

Chapter 1

Highlights of 1998

Revision of the national goals for schooling

At the time of its adoption, the 1989 State and Commonwealth Education Ministers' agreement to a set of Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia was hailed as a historic commitment to improving Australian schooling within a framework of national collaboration. It gave rise to a number of collaborative ventures that have had important implications for schooling in this country over the last ten years. Among the activities that have their origins in the original set of goals are:

- the development of the annual National Report on Schooling
- a major collaborative exercise in curriculum review and development
- a number of initiatives designed to provide teacher professional development
- the implementation of a set of strategies aimed at reducing the educational disadvantage faced by students from minority groups
- the establishment of links between school, training and work.

During 1998, a great deal of progress was made in revising the goals to ensure their continuing relevance to Australian schooling. The Ministers' decision to engage in this process represents a major commitment to the notion of continuous improvement through national collaboration that underwrote the original initiative in 1989. The process has been characterised by wide consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

In considering the revision of the goals, Ministers were anxious to ensure that any changes properly took account of the new

circumstances facing Australia's schools and their students. In addition, they required that the revised goals be appropriate for the economic and social conditions prevailing in Australia as the country faces the new millennium. To this end, the revised goals will be accompanied by performance targets, where they are appropriate, and will provide for annual reporting of progress towards the achievement of these targets. It is likely, therefore, that the nature of this report will change over the next few years to accommodate the more focussed approach to its task.

Progress towards national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy

In 1998, for the first time in the history of Australian schooling, students underwent assessment designed to enable national reporting of literacy achievement against agreed benchmarks. In all States and Territories, year 3 students from all government and some non-government schools were assessed using state-based assessment regimes and the results were then subjected to an agreed equating process. The end point of the process was the determination of the proportion of students who had reached the benchmark in various aspects of literacy. The outcomes of the process for 1998 are described later in this report.

The great significance of the 1998 development lies not so much in the result achieved in 1998, but in the implication for the future measurement of literacy and numeracy achievement in our schools. Up until this time, there has been no national approach to assessment, and aggregation of the results obtained from various system level programs has been impossible. This has meant that, apart from the snapshot

provided by the 1996 National Schools English Literacy Survey, as a nation we have a limited picture of the literacy and numeracy levels in our schools.

One result of this shortcoming has been that debate on the topic has been informed by very limited data on the state of literacy in our schools. As well, we have had no nationally recognised data that would enable measurement of change over time, or that could provide an Australia-wide picture of the relative performances of various groups within the community.

The beginning of the process of using state-based assessment regimes to provide national benchmark performance data is an important step in Australian school education. It allows States to continue to monitor in the manner that is accepted and recognised in their own jurisdictions and at the same time facilitates the building of a national picture.

Vocational education and training in schools

There were major developments in school-based vocational education and training in 1998. These developments were evident in the number of students involved, the number of industry groups participating and the introduction of arrangements for assessment and credentialling.

Schools have always had an interest in fostering close links with industry and have been concerned that students moving from schools to the workforce should be appropriately skilled to make the transition in a manner that is beneficial to both student and employer. Furthermore, most systems have, at some stage, had secondary schools that gave priority to technical education and training and maintained a strong

vocational agenda. However, there have also been periods when school educators saw their major role as the provision of a broad general education and many believed that involvement in vocational education and training was likely to detract from that fundamental purpose.

Developments in recent years have demonstrated that, far from weakening the provision of general education, involvement in vocational education can enrich and improve the school experience of students. Evidence collected in some States during 1998 has shown that students participating in VET in Schools programs are more motivated, less likely to drop out of school and more likely to enter the workforce than students who are not in these programs.

Experience during 1998 showed that the inclusion of vocational education in the senior secondary curriculum provided a range of pathways to suit the different interests and needs of students. Furthermore, the articulation of these programs with apprenticeships, traineeships, employment and further training has resulted in an education system more closely geared to the needs of today's young people. Increasingly, many post-compulsory students are successfully combining school, work and training in an exciting and fulfilling program.

It is also apparent that the expansion of VET in Schools programs is assisting the Australian economy by producing school leavers who are more likely to engage in further training and education before they enter the workforce. As well, those that do move directly to employment are more job-ready than students who have not been involved in such programs.

A feature of the development of VET in Schools programs has been the willingness of employers and industry groups to become involved, even though their participation often entails initial inconvenience and expense. The fact that industry has been an essential part of a 95 per cent increase in students participating in these programs between 1996 and 1998 is a strong indication of their perceived worth.