EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW

REPORT FOR PARA HILLS SCHOOL P-7

Conducted in October 2015
Review details
A priority for the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) is to improve the educational attainment and wellbeing of South Australia’s children and young people.

The purpose of the External School Review is to support schools to raise achievement, sustain high performance and to provide quality assurance to build and sustain public confidence in DECD schools.

The overarching review question is “How well does this school improve student achievement, growth, challenge, engagement and equity?”

This External School Review has evaluated:
- the school’s self-review processes and findings,
- the school’s achievement data and progress over time,
- the outcomes of the meetings and interviews with representatives from the school, and
- parent and student views about the school.

The External School Review included an analysis of the school’s key policies and procedures.

The support and cooperation provided by the staff and school community is acknowledged.

This External School Review was conducted by Liz Matheson, Review Officer, Review, Improvement and Accountability and Sue Mittaga, Review Principal.
Policy compliance

The External School Review process includes verification by the Principal that key DECD policies are implemented and adhered to.

The Principal of Para Hills School P-7 has verified that the school is working towards being compliant in all applicable DECD policies. The Principal advised of the following actions being undertaken to ensure compliance:

- **Governance** - Adding an Educational Brief to the agenda of the Governing Council will enable greater discussion on school planning and improvement processes.
- **Governance** – Provide a report on student behaviour management and bullying data to the Governing Council twice a year.

Implementation of the **DECD Student Attendance Policy** was checked specifically against a documented set of criteria. The school has implemented comprehensive tracking and intervention processes, and was found to be compliant with this policy. In 2014, the school reported attendance of 90.7%, which is below the DECD target of 93%.

School context

Para Hills School P-7 is located in the north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide, approximately 14km from the CBD. The school was originally established in 1961 as the previously co-located Para Hills Junior Primary and Para Hills Primary Schools. Para Hills School P-7 began its first year of operation in 2013 as a result of an amalgamation, with all Junior Primary classes transitioning to the Primary site. The school has a preschool and two district Special Options classes.

The current school enrolment is 270 students. The school has a 2014 ICSEA score of 955, and is classified as Category 3 on the DECD Index of Educational Disadvantage.

The school population includes 5% Aboriginal students, 9% Students with Disabilities, 16% students with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD), and 2 students under the Guardianship of the Minister (GoM).

The Leadership structure was reconfigured in 2013 to reflect the different needs of the new school. The Principal was appointed in 2013. He was previously the Principal of the Primary School. The Leadership Team also includes a Senior Leader with a focus in the Early Years, and a Senior Leader, Student Wellbeing.
Lines of inquiry
During the review process, the panel focused on four key areas from the External School Review Framework:

Student Learning: How well are students achieving over time?
Effective Teaching: How effectively are teachers supporting students in their learning?
Effective Leadership: How well does the leadership facilitate the development of high quality curriculum planning and effective teaching?
Improvement Agenda: How effective are the school’s self-review processes in informing and shaping improvement?

How well are students achieving over time?

In the early years, reading is monitored against Running Records. In 2014, 59% of Year 1 and 45% of Year 2 students achieved the Standard of Educational Achievement (SEA) or above. This compared with an average of 28% in Year 1 and 43% in Year 2 over the period of 2011 to 2013.

In 2015, the reading results, as measured by NAPLAN, indicate that 57% of Year 3 students, 81% of Year 5 students and 69% of Year 7 students achieved the SEA. This compares to an average of 57% for Year 3, 73% for Year 5 and 71% for Year 7 students, achieving the SEA during the period of 2008 to 2014.

It is noted that these percentages include several students who are currently located in the Primary Special Class and would normally be counted as exempt, rather than withdrawn, from the NAPLAN test. If these students were identified as exempt by the school, the percentages achieving SEA would be higher in reading and numeracy.

In 2015, the growth in reading achievement from Year 3 to 5 showed that 8% of students made low progress compared with 44% making high progress. From Year 5 to 7, the percentage of students making low progress was 23% compared with 31% making high progress. The expected low and high growth across South Australia is 25%.

In relation to students who achieved in the top two NAPLAN bands, 30% were in Year 3, 33% were in Year 5 and 19% were in Year 7. This compares to an average of 20%, 14% and 15% for Years 3, 5 and 7 respectively, between 2008 and 2014. For those students who achieved in the top two NAPLAN proficiency bands in reading, 8 out of 9 students (i.e. 88%) from Year 3 remain in the upper bands at Year 5 in 2015, and 3 out of 4 students (i.e. 75%) from Year 3 remain in the upper bands at Year 7 in 2015. This compares to an average of 56% and 30% upper band retention for Years 3 to 5 and Years 3 to 7 respectively, between 2008 and 2014.

In 2015, the numeracy results, as measured by NAPLAN, indicate that 43% of Year 3 students, 74% of Year 5 students and 75% of Year 7 students achieved the SEA. This compares to an average of 60% for Year 3, 71% for Year 5 and 74% for Year 7 students achieving the SEA during the period 2008 to 2014. There is a 3-year upward trend in Year 5 from 56% in 2013 to 74% in 2015.

In 2015, the growth in numeracy achievement from Year 3 to 5 showed that 12% of students made low progress compared with 50% making high progress. From Year 5 to 7, the percentage of students making low progress was 8% compared with 31% making high progress. The expected low and high growth across South Australia is 25%.

In relation to students who achieved in the top two NAPLAN bands, 9% were in Year 3, 11% were in Year 5 and 12% were in Year 7. This compares to an average of 14%, 11% and 12% for Years 3, 5 and 7 respectively, between 2008 and 2014. For those students who achieved in the top two NAPLAN proficiency bands in numeracy, 2 out of 6 students (i.e. 33%) from Year 3 remain in the upper bands at Year 5 in 2015, and 1 out of 2 students (i.e. 50%) from Year 3 remain in the upper bands at Year 7 in 2015. This compares to an average of 39% and 50% upper band retention for Years 3 to 5 and Years 3 to 7 respectively, between 2008 and 2013.
An analysis of the achievement in writing, as measured by NAPLAN, shows the highest mean scores in Years 5 and 7, compared with the previous two years. Students performed least well on the criterion of vocabulary in their writing.

In regard to perception data, 34 parents, 70 students and 31 staff members responded to the 2014 annual opinion surveys. The satisfaction level of parents with the school was evident in the meetings with the Review Panel and in the survey results. The school applied for a grant to support greater communication and involvement with a multicultural group of parents. Cultural diversity is acknowledged and seen as a positive attribute by students and parents. Students’ responses were weaker in regard to the level of ‘excitement’ about their work.

How effectively are teachers supporting students in their learning?

The Review Panel spoke to 36 students in Years 3 to 7, and smaller groups from the Junior Primary, about their learning, their level of engagement and challenge and the extent they know how to improve. Teachers provided a reflection on a recent unit of work in literacy, including the learning intention(s), the introduction to the unit, the tasks set to achieve the intended outcomes, strategies to support students with differing needs and what was positive, negative and interesting. The Montague Partnership conducted an instructional round at Para Hills School P–7 on 13th August 2015. Leaders in the Partnership investigated the Problem of Practice “How do the tasks provided for students enable them to make decisions and choices about their learning, solve problems and develop their skills.” The observations by the leaders were categorised and summarised. These three sources of information provided the Review Panel with corroborated evidence about the strengths in teachers’ pedagogy and assessment practices, and the areas for further development.

Students talked about the daily routines in their maths and literacy lessons. Many older students were able to talk about the strategies they use in reading and mathematics. They used language such as ‘summarising’, ‘predicting’, ‘mental maths’, ‘substituting’ and ‘problem-solving’ to describe the strategies they use. They were aware of genre types, their purposes and the different text structures. Most teachers talked about spending time to develop understanding through oral talk before joint construction and independent writing.

Students described how teachers provide for students who are struggling in their learning or who do not understand the task expected of them. Parents also confirmed their children get help if and when they need it. Teachers indicated they cater for the range of skills in their class through guided reading, which groups students according to their level and skill, as well as setting open-ended tasks. Teachers described how they ‘chunk’ the learning to enable students to practise and master skills independently. The school also has an intervention strategy to develop phonological awareness as a foundational skill for reading, particularly in relation to students for whom English is not a home language.

Each student has a specific goal in reading and mathematics. Most students were able to recall their goals. Examples include: “Listen to see if it (i.e. the text) makes sense” or “read with more expression”. Students talked about reviewing their goals and, when they are successful in achieving their current goal, developing new ones.

Learner engagement is one of the school’s 3 priorities. One of the key strategies has been to use a Rational Emotional Behaviour Education (REBE) methodology to develop positive mindsets and attitudes towards learning. Specifically, this approach identifies, teaches and rewards 5 capabilities designed to support students to manage their feelings and to take greater responsibility, so that learning controls their behaviour, rather than the other way round. REBE was piloted with 3 classes in 2014 and was adopted by the whole school in 2015. Early pre- and post-data suggests it is working to keep identified students ‘on track’. The challenge for the school is to embed this thinking and the capabilities into the daily practices of teachers and students.

There are students, particularly in Years 3 to 7, who already exhibit these capabilities and reported to the Review Panel that the level of engagement, rigour and intellectual stretch depends on which teacher they have. The 2014 student survey results also signify this aspect of the teachers’ practices needs attention.

The Review Panel observed that students in some Junior Primary classes were less able to explain their daily routines for literacy learning. It appeared to the Review Panel the approaches varied between classes and it was not clear what the learning intentions were for some of the activities. Additionally, the Review Panel was
unsure of what monitoring and specific skill teaching occurred for those students who had met the SEA and were deemed to be independent readers. The teaching of genre, however, was more explicit and intentional, and included the development of vocabulary, particularly to describe characters and setting. The allocation of grades in English and Mathematics would also suggest inconsistencies between teachers in their judgement of students’ skills and work.

Older students talked about the inquiry approaches used in History and Social Sciences (HASS) as it enabled them to research topics. Some parents also felt their children were not sufficiently stretched; however, they were more engaged with the inquiry-based research. The Review Panel was told teachers are increasingly using assessment rubrics with older students so that the success criteria are transparent. Students indicated they liked knowing how their work was going to be assessed.

The art of teaching involves clarity about the desired learning outcomes so that the learning activities to achieve these are intentionally selected, planned and enacted. Many teachers at Para Hills School P-7 are increasingly using student achievement data to inform their planning. For example, teachers described how they use the comprehensive reading assessment (DRA) to identify skill gaps. The Review Panel was of the view that data-informed planning needs to be strengthened and deepened to enable teachers to further target and tailor their teaching. Learning activities also need to be selected and designed to intellectually stretch students and to enable them to demonstrate their ability to apply and transfer their learning into new contexts. It is critical to keep the key overarching skills, concepts and understandings at the forefront of planning so that the focus doesn’t become narrow and content-based.

To take advantage of ‘teachable moments’, teachers also need to be responsive to students’ interests and observant of their misconceptions. Quality teaching involves the capability to respond to students’ learning needs, through ongoing formative assessment, so that students can meet the success criteria.

**Direction 1**

Improve the quality of teaching across the school by ensuring planning, pedagogy and learning activities and tasks are intentional, responsive, effective and consistent.

**How well does the leadership facilitate the development of high quality curriculum planning and effective teaching?**

Since the amalgamation in 2013, change has been managed strategically to ensure all staff are working together to provide continuity and cohesiveness for learners. A critical initiative has been the development of the Literacy and Numeracy Agreement. Initially, the documentation was prepared by leaders; however, during 2015, opportunities have been provided for teachers to refine the document, develop their understanding and ownership of the Agreement. The Agreement sets out the expectations of literacy and numeracy daily routines, provides common language, and articulates expected teaching approaches. For example, it outlines contemporary reading comprehension strategies including using ‘here’, ‘hidden’, ‘head’ and ‘heart’ questions and the Australian Curriculum comprehension strategies and processes expected across the school. In respect to teaching writing skills, the Agreement provides an excellent scaffold for teachers as it explicitly outlines the importance of teaching students to plan and the Big 6 of writing. The document outlines the achievement standards for reading, writing outcomes and points of growth in mathematics at each year level. The assessment expectations are set out and expected to be adhered to so that student progress can be timely and routinely tracked.

Staff meetings operate on a 3-weekly basis. Teachers meet in year-level, Australian Curriculum and Site Improvement Plan (SIP) teams. During the review, the Review Panel observed teachers meeting in year level teams to collaboratively plan a unit of work in History. The Senior Leader provided an example of an early years unit of work, emphasising the importance of the key idea in the History curriculum (e.g. perspectives) as the learning intention underpinning the planned activities and learning experiences.

Teachers talked positively about the support and advice they have received, including modelling how to teach genres and skills in reading and writing in classrooms. Several teachers reported the school’s work in ‘unpacking’ the scope and sequence of learning areas has helped them understand the sequential
development of skills and concepts. Teachers are expected to share their planning and work through volunteer spotlight sessions. The Review Panel was told most teachers attend these workshops.

Teachers were asked what school structures and processes had the most impact on their planning and teaching. Almost all teachers talked about the year-level teams as being the most influential on their work, while acknowledging the importance of being involved in the big picture, the school's strategic plan.

As stated above, the pedagogical challenge for teachers at Para Hills School P–7 is to engage and intellectually stretch students by working on their intentionality, responsiveness, effectiveness and consistency. The year-level teams could provide a vehicle for rigorous and collaborative work in planning, selecting and designing learning experiences and tasks, and moderating student work. Research on the link between year-level teams and student outcomes shows they have greater impact when there is structure and guidance, when the discussions are data- and results-focused, and when they are intent on targeting gaps in students' skills and knowledge. This requires allocated time and a learner-focused culture.

**Direction 2**

Strengthen the work of the year-level teams with the expectation they collaboratively use achievement data and student perceptions to inform their planning, are consistently judging and grading students' work and are evaluating the effectiveness of their pedagogy.

**How effective are the school's self-review processes in informing and shaping improvement?**

The Review Panel was of the view that the school has a culture of improvement and all the stakeholders reported being supportive of the school's directions and vision. The values of respect, honesty and commitment are known by students.

The school has a 4-year strategic Improvement Plan and a 2015 Action Plan, known as the Site Improvement Plan (SIP). Both the SIP and Action Plan include 3 priorities: Quality Teaching, Learner Engagement and Literacy and Numeracy Improvement. Teachers are involved in one of the priority teams and meet regularly during staff meetings to work together to implement the documented strategies. Teachers reported there has been considerable change in the school's strategic planning, as they feel their teaching work is inextricably tied to the achievement of the SIP. The targets and strategies are student-focused. Previously, the SIP was viewed more as leaders' work and as unconnected to the critical work in the classroom.

The school has allocated resources to support the achievement of targets. For example, a trained SSO provides intervention support for students struggling to master the phonological skills to meet the school's targets. In Term 3 of 2015, teachers spent a day considering the achievement of each student – *Faces on the Data* – and discussed achievement levels and growth rates. This was a watershed day in the school's improvement journey as it enabled all teachers to see the impact of their collective work.

The SIP targets define the improvement in student outcomes and engagement and the quality of teaching the school is striving to achieve. For example, there are currently 4 targets that relate to students' improvement in reading skills, of which three relate to phonological awareness and one relates to spelling. While phonological awareness is a key foundational skill, especially for EALD students, it is one of the 6 foundational skills for students learning to read. It is difficult to see how the achievement of the current targets would result in the lift that the school community is wanting for its students. Furthermore, in light of the students' current levels of achievement (i.e. 81% of Year 5 students and 69% of Year 7 students achieved the SEA in the 2015 reading NAPLAN), it is timely for the targets and associated strategies to be reviewed and for the school to adopt greater stretch and rigorous targets to drive the school's improvement agenda.

**Direction 3**

Review and develop more rigorous SMART targets and associated strategies in the Site Improvement Plan, based on the current levels of student achievement and engagement. Further, in relation to the Quality Teaching priority, define targets that reflect pedagogical practices, which will stretch and challenge student learning.
OUTCOMES OF EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW 2015

Para Hills School P–7 has developed ownership for their school’s improvement agenda. Student progress is evident by the percentage of students showing high growth in Years 3 to 5 and 5 to 7 above the expected state average, as measured by the 2015 NAPLAN test. The school’s Literacy and Numeracy Agreement is a significant initiative to develop a cohesive whole-school approach to teaching and assessment.

The Principal will work with the Education Director to implement the following Directions:

1. Improve the quality of teaching across the school by ensuring planning, pedagogy and learning activities and tasks are intentional, responsive, effective and consistent.

2. Strengthen the work of the year-level teams with the expectation they collaboratively use achievement data and student perceptions to inform their planning, are consistently judging and grading students’ work and are evaluating the effectiveness of their pedagogy.

3. Review and develop more rigorous SMART targets and associated strategies in the Site Improvement Plan, based on the current levels of student achievement and engagement. Further, in relation to the Quality Teaching priority, define targets that reflect pedagogical practices, which will stretch and challenge student learning.

Based on the school’s current performance, Para Hills School P–7 will be externally reviewed again in 2019.

Tony Lunniss
DIRECTOR
REVIEW, IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Anne Millard
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SCHOOL AND PRESCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The school will provide an implementation plan to the Education Director and community within three months of receipt of this report. Progress towards implementing the plan will be reported in the school’s Annual Report.

Peter Reid
PRINCIPAL
PARA HILLS P-7 SCHOOL

Governing Council Chairperson