



EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW

Partnerships, Schools and Preschools Division

Report for Port Lincoln Special School

Conducted in July 2017



Government of South Australia

Department for Education and
Child Development

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 framework underpinning the External School Review identifies the key levers for school improvement and has been shaped and informed by research.

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

This Report of the External School Review outlines aspects of the school's performance verified through the review process according to the framework. It does not document every aspect of the school's processes, programs and outcomes.

The support and cooperation provided by the staff and school community is acknowledged. While, not all review processes, artefacts and comments are documented, they all have been considered and contributed to the development and directions of this Report.

The External School Review Process includes verification by the Principal that key DECD policies are adhered to and implemented. This information is provided in Appendix One of the report.

This External School Review was conducted by Kathryn Entwistle, Review Officer, Review, Improvement and Accountability Directorate and Cam Wright, Review Principal.

School context

Port Lincoln Special School is located within the town of Port Lincoln on the Eyre Peninsula and opened in 1986. All students enrolled, from 4 to 19 years of age, are identified as students with a disability. Some students have a dual diagnosis. In 2017, 30 students are enrolled.

There are 4 ATSI learners, 5 students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), and 10 students' families are eligible for School Card assistance.

The school Leadership Team consists of a Principal in the second year of her tenure and a Coordinator responsible for SACE. There is a 5.8FTE teacher allocation and 118 hours of ancillary support, filled by 22 School Services Officer (SSOs) most of whom work part-time. A Pastoral Care Support Worker is employed for 14.4 hours per week.

Of the five teaching staff, three are early career teachers and two are contracted.

Lines of Inquiry

In considering the data summary in the School Performance Overview (Appendix 2) and the Principal's presentation, the Review Panel explored the following Lines of Inquiry to evaluate the school's effectiveness towards raising student achievement and sustaining high performance. During the external 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?
School Community Partnerships:	To what extent does parent engagement with the school impact on student learning?
Effective Leadership:	How effectively does the school leadership foster a culture of learning?

How well are students achieving over time?

A range of data provided to the External School Review (ESR) panel prior to the process made evident the value the leader of Port Lincoln Special School has regarding quantifiable evidence about student progress. Recently, the school has embarked upon the Four Literacy Blocks program and, as such, harvests data that informs them of students' understanding of letter identification, phonological awareness and writing skills. In turn, students engage in activities that respond to this data, designed to move them to the next stage of literacy achievement. Teachers at the school design activities that are then implemented in most instances by SSO staff. The ESR panel members saw this approach to literacy operating during classroom visits.

The school has also adopted the Ability Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) assessment and planning approach. ABLES enables students to be assessed on the basis of their abilities, not their disabilities. Through this program, teachers are provided with access to assessment tools, individual reports, and guidance about teaching strategies and resources that will enable them to effectively plan and teach for the individual needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs. The ESR process allowed the panel to see the comprehensive data generated through the ABLES assessment, that clearly identifies students' growth in areas such as Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing, and aspects of Personal and Social Capability. This data has been collated at an individual, class and school level. At the time of the ESR, minimal reference to the place this data has on intentional planning was apparent. During conversations with teaching staff, the panel heard the ABLES data described as affirming they had 'done the right thing' and letting them know 'where a student is at', but that it was not used for planning. SSO knowledge of ABLES was uniformly reported as limited and, in some conversations, ancillary staff were not aware of the assessment at all. The ESR panel members agree that the opportunity to utilise ABLES

assessments to triangulate available data and develop highly informed and accurate teaching plans is apparent. Given the school's priority to meet the varied needs of all learners, a review of the current responsiveness to ABLES assessments and how this data can enhance existing planning and ensure students' growth, is an important next step.

The Review Panel sourced and analysed a broad range of Negotiated Education Plans (NEPs) during the ESR. Discussion with teachers and families made clear that these documents are generated through a consultative and rigorous process. Targets within the documents are highly personalised, and strategies to achieve these targets are equally differentiated. Whilst many students' goals focused on communication, social or behavioural intents, the school's priority to focus on learning is apparent within the documents, as targets regarding literacy achievement also feature in plans. The panel established that the formulation of the NEPs at the school was representative of inclusive and intentional planning, whilst agreeing the inclusion of data and plans generated from the ABLES assessment would further strengthen the document.

In a strategic attempt to ensure students achieve the agreed goals, each classroom teacher has displayed the students' NEP targets in the classroom. The purpose of this was reported as ensuring each SSO with whom the students work understands the intended outcome for the learners and can work towards this. It is important to acknowledge that significant SSO support is utilised at the school. In most classes visited, four SSOs were working with students, and across the school, 22 different SSOs are employed, with varying fractions of time. Their place in the learning agenda at Port Lincoln Special School cannot be overstated. Discussions with SSO personnel clarified that the students' learning goals are universally understood. However, knowledge of how they are expected to achieve these goals and the strategies inherent in reaching the outcome, were far less common. Discussion with SSOs regarding this made evident that some ancillary staff 'go with the flow', watch others to get ideas about what to do, or ask the teacher during the learning time if they are unsure how to proceed. As reported, the strategies within the NEPs are reflective of highly intentional and effective design. The authentic implementation of these in class is crucial to achieving the stated targets. An opportunity to review systems that exist to ensure consistent understanding and application of strategies within the NEPs is apparent.

Direction 1

Ensure each student's intervention is highly intentional and potential growth maximised through a school-wide review of the use of the ABLES assessment and its place in informing planning and practice.

Direction 2

Deliver learning designed to maximise students' potential to achieve agreed goals through the development of communication systems that ensure strategies within learning plans are fully understood and enacted by all staff.

How effectively are teachers supporting students in their learning?

The leaders' presentation and most conversations throughout the ESR made highly evident the priority that now guides practice at the school; that is, to focus on learning and learner achievement. A video presentation and discussion with the leaders showed the ESR panel that over the last two years, expectations regarding the teaching of literacy, and more recently, numeracy, have been introduced across the school. The Four Block approach to literacy has seen a more rigorous and targeted model implemented to the teaching of writing and skills that support encoding and decoding. The panel was provided with a strong example of a teacher designing a rich assessment task, closely aligned with the Australian Curriculum, with a focus on identifying the student's numerical skills and understanding. The panel heard leaders, and some staff, explain that life skills still play an important part in supporting students to develop independence and to ready them for life after Port Lincoln Special School. The intent to equip students with opportunities to develop their literate and numerate self and a culture of high expectations regarding the students' potential to learn is apparent.

Evidence of how this more aspirational approach to student learning translates into practice was sourced during the ESR. In the Secondary setting, the panel member saw students engaged in the Literacy Block. One particular student had access to, and was utilising, a checklist of criteria that allowed him to determine his achievement regarding stated outcomes. The checklist also enabled him to reflect on and comment

about his success. This example of student agency within a special school setting is highly commended by the ESR panel members. In addition, SACE data showed that in 2016 nine subjects were attempted and all completed, and that each student who undertook modified SACE met their goals.

The significant introduction of a system that supports communication, the most crucial aspect of learning for students with disabilities, was a highlight of the school's practices. The use of Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODDs), a means of selecting and organising symbols so that people with complex communication needs and their communication partners can connect more easily, has been introduced across all classes. Many examples of how this system has supported non-verbal students to express opinions, thoughts and feelings were sourced during the ESR. In one class, a student experiencing anxiety and displaying her agitation was calmly asked to 'tell us what you are feeling' through the PODD. She was able to explain her distress, which staff attended to accordingly, reducing and minimising her tension promptly. Whilst not all students are non-verbal, the opportunity for these students to use the PODD to communicate with peers sees them develop bilingual skills. All staff with whom the panel spoke expressed their appreciation of the PODD system and many reported that they would welcome more training regarding its effective use.

Although agreements regarding the teaching of literacy and numeracy, the *what we teach*, are newly introduced concepts at the school, the panel sourced limited evidence of an agreed pedagogical approach, to the *how we teach*, operating in classes. Staff discussed this concept with diverse perceptions. The panel heard one teacher describe *how we teach* as differentiated, while another teacher spoke about making resources as her teaching approach. In another conversation, the panel was informed that teaching at the school was 'good', and another teacher spoke about hands-on activities and designing learning that inspired students' interests. SSOs who work in and across classes described approaches to teaching as different from room to room. The panel heard that in 2016, a trial of the Highly Structured Teaching model had been implemented, but due to staff movement out of the school, this was not operating in 2017. Given the school's priority to focus on learning, the opportunity to review teaching practice, and to embed consistent pedagogical approaches across the school is evident. The ESR panel encourages a collective approach in developing this agreement.

Direction 3

Deepen the school's intent to deliver quality learning experiences through collective inquiry into, and consistent implementation of, pedagogical approaches that cater to diversity and maximise student achievement.

To what extent does parent engagement with the school impact on student learning?

All parents with whom the ESR panel spoke expressed their appreciation for the work the school undertakes to support their children. Parents described staff as hard-working, enthusiastic and responsive to their children's needs. One family that recently moved to the school discussed the significant difference that this decision has had for the child and themselves. These parents explained that previously their child had been accessing approximately four to six hours of schooling a week, and the struggle to get their child to school, given the student's anxiety, was having a negative effect on their wellbeing. The significant change in this student's desire to be at Port Lincoln Special School, and a great reduction in distress, means that this student is now well-placed to learn. The parents' respect for the leaders, SSOs and teachers who have enabled this was immense.

When describing the generation of NEP documents, families discussed a consultative process that they were involved in enabling parents to fully contribute to the NEP. Targets and strategies were developed together with teachers; families described the review of NEPs as authentic, and that modifications were made accordingly. Parents reported that they believed they were listened to when bringing an issue regarding their child to leaders, teachers or ancillary staff. The ESR panel heard that concerns were taken seriously and that follow-up from staff was prompt and appropriate. It was highly evident that a partnership between families and school regarding individual students and their physical, emotional and educational needs operates very effectively at Port Lincoln Special School.

The clear partnership between staff and families regarding student needs has been established and is commended. An opportunity to consider parent voice or agency within the school's improvement agenda now exists. When talking with families, the ESR panel heard some uncertainty regarding the recent focus on literacy and numeracy, and some parents questioned whether life skills are compromised with this enhanced focus on learning. The statements were not presented as a criticism, more as a genuine enquiry, reflective of a lack of understanding of this new position, or why it has been introduced. The panel saw the parents' ambiguity regarding school pronouncements and priorities as an opportunity to review how decisions are reached and communication facilitated within a collective culture.

Direction 4

When bringing about change at the school, ensure school priorities and directions are mutually understood and supported across the parent community through inclusive processes of communication and consultation.

How effectively does the school leadership foster a culture of learning?

Through all processes of the ESR, the panel was made aware that the leaders at the school have a vision that is student-centred, aspirational and improvement-focused. Leaders are clear about the direction they want to pursue and are working to develop coherence regarding this.

Many initiatives introduced to the school, such as PODDs and Four Block Literacy Learning, have been done through initial support from an expert in the field. Almost all staff report they had access to this expert and had an appreciation for this. Although, it must be noted that ancillary staff, new to the school, reported that they had not accessed Professional Learning (PL) or induction that would allow them to understand the use of PODDs, and that their management of the device has been at their discretion. Teachers and SSOs discuss the opportunities they have to attend PL off-campus, much of which is closely aligned with the school's improvement imperatives and expectations or agreements. The ESR made evident that all staff who discussed PL described it as 'going to' events off-campus or having an expert 'come in' for a PL session. Research endorses effective PL as ongoing, providing opportunities for group inquiry, and as school-based and collaborative. No evidence of PL that is regular, in-house or led by staff at the school was sourced. Given the expectations that exist regarding the school's communication and literacy agenda, the opportunity to review and develop ongoing PL, inclusive of all staff and closely aligned with school agreements, is apparent.

As discussed earlier in this report, a significant number of SSOs are employed at the school. Some are new to the role, whilst others have been at the school for many years. In an attempt to promote collective responsibility and understanding, two forums that involve ancillary staff have been established. Fortnightly team meetings are convened by each class teacher and the SSOs with whom they work. The agenda of these meetings was reported with varying perceptions, some referring to a 'catch-up' about class routines, whilst others describe the meeting as an opportunity to discuss students' needs. SSOs and teachers held varying opinions regarding the value and impact of these meetings. Secondly, SSOs have a scheduled 30 minute meeting every Thursday during recess. Reports regarding the use of this time, again, were varied. The panel heard that the meetings were designed to elicit SSO feedback regarding school initiatives, that they were forums to hear what decisions had been made at staff meetings, or that they were ineffective due to limited time and a lack of prompt attendance. The ESR panel acknowledges that the intent to design inclusive approaches to positively affect the school culture is laudable, and that there is an opportunity to collectively review its practical implementation.

It was evident through most conversations with ancillary staff that an opportunity to bring about collective commitment to, and understanding of, the school's direction is a matter of some urgency. Some SSOs with whom the panel spoke reported scepticism regarding the educational priority of the school, discussing life skills as more important. Other SSOs questioned how new directions were determined and plans designed. A few SSO staff members reported that they felt devalued within the decision-making system. The panel heard multiple reports from SSOs that meetings, which include both ancillary and teaching staff, would be of great value in contributing to consistent approaches to student support, as well as a better understanding of school direction. The ESR panel members have no doubt that the leaders at the school have a clear, aspirational direction intended to maximise the potential for all learners at the school. This

intent is informed by evidence and research regarding contemporary approaches to teaching students with special needs. Conversations throughout the ESR made evident that not all staff are aware of more current practice and, therefore, question newly introduced initiatives. The opportunity to review systems and structures that operate to engender collective responsibility and shared commitment to the school's improvement agenda, is highly apparent. Shared access to contemporary research regarding teaching students with special needs in the 21st Century will further contribute to a broader understanding of the school's direction and priorities.

Direction 5

Ensure school agreements are authentically and consistently enacted, and develop a collegiate learning culture through the development of regular, on-campus professional learning opportunities, led by both teaching and ancillary staff.

Direction 6

Establish a culture of shared responsibility and deepen all staff members' understanding of initiatives through an inclusive and consultative review of existing staff forums and collective inquiry into the evidence that informs direction at the school.

What is the school doing particularly well and why is this effective?

During the review process, the panel verified the following effective practice that is contributing significantly to school improvement at Port Lincoln Special School.

Effective practice regarding the Effective Teaching aspect of the External Review Framework was evident at the school. The potential students with special needs have to communicate effectively has been positively influenced by the introduction of the Pragmatic Organisational Dynamic Display (PODDs) system. This communication tool, strategically and deliberately introduced over two years, has enabled students previously without a 'voice' to express ideas, opinions, feelings and needs. This has, in turn, contributed to a decrease in students experiencing anxiety or frustration and reduced tension within the learning culture. Teaching and SSO staff uniformly express their appreciation for the tool and the opportunity it provides to engender student input within the learning agenda. Whilst the ESR panel spoke mostly with verbal students during the process, these students demonstrated that they can use the PODD to speak with their non-verbal peers, contributing to friendships and social interaction. The panel agrees that these students are in fact, bilingual. Evidence of this practice was sourced through every aspect of the ESR process.

OUTCOMES OF EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW 2017

At Port Lincoln Special School the demonstrated growth in student achievement is at or above what would be reasonably expected of a school in a similar context, and a culture of improvement is characterised by high expectations for students.

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

1. Ensure each student's intervention is highly intentional and potential growth maximised through a school-wide review of the use of the ABLES assessment and its place in informing planning and practice.
2. Deliver learning designed to maximise students' potential to achieve agreed goals through the development of communication systems that ensure strategies within learning plans are fully understood and enacted by all staff.
3. Deepen the school's intent to deliver quality learning experiences through collective inquiry into, and consistent implementation of, pedagogical approaches that cater to diversity and maximise student achievement.
4. When bringing about change at the school, ensure school priorities and directions are mutually understood and supported across the parent community through inclusive processes of communication and consultation.
5. Ensure school agreements are authentically and consistently enacted, and develop a collegiate learning culture through the development of regular, on-campus professional learning opportunities, led by both teaching and ancillary staff.
6. Establish a culture of shared responsibility and deepen all staff members' understanding of initiatives through an inclusive and consultative review of existing staff forums and collective inquiry into the evidence that informs direction at the school.

Based on the school's current performance, Port Lincoln Special School will be externally reviewed again in 2021.



Tony Lunniss
DIRECTOR
REVIEW, IMPROVEMENT AND
ACCOUNTABILITY



Anne Millard
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
PARTNERSHIPS, SCHOOLS AND
PRESCHOOLS

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.



Clare Harris
PRINCIPAL
PORT LINCOLN SPECIAL SCHOOL



Governing Council Chairperson

Appendix One

Policy compliance

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

The Principal of Port Lincoln Special School has verified that the school is compliant in all applicable DECD policies.

Implementation of the *DECD Student Attendance Policy* was checked specifically against documented evidence. The school was found to be compliant with this policy. The school attendance rate for 2016 was 89%.

Appendix Two

Special School Performance Overview

Attendance

2014: 88% 2015: 89% 2016: 89%

Students who are enrolled at Port Lincoln Special School often are required to attend medical appointments, a number of which are scheduled in Adelaide. As a result, the students may be absent from school for extended periods of time. This reduces the attendance rate at the school, and is unavoidable in this context. However, documents were sourced that made evident the school's intent to address aspects that are within their control, in this instance to reduce the number of unexplained absences.

Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) Goals

All students who attend Port Lincoln Special School are verified under the DECD Students with Disability Policy. Based on the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) every student has an entitlement to the provision of the Australian Curriculum and appropriate adjustments to support each student. These adjustments can include: Educational (curriculum, assessment and reporting); Instructional (individual teaching programs and strategies); and Environmental (space, equipment and support). Each student at the school has goals that they are working towards over the academic year.

The Review Panel was able to verify that students have appropriate and agreed learning goals based on their 2016 NEP.

The school uses a range of assessment tools that enable students to be assessed on the basis of their abilities. These include Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES), Universally Accessible Emergent Literacy Battery Assessment, Oxford Word List, and engagement with Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODD) communication tool.

SACE

In 2016, 9 subjects were attempted as part of Modified SACE Plans and, of these, 100% were accredited with completion grades. One hundred percent of Stage 2 students, who were potential completers, successfully completed the requirements of the Modified SACE in 2016.