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# THE NEW BASICS RESEARCH REPORT

JUNE 2004





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Assessment & New Basics Branch  
Level 14, 80 Albert Street, Brisbane, Qld  
PO Box 33, Brisbane Albert Street, Qld 4002  
Email: [newbasics@qed.qld.gov.au](mailto:newbasics@qed.qld.gov.au)  
Web: <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics>  
Fax +61 7 3237 1956

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# FOREWORD

The New Basics Trial has been a major undertaking for the Department of Education and the Arts. To equip young Queenslanders with the skills they will need to contribute to a socially, economically and culturally vibrant society, we need to provide them with an education that is more relevant, more flexible and more rewarding than the one which was adequate for the last century.

This report describes the research component of a trial in 38 Queensland state schools of a new way of preparing young Queenslanders to meet the challenges of new times and of contributing to the Smart State. The New Basics Trial investigated the viability of a new framework for integrating what is taught with how it is taught, assessed and reported.

The research program complemented two other key elements of the Trial — development of the components of the framework and its implementation in selected schools. The research activities reported here provide primary data, analyses and some conclusions about the impact of New Basics on the nature and quality of student work, approaches to teaching and learning, assessment procedures, student achievement, as well as school organisation and structure.

I invite staff in schools, academics with an interest in the area, policy makers in other jurisdictions, and members of the broader community to study the summaries of the research papers and the synthesis of their findings, and to engage us in a dialogue around these vital issues.

A fourth element of the Trial was prompted by the Department's commitment to accountable, objective policy development based on unbiased research. The Australian Council for Educational Research was commissioned to conduct an independent program evaluation.

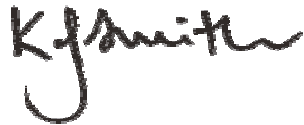
*The New Basics Research Report*, in conjunction with the separate report of the external evaluation, will inform current initiatives underway such as greater national consistency in key areas of the curriculum, and improvements in our assessment and reporting framework, school reporting, and school organisational capacity.

December 2003 marked the end of the Trial, but that was by no means the end of the New Basics. I have authorised 58 schools that have been involved to date to continue with the New Basics while we take the time to reflect on the learnings from the Trial and determine how they can be transferred to all schools.

Later this year, the Minister for Education will present the Government's position on how best to report student achievement and school performance information. The on-going program of work, to which the New Basics research and evaluation will contribute, will extend this into the development of recommendations to Government on how to achieve greater integration of curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting in our schools.

I congratulate the Assessment & New Basics Branch on the conduct of the Trial and the potency of the research findings. While recognising the work of central office staff, I want particularly to acknowledge the very significant contributions of teachers, students, parents, critical friends and others working in schools that made this project possible, and also the members of the Framework Research Advisory Group who played a pivotal role in the design and progress of the research program.

I commend *The New Basics Research Report* to anyone with an interest in school renewal and continuous improvement through a focus on improving teaching and learning outcomes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Smith', with a stylized, cursive script.

**Ken Smith**  
**Director-General**  
**Department of Education and the Arts**

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# PREFACE

This report on the New Basics Research Program includes the story of the New Basics from 1999 to 2004, brings together the findings of 25 separate research activities conducted over the course of the Trial (2000–2003), and presents 11 key messages drawn from the research.

This report has four interconnected parts.

- *The New Basics: Key Elements of the History* outlines the policy drivers that existed when the crucial features of the research program were decided.
- *New Basics Research Program: Synthesis of the Research* gives the results of the research in terms of whether the New Basics is likely to lead to the changes that are wanted, likely to be accepted, and feasible on an extended basis.
- *New Basics Research Papers: In Essence* supports the Synthesis with a summary of each research activity's purpose, key evidence and conclusions.
- *The New Basics: Narrative and Commentary* describes the educational and organisational environment in which the Trial was situated.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In preparing this research report, the Director of the Assessment & New Basics Branch owes a debt of gratitude to many people: Staff, students and their parents, critical friends, and communities of the 38 trial schools whose commitment to the New Basics, including its research demands, made the Trial possible. Non-trial school teachers and students (state and non-state) who willingly accepted the invitation to participate in research activities such as standardised testing, collecting and submitting samples of student work, and responding to questionnaires. Members of the education community and the wider community who participated in various research activities, from viewing student work and reflecting on its qualities to sharing their views about New Basics on the project's electronic discussion lists. Administrators within Education Queensland who supported schools' participation in the Trial in various ways such as exempting trial schools from selected systemic obligations. The Framework Research Advisory Group who played a pivotal role in the design and progress of the overall research program, and whose members oversaw research methods and analyses on an individual basis. Externally contracted and commissioned researchers and the research team within the New Basics Branch whose work forms the basis of *The New Basics Research Report*. Education Queensland Library Services for unflagging support. And a small production team within the Branch who put it all together.

# THE NEW BASICS

## KEY ELEMENTS OF THE HISTORY

This document is the prelude to *The New Basics: Narrative and Commentary*, which appears later in this Report.

- 1 The New Basics idea 2
- 2 The New Basics developed in Queensland, Australia 2
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  - 3.3 School and system reactions and changes 5
- 4 Learnings from the trial 6

### **A note about terminology**

- o The “Queensland Department of Education” and “Education Queensland”

The Queensland State Government’s Department of Education is responsible for a range of policy, legislative and funding issues impacting on state, Catholic and independent schools in Queensland. In the period 1997–2002, the term “Education Queensland” was used to encompass most aspects of the Department’s operations. In 2004, it refers to those parts of the Department that administer state schools.

In February 2004, Arts Queensland was merged with the Department of Education to form the Department of Education and the Arts.

- o The “New Basics Branch”

In 1999, a unit was established within the Education Services Directorate of the then Department of Education to undertake the activities that became the New Basics Project. In May 2000 a Director was appointed to head the New Basics Branch. That Branch became the Assessment & New Basics Branch in 2002. Throughout this Report, this administrative unit (in any of its guises) is referred to as the New Basics Branch.

## **1 THE NEW BASICS IDEA**

There have been many good ideas in education; this particular idea was about knowledge, schools, change (via a framework, not a recipe), assessment, and the new world.

At the heart of the New Basics is the idea that, to get the right things happening in classrooms, there must be an alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. And the alignment of these three must be in practices, not merely in statements of intention or expectations.

The “new basics” themselves are the basics of the schooling our students need for a future that is already upon us: new economies, new workplaces, new technologies, new student identities, diverse communities, and complex cultures. The new basics are the educational outcomes—traditional and new, academic and social—needed by students and communities served by schools.

To develop and support these outcomes, the New Basics provides an aligned set of principled curriculum organisers, effective teaching strategies and an assessment system based on moderated teacher assessment of substantial, multi-faceted performances by students in three suites of Rich Tasks to be reported on in Years 3, 6 and 9.

## **2 DEVELOPED IN QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA**

The New Basics idea was developed in Queensland on the cusp of the 20th and 21st centuries and went into trial implementation in 38 schools in 2000.

Queensland is the only mainland State in Australia where the population of the capital city (Brisbane – 1.6 million) is less than the population outside it (2 million). Queensland is culturally and geographically diverse, stretching from the islands of the Torres Strait at the tip of Cape York to the beaches of the Gold Coast in the south-eastern corner, from farming and grazing and mining inland to provincial cities along the eastern seaboard.

Approximately 76 per cent of primary school students (Years P–7) and 64 per cent of secondary school students (Years 8–12) attend state (government) schools. Delivery of education in state schools, all of which are coeducational, is the responsibility of Education Queensland (EQ) within the State Department of Education and the Arts<sup>1</sup>.

The Queensland senior secondary system (Years 11 and 12) has externally moderated school-based assessment and standardised cross-curriculum testing; stringent quality assurance processes accompany curriculum and assessment, working across state and non-state schools to provide high-stakes results. The junior secondary system (Years 8–10) has unmoderated school-devised assessment. In the primary school, there is no mandatory assessment beyond the national literacy and numeracy testing program—standardised tests with results reported against national benchmarks in Years 3, 5 and 7.

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<sup>1</sup> Which it became in 2004. When the Trial began in 2000 it was the Department of Education.

## 2.1 WHY THE NEW BASICS TRIAL WAS IN QUEENSLAND

For some years there has been a general drive for change in Queensland state education, for reasons that relate to:

- teacher and community pressure for changes and improvement in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and outcomes;
- a drift of students to the non-state sector;
- a perception that the middle years of schooling were not as productive as they could be; characterised by subject-centric learning with low levels of effective teaching and low-stakes assessment regimes that are *ad hoc* and inconsistent.

A comprehensive observational study, the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (QSRLS), which reported finally in 2001, clarified many of the problematic aspects of the existing situation in classrooms and the need, capacity and conditions for change. It became clear that a shift in focus was needed (teachers had rated intellectual demand as their lowest priority and assessment tasks were usually low in cognitive demand, not connected to the world, and not challenging intellectually), a shift towards the sustained higher-order thinking needed for future success. The QSRLS team coined the term “Productive Pedagogies” for the teaching approaches that were needed to drive that shift.

## 2.2 THE NEW BASICS APPROACH TO CHANGE

The New Basics program is based on a notion of building curriculum—not from specific behavioural objectives, knowledge or process outcomes—but by envisioning the kinds of life worlds and human subjects that the education system wants to contribute to and build. This has been called the Reconceptualist<sup>2</sup> model.

The New Basics approach to orchestrating the three “message systems”<sup>3</sup> of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment draws on ideas that change will be accomplished through building understanding by teachers, students, the schools, and the system<sup>4</sup>. The Rich Tasks exemplify and drive key elements of the new approach.

At the same time as the New Basics program was being developed and implemented, another program of educational reform was in progress—the Key Learning Areas (KLAs). The history of the New Basics needs to be understood in the context of the influence on teachers and schools of the KLA idea, and the differences between the two:

- The KLA curriculum is organised into eight areas, which are based on composite fields of knowledge, each with its own content and context. The New Basics idea organises a futures-oriented curriculum into four categories, each of which has an explicit orientation towards researching, understanding, and coming to grips with newly emerging economic, social and cultural conditions.
- Within the New Basics Framework, Productive Pedagogies are a mandatory rather than desirable component.

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<sup>2</sup> See Pinar (1975).

<sup>3</sup> See Bernstein (1990).

<sup>4</sup> In common usage, the word “system” when juxtaposed against schools has come to refer to the bureaucracy.

## **The New Basics Research Report**

- In the KLA idea, outcomes are expressed in terms of what students are expected to know and to be able to do within a composite of specific fields of knowledge at certain stages. In the New Basics idea, outcomes are expressed as Rich Tasks—the specific activities with real-world value and use, through which students are able to display their grasp of important concepts and skills.
- The KLA idea incorporates a staged implementation of syllabuses as they became available over a span of years. The New Basics idea makes all Rich Tasks available at once.

### **3 THE WHY AND HOW OF A TRIAL**

Under the New Basics approach to change—building and developing understanding—a trial is needed. In a trial, the exact form of the initiative is not fully known at the outset and the nature of likely outcomes is unclear. Above all, a trial presumes rigorous attention to research and evaluation in order to understand more clearly the constructive interventions and optimal conditions required for its successful realisation (and the conditions under which it is less likely to succeed).

The precise details of how and when schools were included in the Trial show the complexity of reality: There were many different factors at work—systemic, individual, local and statewide. Eventually, some 38 schools entered and completed the 4-year trial (students were not involved in the first year) up to the assessment of, and reporting on, Rich Task performance for students in Years 3, 6 and 9 in 2003. Another 21 schools form a second phase but these schools are not part of the trial proper.

#### **3.1 THE TRIAL IN ITS SYSTEM SETTING**

The New Basics Trial was funded within the Department of Education's existing budget allocations. Internal budget bids provided funding of \$14.3 million for the entire New Basics from 1999 to 2003 and post-trial costs in 2004 for research reports and the external evaluation.

This total allocation included provision for New Basics Branch services, research and evaluation activities and (after 2000) support for Phase II schools (outside the Trial proper). Spending on the New Basics development and implementation in Phase I (trial) schools over the four years of the trial was \$5.1 million, of which \$1.7 million was used for funding teacher release to support professional development in trial schools.

A unit, the New Basics Branch, was set up to manage the trial and later acquired additional responsibilities for the development of an assessment and reporting framework for state schools (Years 1–10).

The trial schools, sometimes in clusters, sometimes individually, were supported by critical friends.

#### **3.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW BASICS FRAMEWORK**

Interactions of the original proposals, events, reactions from schools and teachers, funding and personalities, resulted in important evolutionary changes in, and developments to, the New Basics Framework during the course of the Trial. These included:

- Presentation of the Rich Tasks in a format that provided teachers with a scaffold for sequencing the steps in task preparation (task specs) and that defined task parameters;
- Development of the assessment techniques for the Rich Tasks, including the identification of so-called desirable features (and, later, more detail on how to assess in the form of grading masters)—designed to give some clarity to the richness of each task and to ensure that each suite as a whole covered the New Basics;
- Development and operation of the New Basics assessment system (including moderation), designed to ensure that New Basics assessment in practice both reflected and reinforced the priorities of the curriculum organisers and productive pedagogies, and delivered statewide comparability of standards for reporting results to parents and the system.

### 3.3 SCHOOL AND SYSTEM REACTIONS AND CHANGES

The positive and supportive reactions from schools and the system were, by definition, obviously helpful. Other reactions—confusions, conflicts, counter-directions, and personal agendas—were also helpful in developing a mature system, capable of further extension. These included:

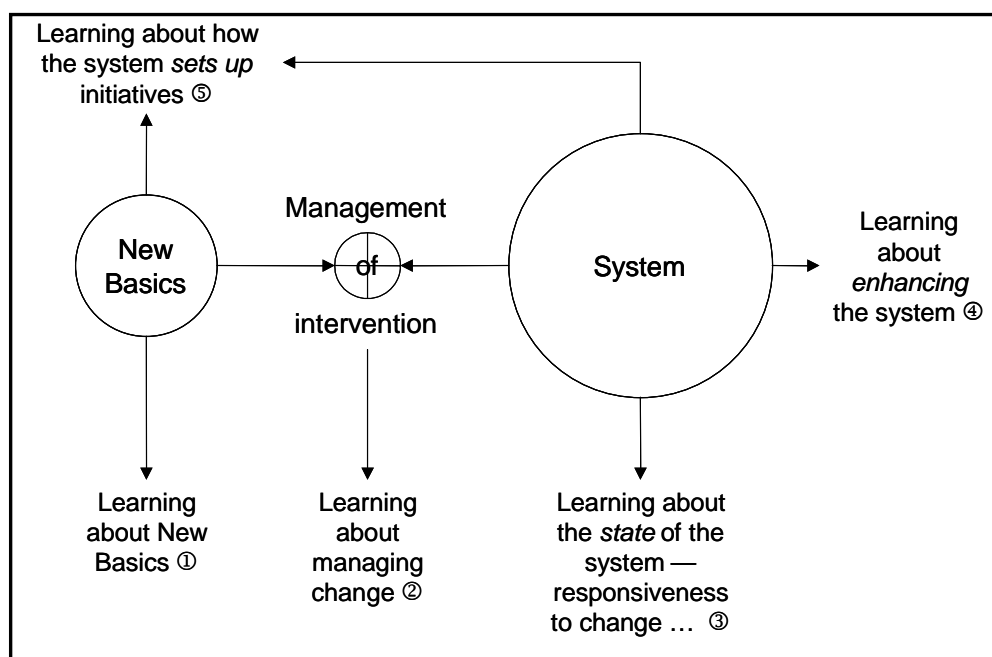
- Confusion and uncertainty about the role that KLAs should play in the curriculum planning of New Basics schools (some teachers imposed a double burden on themselves, seeking to cover the hundreds of KLA outcomes as well as achieving the 20 New Basics outcomes);
- Adoption by EQ of Productive Pedagogies as a systemic priority for professional development, which intersected with changes to the role of District Director and effectively neutralised the expectation that trial schools would do something special with pedagogy;
- A focus in some schools on the targeted repertoires of practice, in isolation, for curriculum planning, thus deflecting attention from the four new curriculum organisers (the New Basics categories) and the operational fields of knowledge that are required to do Rich Tasks;
- Learned dependence by some school staff on receiving, in a timely manner, authoritative messages via professional development—a dependence that works against the New Basics emphasis on “upping the ante” intellectually through extending and deepening teacher professionalism;
- The absence of response at system, school and teacher levels to the reporting of evidence from the collections of student classroom work in 2002 and 2003 that the intended significant changes in classroom practices were often not occurring—that there was “business as usual” in the fragmented, disconnected, routinised, low-level, “busy” tasks that occupied much student time;
- Difficulties sometimes confronted by those in the role of critical friend in discharging their dual role of being friendly (in supporting the school to develop its capacity to implement the New Basics) and being able to critique school procedures;

- Questioning of participation in external tests (England’s World Class Tests in 2002 and 2003, and ACER’s International Schools’ Assessment in 2003, twice)—questions about which tests, taken by whom, for what purpose, and how teachers and students do and could respond to these and similar tests.

## 4 LEARNINGS FROM THE TRIAL

This is not the place to describe the details of the research results, or to foreshadow the synthesis that pulls together these separate perspectives. Summaries of the 25 research papers appear in the section *New Basics Research Papers: In Essence*, while the drawing together of the separate perspectives provided by those individual research activities appears in the section *New Basics Research Program: Synthesis of the Research*. The purpose of the New Basics Research Program was to produce learning about New Basics *per se*, but it has proved impossible to report on the New Basics without commenting on the effects of, and on, several aspects of the system within which the Trial was conducted. Figure 1 illustrates one approach to viewing the interrelationships among those learnings.

Some of the schools in the Trial met the challenges of the New Basics reform agenda with flair and success. The successful schools seemed able to generate the capacity to use both external and internal perspectives on their progress, and to realign their practices along the course of the Trial, so that they were able to anticipate and organise for most change demands.



**Figure 1 Overview of “learnings” used by the researchers**

The inclusion in the Trial of three special schools produced important results including: multi-impaired students gaining accreditation against mainstream assessment criteria; the production of a Productive Pedagogies package for teachers of students ascertained with special needs (including video clips of strategies and case studies); and the production of Special Rich Tasks in alignment with the Rich Tasks.

## **Key Elements of the History**

Since one of the wellsprings of the New Basics was the need to up the intellectual ante in classrooms, it is no surprise that the integrated intellectual activities represented by the Rich Tasks are ideally suited to the needs of exceptional students. The Rich Tasks also provide opportunities for a broad range of students to experience activities that are deep, connected to the world, substantial and coherent.

The history of the New Basics Trial reinforces key lessons about change. Desired changes will not be achieved piece by piece, facet by facet, fiat by fiat. A change does not start at the moment of innovation. New innovations and change agents are related to, and build upon, a history of old ones. Change is set within, and is accommodated to, the micro-political history of the institution—typically a history of conflict rather than the technical and consensual process that so many organisational theorists portray. And it was certainly the case that the story of the New Basics included these elements.

