

The Learning Assistance Program: A Reflective Study

June 2006

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Acknowledgements

Meredith Martin, Vanessa Jackson and Mary Ellen Burke were most appreciative of the commitment and passion of the all the people who gave their time so willingly to share their work and stories with us.

We were particularly interested in the examples of whole school programs where all students regardless of their learning needs were being supported in a range of ways in regular classrooms. The inclusive nature of the programs and the emphasis on measuring student outcomes were impressive in these schools that clearly 'owned all students'. The focus of all these schools was clearly to get the best outcomes for all students regardless of needs. They were very proud, and so they should be, to share their results with us.

We would also like to thank the students and parents who are involved in the Learning Assistance Program for taking the time to share their stories. They provided a very human face to the project.

We spoke to the many peak groups who represent teachers, parents and students. They are clearly committed to the best interests of their constituents, and expressed their views on the issues that concerned them as well as the strengths and benefits of the Learning Assistance Program. We would like to thank them for helping us to get as full and detailed a picture of the program as we could.

This has been a very rewarding study to undertake because at its heart was the undeniable focus of all participants on how to better support the learning of all students in schools.

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Executive Summary

The Learning Assistance Program (LAP) was established in 2004 with a 3 year funding period. Its purpose is to assist students enrolled in regular classes K-12 who are having difficulty in literacy, numeracy or language. It also focuses on building the capacity of classroom teachers to provide effective support to students experiencing difficulties in these basic areas of learning. This also includes students with mild intellectual disabilities and language disorders.

The Learning Assistance Team in Disability Programs Directorate, Access and Equity (Schools Group) has commissioned an independent reflective study of LAP. The results of this study will inform the consultative process that will shape the future of LAP.

The framework for the reflective study has been provided by the *Review of Support for Students with Low Support Needs Enrolled in Regular Classes (Parkins W, 2002)*.

All regions provided information by interviews and questionnaires. In addition three regions were studied in more depth with focus groups, structured interviews and visits to schools. In the pilot regions parents and schools also received questionnaires. Key school organizations and community groups were consulted.

All sources of information were collated and a summary of the findings are presented below under headings corresponding to the terms of reference in the Parkins Report (2002).

FINDINGS

The overall view of all stakeholder groups towards LAP is a positive one. There were many benefits for students, teachers and schools.

Allocation

The recommendation for the allocation of support teacher learning (STLA) positions based on the BST, ELLA and SNAP results was implemented in the LAP for the 2004-2006 period and this has been overwhelmingly positively received.

A 3 year funding period based on a process that largely uses state wide assessment scores should be maintained for the allocation of STLA and funding for the LAP in the next allocation period. Some adjustments based on enrolments and school based data may also enhance the process but the most equitable process does appear to

be the state wide results. An area for ongoing consideration should be to allocate on an average score over time and not to 'punish' schools that are achieving above average outcomes by using their allocation very effectively.

Guidelines for allocation at a regional level should not restrict adjustments to any local inequities that may exist. Regions should also include some process of addressing any changing needs which occur during the funding period. This in particular relates to new schools and changing populations.

Regions should be given suggestions for how to allocate and support small schools but the actual arrangements should be determined and managed locally.

The process of allocation must be totally transparent at both the state and regional level.

Categorisation

The non categorical approach was not nearly as great an issue as it may have appeared in the past. This was the case so long as schools were very confident that levels of support were going to be at least maintained or increased. Students with behaviour problems were seen by the majority of respondents to be appropriate for LAP.

Any change to the LAP 'categories' must be properly resourced.

The only group of students whom the majority of respondents felt should not be included in a non categorical LAP were those with significant mental health problems and severe behaviour disorders.

Schools must have access to appropriate and sufficient expertise to support the different needs of a wider range of students. This issue relates to professional development as well as service delivery models.

Schools which siloed the positions and funding were less able to meet the needs of all students with learning support. They noted numbers of students in these schools who were 'falling between the cracks'. These were the students with mild intellectual disabilities and language disorders.

Whole school programs were better able to produce outcomes for more students and showed significant value adding to state wide and other school assessments. In these cases there were excellent examples of capacity building of all staff in the skills of meeting the learning needs of a range of students.

Service Delivery Models

The general view of respondents can be summarised by a comment from the Secondary Principals Council - *"In terms of the big picture it is a successful model."*

It is also a model that is extremely flexible and allows for each school to cater for local needs. This flexibility has led to a highly creative and effective use of resources in many schools.

In schools where the focus of service delivery is on building the capacity of the teachers to support their students in the classroom very positive consequences are being reported.

Although schools were able to present student outcome data this was not necessarily being used to make service delivery decisions at a regional level. The issue of accountability for the LAP resources needs to be followed up.

The existence of special language, reading and early support classes is a more controversial issue that requires further and more objective investigation.

Professional Learning

There is without a doubt a common view that the STLA position is a highly skilled role.

STLAs must be highly trained and qualified to do such an important job effectively.

There was a need for initial training and then continuous, systematic professional support for STLAs. If some of this is to be provided by the APLA then they similarly need on going professional support.

The management and operation of Learning Support Teams was highlighted as an area of training need. Given the importance of their role many schools were unsure of how to effectively utilise this resource.

The Learning Assistance Program: a Reflective Study

March -June 2006

Introduction

The Learning Assistance Team in Disability Programs Directorate, Access and Equity (Schools Group) has commissioned Martin and Associates, an independent Special Education and Training organization to complete a reflective study of the Learning Assistance Program (LAP). The results of this study will inform the consultative process that will shape the future of LAP.

The framework for the reflective study has been provided by the *Review of Support for Students with Low Support Needs Enrolled in Regular Classes (Parkins W, 2002)*. Parkins undertook his review and made recommendations in regard to four frames of reference:

- 1) *Assess the current criteria and processes for the identification of students with low support needs who require additional support and report on possible improvements and the efficiency of Health Department involvement.*
- 2) *Propose ways of consolidating and better targeting the range of support programs currently provided to students in regular classes who have disabilities (low support needs) or learning difficulties.*
- 3) *Propose a resource allocation methodology based on the support needs of individual students in the context of their specific educational setting/school and the availability and type of support available from district and state programs.*
- 4) *Comment on how training and development initiatives and curriculum support documents could assist schools and districts to meet the educational needs of students with low support needs.*

The *Learning Assistance Program (LAP)* was designed and implemented as a result of the recommendations from the Parkins Report (2002).

The Learning Assistance Program (LAP)

LAP was established in 2004 with a 3 year funding period. Its purpose is to assist students enrolled in regular classes K-12 who are having difficulty in literacy, numeracy or language. It also focuses on building the capacity of classroom teachers to provide effective support to students experiencing difficulties in these basic areas of learning. This also includes students with mild intellectual disabilities and language disorders. Students may access both funding and support teachers learning assistance (STLAs) through this program.

The model of support provided to students with learning difficulties is underpinned by international, national and local research.

LAP provided a total of \$105 million worth of resources in the 2004-2006 funding period. This included:

- 1,357 STLAs in primary and secondary schools, including 18.4 STLAs purchased by schools from additional LAP funding for the three year period.
- Over \$8.5 million allocated annually to 1,997 schools.

STLAs are allocated to primary schools on the results achieved in the Basic Skills Test (BST) and in secondary schools on the basis of English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) and Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program (SNAP) results.

The model of service delivery for LAP is explained below for schools, regions and the state.

Schools:

The basis of LAP in a school is the learning support team which is a group of staff who are responsible for planning for all students, including those with special learning needs. Most schools also have some allocation of STLA positions that then form part of the learning support team. Under LAP, school learning support teams have the flexibility to choose how to use the resources that they have been allocated to plan support for students needing additional assistance in the basic areas of learning. This may include professional learning for staff, additional teacher time for program development, implementation and coordination, opportunities for teachers to visit other schools to look at exemplary programs or providing teacher's aide special time for tuition support.

Schools are expected to report in their school management plans on the use of resources to improve learning outcomes for students with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Regions:

Each of the Department's 10 regions has a School Education Director (SED) with overall responsibility for the implementation of LAP.

In all but two Regions (North Coast and New England) the Regional Student Support Coordinator, Disability Programs has responsibility for the management of the program across the region with the daily operation administered by regional personnel such as student services officers.

In addition to the STLAs in schools there is a regional learning assistance support team. These teams consist of:

- *Assistant Principals Learning Assistance (APLAs)*, who provide local coordination and professional support for STLAs and also have a flexible STLA teaching load (0.2-0.6),
- *Designated Support Teachers Learning Assistance (DSTLAs)*, who work across regions with students with significant learning difficulties and their teachers in their home schools,
- *STLAs (Early School Support)* who work with students K-2 with mild intellectual disabilities in regular classes and their teachers,
- *STLAs (Reading)* who provide intensive short term support for students with significant reading difficulties usually in special classes,
- *STLAs (Language)* who provide specialist support to students with significant language difficulties in special regular classes or through an outreach model supporting students and their teachers in regular classes,
- Other regional personnel as appropriate e.g. Quality Teaching, Literacy and Mathematics Consultants.

The purpose of these additional regional positions is to provide professional learning for STLA networks and class teachers to assist in identifying and supporting students experiencing difficulties with literacy and numeracy. They also provide specialist support to students with significant learning difficulties where schools need additional assistance. These positions are actually based in schools although they are a regional resource.

State Office:

Dalwood Assessment Centre/Palm Avenue School is a joint NSW Health and Education and Training facility for primary students with significant learning difficulties in isolated country areas of the state. This facility provides specialist assessment and intensive intervention for students through residential and outreach services.

The Jill Sherlock Memorial Library, based in Oatlands Public School, provides learning difficulties resources to schools and teachers across the state.

The Learning Assistance Team in Disability Programs Directorate, Access and Equity (Schools Group) provides state-wide support by:

- developing state policy and guidelines involving consultation with other directorates, regions and community and school organisations
- allocating resources based on need e.g. STLAs and annual funding
- monitoring of the program state-wide
- supporting the *State Literacy and Numeracy Plan 2006-2008*
- developing support materials for STLAs and schools
- assisting other state office directorates in the development of procedures and materials to assist students with disabilities and learning difficulties
- assisting regions to build their capacity to provide for students experiencing difficulties in learning, including those with disabilities
- liaising with key parent and community organisations in relation to supporting students with learning difficulties
- liaising with other government departments and agencies.

Allocation Process for 2004-2006

Notional allocations of funding and support teachers learning assistance (STLA) positions were provided to each of the then 40 districts based on the literacy, numeracy and language learning needs of students as indicated through state-wide assessments: BST, ELLA and SNAP. Late in 2003 representative district committees determined specific allocations of STLAs and funding to primary and secondary schools for the 3 year period 2004-2006. The allocation process to primary and secondary schools differed. The secondary district committees moderated STLA allocations to secondary schools; however the funding to secondary schools was based entirely on need. In contrast the primary district committees were able to moderate both the STLA positions and the funding to primary schools.

Each district was required to have at least one DSTLA for primary schools. Most secondary schools did not choose to have these positions and so almost all the STLA positions were allocated to secondary schools.

Focus of the Reflective Study

It is important to note that a review or evaluation of LAP has not been attempted. This reflective study is instead a picture of the program as it has operated in schools and regions for the past 2 and a half years.

The methodology and findings have focused on the following four major headings which address the Parkins Report recommendations:

- 1) Allocation of the Resources
- 2) Categorisation of students in LAP
- 3) Service Delivery Model
- 4) Professional Learning and Support Materials

Methodology

The LAP Reflective Study has employed a number of investigative processes and involved a wide range of participants and stakeholders at the state, regional and local school level. At a state level key organizations which represent students, parents and teachers were consulted and structured interviews were conducted.

All 10 regions were consulted via structured interviews with each Student Support Coordinator, Disability Programs and questionnaires to regional staff.

Three regions, Hunter/Central Coast, New England and Western Sydney were studied in more depth and were called the Pilot Regions.

Details of the actual data collection techniques and stakeholder groups for the state and 10 regions are listed in the tables below. These tables are then followed by details of the pilot regions' data collection.

DATA COLLECTION PROFILE

1. State wide

STAKEHOLDER	DATA SOURCE
Key School Organisations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Primary Principal's Association ▪ Secondary Principals Council ▪ Public Schools Principals Forum ▪ NSW Teachers Federation. 	Structured interviews with representatives
Key Community Organisations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents and Citizens Association of NSW ▪ Family Advocacy ▪ SPELD NSW ▪ Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW ▪ Learning Links ▪ Australian Association of Special Educators. 	Structured interviews with representatives
Parents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Questionnaires sent by parent groups 	Total of 51 received

2. Regions

STAKEHOLDERS	DATA SOURCE
<p>10 Regions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School Education Directors (SEDs) ○ Student Support Coordinators, Disability Programs ○ Student Services Officer ○ Disability Program Consultants ○ APLAs 	<p>Questionnaires</p> <p>Structured Interviews and Questionnaires</p> <p>Questionnaires</p> <p>Questionnaires</p> <p>Questionnaires</p>

3. Pilot Region Data Collection

Each of the pilot regions were visited by members of the study team. There was a combination of focus groups, structured interviews, questionnaires and observations. Details for each pilot region are as follows:

Focus Groups

Focus group discussions were held in each of the three pilot regions. The composition of the different focus groups for each of the Regions was as follows:

Hunter/Central Coast

- SEDs and Student Support Coordinator (Disability Programs)
- Assistant Principals Learning Assistance (APLAs); Student Services Officer.

New England

- Principal Small school, Student Services Officer, SED, Student Support Coordinator (Disability Programs)
- Tamworth Regional Office staff: SED; 3 APLAs; Director of Quality Teaching; Primary School Principal; 2 DSTLA,

Western Sydney

- APLAs, DSTLAs and Student Support Coordinator (Disability Programs)
- SED
- Primary Principal, STLA, Classroom Teacher
- Secondary Principal, Head of Teaching and Learning, 3 STLAs

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were also sent to 30 schools in each of 3 pilot regions. One for staff such as Principals, Executive Staff, School Counsellors, Support Teachers Learning Assistance (STLA), Classroom Teachers and Teacher Aides (special), and the other for parents. A table of responses is below. Responses from a total of 215 school staff were received. The breakdown by position held is shown below:

School Questionnaire Respondents

Position	Frequency	Percent of Total
Principal	31	15
Executive	43	20
School Counsellor	10	5
Classroom Teacher	71	33
STLA	36	17
STLA language	3	1
STLA Reading	3	1
STLA Early School Support	5	2
Teachers Aide Special	6	2
Other (did not identify position)	7	4
Total	215	100%

A total of 197 parents responded to the questionnaire distributed by schools.

Visits to Regions and Schools

A sample of schools in each of the three pilot regions were selected by the regions to visit, and interviews were conducted with students, staff and parents, as below:

Pilot Region Visits

REGION	REGIONAL STAFF	PRIMARY SCHOOL	SECONDARY SCHOOL
HUNTER-CENTRAL COAST	2 Senior Education Directors 1 Student Support Coordinator 1 Student Services Officer 4 APLA s	Garden Suburb PS Principal 1 STLA(Reading) STLA(Language x 2) Students Budgiewoi PS Principal Assistant Principal STLA Windale PS Assistant Principal STLA	Belmont High School Principal Assistant Principal STLA

NEW ENGLAND	1. 2 Senior Education Directors Student Support Coordinator 3 APLAs Designated STLA Welfare Officer 2. SED, 3 APLAs, 2 DSTLAs, Primary Principal, Team Leader Quality Teaching	Armidale City Primary School Principal STLA Language STLA Reading STLA ESSP School Counsellor 5 Parents APLA	Oxley High School Principal Deputy Principal STLA Aboriginal Welfare Officer
WESTERN SYDNEY	Student Support Coordinator 4 APLAs 4 Designated STLAS Student Services Officer Disability Programs Consultant	Maryong Public School Principal STLA Class Teacher Teacher's Aide	Authur Phillip High School Principal Head Teacher (Learning) 3 STLAS

Results from all the questionnaires were collated on an EXCELL spreadsheet and analysed using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)*.

Findings

The overall view of all stakeholder groups towards LAP is a positive one. Information from the different data sources was reasonably consistent. However, where there were differences of opinion these will be noted in the following sections.

The benefits of the program noted by School and Regional Staff on the questionnaires were:

For students:

- Improved self esteem
- *"Students loved not being withdrawn"*
- Improved literacy and numeracy
- Improved individual progress across KLAs
- Better early identification of students with needs
- Better assessment and planning
- Students are involved in their learning
- There were benefits to all students, not just the target students.

Benefits for Teachers were:

- Team teaching
- Specialist help for students and teachers
- Frees up teachers for other students
- Teachers like getting support and professional development
- Enables small groups and individual attention
- There is now a consistency of staff

Benefits for Schools were:

- 3 year funding cycle
- Flexibility
- Capacity building of teachers
- Whole school approach
- Freed up school counsellors
- Schools now owned the problems
- Less paperwork
- A coordinated approach
- Raised expectations of students when IM classes were closed.
"There was a shift in mindset. People now expect more of the students and they are rising to the expectations".

The aspect of the program which was most appreciated was the allocation of the positions and funding on a 3 year basis and the flexibility it allowed the schools to manage the resources to best meet their local needs.

A number of issues were also noted in the questionnaires although they were far outweighed by the positive comments. The concerns were:

- Not enough funding for the program
- Do not punish schools who do a good job by reducing their allocation in the next funding round
- Need trained STLAs
- Big concern that students with mild intellectual disabilities and language disorders are missing out on the LAP resources
- Students with multiple problems also miss out
- Students with significant and Emotional Disturbance labels are not appropriate for the LAP.
- How to provide a service to small schools.

Finally the comments also included some suggested changes to the LAP.

- Increase the number of STLAs
- Expand the categories of students included in the program
- Include students with behaviour problems in LAP
- More support for High Schools needed (e.g. from APLAs)
- More professional development especially for behaviour and language areas
- Need more access to Speech Pathologists
- Increase the flexibility in the program.

Parent Views

Parent views are reported separately because they were asked to comment generally about LAP for their child. Below is a summary of the views from the 187 questionnaires returned from the pilot regions, the 51 questionnaires from the Peak organisations and from discussions with parents at the school visits.

While most respondents were parents of children in grades 2 to grade 5, they ranged from kindergarten to year 11. The majority were students who had received support from an STLA. However, all LAP services were included in the returned questionnaires and parent interviews.

All but two parents reported improvements in their children's performance-especially in reading and spelling, and in their confidence in learning. Only two parents expressed negative comments in regard to the program: that their children had not improved. Several would have liked more frequent support for their child.

The other parents who commented were positive about the program: it had provided a great benefit, or made a *“huge difference”*. Some of the parent comments were:

“He didn’t enjoy school or learning, his attitude has changed and on some occasions will have a go, where before was inclined to give up.”(Year 6)

“The program has had a huge effect on my son’s ability to succeed in all areas and as a result he is much more confident.”(Year 4)

“Reading doesn’t scare me anymore.”

“I am scared they are going to take it away. I chose this program because I don’t want a label for my son.”(Year 1 Parent re ESSP)

“My son used to just ‘grunt’, now you would never know there was anything wrong and he has just started High School.” (Parent whose son received STLA support with language in Kindergarten and Year 1).

The findings from all the remaining interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and visits are organised under four headings:

1. Allocation of Resources
2. Categories of Students
3. Service Delivery Models
4. Professional Learning and Support Materials

Allocation of Resources

Allocation Cycle

As already noted, the overwhelming positive aspect of *LAP* was the allocation of the resources on a 3 year basis. All stakeholder groups had this view for both the positions and the funding. Over 90 percent of all questionnaire responses suggested that 3 years was good. A similar percent agreed with the positive benefits of the flexibility the program allowed.

The 3 year funding process enabled schools to plan a service delivery model and to implement it with certainty. Schools were pleased not to have to waste *‘precious time applying for funding’*. The continuity of staff and positions was a great bonus for LAP in schools. These views were held across the State in all types of schools and with all interest groups.

“The general feeling is that people understand it and can plan over three years, people are happy.”(P& C)

“Principals love the allocation to schools.” (Primary Principals’ Association)

“It is good to know that what you have is for three years.” (Teachers Federation).

All stakeholders wanted to continue the 3 year funding cycle although a few issues were noted. One suggestion was to allocate the funding on the same 3 year cycle as the Strategic Planning Process. To do this the next allocation would need to be for 2 years as the Strategic Planning cycle commenced in 2006.

Another issue was the need to be able to respond to changes that may occur within the 3 year time frame, such as fast growth areas and new schools coming on line. The Primary Principals Association was particularly concerned about this issue. As all funding and positions were fully allocated at the beginning of the 3 year cycle, a number of schools, found the changes to their school populations difficult to cope with after the first or second year. It was however noted that both these situations are usually known well in advance and so the Regions should factor this into their allocation to schools on a local basis. The alternative was for State Office to retain some funds for this situation but this was not a popular solution. Several regions allocated all the money as soon as it was received but noted that there would be some changes as new schools came on line. It was also noted that the Designated STLA positions were designed to cope with these ‘unforeseen’ changes. However, no school or region felt this actually solved the problem and the use of these positions was unsatisfactory as the resource was too stretched.

Process of Allocation

The allocation of the positions and the funding based on the State-wide tests was generally seen as the fairest process. However, while this view was quite strongly held at a Regional level (over 77% agreeing), the school staff were more ambivalent (40% agreeing). With the school responses about 20% did not know if state-wide testing was equitable or not. This is most likely because most schools were not directly involved in the allocation process.

A number of schools noted in interviews that they now are very aware of the advantages of having as many students sit for state-wide tests as possible. That is, students who in the past may not have preformed well did not sit. Now that there are additional special provisions (e.g. a reader) to assist in state assessments, regions (81%) and schools (67%)

agreed that it is possible for more students with disabilities and difficulties in learning to participate.

There were concerns by some key organizations about whether or not the arrangements around the sitting of the BST were equitable for the students that they represented. Although readers were now available to students, they maintained that many parents were not aware of this, that information had not "trickled down" and that some students were still not allowed to sit the tests.

The Primary Principals Association in particular suggested that the allocation should place a greater emphasis on school based data and enrolment trends. Views on how to modify the state-wide results for the purpose of allocating LAP funding and positions varied according to what would benefit the particular region. Some wanted distance, mobility and social factors considered, others did not.

A number of principals expressed a view that there is a need to get away from an assumption that all learning needs are socio-economically based. Some examples were given by regions where the previous allocation was modified by SES data which led to some serious inequities in allocations across a region. For example, some very well known areas with serious social issues were felt to be vastly over resourced with LAP allocations compared to other areas in the region that were seriously under resourced and yet had great needs. These issues need to be discussed and managed at a Regional level so that these apparent inequities can be sorted out. Guidelines which restrict such changes will be harmful to the program as a whole.

Another concern expressed by many different groups and summarized by the Teachers Federation was the issue of how to allocate resources to small schools.

" There is an ongoing issue in regard to small schools. Small schools get the scraps. How you provide a meaningful allocation to small schools is very important-the "winner takes all" attitude is not helpful." (Teachers Federation).

There were no simple solutions to this problem. Regions were looking for some guidance from State Office, although they also wanted to make the allocation to the small schools according to local needs. Principals of small schools received such small amounts of STLA assistance. Some received only 1 day per term. Yet they said the best gains were made when the support teacher could visit 3 or 4 times per week even for a very short time. To accommodate this it was better to allow the Principal to select their own staff member from the local area

rather than share one with other schools and only see them once per fortnight or less.

A very real concern of schools was that if the allocation is based on State Wide test results then there is little incentive to improve student scores as there is then a risk of their allocation being reduced. This was seen as a process of punishing the schools that do 'best' in assisting students with learning needs. Suggestions to overcome this 'problem' included averaging the results over 3 years and don't change the allocation to any school without input from a local committee or group. Again, if regions are allowed to do the allocations to schools on a local basis, then this problem should be largely addressed. When allocations are made to schools or groups of schools by State Office there is a definite loss of local adjustment according to local needs and this was seen as a big issue by the regions and schools.

Knowledge of the Process

Transparency of the allocation process was raised by a number of different stakeholders as an issue. State Office set guidelines for the composition of the committees at a District level in the last allocation round. For the 2007 allocation the Regional structures have now changed and there are no Districts within Regions. It was noted in this study that Regions are operating in many different ways, some from the central Region and others on management groups of schools of varying numbers. While a number of stakeholders wanted LAP allocations to bypass the Regional Offices, there was a general view that all resources should be given to each Region who would then make a decision as to the actual process of allocation within their region. Some guidelines about the composition of committees and clear and consistent guidelines on how to allocate were acceptable but no region wanted more direction than that.

The groups representing parents also had opinions on their roles in regard to regional allocation to schools: they wanted to be on regional allocation committees, and wanted more information so that their participation could be active, not token. This all hinged on having enough information to better support parents.

Along with a transparent process to all stakeholders was the need to provide clear information on the actual LAP program. It was noted at all levels that knowledge of the program was rather misunderstood and parents in particular were the least informed. The brochure explaining LAP program was not suitable for parents and many teachers had little idea of the program except if they were directly involved.

Not all parents were aware of the program and the assistance it was providing. The lack of information, they maintained begins at the Department's website which is hard to navigate. The brochure is also considered to be inadequate, and peak groups maintained that when parents asked they would refer them to the brochure and the parents would then ask the school and be told *"there's no money left"*. On the whole parents would like to know about the program and how allocation to students is decided.

Parents would also like to be more involved in helping to decide how their child is supported. They would like to be on Learning Support Teams for example, *"They also felt that there should be a parent representative on every Learning Support Team."*(Family Advocacy)

Summary

The Parkins recommendation for the allocation of support teacher learning (STLA) positions based on the BST, ELLA and SNAP results was implemented in LAP for the 2004-2006 period and this has been overwhelmingly positively received.

A 3 year funding cycle should be maintained.

Funds should be allocated to regions so that local needs in allocating to schools can be accommodated.

The allocation process should be transparent and include the views of Peak Group representatives and parents.

There needs to be clearer information about LAP which is accessible to schools and parents.

Categorisation

The Parkins Report (2002) recommended that positions called support teacher learning (STL) be created and be responsible for providing support to students experiencing difficulties in learning, irrespective of cause. It was recommended that this take place in pilot districts. In fact LAP created STLA positions across the whole state. In addition funding was also allocated to all regions for distribution to schools for other LAP uses. This included the employment of teachers, teacher aides (special), program coordination, teacher release, training and development or transfer of duty.

After 2 and a half years it is now possible to see what the general view of the changes to the partial non categorical move has been.

Outcomes/benefits of Non Categorisation

The removal of assessment that identified and categorised some groups of students in LAP for the purposes of funding allocation had some very positive outcomes as noted by many stakeholders. The Primary Principal Association representative said that *'non-categorisation is fabulous'*.

"In the past if our kids don't fit in boxes and then you can't support them." (Primary Principals Association).

The most striking outcome was the 'ownership' of all students with learning support needs that was expressed by schools. There was a strong view that schools must assist students in having their learning needs met within the mainstream school context. There was little reference to 'referring' students with learning support problems onto another specialist.

"STLA resources have been very well used and received by the whole school community. One of our STLAs has received a Premier's Education Excellence Award and the school has been nominated for state and national recognition for our improvement in literacy."
(Secondary School Executive Teacher)

Another finding was the apparent benefits of the LAP model to students who were not targeted for support. These benefits were the result of providing some extra support such as team teaching and of classroom teachers using the techniques of adjusting curriculum to increase student access to the content for all students. There were some impressive examples in schools visited. For example a teacher who was teaching the lowest stream of students using techniques provided by the STLA which resulted in the gains they made outstripping so called 'more able students'. One high school head teacher commented:

"I learnt more in 2 hours with the STLA about how to teach than in 20 years of practice".

In schools where the learning support was provided on a whole school basis, rather than on a student basis, there was little discussion of labels or 'categorisation of students'. There was also outstanding enthusiasm for LAP supported by school wide results. This was for both Primary and Secondary schools.

Although all schools wanted more resources, the advantages of the 3 year LAP support resulted in some exciting school wide

implementation, within whatever resources the individual schools could muster. In these cases the students and the funding were not 'categorised' but rather, organised on a needs basis across the whole school. All students were tracked, prevention programs, usually in literacy, were implemented and all classroom teachers were involved. The planning and implementation of such whole school programs were driven by an active Learning Support Team as illustrated by the following comment by one High School Principal:

"The Learning Support Team drives this whole school. It is at the pinnacle."

A few principals noted that although they were vehemently opposed to the dissolution of their support class for students with mild intellectual disability, they were now ready to concede that the fully integrated students have improved their academic performance and their self esteem. The Secondary Principals Council commented that the positions allocated to teachers for students with a mild intellectual disability should *"also become STLAs and be reallocated on the basis of need in 2009, after 3 years in the current school is completed"*.

School counsellors also agreed that their time was freed up from assessment and testing for LAP students.

Most parents were emphatic that they did not want their child labelled and were fully supportive of the non categorical model. Their main concern was that their child got the assistance and support they needed. They did not need or want labels for their child.

Increasing Inclusion in LAP

Perhaps one of the more controversial issues in this study was to consider whether there are any students who should or should not be included in the program. This was a very 'open ended' question put to all stakeholders in interviews and in the questionnaires. The findings were quite consistent across all stakeholders even though then opinions were quite split.

Approximately 50% of regional staff responses wanted to maintain the existing categories of students in the LAP program and half wanted to add additional categories. There were many who wanted a complete collapse of categories for funding and service to students. Their arguments were particularly strong for students with behaviour and social problems. It was noted that it was often not possible to separate many behaviour problems from learning problems. The separation of these issues was not in the best interests of the students as they generally had the same needs. Calling in different 'experts' eg an

Itinerant Teacher Behaviour rather than an STLA was considered an inefficient use of resources. Principals interviewed were prepared to put ISTB positions into schools:

“It makes sense to integrate the support for all students as the different conditions often result in the students having learning difficulties. Conversely the learning difficulties exacerbate behaviour”.

“Absorb them into LAP and let the school choose how to use it. You may lose expertise but it becomes a school based resource”. (Secondary Principals Council).

Schools were less conservative in their views on categorisation with about 75% wanting to add additional categories of students to LAP. There was general agreement that if further categories were to be added then the preferred students would be those with behaviour and/ or social problems, then those with autistic spectrum disorders (including Asperger’s Syndrome).

Exclusion from LAP

All stakeholder groups were least enthusiastic when it came to including students with significant mental health issues and serious behaviour problems in a less categorical funding model.

There were few reasons cited although many felt these students were particularly difficult to accommodate and specific expertise was required, including Mental Health input.

Issues with Non Categorisation

The main issue for schools if more students were to be included in a non categorical funding approach was the possible loss of resources. This was a very strongly held view across all stakeholders. There was a note of caution from the Teachers Federation: ***“We don't want to see a situation where kids are not identified -to the extent that the process goes down this path it is a negative, especially with the IM kids-the department wants to rid itself of this category”.***

The resource issue was raised in every forum. However, those who provided services on a discrete, individual student basis were far less likely to support non categorisation. In contrast, the schools that provided a whole school based learning support program had few issues except for a perceived possible reduction in resources. There were concerns raised in regard to the non categorical model about a lack of expertise. For example, could STLAs manage students with challenging behaviour and also other categories of specialisation, such as students with sensory problems.

In the whole school models that were observed there were students with a significant range of needs who were all being catered for. There was a mixture of in class support with a team teaching model and some small group work depending on the needs of the students in the particular lesson. In these schools students with mild intellectual disabilities (as well as those with more significant disabilities) were not considered an issue, any more than other students. Whereas in the withdrawal models students with mild ID were often said to be 'falling between the cracks'. That is, there were not enough resources to meet their needs.

While over 75% of stakeholders agreed that LAP was meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties, there were less (57%) who thought the needs of students with mild intellectual disabilities were being met. There was an even stronger view (50%) that students with language disorders were not having their needs met in LAP. The reasons were a lack of appropriate resources, such as access to speech pathologists, a lack of expertise and being prioritised lower for resources and assistance by individual schools. Teachers and STLAs expressed a view that they lacked the skills to meet the needs of students with language disorders in particular. In the rare instance where a teacher or STLA had access to a speech pathologist this was not such a problem. However, this was very rare and rather an historical accident where a speech pathologist remained from the past Special Education Centres.

Schools which had large amounts of funding due to the individually funded students with high support needs were very reluctant to do away with categories and labels for students. They were strongly of the opinion that they would lose resources for their school.

Stakeholders offered many suggestions for sources of funding that should be included in LAP funding to increase the program. By far the overwhelming suggestion was the inclusion of Itinerant Teachers for Behaviour. There was almost no support for the continuance of this position. Reading recovery positions were also mentioned by schools in all regions. There was a general view that this money would have been better allocated to LAP funding as it would serve a greater number of students and the reviewers met several students who had finished the Reading Recovery Program and then moved onto Intense Reading Support Classes.

Summary

The non categorical approach was not nearly as great an issue as it may have appeared in the past, so long as schools were very

confident that levels of support were going to be at least maintained or increased.

The only group of students whom the majority of respondents felt should not be included in a non categorical LAP were those with significant mental health problems and severe behaviour disorders. Schools must have access to appropriate and sufficient expertise to support the different needs of a wider range of students. This issue relates to professional development as well as service delivery models which are considered in the next sections.

Schools which 'siloe'd' the positions and funding were less able to meet the needs of all students with learning support. They noted numbers of students in these schools who were 'falling between the cracks'.

Whole school programs were able to produce outcomes for all students and showed significant value adding to state wide and other school assessments with all students receiving assistance. In these cases there were excellent examples of capacity building of all staff in the skills of meeting the learning needs of a range of students.

Perhaps the last word on categorisation should go to a parent who has a child supported by the LAP program:

"There is not one measure fixes all for these kids. STLA programs need to be understood as providing kids in the margins but not in the boxes with support that is essential for their basic human rights to an education."

Service Delivery Model

The Learning Assistance Program includes Support Teachers Learning Assistance (STLA), Designated Support Teachers Learning Assistance (DSTLA), Assistant Principals Learning Assistance (APLA) as well as a number of support classes (Reading), (Language) and (Early School Support). Other positions include Teacher Aide (Special) which schools purchase out of LAP funding. Each school has a Learning Support Team (LST) which is meant to coordinate the services to students with learning needs. Over 90% of the schools who responded to the questionnaires said that the school learning support team decides how the support is organised in a school.

While most schools said they valued the role of the LST there was also a view that more training was needed on how to run them more effectively.

Below are the study's findings in regard to the model of service delivery and in particular to the roles of personnel delivering the LAP support to students.

STLAs

The Parkins Report (2002) recommended that positions called support teacher learning (STL) be created and be responsible for providing support to students experiencing difficulties in learning, irrespective of cause. It was recommended that this take place in pilot districts. In fact LAP created STLA positions across the whole state. In addition funding was also allocated to all regions for distribution to schools for other uses, such as the employment of teacher aide (special), program coordination, teacher release, training and development or transfer of duty.

Schools could also purchase extra STLA time using LAP funds. Many schools were not aware of this option. However, those that did take advantage to increase part time positions to full time also benefited from all the entitlements that flowed on to a school from this teaching position. Schools that did this were very happy with this option.

After 2 and a half years it is now possible to see what the general view of this move has been.

Benefits of STLAs

STLAs were highly valued. This was especially in schools where the allocation was sufficient to provide frequent support to students in need.

The STLAs are the backbone of LAP. It is a highly skilled position. The position requires not only skills in adjusting curriculum for a range of student needs but also across all KLAs. The STLA is most effective when these adjustments and adaptations can be implemented by classroom teachers. Teachers commented that this model led to improved teacher skills in meeting the needs of all students and was referred to as a capacity building model.

"The STLAs team teach with classroom teachers to teach them to teach reading in all KLAs. Volunteers from each department then formed the school literacy committee." (High School Principal)

A more traditional model of withdrawing an individual or small groups of students out of the regular classroom is not considered best practice. Research does not support this model of service delivery. The opportunity for teachers to upskill in a withdrawal model is minimal. Many people also commented that the students themselves hate being withdrawn from class for extra support.

“A benefit of LAP is that support is given in the regular routine environment- the more kids that get it the less ‘different’ they feel when receiving support.” (School Counsellor)

The questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and school visits showed that the STLAs were providing support to schools in a number of ways. Almost 90% said they provided support in the classroom with the students’ teachers. About two thirds also provide some withdrawal support. Most schools who responded (90%) also use volunteers and peer tutors to support students with learning difficulties.

The effective use of STLA time and skills was definitely related to the skills of the STLA. Issues of having a meaningful allocation so the STLA can actually achieve something were also raised by many people.

Issues in Regard to STLAs

A number of issues were raised about STLAs. The main issue for STLAs is the level of training. That is, it was reported that a large number STLAs are untrained in Special Education.

Another issue is the split positions where an STLA is shared across a number of schools. This situation led to difficulties of offering support on a frequent basis, which is important for student outcomes. It was also a problem where the STLA did not feel that they belonged in a particular school and was therefore less valued and effective in bringing about whole school change. Principals would also like have a say in the appointment of STLAS to their school so that their particular needs could be met. Schools were very concerned that they have some choice in the actual person as they did not want an inappropriate appointment.

Teacher groups had a lot to say about STLAs, especially the kind of person doing the job. They were described as sometimes being **“refugees from the classroom”** but **“a good STLA is like a head teacher: They help out with aides, itinerants, submissions etc.”** (Secondary Principals Council).

The Primary Principals Association commented:

“Schools should have a greater say in the appointment of permanent STLAs as so much of the success of the program depends on the person and their expertise and qualifications.”

The Teachers Federation felt that schools were encouraged to spend money on teacher’s aides because they represented more hours of assistance to students, although the quality of the support is not as good as it would be if it was STLA support. This view was widely held by many stakeholders.

DSTLAs

In the 2004 LAP allocation each district was to have at least one designated STLA. This was the case for Primary schools however, the secondary schools allocated all STLA positions to schools. The DSLTA positions were thought to be one way to cater for a number of small schools and also as a means of addressing changes which may occur during the 3 year allocation period.

Overall, the positions were not highly regarded by the schools in this study but they were a valued position by the APLAs. Schools reported not getting much benefit from them and likened the position to the ITB where the intervention/support was short term and there was lots of wasted time with travel. There was no evidence of capacity building from these positions.

APLAs did value the positions as they responded to need on a referral basis and generally were able to respond to the most difficult cases. The people in these positions were generally thought to be highly skilled. The position itself was a problem in terms of efficiency and outcomes. Regions wanted the options to choose if and where to maintain these positions and did not want to be told how many to retain. This was especially so in a few cases where the DSTLA was supporting a number of small schools in a given geographical area.

APLAs

The APLA was generally a valued position by regional and school staff, especially in primary schools. The main roles of the position across the study were identified as professional development and support for the STLAs. The other main roles in order of decreasing priority were coordination, supervision (although they do not officially supervise anyone), consultancy, teaching and resource management.

Issues in regard to APLAS

Issues raised about this position were: the appropriateness of the position as a school based position as opposed to a regional consultancy or SEO1 position. People were quite divided on this issue as many said the APLAs are operating as an SEO1 position. Some of the APLAs themselves they did not want to change their working conditions.

Another issue was the lack of supervision responsibilities the APLAs had over the STLAs.

APLAs wanted more opportunity to participate in state wide training. The greatest area of need was Language disorders.

Support Classes (Reading), (Language) and (Early School Support)

The role of the support classes in the LAP did generate some strong responses. The nature of the response was directly related to whether the person responding had direct access to one of the support classes. That is, the schools where they were located were strongly of the opinion that they were 'fantastic' as were the parents whose children managed to get into one of the classes. All other people's responses ranged from strongly opposed to not sure.

A number of observations about the specialist support classes were made from all the sources of data in this reflective study.

1. Support classes are located because of historical reasons and there is no basis for their location now.
2. No one could produce any evidence to support the long term gains for any of the classes.
3. The resources are very scarce in all regions and therefore regardless of how effective they are, the allocation of students is very inequitable.
4. Most people had a strong opinion that one or other particular support class was a 'good' model but not all three. Which one or ones were good was highly variable and all decision making was based on opinion and the current teacher, not on objective outcome data.
5. The parents whose children had accessed any of the programs felt they had 'won the lottery' when their child was accepted into the program.
6. There are a number of different models operating across the regions and again no efficacy data was produced to justify the models.
7. The main problems with support classes, which are a scarce resource, were the inequity, the distance students had to travel to access the reading classes and the apparent lack of capacity building in the classes and schools where the students returned to.

Language Support Class Issues

The most common concern about the Language Support classes was a philosophical one. That is, people expressed strong views about the notion of having a whole class of children who had severe difficulties communicating all in the same class. There were no role models for these children. Schools which had language classes argued that the children had role models on the playground.

One of the major problems with the Language classes was their links with speech pathologists from the Department of Health. This expertise is essential for children with severe speech and language disorders. There is a desperate need for this expertise to increase and be

accessible for all STLA's across the state. Any loss or changes to the support classes for language would have to ensure that access to speech therapists was not lost and preferably increased. Using local Health Care Clinics was not a solution as parents had tried this and it was either not available or inappropriate for the severity of their child's problems.

Reading Class Issues

Reading classes were a very brief (two terms) of intense instruction in the morning and then the students return to their home school in the afternoon. There were some variations on this model where the class moved every 2 terms in an attempt to address some of the inequities. There were also examples where only students from the actual school where the class was located could get into the class.

Issues re the reading classes were that several of the teachers said that if they could get '**pure reading problems**' then they would get better outcomes. There was no evidence provided about long term gains but more importantly many principals suggested the resource would be better utilised as an STLA allocation.

Early School Support Program Issues

Early School Support program did support up to 15 students with mild intellectual disabilities in K to year 2 in their class. This program did have strong opposition but less so than the reading and language classes.

Overall, the support classes were controversial. A variety of opinions, positive and negative were expressed by teachers groups

On the positive side:

"YES keep them going"

"Not enough of them."

"Highly valued"

.On the negative side

"I doubt if they are a useful thing, they don't support a lot of kids."

"The application process is tedious and a lot of hard work and chances of getting a student being accepted into the program are slim."

"We haven't really got a clue if they are any more effective than anything else"

Many argued that the resources would be better off integrated into the STLA pool and distributed more equitably. Regions have the capacity to organise and allocate the support class resources to meet local

needs in the current service delivery model of LAP. However, this is very difficult to do without objective evidence as to their worth.

Teachers Aide (Special)

Schools were able to purchase teacher aide (special) time with the STLA funding. About 50 percent of the schools who responded to the questionnaires stated that they had purchased extra teacher aide time with the funds. With the 3 year funding schools were very positive about this because it meant they could promise some certainty to teacher aides for 3 years and they could also choose to invest some resources to training the aides. Although schools were generally very positive about the resource, a number of people were very concerned about an overuse of TAs functioning as teachers with students with the greatest needs. When the TAs were used to support a classroom teacher as an aide to the teacher then people were far more positive.

Summary

The general view of respondents can be summarised by a comment from the Secondary Principals Council - ***“In terms of the big picture it is a successful model.”*** It is also a model that is extremely flexible, and allows for each school to cater for local needs. This flexibility has led to a highly creative and effective use of resources in many schools.

In schools where the focus of service delivery is on building the capacity of the teachers to support their students in the classroom very positive consequences are being reported.

The existence of special language, reading and early support classes is a more controversial issue that requires further and more objective investigation.

Professional Learning

The Parkins Report (2002) recommended *‘that training and development be provided to the support teacher learning. This training and development would focus on the skills required to undertake a more generic learning support role’*. Primary school STLAs reported that they did on the whole feel well supported by an APLA and this was the main means of professional learning. Most reported that there were network meetings about once a term where relevant topics were covered.

On the other hand, secondary STLAs were poorly supported by APLAs in most cases. The high school STLAs did report that they attend the

network meetings but as most of the APLAs were primary trained teachers there was often not much relevance for the high school support teachers. One secondary STLA commented on the lack of training for STLAs:

"As a secondary STLA most of my training has come through my own initiatives and my own efforts to ensure I am up to date with the latest research by attending courses and membership of relevant associations. Little support is given to secondary STLAs."

It was stated that the professional learning for the support teachers was rather 'hit and miss' and was very much dependent on the skills of the APLA. Some STLAs expressed a view that they had heard it all before from the same old people.

Professional learning was, as Parkins recommended, a very important aspect of the changes to support to students with low support needs. It did not appear from this reflective study that professional support had been a very high priority and was poorly coordinated and patchy across the state. This is particularly concerning given the high number of untrained STLAs operating in the positions.

The management and operation of Learning Support Teams was highlighted as an area of training need. Given the importance of their role many schools were unsure of how to effectively utilise this resource,

A number of regions wanted more input from State Office in Professional learning activities. There were strong requests for information about language disorders.

Regional APLAs in particular requested more training support from State Office.

Summary

There is without a doubt a common view that the STLA position is a highly skilled role and that STLAs must be highly trained and qualified to do such an important job effectively.

Thus a need was seen for initial training and then continuous, systematic professional support for STLAs. If some of this is to be provided by the APLA then they similarly need on going professional support.