Report of the Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce 2008/2009

February 2009

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<u>Foreword</u>

The Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce was formed in January 2008 and contains a team of experienced, successful educationalists from a range of institutions. It is not designed to be representative of all stakeholder groups, but does have at its heart people who are passionate about improving the educational service for **all** children in Northern Ireland. By definition, a relatively small group such as this, meeting six times a year, cannot be expected to lead reform of literacy and numeracy across the whole school system. What it can and will do is signal to the policy makers and practitioners what it sees as the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and what might enhance future provision, and challenge them to make sure that action is taken to do this.

It is clear that there are still far too many children who struggle with reading, writing and mathematics and who leave school without the fundamental skills which will equip them for life in the 21st Century. This situation is unacceptable in any modern country so perpetuating a system which favours some, but disadvantages many, has to change.

Though these are early days the Taskforce has highlighted some key issues in this report and has suggested further areas which we feel should be examined. We hope that this and subsequent reports will prove interesting to the wide range of people concerned with schools and who share the belief that the education of all children is an immensely important part of our society.

Sir Robert Salisbury
Chair of Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce

Background

Origins of Taskforce

As part of the ongoing work to raise standards in literacy and numeracy across all schools and in response to the reports on literacy and numeracy from the Northern Ireland Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee, the Department of Education gave a commitment to establish a literacy and numeracy taskforce.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference set for the taskforce were as follows:

a. Finalise a vision, strategy and targets for the promotion of literacy and numeracy for building the capacity of all students;

b. Make recommendations in relation to the implementation of the strategy and evaluation thereof;

c. Report to the Department on the effectiveness of the strategy and make recommendations on improvements which could be made. A report will be delivered annually to the Department. The report should comment on progress, actions taken and their impact and include recommendations for any future actions which need to be taken in order to improve standards; and

d. To receive and comment on reports from the Department on progress against all agreed actions set out in the Department's response to the PAC report into literacy and numeracy.

Timescale

Finalise the literacy and numeracy strategy for implementation from 1 September 2008 (Year 1). The first annual report should be delivered by 31st December 2008 and yearly thereafter. The report will be presented at a meeting of the Taskforce attended by the Permanent Secretary who will also meet with the Chairman in December/January to discuss progress and any matters of concern. The annual report will be published by the Department around February/March

each year. A trial evaluation and recommendation for further development should be completed in Year 2.

Membership

<u>Chair</u>

Sir Robert Salisbury

Until recently, Professor Sir Robert Salisbury worked in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham as Director of Partnerships. In this role, he co-ordinated the regional leadership activities, liaised with the National College for School Leadership and encouraged collaborative international initiatives. He is now based in Northern Ireland where he works with the Queen's University and the Regional Training Unit. He is co-leader of the Trainee Heads Scheme at the National College of School Leadership and is Chair of three Intervention Boards for the DCSF in England.

He is the former Headteacher of The Garibaldi School in Forest Town, Mansfield, Nottinghamshire. This 11 - 18 mixed comprehensive was in trouble having experienced a chequered history and by 1989 was losing a large number of pupils to neighbouring schools. Expectations were low, vandalism high, results poor, and a very negative image of the institution existed in the community. Things changed dramatically under Sir Robert's leadership and Garibaldi is now being recognised for its achievements both nationally and internationally.

Sir Bob Salisbury now has a national and international reputation for his thought-provoking ideas on leadership styles and staff motivation. His innovative approach to challenging complacency, raising achievement, creating 'enterprise cultures'; and education for the 21st Century, has brought him many invitations to speak to both educational and commercial audiences. He works regularly with schools in challenging circumstances.

Maureen Smyth

Maureen, who has extensive experience in the area of Literacy, is Principal of Cumber Claudy Primary School. In her previous school, Newbuildings PS, she was an effective Literacy co-ordinator with responsibility for reviewing Literacy schemes throughout the school, selecting resources and modelling strategies. She trained in First Steps – a Language and Literacy resource developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research. This is the model from which the previous NI Literacy strategy was designed and which reflects much of the rationale underpinning literacy in The Revised Curriculum.

Maureen trained as a Reading Recovery teacher, delivering the programme from 2002-2006, which involved supporting individual children on a daily basis. In January 2007, she was awarded the Professional Qualification for Headship (NI). As part of her studies she planned and carried out school improvement work, "Raising Standards in Literacy", analysed data and reviewed the process of reading at the Foundation stage.

She has been Teacher Tutor for a number of years supporting Beginning Teachers and those on Early Professional Development. As principal, she is responsible for overseeing all curriculum areas, analysing data, setting targets, prioritising the needs of the children and the continuous professional development of her staff.

Andy McMorran

Andy has been a teacher since 1975 and Principal of Ashfield Boys' since September 1999. During his period as Principal, he has been largely responsible for raising the performance of the school (24% of pupils achieved 5+ GCSE A*-C in 2000; by 2007/08, 73% achieved 5+ GCSE A*-C).

Máire McGinn

Máire, who is Head of Mathematics and numeracy co-ordinator, Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore, is an excellent practitioner and leads a department which attains very good mathematics results (although the school has a FSME figure of approximately 40%, over 60% of its pupils regularly achieve a grade C or better at GCSE; the level 6+ KS3 proportion is regularly over 30%). The department has also entered teams of pupils in mathematics competitions with notable success. During the past two years Máire was a member of a focus group with whom CCEA had been consulting on the Levels of Progression for Using Mathematics.

Of particular interest to Máire is to strive to remove the stigma associated with the study of mathematics and by targeting parents, teachers, employers and the media to promote mathematics in a more positive way. She also firmly believes that motivation is a key factor in raising pupil achievement and that it is essential to make strong connections between the mathematics taught and pupils' lives outside the classroom.

Anne Moran

Anne is Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ulster. She joined the University in 1985 as a lecturer having previously been a Senior Teacher in a post-primary school in Belfast. In 1999 she assumed the role of Head of School of Education, was awarded a chair in Education in 2000 and in 2002 was appointed to the role of Dean. Her teaching and research interests are in inclusive and special education, adult literacy, learning and teaching, and the use of technologies to support students' learning. Between 2001 and 2003 she was awarded a grant from the EU Grundig programme to undertake a project entitled *Access for Disadvantaged Adults to Education*, with institutions in Cork, Greece and Munich. During that time she was also funded by DEL to support

work in the area of Essential Skills and as part of this work, participated in a study visit to the USA to examine practices in adult literacy.

Dr Robbie McVeigh

Dr Robbie McVeigh is currently working as Senior Expert on the *Roma Migration Study* - a European Roma Rights Center Project for the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency. Much of his research work has focused on racism, sectarianism and equality in Ireland, north and south. His recent publications include *The Next Stephen Lawrence? Racist Violence and Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland* (NICEM, 2006) and *Migrant Workers and their Families: A Trade Union Response* (ICTU, 2006). He is co-chair of the Department of Education Taskforce on Traveller Education. Dr McVeigh is also chair of the Board of Governors of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir, an Irish-medium primary school in Derry.

Dr Eemer Eivers

Eemer is a researcher at the Educational Research Centre, Dublin. She was the Republic's national project manager for the 2006 cycle of the OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study and is currently managing the National Assessments of English, Reading and Mathematics. Recent publications include: *A Teacher's Guide to PISA Science* (2008), *Ready for Tomorrow's World?: The competencies of Irish 15-year-olds in PISA 2006* (2007); and *Implementing the Revised Junior Certificate Science Syllabus* (2006). She has authored a number of technical reports (e.g., '*The 2004 National Assessment of English Reading',* and; '*Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools'*), and reports for more general audiences (e.g., '*Succeeding in Reading?',* and, '*Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools: Problems and Solutions'*). Eemer has conducted research at all levels of the education system, and has a particular interest in reading literacy and educational disadvantage.

<u>Role of Observers</u>

The Department of Education and the Departments for Employment & Learning and Social Development have observer status on the Taskforce as they all have work areas contributing to the raising of standards in literacy and numeracy. This is to ensure that the Taskforce benefits both from the experience of these observers and from the workings of their respective Departments, and for the Departments to be kept informed and take account of the work of the Taskforce.

Context

Current position in achievement in literacy and numeracy/Challenges and evidence of underachievement

The school system in Northern Ireland has many strengths but there are also significant weaknesses and particular areas of underperformance that need to be addressed.

Overall Performance

In 2006/07 in post-primary schools, 64% of Year 12 pupils obtained 5+ GCSEs (or equivalent)[1] at grades A*-C. However, when the measure is amended to include English and Mathematics (i.e. 5+ GCSE including English and Mathematics at grades A*-C) the percentage achieving drops to 52%. As a comparison the equivalent data for England is 62% of Year 12 pupils obtained 5+ GCSEs at grades A*-C and 47% obtained 5+ GCSEs including English and Maths at grades A*-C.

It is worth noting that since the introduction of the new 2-tier GCSE specification in Mathematics (first award August 2008) all candidates have access to Grade C. Prior to this candidates entered for Foundation tier could only be awarded grades in the range G- D.

At Key Stage 2, the point at which young people complete 7 years of primary education, teacher assessment tells us that 78.0 % of young people reach or exceed the expected levels in literacy and 79.5% in Mathematics. Approximately 4,600 children, or 1 child in every 5, move from primary to post-primary school with what can be characterized as "poor" standards of literacy and numeracy. There may also be some discrepancy between teacher-assessed levels awarded to pupils at end of KS2 (in both English and Mathematics) and the actual abilities

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[1] Where the term GCSE is used it also includes the recognised equivalent qualifications.

of these pupils at start of Year 8 as evident from teacher observation and results obtained from standardised testing during Term 1 in the Post Primary schools.

Five or more GCSEs (or equivalent) at grades A*-C (including English and Mathematics) is recognised as the qualification which puts an individual on the employment/further education ladder. Without this level of qualification young people are left at a disadvantage in both the education and labour markets. Yet every year around 12,000 (48%) young people do not achieve at this standard at the end of Key Stage four.

In terms of English and Mathematics:-
- 47% of young people, around 11,000 pupils, do not achieve a GCSE Grade C pass in English and Mathematics and therefore do not have the qualifications to progress into higher education and may face difficulties progressing in the workplace;
- Some 3,500 failed to obtain even a Grade G in English and Mathematics and thus have inadequate literacy and numeracy skills to progress.

Children leaving school without basic literacy and numeracy skills will likely face a lifetime of difficulty and disadvantage.

Evidence can also be taken from non-examination sources, such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). First conducted in 2000, PISA is an examination of the reading, mathematical and scientific skills of 15-year-olds in OECD and other countries. It takes place every three years, and is designed to measure students' ability to *apply* knowledge, and their readiness for the scientific, reading, and mathematical demands of future education and adult life.

On the most recent PISA (2006) there were no statistically significant differences between the OECD and Northern Ireland mean scores for reading and mathematics. Put simply, in an international context, Northern Irish students

display average levels of reading and mathematics skills. Further, the mean scores of students in Northern Ireland have dropped over the three PISA cycles (2000, 2003, 2006). For example, whereas the mean score for maths in 2000 was 524 (statistically significantly above the OECD average of 500), the score in 2006 was 494 (below the OECD average of 498, but not significantly so). For reading, the mean of 524 obtained on PISA 2000 (OECD: 500) fell to 495 in PISA 2006 (not significantly above the OECD mean of 492). In summary, Northern Ireland's students have changed from performing above the OECD average in 2000 to being only average in 2006.

Spread of achievement / High and low achievers

As well as looking at the *average* student, performance on reading and maths can be described by the size of the gap between the weakest and strongest students, and by examining students at either extreme of the scale. In Northern Ireland, the gap (in terms of scores on PISA mathematics or reading) is larger than the average across OECD countries. It is also larger than the gap found in England, Scotland or Wales, and is considerably larger than the gap in the Republic. Relative to the situation in many other countries, "weak" students fall further behind "strong" students in Northern Ireland.

PISA also describes student reading and mathematics skills in terms of proficiency levels. Students who fail to reach "baseline proficiency level" may not have the basic competencies that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life situations and in future education. In Northern Ireland, 21% of students (30% of males) failed to show baseline reading proficiency in PISA 2006. While this is close to the OECD average of 20% and 19% in England, it is considerably worse than in countries such as the Republic of Ireland (only 12% of students do not reach baseline), Korea and Finland (5%). For mathematics, 23% of students in Northern Ireland did not demonstrate baseline proficiency (OECD average 21%). The equivalent figures for England and the Republic of Ireland are 20% and 16%.

The data from PISA (and from GCSEs) suggest that Northern Ireland demonstrates a long "tail" of underachievement. While many students perform at a very high level, there are also many who fail to show what would be considered basic levels of literacy and numeracy. The future for such students is likely to include poorer employment opportunities, higher rates of unemployment, lower earning potential and an increased likelihood of living in poverty.

NI Average Assessment Outcomes per Academic Year

	2002/03	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
KS2 Assessments	**% of pupils achieving**			
KS2 English (level 4 or above)	75.6	76.6	78.0	78.0
KS2 Mathematics (level 4 or above)	78.2	79.0	80.0	79.5

	2002/03	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
KS3 Assessments (all post-primary)	**% of pupils achieving**			
KS3 English (level 5 or above)	74.9	74.6	76.6	78.2
KS3 Mathematics (level 5 or above)	74.2	73.9	72.9	74.4

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
GCSEs (non-selective)	**% of pupils achieving**			
5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) Grades A*-C	38	40	43	44.9
5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) Grades A*-C including Mathematics & English	n/available	n/a	27.5	28.8

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
GCSEs (grammar)	**% of pupils achieving**			
7+ GCSEs (or equivalent) Grades A*-C	n/a	n/a	n/a	91.2
7+ GCSEs (or equivalent) Grades A*-C including Mathematics & English	n/a	n/a	n/a	87.8

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
'A' Level (all post-primary)	**% of pupils achieving**			
2+A Levels (or equivalent) Grades A-E	96	97	98	97
3+A Levels (or equivalent) Grades A-C	60	61	63	62.4

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
GCSEs (all post-primary)	**% of pupils achieving**			
5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) Grades A*-C	60	61	63	64
5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) Grades A*-C including Mathematics & English	49.3	51	51.2	52

GCSE Performance data - % achieving each grade in English and Mathematics

	Mathematics			English		
	2007/08	2006/07	2005/06	2007/08	2006/07	2005/06
A*	8	6	6	4	4	4
A	12	10	11	16	16	16
B	19	20	19	24	24	21
C	25	26	26	27	26	27
D	13	14	14	16	17	18
E	10	11	12	8	8	8
F	7	7	7	3	3	4
G	4	3	3	1	1	1
U	2	3	2	1	1	1

Preparation of and consultation on draft literacy and numeracy strategy

The Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce contributed to and reviewed the draft strategy for raising attainment in literacy and numeracy and members provided some very helpful and insightful comments.

The strategy was issued for consultation on 23rd June 2008 and the consultation closed on 30th November 2008.

Taskforce Report to DE

Early Work Programme: Priority areas

- The volunteer Taskforce has met formally five times but the members have undertaken many informal consultations and visits to try to gain a greater understanding of the underlying issues. The first task of the group was to determine the actual situation concerning performance in Literacy and Numeracy in NI and to decide from that the precise programme to follow.

- Extensive data was provided by the Department and this was scrutinized by the Taskforce. There is clear evidence from the data that:

  1. There is a marked gap between the achievement in the highest- and lowest-performing schools;
  2. There is a marked difference in the performance of boys and girls but an even greater difference based on Socio Economic Status;
  3. Though the overall performance of some students is far more than satisfactory, the averages hide a significant tail of underachievement;
  4. There is clear evidence from the data that early targeted interventions can make a real and positive difference but too often inconsistencies in structures and practice mean that some children are left behind.

- The Taskforce also considered in the early stages the reasons the 1998 initiative ('A Strategy for the Promotion of Literacy and Numeracy in Primary and Secondary Schools in Northern Ireland') had disappointing outcomes and in broad terms the reasons seemed to be:

  1. The targets set for schools were not specific enough and no common 'baseline data' existed to help school leaders and Governors make decisions about targets;

2. There seemed to be little strategic planning between Library Boards in respect of successful interventions;

3. The existing school systems meant that some pupils were not catered for and the existing curriculum was skewed towards teaching towards the transfer test. Anecdotal evidence suggested that some schools virtually sidelined those children who opted not to take the transfer test so progress effectively stopped.

4. There was no culture of accountability for standards in literacy and numeracy at school, Board or Departmental level. Checks on progress, where they existed, were not rigorous enough as they were hampered by a lack of clear targets, if indeed these existed at all.

5. Guidance given to schools concentrated on 'inputs' rather than assessment of 'outcomes'. In addition the programmes seemed to focus only on what *schools* could achieve rather than what they ought to achieve.

6. The relative lack of recognition of the role of the home and the community in promoting literacy and numeracy constrained the extent to which *any* programme could be successful.

From these early deliberations the group decided to focus on a number of initial priorities during the 2008/09 academic year, which they felt would inform the way forward:

- o The effective use of performance and other data within schools to inform teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy and to raise levels of achievement;

- o The support and training available to teachers to ensure that they have the capacity (in terms of skills and time) needed to analyse data and to use it effectively to inform teaching and learning;

- o How the skills, expertise and talents of the many excellent teachers in schools here are being identified, celebrated and shared across the education system, with a particular focus on how exceptional teachers, particularly those currently teaching, can contribute to the professional development of other education staff in schools; and

- o The significant impact which parental involvement can have on the development of children's literacy and numeracy skills.

Taskforce Work Programme 2008

A programme of work was devised to assist the Taskforce in focusing on the key issues identified earlier in the report and selected organisations were invited to contribute to the debate. Detailed questioning and critical dialogue on the part of the Taskforce members formed a crucial part of this process. A brief overview of the inputs and activities are listed below:

1. Presentation of the background and formation of the new Literacy/ Numeracy strategy by Katrina Godfrey, DE.
2. Presentation of data from NI schools John Caldwell, DE.
3. Submissions of key issues from ELBS, CCEA, CCMS and RTU.
4. Presentation from NI Literacy Steering Group on the Regional Literacy Plan for NI, Paddy Mackey (WELB); Yvonne Mathers (WELB) and Hazel Mullan (SELB).
5. Presentation from NI Numeracy Steering Group on the Regional Numeracy Plan for NI by Gerry Toal and Hazel Mullen (SELB)
6. Presentation from Dr Nick Todd and Peter Hollywood, ETI, on, 'An Evaluation of Literacy and Numeracy in Primary and Post-Primary Schools: Characteristics that Determine Effective Provision.'
7. Taskforce presentation to the Education Committee.

8   Attendance at a conference in Cavan, 'Promoting Attainment in Numeracy
in   Primary Schools'.

9   Presentation from Dolores Loughrey and Shauna McGill (University of
        Ulster) on Primary PGCE.

10   Presentation from Nicola Ward, Dr Alan Cully and Dr Linda Clarke on Post
        Primary PGCE (University of Ulster).

11   Presentation from Kieran Harding and Graham McKimm (Business in the
        Community) on the Time to Read programme.

The Commitment of DE

It is clear that there is a commitment on the part of the Department of Education
to tackle underachievement and to confront the issues which led to disappointing
outcomes from the 1998 initiative. The Department has worked consistently
towards using evidence-based approaches in developing its strategies and the
consultation process has been open and inclusive. The draft strategy has been
amended to take into account feedback received from the various stakeholders.
In addition a complementary strategy is being developed in consultation with
representatives of the Irish-medium Sector. In short there is coherence about the
policy direction and what seems like a wide acceptance that current practice and
educational outcomes are unsatisfactory for many students.

Capacity of the Education Service to Deliver

In several ways, the capacity of the education service to make these strategies
work in practice, and to deliver the necessary outcomes depends on its ability to
co-ordinate its efforts and retain a clear and unambiguous focus on standards
and achievement. The formation and introduction of the Education and Skills
Authority is, in the view of the Taskforce, a vital ingredient in the revised literacy
and numeracy strategy and it is difficult to see how significant progress can be

made until it is up and running. The literacy and numeracy strategy sets out a very clear set of expectations for ESA and these key areas are central to the success or otherwise of its implementation. However, in view of the statistics presented, the system cannot wait for ESA to be established and action must be taken now in order to effectively address the issues.

Similarly, though the Revised Curriculum is in the process of being implemented in schools and is deemed by most to be a step in the right direction, confusion about the future pattern of post-primary schooling and the way in which children will transfer at eleven remains an issue for many. A clear resolution of this matter would greatly assist schools in establishing common assessment strategies, the transfer of key data on individual children and consolidation of curricular continuity at the change- over stage. The abolition of the transfer test should also, in the view of the Taskforce, free up time spent 'teaching for the test' and would enable primary schools to focus on meeting the needs of individual children.

Significant change is also underway in initial teacher education (ITE). Whatever eventual pattern of teacher education emerges in the future, it is vital that the education service ensures that all Initial Teacher Education equips newly trained teachers with appropriate pedagogical skills to deliver and develop quality teaching in literacy and numeracy. All students taking PGCE or BEd courses, primary and post- primary and irrespective of their personal specialisms, must have a sound understanding of the teaching of literacy and numeracy, and how to teach these skills must be viewed as the core competencies required by teachers. During training, student teachers should be routinely exposed to exemplary teaching practice of literacy and numeracy in best-practice schools.

Progress towards the PAC recommendations

DE has taken initial steps towards improving pupil literacy and numeracy levels. The Department commissioned research to consider the nature and quality of

outcomes in literacy and numeracy in schools, alongside benchmarking attainment in Belfast against educational outcomes in relevant cities in Britain and Ireland. This research informed the development of a revised literacy and numeracy strategy, recently consulted upon, which highlights the problem of underachievement, particularly within disadvantaged groups, as an issue to be tackled.

It is recognised that through the work of the Department there is now general acceptance that there are fundamental, deep-rooted failings in parts of the NI educational system which require immediate action.

In the view of the Taskforce not enough has yet been done to identify good practice and to share this with other schools. In a similar way, the Taskforce feel that there must be much greater accountability and challenge for those schools which are consistently underperforming in terms of literacy and numeracy. The Department has set clear targets for schools and has stressed that these will be used as the objective measurement of the attainment levels of schools. Hopefully, as work progresses, these targets will be designed to match the individual context of each school.

A common baseline data system has not yet been implemented, but work is in hand to develop an appropriate system. Comparative data has been studied from comparable cities in the UK and the research findings analysed.

Strategies also need to be designed to encourage more parental involvement, though in many schools 'opening the doors' to greater outside cooperation may require a major cultural and operations shift. However, such a shift is a prerequisite for any literacy or numeracy strategy to effect significant change.

The long standing gap between the best and worst achievers in literacy and numeracy still prevails. However, the recent work of the Department has

highlighted the problem. There is now a wider acceptance that a system which sets up children for failure is unfair and inappropriate in a modern society. Despite this, there is an entrenched reluctance on the part of some to accept any kind of change. Moving things forward in practice is proving to be difficult but DE has given helpful guidance on the way forward. However, much more international evidence should be brought into the public debate especially in terms of the negative impact which selection has on those children not selected. In short the PAC recommendations have been largely addressed and work is underway.

Progress towards the NIAO recommendations.

The central recommendations identified by the NIAO report have been largely addressed by the DE with the implementation of the new literacy and numeracy strategy and in the Every School a Good School policy. Earlier in this report the Taskforce stressed the importance of establishing the ESA and getting this body operational in order to address the strategic and structural weaknesses by the five Education and Library Boards identified by NIAO. This should also address the problems associated with having a large degree of variability in the reports from the different Library Boards and the disparity in target setting and data analysis. The NIAO's concerns about setting up a system of targeted resources, encouraging greater parental involvement, and giving more precise pedagogical guidance in terms of successful teaching strategies have been addressed earlier.

The NIAO recommendations have been accepted and progress to address them is well underway.

The Key Challenges which must be tackled are:

1. Establishment of a baseline database across all schools would seem to make sense. Most schools already collect data in some form but its use is unsystematic and varied so benchmarking performance with other similar schools is very difficult. A 'value-added ' system which takes a detailed look at the context of each school would help schools determine realistic targets for action and would reassure them if they are on the right track. Hopefully the improved data may then help schools to set targets for each pupil.

    1.1 However, raising the bar at the lower end of the scale still requires schools to develop an individual plan for every child based on the outcomes of standardised tests, diagnostic tests and teacher tests conducted within the school.

    1.2 The Taskforce considers that investigation into the 'Fischer Family Trust' or 'Raiseonline' approach may provide a starting point to develop a system which would fit with local needs.

    1.3 Creating a common data- bank would also enable identification of 'good practice' so 'statistical pairs' of schools could work together. All the main current partners (ELBs, RTU, CCMS, CCEA) were asked by the Taskforce to report on their current practice in terms of identifying and sharing 'good practice'. Responses varied greatly in operational detail and it is clear that there is a need for substantial review of how good teachers and effective practices are identified and their strategies shared.

    1.4 The Taskforce feels that the development of a 'shared good practice' culture is essential because teachers at grassroots level, working with colleagues in other schools to share ideas and methods, has proved to be both cost effective and highly successful. Identifying particular schools as

exemplars or 'beacons' has been, in other countries, much less effective, because it seems to create competitive rivalries, but getting pairs or small groups of teachers together to work on the specific sharing of approaches and strategies is likely to prove productive. Undoubtedly, good practice does exist currently in current schools here and in the view of the Taskforce this should be identified and used across the educational system.

1.5 In a similar way, schools should be encouraged to try to establish an 'internal culture' which openly identifies and shares good practice within their own school. This last point may seem so obvious that it is not worth making but one of the key components of successful schools is that they have developed an acceptance that regularly 'talking about teaching' moves everyone forward. Opportunities should be provided to high-quality teachers of literacy and numeracy to impart their expertise to colleagues.

1.6 The establishment of a common value-added data system would also assist the transfer of data at the primary/post-primary intersection. It would also assist the ETI in identifying and challenging those schools that are consistently underperforming.

2   Ensuring that literacy and numeracy is an essential part of school strategic planning by creating linkages between SDP, PRSD, CPD, individual lesson plans, data collection etc. The Taskforce feels that there should be a literacy/numeracy 'thread' running through all aspects of the work of the school so that it is clearly viewed as a priority. It is possible for Governors, especially those who are new to the process, to be unsure of their legitimate areas of responsibility so the development of 'key questions' for Governors to ask of the school leaders about assessment, actions and outcomes ought to be devised. These could be offered as part of the Governor Training programme and would help to ensure that matters of

literacy and numeracy are constantly part of the agenda. With the ever increasing responsibilities of governors to be accountable, especially for raising levels of literacy and numeracy, it might be an opportune moment to review the make up and precise responsibilities expected of governing bodies.

2.1 It is very difficult for any school to raise standards of literacy and numeracy in isolation and it is clear that a culture must be developed which strives to create an appropriate nexus between home and school, parent and child. Many other countries have already implemented successful home-school intervention models which have proved effective but the current process is weak here. In order to move things forward we need to introduce strategies which 'blur the edges' where traditional schools stop and where outside communities begin.

2.2 Parents, commercial organisations, charitable organisations and other interested stakeholders should be invited and encouraged to be part of the overall push to improve literacy and numeracy. Public attitudes to numeracy also need to change and the media especially should be encouraged to promote mathematics in a more positive way. This is a huge area for development which potentially could have a substantial impact.

3 Recent research in England and the south of Ireland has shown that progress, especially in mathematics, can be hampered by a lack of subject expertise amongst the teaching staff. It may well be a useful exercise to conduct a survey especially across small primary schools to establish the subject competencies (including experiences, beliefs, attitudes and confidence levels) of the teaching force. Targeted training and support could then be arranged if this proved necessary.

3.1 As mentioned earlier, current teacher education courses should ensure that all teachers, whether primary or post-primary, emerge with adequate expertise in the key skills of teaching literacy and numeracy and the ability to use data effectively, irrespective of their subject specialisms.

4 As mentioned earlier the main current partners were asked by the Taskforce to describe their processes for the use of data, support and training of teachers and the dissemination of good practice. It is clear that a great deal of development is happening, but this is to some extent piecemeal and therefore has a limited impact. The arrival of ESA should hopefully solve this. There was also some mismatch between what the various agencies said was happening and the perceptions of staff in the schools, so there is clearly an issue of communication here.

4.1 To reiterate previous points, the Taskforce takes the view that the establishment of the ESA is vital to the effective introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy because many of the key elements in the actual implementation and monitoring of policy fall within the remit of the ESA and welcomes the clarity that now exists in relation to the timescale for establishing ESA. A key challenge will be to ensure that, in the months ahead, the existing organisations give literacy and numeracy priority and work and plan together for the implementation of the revised strategy.

5 It seems an appropriate time to investigate whether or not individual schools have the resources, in terms of finance or available time, to provide additional support for those children who are in need of extra help. It will be particularly important to make sure that the proposed review of funding for schools has a particular focus on needs in relation to literacy and numeracy and also recognises the particular challenges faced by schools which draw a large proportion of their pupils from disadvantaged

areas. It is also the view of the Taskforce that resources need to be targeted to support schools that need most help in improving standards – naturally this should be linked to action plans containing suitable targets and objectives. In setting these there should be a clear link not only to school development planning but also to Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD). This could be managed by the ESA as it is one of the key areas of responsibility identified for the ESA in the draft Literacy & Numeracy Strategy. It is the view of the Taskforce that any additional allocation should be aimed at early years' education where it is likely to be most effective. Once children have been 'missed' in the first stages of their education, the evidence suggests that it becomes increasingly difficult for recovery to take place. Furthermore funding needs to be balanced – good strategies started in Foundation stage/ Key Stage 1 need to be maintained. Drawing from James Heckman, 'Policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in early years are much more costly than early investments wisely made and do not restore lost capacities even when large costs are incurred. The later in life we attempt to repair early deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes[2].'

6   DE and ESA should prepare clear guidance for schools about what they consider to be the most appropriate strategies for improving numeracy and literacy. This would provide research evidence and would help understanding of the effectiveness of Reading Recovery, the teaching of phonics etc. The Taskforce considers that investigation of the most effective ICT courses would help teachers to select a way forward.

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[2] James J Heckman PhD, Nobel Laureate in Economics, 2000

Recommendations to DE on priority areas to be tackled in 2009

Data & Good Practice
- Establishment of a value-added baseline data system across all schools.

- Identification of good practice from a range of sources, including ETI and advisory staff, and the development of effective ways to disseminate this.

- Adopting a special focus on monitoring effective early intervention practices.

Planning and Resources
- Embedding a literacy and numeracy 'thread' across School Development Planning, Performance Review & Staff Development, Continuing Professional Development, Lesson plans, assessment techniques and data collection etc, while retaining the 'core' time spent on literacy & numeracy.

- Surveying the literacy and numeracy competencies of teachers in all schools and devising appropriate support.

- Ensuring that the resources provided in support of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are accurately targeted and linked to clear targets for improvement.

- Ensuring that the challenges and investigations outlined in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for those schools which consistently under-perform are carried out in practice.

- Consider the roles of early intervention and special needs.

- Developing cultures where monitoring and analysing pupil progress data is an integral part of their accountability processes.

Training & Support

- Planning specific training/support for Governors, principals and teachers in terms of literacy and numeracy.

- Encourage Teacher Education providers to equip new teachers with the skills to meet the demands of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

- Examine the relevance of current programmes for parental and community involvement.

Taskforce work programme for 2009

In building upon the work undertaken by the group to date the Taskforce has identified the following four areas as being the priority focus for its 2009 work programme:

1   Finalising the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy – influence the strategy post-consultation.
2.   Providing advice on targets and implementation arrangements.
3.   PAC/NIAO - scrutinise progress against the Action Plan.
4.   Scrutiny of the interim 2009/10 literacy and numeracy Action Plan.