Background

National data identify a substantial systemic decline in both the number and percentage of students achieving Numeracy Benchmarks in Year 3, Year 5 and Year 7. This trend needs to be attended to as a matter of urgency.

It is our contention that it is particularly difficult to bring about sustainable change within ‘normal’ classroom environments with students, who are persistently at or below benchmarks by Year 5. Consequently, there is a need for educational interventions that support students who experience these difficulties. It was this notion that was the catalyst for the development of the QuickSmart program.

QuickSmart is an example of an evolutionary student intervention program of research that is having a strong impact with low–achieving students. The research program associated with QuickSmart is one of a few programmatic interventions that has accrued substantial evidence regarding value and applicability from research conducted in Australian schools targeting low–achieving middle–school students.

Development of the QuickSmart Project

QuickSmart was developed with the support of the National Centre for Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR National Centre) at the University of New England.

The development of the QuickSmart intervention has drawn upon extensive analyses of the research literature (e.g., Swanson & Hoskyn, 1998) while its implementation has been supported by research grants from the Australian Research Council, the Federal Government, project funds from SiMERR, and extensive cash and in–kind support from the Northern Territory and New South Wales.

The following principles have guided both the development and scaling up of the QuickSmart intervention:

- Research evidence should inform policy positions and systemic approaches to addressing the needs of low–achieving middle–school students.
- Programs designed to address the learning needs of low–achieving middle–school students should be intense, of significant duration, and conducted in small class instructional settings.
- An extensive professional learning program for teachers, teacher aides and executive members of schools and education jurisdictions should be an important component of any sustainable instructional intervention.
- Improving the skill base of teacher aides should be a focus of attention for all support programs, especially those in rural and remote areas or difficult to staff schools where teaching staff mobility is a significant factor.
• To ensure sustainability, National, State, regional and school level stakeholders need to coordinate their efforts and collaborate to ensure the fidelity of the program, and the viability of its implementation and scaling up processes.

• Costs of the program should be shared across national, state, regional and school–level stakeholders.

The research program associated with QuickSmart is unique because it has explored a programmatic intervention conducted in a wide variety of Australian schools. Since 2001, systematic data collection and analysis has accrued substantial evidence regarding the value and applicability of the QuickSmart Numeracy (basic mathematics) and QuickSmart Literacy (reading, vocabulary and comprehension) programs as they have been implemented to an increasingly expansive scale.

During 2008, the program has continued to expand to meet the needs of low–achieving middle–school students. Over 90 QuickSmart Numeracy schools operating in New South Wales and the Northern Territory took part in the program.

In 2009, federal funding is being used to support two large clusters of schools for two years in New South Wales in the Lismore Diocese and in the Western Sydney Region.

In March, three new clusters of schools joined the QuickSmart Numeracy program. These clusters of schools were formed by interested government schools in the Australian Capital Territory; Catholic schools in the Port Pirie Diocese in South Australia; and government schools in the Grampians Region of Victoria. The number of schools involved in delivering QuickSmart in the Northern Territory rose to 64 for numeracy, while 11 schools commenced the QuickSmart Literacy program.

In May, the NSW Department of Education and Training announced that QuickSmart Numeracy was an approved numeracy intervention program to be offered under the new state/federal school partnership funding arrangement for schools with literacy and numeracy needs and schools in areas of low socioeconomic status.

Some key features of QuickSmart that underpin its effectiveness include:

• A whole school approach to intervention for low–achieving students which includes professional learning sessions geared to principals and administrators;

• The establishment of a QuickSmart team within each school consisting of a QuickSmart coordinator and QuickSmart instructors as well as a member of the senior executive;

• Active participation in a six day professional learning program throughout the year that introduces then consolidates the QuickSmart approach and requires the QuickSmart team from each school to report back to other teams from schools that make up a geographically proximate learning community of about 10–15 schools; and

• An intervention that is based on research evidence and supported by extensive resource materials, manuals, software and levels of practical and troubleshooting advice.