Education.

The section that follows reflects this diversity.

# Findings

## A. Making decisions

Local decisions to improve teaching and learning are made by the school working with its local community.

The right decisions are made by people in schools and across the system, who are accountable to manage resources and deliver a quality education for all students.

### What type of decisions currently made by the state office and regions should be shifted to schools?

The consultation generated a large number of ideas on how to increase local authority in schools. Enthusiasm for more local decisions characterised these contributions, although they frequently indicated a preference for local decision making to occur in the context of a system of public schools with a strong central policy framework to guide and support local decision making, ensure state-wide equity, and provide options or a safety net to schools.

Contributors used this question to propose solutions across all the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* reform themes. While these are briefly touched on below, they are explored in greater detail in the four reform themes that follow.

Ideas about local selection of school staff featured strongly in responses to this question. Common suggestions included increasing the degree of flexibility for school leaders to determine the appropriate mix of staff, greater local authority in the selection of teaching and non-teaching staff to better meet local needs, and principal and school authority to manage staff performance and development.

Suggestions on how to achieve a better balance in recruitment were common, including enhanced ability to choose staff from a range of options *within* a state-wide staffing framework, including merit selection and certain types of transfers. Many such contributions proposed a '50/50' approach whereby no school could be compelled to accept two successive transfers, but would have the option to choose an alternate selection method following a transfer appointment. However, there were also suggestions to give schools complete discretion over how they select, appoint, and manage staff.

Contributors also suggested ways of sharing staff among local schools or within communities of schools. For example, it was suggested that joint meetings of school management could facilitate sharing staff. These were often raised as part of broader suggestions to encourage more sharing of resources, ideas and information between schools.

There was strong evidence of support to shift a range of currently central or regional programs to schools. This appears to be related to a preference for more local decision making about expenditure, particularly of funds currently tied to centrally administered programs. Contributors wanted to see reduction or removal of restrictions currently attached to some program and 'tied' funds to allow more 'broadbanded' funds, reducing separate management and reporting requirements.

Others went further, suggesting the introduction of wholly flexible 'one-line budgets' allocated to schools or that schools be allowed to roll over any unspent funds to address longer term priorities.

Ideas about simplifying access to additional resources in areas such as equity and welfare included the suggestion that all such funding and resources, including consultants, and a range of other education specialists, should be automatically provided on demand, or be funded automatically through a more sophisticated resource allocation model.

Contributors indicated a preference for local schools to have more authority over asset management and maintenance decisions, including setting maintenance priorities, having greater flexibility to use local contractors, and determining the best use of general assistants in schools. A subset of these contributors proposed total devolution of asset management and maintenance to schools. Others suggested that all asset management decisions, including maintenance and cleaning, be managed by the state office.

Contributors sought increased local decision making in relation to procurement, frequently proposing that schools be given authority to make local purchases below a value threshold, or to 'opt in or out' of central contracts and systems.

The view that schools should be able to make more decisions about various matters in the classroom was commonly expressed. These included:

- size and composition of classes
- delivery of curriculum, with some proposing increased local authority over setting curriculum, while others regard this as a state office responsibility

- timetabling of key learning areas to better suit local contexts
- management of individual student welfare and behaviour.

Contributors also made suggestions to simplify processes in a range of areas, including reducing red tape around funding, simplifying applications for student welfare support, and streamlining the performance management process.

Some contributors made suggestions about responsibilities to be assigned to regions and the state office. For example, there was support for the state office to retain responsibility for specialised functions such as legal advice, media, and some child protection matters, and for regions to manage assets, human resources and some targeted student programs. In general, the preference of contributors was for a state office policy framework, regional expertise and support, and local decisions.

The majority of the suggestions made in response to this question are revisited and examined in more detail in the four other reform areas discussed below.

### Issues and risks

Although the issue of local staff selection generated a great many suggestions in line with the reform direction, it also dominated concerns expressed by contributors. Opposition was expressed by some contributors to any changes to the current centralised and formula driven approach to staffing our schools.

Some contributors questioned the adequacy of current resources, expressing concerns that increased decision making in schools would increase demands on existing resources. Other contributors stated plainly that they believed cutting costs was the prime motivation behind *Local Schools, Local Decisions*.

Concerns were also expressed over the impact that changes could have on both teacher and principal workload. Contributors perceived a tension between what they regard as core teaching and learning functions, and managerial activity. These included contributions from principals identifying a risk that an increased administrative burden could impact on their role as 'educational leaders'.

Other suggestions emphasised the need for vastly improved capability in schools to prepare for increased local authority. Targeted professional learning, especially for principals in the areas of planning, human resources management, and financial management were identified as essential requirements to support increased local decision making.

In general, contributors associated increased local decision making with increased local risk in the context of a less involved state office. These contributors expressed concern that schools not be left to fend for themselves and emphasised the importance of maintaining a safety net.

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## What accountability processes should be in place?

Some contributors argued in favour of strengthening existing accountability measures to reflect increased local authority. Others took the view that accountability mechanisms for schools should be limited to publication of results on the My School website and infrequent compliance audits, or be abolished altogether.

Audits were the most commonly proposed accountability mechanism for schools. Proposals ranged from regular audits of financial data, to reviews of staffing decisions, as well as inspections of maintenance, procurement and capital works. There were proposals for traditional compliance audits, as well as for a more comprehensive cyclical process of performance audits or reviews.

Support for the current line management of principals reporting to school education directors was strongly evidenced, facilitated by the existing Principal Assessment and Review Schedule or a similar, but strengthened, process.

Contributors emphasised the need for a clear policy framework to guide and support increased local decision making. The need for stronger and simpler rules such as codes of conduct, guidelines and standards was frequently referenced. The view that principals will require additional support and training to meet appropriate accountability measures was also put forward, with suggestions including the provision of additional support from school education directors, auditors, or business managers.

Contributors also highlighted the need to improve business information systems to better support local decision making and appropriate accountability for performance. The Learning Management and Business Reform program was referenced as an enabler of reform in this context.

Strong support for a simplified and streamlined reporting process was evident, including recommendations that all reporting requirements be combined into a single report, such as an annual school report and annual financial statement against the school's management plan. There was also widespread support for a greater focus on evaluating performance against appropriate targets, including examples such as student outcomes, professional learning for staff, post-school destinations of students, equity, and customer or staff satisfaction.

Contributors suggested that there are some matters over which schools should have complete discretion and should not need to seek approval or report to a line manager, for example curriculum delivery and excursions.

On the other hand, there were frequently expressed concerns about probity and ethical conduct in local decision making, as well as the need to ensure that local leaders have appropriate protections within the system.

Some contributors proposed local governance structures to formally involve stakeholders such as parents, students and teachers in decision making. Others expressed strong opposition to formal authority residing with local parent boards or councils.



# Findings

## B. Managing resources

Schools directly manage an increased percentage of the total education budget, including the budget for school-based staff.

Funding allocations to schools reflect the complexity of the school and its students.

Schools have the flexibility to respond to student needs by managing a single overall budget rather than many small program budgets.

What type of resources currently managed by the state office or regions should be shifted to the school budget?

Contributors emphasised the need for local control over resources to enable schools to effectively target school priorities. Suggestions about what types of resources should be shifted to schools included special education, Aboriginal programs, student welfare, and equity programs.

Contributors wanted more flexibility and reductions in the number of tied grants and program funds with many suggesting that schools should manage 'one bucket of funds' or at least a greatly reduced number of 'broadbanded' funds.

The following resources were discussed as being suitable for shifting to the school budget:

- **Maintenance** – some contributors sought local authority over all maintenance, others made a distinction between urgent or minor maintenance that should be managed by the school and larger scale and cyclical maintenance that should be managed by experts in regions
- **Human resources** – contributors sought increased local authority over a range of human resources matters including staffing budgets, mix, selection, appointment, professional learning and development, and management of underperformance for teaching and other school staff, including general assistants and specialists such as school counsellors. Others expressed a strong view that certain human resources, such as short term causal relief should be managed by state office
- **Information and communication technology** – some contributors sought to transfer authority over technology procurement and support to schools, while others recognised the value of consistent standards and bulk purchasing
- **Utilities** – contributors expressed a diversity of views about the management of utilities budgets, with some suggesting local management and others proposing that all costs be met from a central budget
- **Procurement** – contributors sought greater local flexibility in an 'opt in/opt out' system, or local authority over purchases below a value threshold
- **Capital works** – some contributors proposed that local schools manage all buildings, facilities and other capital works. Others regarded this as work as best undertaken by regions or the state office.

## What local factors should be used to determine funding allocations to schools? Which of these factors are most important?

There was broad support for complexity as a factor additional to student numbers in determining school funding allocations. Four broad categories of complexity factors were suggested:

- Student complexity and educational advantage (eg low SES, ESL, ICSEA, special needs, Aboriginality)
- Staff numbers and profile (eg teacher experience, specialist staff, rates of turnover)
- Site complexity (eg physical size, isolation/remoteness, age and condition of buildings and assets)
- Size of budget (eg additional program budgets)

Some argued that funding should be allocated to improve performance. Others argued that funding should reward high performance. Contributors also recognised the special circumstances of certain types of public schools, such as Schools for Specific Purposes and Central Schools with K-12 enrolments.

Some concerns were expressed over how 'complexity' should be defined and who would define it, with some contributors expressing the view that all schools are complex in some way.

## How can we streamline and simplify school budgets and reporting to increase local flexibility?

Suggestions emphasised reducing the number of individual program budgets, funds and tied grants, indicating a preference for 'one bucket of funds' or 'one-line budgets.' Others proposed broadbanding of funds to increase local flexibility while retaining the certainty of some funds targeted to particular domains, such as teacher professional learning.

Alongside generic calls to 'reduce reporting', there were specific proposals to discontinue reporting on funds associated with central programs and to dispense with the Annual School Report. This contrasted with other contributions that proposed an enhanced school management plan and annual school report as a single planning and reporting mechanism.

Contributors also proposed local business managers to help schools manage their budgets, sites and compliance and reporting obligations.

Specific suggestions to better align and streamline the timing of budgets, planning, and reporting included:

- administering all school funding on calendar years rather than financial years
- providing budgets to schools once, at a consistent time, rather than at different times during the year for different programs
- streamlining and aligning all reporting timeframes
- publishing a calendar of planning and reporting obligations.

Contributions commonly favoured the ability for schools to rollover unspent funds, rather than having them redistributed if not expended within the year. Some proposed a funding period aligned with the school planning cycle, arguing that the ability to rollover funds would encourage saving for future projects. However, concerns were also expressed about this practice with some suggesting that incentives to save program funds could deny current students the intended benefits.

### Issues and risks

Contributors raised concerns that increased local authority over managing resources could increase the workload of principals and distract them from their role in 'educational leadership.' There were frequent proposals for business managers in schools to address these concerns.

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Concerns about probity and ethical conduct in local decision making were frequently expressed, along with the risk that more flexible funding allocations might not be used to achieve their intended outcomes in the same way that tied funds are now.

With new responsibilities for managing a higher proportion of the funding, including staff salaries, many contributors expressed the need for principals to receive training in financial management and control and for improved information systems. The importance of a safety net for schools experiencing financial difficulty was also emphasised.

## What accountability processes should be in place?

Contributors suggested formal audit processes as a key accountability mechanism for managing resources.

Strong support was evident for the creation of a single accountability framework, with a school management plan and annual school report often proposed as the primary planning and reporting tools. Contributors emphasised the need for appropriate targets with a focus on student outcomes, but not limited to NAPLAN results.

Existing processes such as the Principal Assessment and Review Schedule (PARS) and Teacher Assessment Review Schedule (TARS) were frequently referenced as suitable accountability mechanisms in relation to managing resources. Some contributors suggested strengthening these processes or increasing the emphasis on professional development.

The line management relationship between principals and school education directors was also regarded as a valuable accountability mechanism. Some contributors suggested that professionalism should be the basis of any accountability model.

Some contributors proposed local governance structures as accountability mechanisms, suggesting that school councils, committees or boards could assist in decision making and encourage transparent reporting to the community.

Contributors also proposed local business managers as important resources to support local accountability processes.

A strong theme emerged proposing that reporting be simplified or streamlined by aligning funding cycles, reporting and other activities to reduce the workload and complexity of planning and reporting for schools.

Contributors emphasised the need for a clear policy framework, with clear guidelines and standards that apply to all schools across the system.

# Findings

## C. Staff in our schools

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The needs of students drive the mixture of staff, including teaching, leadership and support positions.

The culture of professional, quality teaching is enhanced because principals have increased local authority to make decisions about teacher performance, professional learning and program delivery.

Principal salary and classification are linked to school complexity, not just student numbers.

### What authority should schools have to determine and select the right mix of staff?

Responses to this question varied widely, with proposals ranging from allowing complete local discretion to determine and select the right mix of staff, including school leaders, teachers, non-teaching and specialist staff, to authority residing entirely with the state office for the funding, mix and placement of staff.

Some contributors expressed concerns that principals cannot be properly held accountable for teacher quality unless they have more influence in the selection of their staff.

There was a strong preference for schools to be able to select staff from a suite of recruitment options, including merit selection, some types of transfers, and targeted graduates. The selection of staff from a state or regional pool of available staff was also suggested.

There was a high level of interest, particularly among principals, in increasing opportunities to offer permanent positions to temporary staff who have worked in the school for some time, demonstrated their ability, and often received considerable professional learning and development opportunities.

Some contributors advocated for central provision of a core staffing entitlement to schools, but with local discretion over a flexible component of staffing. Contributors expressed the view that this would guarantee staffing for key curriculum areas, while helping schools respond to the changing needs of students.

Other contributors favoured a mix of local merit selection and central appointment of staff via transfers, including suggestions that schools be able to choose the selection method for every second vacancy to reduce the impact of the transfer system on individual schools.

Principals, in particular, proposed increased local flexibility to appoint specialist staff on a needs basis (eg allied health professionals, business managers).

Some contributors commented that the staffing codes used to determine the current mix of staff in schools are inflexible and should be reviewed to ensure that schools are able to better cater to local needs.

Contributors indicated a preference for school executive teams to share in increased local authority over staffing. In some cases this extended to school communities through formal local governance arrangements. The view that consultation with the broader school community was needed to inform the appropriate staff mix for schools was widely held. Some emphasised the importance of providing training for those serving on merit selection panels.

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Contributors indicated a strong preference for schools to have increased authority over the placement of temporary and permanent staff in schools to ensure 'a good fit' that will meet local needs. For some contributors, this means more consultation with schools and being able to interview or screen potential placements, and for others, it means having the right to refuse transfers.

There was support for schools having greater input into the selection criteria and role descriptions for vacant positions as they arise. Contributors explained that this would enable local priorities to be considered in designing the appropriate mix of staff without affecting existing permanent staff in the school.

Contributors were strongly supportive of schools having increased flexibility to offer incentives to attract and retain staff. Specific incentives suggested by contributors included financial incentives, scholarships, assistance with higher education fees, rent or housing, and other incentive packages. Flexible incentives were regarded as particularly relevant for hard to staff positions, such as those in remote communities. Some contributors emphasised the need for ongoing incentives to retain staff in these schools, rather than simply attracting them for a short time before they transfer to a more desirable location.

Contributors highlighted the importance of support for schools with increased authority over staffing, and noted the importance of a clear policy framework and access to regional expertise.

Some raised the need for appropriate safeguards and protection for senior staff exercising local authority, as well as for the staff in schools that they manage. Others emphasised that school leaders will require training in how to design a mix of staff that will meet the needs of the school community.

Contributors supported an increased role for regions in providing expert advice. Regions are perceived to better understand local contexts and have stronger relationships with schools than the state office. Proposals included having regional staffing branches or officers, allowing staffing decisions to be made in consultation with or overseen by regions, and letting regions have responsibility for all recruitment and appointments.

There was strong and consistent support for increasing local authority while maintaining the right to some types of transfers in a state-wide system.

Many of these suggestions related to incentive transfers and the need to ensure quality applicants for hard to staff positions. Some contributors favoured a model of 'core staffing plus flexible staffing' as a way to ensure appropriate limits on the authority of school leaders and provide a safety net should schools be unable to recruit staff locally. Contributors also noted that transfers facilitate the sharing of skills across schools and promote a diverse mix of staff within schools.

There was considerable interest in increasing the mobility of teaching and non-teaching staff, particularly within communities of schools or local management groups.

This included strong preferences for schools to be able to share specialist staff, including specialist teachers and business managers, as well as general assistants and administrative staff. Some contributors proposed greater flexibility to share staff and resources between primary and secondary schools, or between secondary schools and TAFE institutes. Contributors also suggested that schools should have increased authority to share or exchange teaching and executive staff to provide professional learning and development opportunities and prevent stagnation.

Some contributors proposed the introduction of fixed term appointments for some or all staff in schools. Advocates of this idea suggested that limiting tenure would help schools meet the changing needs of their school communities by varying the mix and roles of staff on a regular basis. This was regarded as a way to prevent the risk of complacency among long serving staff members, build a sense of obligation among staff toward the whole public school system, and encourage professional development. By contrast, other contributors expressed strong opposition to any changes to tenure, emphasising their view about the value of permanent appointments.

The introduction of fixed probationary periods for all placements in schools, regardless of the method of selection, was also proposed.

Some contributors linked increased authority to determine the mix of staff in schools to increased flexibility over class sizes. Increased flexibility to design class sizes that better meet local needs was supported by some contributors, while

others regarded it as a risk that needs to be managed. Some contributors proposed local governance through community consultation or expert advisers to mitigate risks.

Some contributors suggested that all responsibilities for determining the mix of staff in schools should stay with the state office or be transferred to regions. This included proposals that the state office retain responsibility for staffing policy and procedures, staff transfers, legal processes (eg child protection), and some types of incentives for hard to staff positions and that regions take full responsibility for staffing, or play a larger role in the allocation of staff, especially executive staff, to schools. Other contributors suggested that staff be appointed to and managed by regions or communities of schools rather than to individual schools.

Contributions favouring a centralised staffing system suggested that the current arrangements offer schools flexibility in staffing options, meet the majority of local needs and maintain equity in staffing across the state.

### Issues and risks

Contributors expressed concern about the ability of isolated schools or hard to staff positions to attract and retain qualified and experienced staff in the context of increased local authority.

There were concerns raised by teachers, other school staff and parents that a system of increased local authority might concentrate too much decision making about staffing in the local school.

Concerns included the risk of a lack of probity, fairness, and transparency in decision making, as well as a lack of appropriate skills among school leaders.

Although changes to tenure were also proposed, predominantly by principals, some other staff highlighted perceived risks associated with reducing permanency and job security by introducing fixed term appointments. Some contributors commented that the sense of stability within school communities may be undermined if teachers are required to change schools too often.

Some contributors called for additional funds or resources to assist schools in the management of staff. Specific proposals included:

- additional short term casual relief, possibly employed permanently by regions or communities of schools to be on call as needs arise in particular schools, executive staff, and specialist staff, particularly school counsellors
- additional funding to offer incentives to staff
- changes to staffing formulas for Kindergarten to Year 2 and Year 3 to Year 6.

Some suggestions identified deficiencies in current business information systems as barriers to increasing the mobility of staff within regions or communities of schools. They also expressed a desire to access information on available staff prior to appointment.

The need to ensure consistent management of human resources within a system of increased local authority was noted by some contributors. Areas of particular concern included managing salaries, short and longer term leave, and workers compensation. Some contributors were concerned about the capacity of schools to manage transactional processes such as payroll.

Contributors also identified some industrial relations issues that could impede local decision making about staff in schools. These include current and future agreements regarding teachers' salaries and working conditions and the position of key industrial stakeholder groups in relation to the proposed reforms.

Contributors noted the importance of getting the balance of accountability right. Some emphasised the need for checks and balances to ensure sound decision making, while others warned of the risks of overburdening schools with accountability requirements.

### What authority should principals have to manage teacher performance?

Suggestions emphasised the need for a clear central policy framework with streamlined processes, tougher consequences for underperformance, and clear role statements, guidelines, and codes of conduct.

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Specific aspects of the authority for principals to manage teacher performance explored by contributors included identifying poor performance, directing teachers to improvement programs and professional learning, approving salary increments, and recognising high performance.

Contributors frequently referenced the teaching standards developed by the NSW Institute of Teachers and national professional standards. Some principals expressed the view that these provide a good basis for assessing relevant competencies.

There was considerable emphasis on linking performance management to these standards through a strengthened Teacher Assessment and Review Schedule, or a similar process.

Contributors frequently described current performance management processes as cumbersome, lengthy and unwieldy. Streamlining and simplifying these processes was seen as an essential prerequisite for increasing local authority.

Contributors argued that principals should have more authority to manage underperformance including, in some cases, the right to fire underperforming staff. Suggestions that responsibility should be shared were also common, with contributors expressing concern about decision making being too concentrated in schools.

A strong theme emerged seeking additional expert support from outside the school to help principals manage improvement programs.

Contributors proposed a more active role for regions in providing expert advice to support schools with matters such as staffing, performance management, and the management of poor performance. Others proposed that regions be delegated decision making authority in relation to matters such as poor teacher performance, professional learning and work health and safety.

While at least some degree of increased local authority was widely supported, others suggested that assessment and management of teacher performance should be undertaken by experts external to the school. These proposals included suggestions that the principal should have authority to identify underperforming teachers, but that an independent expert should manage all improvement programs. Principals expressing these views sometimes referred to the impact performance and conduct issues can have on relationships within the school or broader school community.

Contributions from principals and teachers alike identified the need to better support teachers experiencing difficulties, particularly new and inexperienced staff. Suggestions emphasised the professional development aspects of performance management. The need for early intervention and better efforts to help new teachers develop effective practice was clearly expressed.

While an effective performance management system, with appropriate incentives and sanctions, was seen to be important, effective recruitment was seen as another key to quality teaching in schools. Contributors argued that the centrally imposed staffing model limits perceived accountability for the performance of teachers and therefore contributes to long term underperformance by some staff being inadequately addressed.

Contributors also raised concerns about the quality and readiness of available candidates. While professional teaching standards were seen as critical for measuring improvement and grounding professional development, some contributors questioned the current standard of pre-service education.

Though the issue of underperformance and teacher improvement dominated contributions to this discussion question, the importance of recognising high performance was also raised, including some discussion about performance pay. Other contributors expressed strong negative views about performance pay.

Proposals to strengthen links between performance management and professional standards were common, including suggestions for standards-based career progression. This included proposals that salary increments should be linked to an individual meeting professional standards, and that higher levels of accreditation should be a prerequisite for promotion to school leadership roles.

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In common with other discussion questions, ideas about greater local authority for the management of teacher performance prompted strongly stated concerns about the current capability of principals and other school leaders.

## How should principals build staff capability and align staff professional learning to best meet local needs?

Contributions to this discussion question identified the need to align professional learning needs for all staff to the school management plan. This emphasised the value of linking professional learning priorities with school plan strategies and targets to assist principals to set and monitor achievement of meaningful professional learning.

Individual professional learning plans for all staff were frequently suggested – sometimes explicitly linked to the school plan. Many contributors noted the value of existing assessment and review schedules in relation to professional learning. Some raised concerns that individual teachers should have more say over professional learning as a critical element of their career development.

A desire was expressed for increased flexibility in the use of professional learning funds, including being able to allocate funds to professional learning for casual and non-teaching staff. Some indicated a preference for flexibility to roll over unspent professional learning funds, and to locally design and select a mix of staff appropriate to local school needs.

Other contributors proposed strategies to make it easier for staff to gain experience in a variety of school environments. These suggestions included appointing staff to communities of schools to encourage mobility, improve staffing flexibility, and share access to expertise and professional development opportunities.

Mentoring was proposed as a specific strategy to facilitate professional learning, both at the local and regional level. Contributors emphasised that professional learning needs to be available in a variety of forms, with flexible modes of delivery to meet the many and varied needs of staff and schools. Ensuring equitable access to professional learning opportunities, especially in small, rural and isolated school contexts, was a recurring theme. These contributions referenced distance and time constraints as obstacles to accessing professional development activities and suggested that more creative use of technology could help to maintain professional links for learning and renewal.

Contributors raised concerns about the current capability of school leaders to effectively manage and account for professional learning funds in a more devolved environment. Questions were also raised about the capability of school leaders to accurately assess the professional learning needs of staff.

Suggestions also pointed to the need to balance professional learning opportunities between those explicitly relevant to local needs, and for those relating to wider context or individual interests.

Ensuring that professional learning complies with mandatory legislative accountabilities such as the *NSW Institute of Teachers Act 2004* was also recognised as an issue.

## What types of programs currently managed by the state office or in regions should be shifted to schools?

There was considerable variation in perceptions of the current state, and the most appropriate context, for delivery of programs but there was a clear desire to make programs less bureaucratic and more transparent and fairer.

Contributors frequently referenced program activity in equity, Aboriginal education, curriculum, student welfare and disability support as areas where increased local authority could improve student outcomes. There was a strong emphasis on schools needing greater flexibility over how they spend program allocations aligned with school priorities.

Some expressed frustration at the number of overlapping programs as well as the administration required to access support for students.

Contributors also expressed a desire for schools to have more say in how specialist program staff are allocated to schools, including proposals that these budgets be devolved to schools to purchase the services they require from regions.

Contributors also responded to this question with a range of views about other state office functions. These suggestions included proposals



that state office units such as the Employment Performance and Conduct Directorate (EPAC) and Finance Directorate should have a greater local or regional presence.

The view that schools should have more local say in professional development programs was also emphasised.

While some saw reform as an opportunity to streamline their work, other contributors associated increased local authority with an increased administrative burden on schools.

Concerns were also raised about the challenge of appropriately allocating funding for specific local needs, including questions about the usefulness of broad indices and existing data sources to allocate funding of this type.

## What accountability processes should be in place?

Contributors emphasised the value of existing performance management processes, including the range of assessment and review schedules for teaching and executive staff.

The central role of a school management plan and annual school report were frequently discussed in relation to managing, monitoring and reporting against appropriate targets, including professional learning targets and student learning outcomes. The links between local authority and accountability through these local plans, reports and reviews directed by principals and regions were also raised.

Contributors also noted the importance of getting the 'balance of accountability'

right for schools. Some emphasised the need for checks and balances to ensure sound decision making, while others warned of the risks of overburdening schools with accountability requirements. As in other discussion questions, the role of school education directors as the line managers of principals was often referenced as an important accountability function.

Audits were proposed both to monitor compliance matters such as the proper expenditure of funds, and also to monitor performance matters such as the skill levels of staff.

Contributors identified the importance of a clear policy framework around local authority for the selection and management of staff, with standards and guidelines to use in local decision making.

## How should principal classification be determined?

Suggestions on how principal classification should be determined generally reflected the view that, while numbers of students are an important consideration, other 'complexity' factors are also relevant. Specific complexities proposed by contributors to be included in calculations of principal classification fit into four broad categories:

- Student complexity (eg low SES, ESL, ICSEA, special needs, Aboriginality)
- Staff numbers and make up (eg teacher experience, specialist staff)
- Site complexity (eg physical size, isolation/remoteness, condition of assets)
- Size of budget (eg additional program budgets).

Some contributors also proposed that factors associated with individual principals should be considered, including their experience, qualifications, and performance.

There was some geographical variation in perspectives on this question. For example, among principals, factors such as 'isolation' were identified more frequently in non-metropolitan regions than in metropolitan regions.

There was also a difference between contributions from principals, who were more likely to emphasise staff factors, and teachers, who tended to place greater emphasis on student factors.

Some contributions, particularly among principals, raised concerns about whether complexity could be defined accurately and fairly. Some expressed concern over any implied difference in complexity between primary and secondary schools and proposed a more equal alignment of remuneration and release time for both settings.

Some principals expressed concern about transition arrangements if the classification of a school changes or suggested that the pay a principal receives should not be reduced if the role is defined as less complex.

Other contributors made general observations about the remuneration of principals, including proposals for pay increases. Some contributions relating to teaching principals in small schools also proposed reducing the teaching loads of principals. By contrast, others proposed amalgamating small schools under the leadership of a single principal with a higher classification.

# Findings

## D. Working locally

Schools have more authority to make local decisions about maintenance and purchasing, including the use of local tradespeople and businesses where they offer better value.

Schools have more opportunities to meet their local needs by working together and combining resources (eg curriculum delivery, shared facilities, staff) within communities of schools, and across our large network of schools.

### What maintenance and purchasing decisions currently made by the state office and regions should be shifted to the school?

Some proposals to shift maintenance of school buildings and grounds and procurement of materials and equipment were forceful and enthusiastic.

This support for increased local authority was particularly evident in relation to minor works and maintenance required to keep school facilities up to standard and urgent works required for safety and functional reasons. However, contributors tended to regard authority and accountability for large and complex projects as being better retained in the state office or regions.

Contributors expressed some concerns that delegation of this authority and accountability to schools might increase the workload for principals. Some contributors were wary of expectations that principals could take on responsibility for matters other than the educational leadership of the school. Contributors also commented that the

knowledge and skills of principals differ in these matters.

Contributions expressed support for greater school discretion over the employment of local contractors, but some proposed that schools still be able to 'opt in' to state contracts and processes for greater efficiency as required, or for the management of complex purchases and contracts.

Some contributions expressed a view that the department's current procurement processes and guidelines can sometimes prevent schools from accessing better value local deals and limit the ability of schools to build and strengthen relationships with local contractors and suppliers.

Other contributors identified advantages associated with state-wide contracts but sought a better balance between centralised procurement and buying locally.

There were mixed views in relation to procurement of information and communication technologies. Some contributors expressed a preference for increased local authority for purchasing decisions in this area.

Other contributors stated that provision of these services through a state-wide system ensures consistency, compatibility, ease of maintenance and access to volume discounts.

Contributors noted the need for clear guidelines, as well as timely support from state and regional offices for increased local decision making about purchasing and maintenance. Some contributors expressed support for regions having a key role in supporting, or managing school maintenance.

Some responses to this question referenced cleaning contracts. There was a mix of views expressed, including delegating the authority, funding and accountability for cleaning to schools, and retaining central responsibility for this service.

As for other reform areas, some contributions questioned whether principals have the time or the necessary training to make more decisions about maintenance and purchasing.

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## How can we better facilitate sharing of resources between schools?

Contributors expressed strong support for sharing staff and resources across groups of schools or communities of schools, noting opportunities for significant efficiencies for schools that pool their resources to purchase bulk materials, services and large items. Staff proposed as suitable for sharing between schools included business managers, specialist teaching staff, cleaners, general assistants and careers advisors.

A range of suggestions was made about how these learning communities could be formed and resourced. Some contributors favoured an approach in which schools voluntarily form informal groups based on shared interests or needs, on geographical proximity, or on membership of a particular local management structure. Others emphasised the value of highly formal arrangements between schools to manage matters of mutual interest, including sharing of resources. Models proposed include colleges and local management groups that include both primary and secondary schools in a geographical area.

Contributors suggested that regions are best placed to coordinate and support these local arrangements. Others suggested that some regional responsibilities could be transferred to communities of schools.

Modern technologies such as video-conferencing were proposed as a way to enhance communications between schools and facilitate sharing in areas such as combined professional learning. There were some suggestions that financial incentives and shared funding could encourage schools to join together for mutual benefit.

Contributors also proposed sharing staff to perform key functions across several schools. Examples included work health and safety, building/site management, business management, and curriculum leadership, as well as paraprofessionals and part-time staff in a range of specialist areas. Shared use of facilities was also proposed as beneficial for schools.

Some contributions proposed that funding could be better targeted across the system by reducing duplication between nearby schools that could share resources, or even merge. Concerns were raised that some small schools, including small secondary schools, may not be able to effectively deliver appropriate curriculum choice to students.

## What accountability processes should be in place?

The importance of a clear set of guidelines was emphasised by contributors in relation to accountability requirements for working locally.

Proposals included the suggestion of enhancing the code of conduct in relation to local procurement to ensure

that potential conflicts of interest in purchasing or contracting goods and services are managed appropriately.

The need to support the transition to greater local authority with training in procurement, project management, ethical conduct, and risk assessment were also raised.

Regular audits of school financial and purchasing arrangements were proposed to ensure compliance with regulations and guidelines. Quality assurance audits were also suggested to assess and provide advice on improving practices and processes in schools.

Contributors noted that increasing local authority will require improved business information and tools, including a simple system to provide up-to-date information about products, pricing and guidelines.

Contributors emphasised school management plans and annual school reports as key accountability instruments in relation to school purchasing decisions and the outcomes they achieve.

There were some differences in perspective between different types of contributors. Principals who contributed were more likely to raise the potential for honest mistakes and to express the need for protection and support for the decision maker from regions and the state office.

# Findings

## E. Red tape

Schools have reduced paperwork and red tape by reporting against their own school plans instead of a complex range of separate programs.

### What can we stop doing or do differently to minimise paperwork and red tape?

Contributors expressed enthusiasm for simplifying processes and streamlining paperwork across the system, particularly in the following areas:

- applications for student support, such as access requests
- work health and safety
- merit selection
- performance management
- school development day variations
- permission to travel.

Contributors commented that some current online processes are cumbersome, slow and time consuming. They expressed considerable frustration that these processes often take them away from focusing on teaching and learning.

There were many suggestions to redesign business information systems to better suit the needs of schools, and to improve the support for and in schools to complete and manage paperwork.

Contributors consistently emphasised the importance of simplifying and reducing reporting, including suggestions that the requirement for separate reporting against individual programs be removed. Contributors supported a central role for a strengthened school management plan, against which all activity and outcomes should be reported.

Contributors were strongly in favour of directly harvesting school data from shared business information systems to reduce the duplication and high volume of requests for information from schools. This suggestion was particularly common in relation to student information such as demographic, suspension and attendance data. The Learning Management and Business Reform Program was frequently cited as an enabler of reform in this area.

There was a mix of views in relation to the Annual School Report, at least in its current form. Some contributors proposed abolishing the report, while others suggested that schools be given greater authority to vary or personalise the report. In many cases, these proposals were linked to the idea that much of the information contained within annual school reports is now available through other sources (eg the My School website) and that its purpose and intended audience have become confused.

Other contributors saw enhanced annual school reports as an opportunity to streamline, reduce, or eliminate other types of reporting by providing a single comprehensive report against the school's management plan.

Some contributors highlighted current procurement and maintenance processes as labour intensive sources of red tape. They observed that increasing local authority to manage these matters could reduce this workload. Contributors also observed that schools and school leaders will require access to expert advice and training in these areas. Some suggested that regions are best placed to provide this support, particularly in the areas of maintenance, work health and safety, and meeting reporting requirements.

While the idea of streamlining administrative effort was strongly supported, some contributors identified possible risks associated with efforts to reduce red tape. The relationship between red tape and proper accountability was frequently identified. For example, some contributors pointed out that some separate reporting arrangements helped to ensure that program funding serves its intended purpose.

## What current reporting can we consolidate into the planning and reporting process?

Contributors indicated a strong preference to consolidate all reporting into a single report – preferably against a school management plan. This combination of a single school management plan and a single report against the plan were commonly proposed as the key planning and reporting documents for schools.

Some contributors specifically referenced annual school reports, although others maintained that, in their current form, they duplicate information that can be found elsewhere and should be discontinued. The Annual Financial Statement in annual school reports was also frequently cited as an important reporting obligation. Regardless of the format proposed for a single report against the school management plan, contributors tended to support standardised templates that schools can customise to better suit their local contexts.

There was also considerable support for improved business information systems to streamline processes, reduce duplication, and better support school planning and reporting. As referenced in previous discussion questions, contributors expressed a strong preference for central harvesting of data from shared information systems to eliminate frequent and repetitive requests for information and free up school leaders and staff to focus on Discussionother responsibilities.



# Discussion

This section contains a discussion of some key findings arising from the analysis of contributions to the consultation about how to achieve the eleven reform outcomes of *Local Schools, Local Decisions*.

Some ideas and themes appeared repeatedly across contributions to different discussion questions and reform themes. These include ideas about:

1. Getting it done
2. Authority and accountability
3. Tension between authority, funding and accountability.

These themes are complex and interdependent and were raised across all geographic regions and all types of contributors, including principals, teachers and other school and departmental staff, students, parents and the community, and unions and other interest groups.

## 1. Getting it done

Contributors expressed considerable enthusiasm for increasing local authority to make decisions across a range of domains and in relation to a number of resources and programs. While concerns were raised about the future role and capability of school leaders in a system of devolved authority, respondents also nominated a range of ways to assist schools during the transition, with, for instance, professional learning, training, and development and improved business information systems.

Some contributors voiced concerns regarding the future role of principals and indicated concern about expanding the range of their responsibilities. This concern appears to be related to feedback that seeks to isolate 'teaching and learning' from other aspects of running a school and an education system, such as overseeing or managing finances and facilities.

In addition, there is some concern about the capability (ie skills, knowledge, and expertise) of school leaders to operate in a more distributed model of authority across the range of reform themes.

However, there was evidence of widespread willingness to take on additional responsibilities as long as adequate training and support is available. A range of practical solutions to up-skill and support schools and staff in preparation for implementation of *Local Schools, Local Decisions* have been proposed, including specific proposals for training school leaders in finance, leadership and management.

Solutions proposed also include additional support and resources (with bursars or business managers the most frequent suggestions), to narrow the perceived gap between current skills and expanded responsibilities in schools.

Contributors also indicated a need for improved business management and information systems to support decision making and streamline reporting, complemented by training and support in the use of these systems.

These responses reinforce the importance of providing relevant and ongoing training and support to principals and school staff to ensure they have the confidence and skills to make local decisions and manage resources and programs locally.

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## 2. Authority and accountability

Contributors expressed a wide variety of attitudes and understandings of accountability. Suggestions included the use of specific instruments and reporting lines and the need for an overarching central policy framework to guide local decision making.

A dichotomy appears in contributions around the issue of accountability, with some advocating for professional trust between schools and the state office, while others expressed concerns about the potential for poor performance, and the importance of having checks and balances to ensure the best possible decision making. Local governance structures were nominated as one way to mitigate this risk.

There was a clearly expressed desire for the state office to set broad directions and provide a clear policy framework to guide local decision making and clearly articulate local authority. This was also expressed through proposals of clear standards, guidelines and regulations.

There were suggestions for the use of school plans as one all-encompassing accountability document that would set out schools' priorities, strategies, resource management, and targets to meet the needs of students.

Additional accountability instruments nominated included the Annual School Report and existing performance management tools such as PARS and TARS. There is also strong evidence of support to continue principals' line management reporting to school education directors. Audits also figured prominently in proposals across all reform areas, particularly in the oversight of school budgets, but also to ensure compliance with guidelines for matters such as work health and safety, technology, and professional learning.

In contrast to these proposals, some contributors have suggested the need for more trust in the ability of school leaders to make decisions and manage resources in a model of devolved authority.

Some contributors acknowledge that accountability processes are required to meet community expectations, to justify the expenditure of public funds, to detect the occurrence of errors or mistakes, and to encourage transparency and probity in decision making. Some of these contributors also acknowledged that a robust accountability framework provides protection to school leaders in the proper use of their authority and reassures those with concerns about the way decisions are being made that appropriate oversight is in place.

There was also need for appropriate accountability at multiple levels in a model of distributed authority, including specific references to school education directors and regional directors.

Contributors expressed serious concerns about decision making being too concentrated in the local school context without appropriate checks and balances.

Specific proposals to reduce these risks included establishing local governance structures, such as school councils, to extend aspects of authority to involve the broader school community in decision making. Proposals varied, with ideas about local governance featuring different combinations of representatives from some or all groups, including the community, parents, students, and staff.

Other contributors expressed concern about risks associated with increased local governance, such as the inability to hold council or board members accountable for their decisions, and the lack of specialist expertise about education on community boards.

These ideas about authority and accountability highlight the importance of clearly articulating the extent and limits of greater delegated authority, as well as the consequences of misusing that authority.

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### 3. Tension between authority, funding and accountability

There is strong support for increasing local authority in a range of domains, however there is a tension between the desire for greater local authority on the one hand, and concern about difficult decisions and trade-offs on the other. Contributions include many suggestions that would separate authority from funding and/or accountability in particular areas. If implemented, these proposals would give some people in the system the authority to initiate or approve activities for which someone else in the system would have to pay or be held accountable for the outcomes achieved.

Contributors nominated a variety of resources to be managed at the local level, particularly in the domain of staff in our schools. They consistently expressed support for the policy direction of principals having greater flexibility to select and determine the best mix of staff to meet the needs of the students and the local community, within a state-wide system with a clear central policy framework.

Other common proposals for increasing local authority include:

- managing a single overall budget rather than many small program budgets to better respond to student needs
- increasing flexibility to make decisions about maintenance and purchasing, particularly over the use of local tradespeople and businesses

- greater authority over teacher professional learning and program delivery.

However, at the same time that these resources were put forward as suitable for local management, contributions from across the state, including from the same respondents, indicated strong views that some resources currently being managed by schools should be managed by the state office.

This widespread preference is often linked to the idea that schools should have considerable flexibility to control funds related to 'teaching and learning,' while for everything else schools should have the authority to incur expenses to be paid for by the state or regional offices.

While it was acknowledged that all costs were ultimately funded from a single budget for public education, contributors tended to assert that schools should not have to make a choice between paying for teaching and learning programs or site costs such as utilities.

Some respondents made similar suggestions in relation to activities that are directly related to teaching and learning. Suggestions included schools making decisions about the selection and removal of staff while the centre remains "responsible," and that schools be directly empowered to employ specialists on demand with the state office or region meeting all costs.

This trend regarding the relationship between authority, funding and accountability suggests the need to more clearly communicate the interconnected and interdependent nature of funding for schools. Increasing local authority without local accountability and control of funding introduces the risk that certain types of costs will not be actively managed, reducing the funds available for more important activities.



# Conclusion

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The input of the thousands of people who contributed to the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* consultation process is a valuable source of ideas to improve our public school education system.

The *Local Schools, Local Decisions* consultation contributions will be considered along with a number of other sources of evidence, including:

- the School-Based Management Pilot undertaken in 47 schools, including the department's internal evaluation and an independent review of the pilot commissioned by the NSW Government and published on 3 November at <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/about-us/statistics-and-research/key-statistics-and-reports>
- the Commonwealth Government's *Empowering Local Schools* policy
- the Learning Management and Business Reform (LMBR) Program
- relevant research literature
- the Commonwealth Government's Review of School Funding chaired by David Gonski AC.

Next steps to implement this important educational reform will be based on all of these sources of evidence and will be submitted to the Minister for Education in February 2012.

# Appendix: Background

## Local Schools, Local Decisions: Policy context

Over recent decades, there has been a global shift towards providing schools with greater local authority to manage their budgets and their human resources more effectively. A growing body of research is now devoted to examining the impact of this shift on education outcomes. While the evidence supporting school based management in isolation is mixed, research undertaken by the OECD suggests that autonomy when intelligently combined with accountability, tends to be associated with improved outcomes (OECD 2010).

To improve student outcomes, the OECD encouraged countries to examine both how a sound framework of autonomy and accountability can be implemented or strengthened and what other factors need to work in conjunction with school autonomy.

Since 2007 the Commonwealth Government has pursued policies of school improvement supported by strong community engagement, better targeting of resources, and greater authority and accountability at the school level.

The Commonwealth Government has also committed \$480.5 million over seven years to 2017 for the Empowering Local Schools initiative. This policy commits to a trial in 1,000 schools across the country in 2012 and 2013.

The Commonwealth Government's Empowering Local Schools Reforms are consistent with the broad aims of *Local Schools, Local Decisions* and the NSW Government has agreed to participate in the initiative. However, there is a strong commitment throughout the NSW school community for this state to develop its own model of distributed authority. The *Local Schools, Local Decisions* reforms will ensure that the NSW model of increased local authority reflects the unique circumstances and challenges of public education in this state.

## NSW Government Policy

The NSW Government was elected in March 2011 with a strong policy commitment to increasing local decision making in schools.

This commitment to align the NSW public schools education system with other high performing systems around the world is now part of the Government's NSW 2012 Plan.

On 11 August 2011, the Minister for Education announced that the Government would make changes to further enhance authority for school-based decisions to better meet the needs of students.

The Minister for Education outlined this Local Schools, Local Decisions policy direction through eleven reform outcomes that build on the Government's pre-election commitments. They also draw on feedback provided by principals through Forums for the Future held across NSW in 2010-11 which indicated strong demand for reforms to increase and improve the alignment of authority, funding, and accountability in schools.

## Consultation process

The department undertook a formal 10 week consultation process which concluded on 18 November 2011.

The eleven outcomes announced by the Minister for Education provided a clear policy direction. The purpose of the consultation was to capture ideas from the public education community in NSW about how best to achieve these reform outcomes.

The eleven outcomes were organised into five reform themes:

- a) Making decisions
- b) Managing resources
- c) Staff in our schools
- d) Working locally
- e) Reducing red tape

On 19 September 2011 the department released a **Discussion Paper**, which included a brief explanation of each reform theme and a series of questions designed to elicit ideas about how to achieve the eleven outcomes.

This structure formed the basis of all materials produced for the consultation, including a dedicated section of the NSW Public Schools website.

Consultation was designed to maximise the opportunities to participate, including:

- face to face consultation meetings and e-forums held across NSW
- a moderated online discussion forum open to all contributors
- written submissions through the forum portal, posted, faxed or emailed.

Although some contributors expressed the views that the consultation period should have been longer and that not all forums were conducted in the same way, the large number of participants and the high quality of contributions provided rich and valuable insight into the suggestions of the NSW public school education community.

## Face to face forums

A school education director from each region across NSW was appointed full-time for the duration of the consultation period to coordinate local consultation.

These regional coordinators worked with key stakeholder groups to organise local approaches to consultation. The number, size, duration, and type of forums were designed to meet the unique needs of each region.

Regional coordinators met with parent and community groups including P & C representatives and, in many cases, organised consultation forums specifically for groups such as regional P & C bodies.

Each regional coordinator communicated with Aboriginal Educational Consultative Groups and encouraged their participation in the consultation process.

The consultation project team also included two state office directors from the Public Schools NSW portfolio who co-ordinated consultation forums for non-school staff across the portfolio. Additional forums were held for corporate staff.

Facilitation booklets and supporting resources were developed. These included a PowerPoint presentation, FAQs, conversation prompts such as anecdotes from the School-Based Management Pilot, attendance sheets, reflection sheets, and feedback sheets to capture responses to Discussion Paper questions.

The early phases of face to face consultation focused on forums for principals. Later forums were conducted for teachers, other staff, students, parents and community members. A facilitation booklet and supporting resources were also developed to help principals conduct consultation forums in their own school communities.

By the end of the ten week consultation period, a total of 444 forums had been conducted across the state, attended by 6,167 participants.

**The table below contains a breakdown of attendees:**

CONTRIBUTOR TYPE	NO.
Principal	1,807
Teacher	1,894
Other staff	1,358
Student	508
Parent	412
Other	188

## Online forum

A moderated online forum for *Local Schools, Local Decisions* was hosted through the NSW Government's online consultation portal at:

<http://haveyoursay.nsw.gov.au/localschools>. This was the first time that the department has engaged in a public online forum about major reforms.

The online forum enabled any interested party to post responses and engage in conversations about the reform themes. Those posting to the forum could choose to do so anonymously and could contribute to as many or as few discussion questions and reform themes as they chose.

The forum was promoted on Twitter, Facebook and in media releases to generate interest and encourage participation.

By the end close of the consultation, the site had received 3,938 visits. 312 people registered on the online forum with 198 of these posting a total of 687 comments.

## Written submissions

Contributions were also invited through written submissions. 4,042 written submissions were received from individuals and 14 from representative groups and departmental directorates via post, fax or email.

The written submissions from individuals included 4,020 sent by the NSW Teachers Federation on behalf of its members or, in the case of approximately 700 of these submissions, faxed directly by members.

Around 95 per cent of the form submissions contained the unedited text prepared by the Federation. Where the form submissions included additional statements about one or more reform outcomes, the amended content from each of these submissions was identified and included in the analysis.

Submissions from key stakeholders can be found on the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* section of the department's website.

## Interim report

In week 8 of the consultation an Interim Report was released. The **Interim Report** summarised the emerging themes from contributions received up to 28 October 2011. It provided an opportunity for principals, teachers, school and other staff, parents, students and the broader public education community to reflect on the feedback received to that point and to consider it in preparing contributions in the final two weeks of the consultation period. The report noted that the themes and emphasis could change as contributions from other types of participants increased.

## How contributions were processed

Each individual comment, idea, or suggestion recorded from face to face sessions, the online forum and from written submissions was logged and entered as a separate entry in a purpose built relational database. The complete data set contained over 30,000 entries.

The database enabled responses to be tracked and filtered to assist in analysis. For example, the database facilitates easy comparisons of differences between geographic regions within NSW, such as between metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions.

All contributions from each face to face forum were recorded on feedback sheets. A reflection sheet was also submitted by the facilitator of each consultation session to capture any key points of emphasis in the discussion. Every response recorded on every feedback sheet was entered into the database under the relevant reform theme and discussion question.

Written submissions and comments posted to the online forum were also entered into the database. Most written submissions addressed the reforms as set out in the discussion paper. Where responses were structured differently, or raised issues additional to the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* reforms, the content was reviewed and matched with the relevant reform themes.

While the quantity of responses helped to identify priorities and concerns about implementation of the reform directions, the consultation was not a vote. Analysis of contributions focused on the value of the ideas and how they support *Local Schools, Local Decisions* as an effective policy framework for the future.

## How contributions were analysed

The contributions in the database formed a rich data set that was analysed using qualitative methods.

Data entry staff entered all contributions into the database according to the five reform themes and 17 discussion questions from the consultation documents.

Analysts then read and labelled the data with organising codes for further analysis. Analysts regularly discussed the process of coding, shared exemplars and cross-checked coding to ensure consistency. A sample of approximately 25 per cent was progressively cross-checked to validate coding.

Contributions were sorted by reform themes and discussion questions for further analysis. This included a line-by-line scrutiny of all responses to identify content themes emerging from the data. Content themes were derived by categorising and summarising contributions that contained closely related ideas, analysing the frequency with which codes occurred, workshopping

similarities and differences in codes across different geographical regions and types of contributors, and by analysing the relationships between codes.

This work was supported by computer assisted qualitative data analysis. This helped to improve the efficiency of coding and acted as a useful validation step to check interpretation and emphasis.

Analysts worked closely together to validate coding and consulted experienced senior educators to confirm interpretations of key terms. Analysts also had the benefit of access to reflection sheets completed by consultation forum facilitators. These helped to maintain the richness of the data set through the coding process and assisted the interpretation of codes in the findings section.



GPO Box 33  
Sydney NSW 2001  
Australia  
T 9561 8000  
[www.det.nsw.edu.au](http://www.det.nsw.edu.au)

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