In conversation with
Dr Stephen Brown

The executive director of the Victorian Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat has good reason to be passionate about his work.

Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard has said “demography is not destiny” and students in disadvantaged communities can succeed. Do you agree?

Yes, I absolutely agree that “demography is not destiny” and have seen evidence of this belief as I have travelled the state. As regional director in Hume for the past four years, I have seen compelling evidence of schools “punching above their weight”. Principals, staff and the broader school community strongly believe that all children and young people can achieve, when provided with targeted, informed support, and confidence in their own abilities.

There is a strong air of optimism and the conversations around student outcomes are more strategic, compelling and positive. I recently visited Yarra Junction Primary School where the message is “High Expectations – No Excuses”. This is a message that now resonates in many of our schools with students from low socio-economic backgrounds and other factors that impact on student learning. I am heartened by the strong moral purpose in schools, led by committed and passionate principals.

What have been the highlights of working with schools funded under the Smarter Schools National Partnerships?

It is valuable to see how other regions are developing theories of action to address the specific literacy and numeracy needs of their regions. I would hope there is a consistent approach to many of the strategies, however, I understand the unique needs of both the metropolitan and rural regions. I am invigorated by the commitment of principals and school teams in National Partnership schools, particularly with the deployment of coaches who provide planned and ongoing support in guiding and assisting teachers to build their own capacity.

What are some of the challenges faced by Koorie and ESL students in relation to literacy and numeracy and how are these being addressed?

Students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including newly arrived students for whom English is not their first language, face a unique set of challenges and we need to target support to where it is needed. We have a range of initiatives and support mechanisms in place in our schools to assist these students, including Koorie Literacy Coaches and intensive language support and we want to build on that to ensure these students have every opportunity to develop these core skills.

Hot on the heels of the forum for National Partnership schools, what did you observe?

The forum was an opportunity for delegates to hear from principals who are leading programs to drive literacy and numeracy improvement in their schools. It was also a good opportunity....
You are leading a team dedicated to improving literacy and numeracy outcomes amongst students. What are the priority areas for the Secretariat?

Identifying and sharing best practice, supporting regions to develop student literacy and numeracy achievement targets and monitoring and evaluating literacy and numeracy performance are among the areas of focus. By building this understanding, particularly in the context of the diverse needs of schools, we are coming from an informed position that allows us to target support where it’s needed.

Dr Stephen Brown has been travelling around the state to meet with school and network leaders involved in the Smarter Schools National Partnerships. The forum for National Partnership schools was held on June 4 at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre.