



EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW

Partnerships, Schools and Preschools Division

Report for the Gordon Education Centre

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 Helen Tunney, Review Officer, Review, Improvement and Accountability Directorate and Margot McDougall, Review Principal.

School context

The Gordon Education Centre is a special school that caters for children and young people from Reception to Year 12. It is situated 433kms south-east of the Adelaide CBD in the city of Mt Gambier and is part of the Blue Lake Partnership. The school is a DECD special option in the Mt Gambier area. Students attend the school from within a 100km radius. The enrolment in 2017 is 74 students; it has increased over the last 5 years and is capped at 75. The school is classified as Category 4 on the DECD Index of Educational Disadvantage.

All students in the school are verified with a disability, and many have multiple disabilities. The disabilities include: 97% intellectual; 21% Autism Spectrum Disorder; and 10% global developmental delay. Other disabilities include language and communication impairment, physical disability, and vision and/or hearing impairment. The school population includes 4 Aboriginal students, 62% of families eligible for School Card assistance, and 7 students in care. 1 student is enrolled in Flexible Learning Options (FLO).

There are 3 sub-schools: Junior (Reception to Year 4), Middle (Years 5 to 9) and Senior School (Years 10 to 12).

The school Leadership Team consists of a Principal in the 9th year of his tenure at the school and four Senior Leaders. These include a Deputy Principal, two Coordinators and a Lead Teacher. There are ten teachers including one in the early years of their career, and two contract teachers.

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 two key areas from the External School Review Framework:

Effective Teaching: How well does the school cater for the varied needs of learners?

Improvement Agenda: How well does the school make data-informed judgements about student learning?

How embedded and planned are the systems and practices for self-review?

How well does the school cater for the varied needs of learners?

Through this line of inquiry the panel explored the ways teaching and learning is differentiated for students at Gordon Education Centre. All students require significant curriculum and pedagogical accommodations, with some students requiring a very high degree of accommodation. The panel found that all programming and reporting is focused on the learning of students in the context of the Australian Curriculum. The school has adapted the curriculum to match the developmental needs of its neuro-atypical student population. This work is of a high level and all teachers are skilled in it. The Australian Curriculum is adapted not only to ensure student access, but also to ensure that each student progresses from one point of learning to the next in a scaffolded, developmentally appropriate way. Student engagement is the focus of all pedagogy, and staff are very skilled in adapting and accommodating in order to enable student engagement in learning tasks. Learning is deeply differentiated and scaffolded to facilitate both intentional teaching and student engagement.

Recently, the school has been working in the space of STEM in order to continue to improve the quality and effectiveness of its pedagogy. This initiative is being explored in various ways across the school. For example, in senior school classes the school is having great success in students being able to apply literacy and numeracy skills to the programming of a variety of digital devices, such as 'bee bots' and a drone. In junior classes, the panel observed students exploring the science topic: air. They were studying the flight and fall of balloons through experimentation. The value of these real-life, hands-on learning experiences for students is being noted by staff and families. Families reported that students are excitedly talking about their STEM learning at home, and transferring their understanding into other aspects of their lives.

The school works relentlessly to develop an independent communication mode for each student, including their confidence to communicate in a variety of public and learning contexts. Parents commented on the ways in which the Principal and staff greet students every day, modelling and normalising their form of communication. Additionally, students are regularly taken into the community to both learn functional life skills and to relate to people appropriately in public. This is building respectful two-way relationships in the broader community.

Daily home-school communication is vital to the educational success of students. Wellbeing for learning and the coherence of schooling for students is enhanced when conversation and sharing with their family about their day at school is facilitated. The school uses an individual communication book or diary to enable this. Work samples and photos are regularly sent home, and a Front Office TV monitor cycles through photos of students engaged in learning tasks. At the end of each semester a student folio is provided to the family, who value it highly, which illustrates student learning through annotated photos.

The panel asked parents what academic learning growth they have observed in their child or young person over time. Parents described the use of reading symbols, writing numerals, single-digit addition and identifying and manipulating letters unprompted being observed at home and in the community. Until the student came to the Gordon Education Centre these behaviours had not been previously observed by parents. One parent of a 16-year-old who took her son to Centrelink commented on his ability in the reading assessment and answering of questions during his interview. Parents also reported that their previously non-verbal offspring are becoming increasingly verbal, and using language in context to express needs, views and opinions. Students told the panel that they know their reading is getting better because they know more words, and that they now read outside of school. One student said: "I couldn't figure out how much to spend at shops and now they have taught me how much is a lot and a little to spend".

Examples of quality practice observed in classrooms during the review included independent and group work in highly scaffolded literacy tasks, rigorous and purposeful learning design, the inclusion of tasks determined by the speech pathologist, and tasks which foster social development and purposeful communication between students. There was evidence of choice and locus of control in tasks. A diverse range of communication tools was being used depending on student need and student and parent preference. Relationships between teachers, School Services Officers (SSOs) and students were very respectful, kind, supportive and encouraging, and communicated high expectations.

Robust and reliable digital access is critical to learning for Gordon Education Centre students. It is essential for some students to facilitate independence in communication. And, in learning, it facilitates student engagement in higher-order learning tasks by freeing them from the need to be independently fluent readers and writers. There is opportunity to make digital technology more reliable at the school.

The school supports students and families with sexuality and sexual health education. Teachers write life skills into each student's SACE plan. Families of students in Year 10 are taken by the school to visit all of the post-school work options for their young person. Families reported that this is extremely helpful as they can begin to visualise a suitable post-school placement. This is part of the school's *What's happening next?* strategy which prepares students for life post-school.

However, the panel was told that the issue of post-school options for Gordon Education Centre students is of ongoing concern for all groups of stakeholders. Regional centre work options are limited. The SACE has provided academic rigour for Gordon Education Centre senior students, but it also means that students exit school much sooner and teachers told the panel that the demands of SACE limit time and opportunities to take students into the community. The 'What's happening next?' initiative should be reviewed using an evidence-base with a view to strengthening it. Furthermore, staff and parents have concerns about the lack of holiday options for Gordon Education Centre students.

The panel concluded that the quality of provisions being made in the school for the individual needs of learners is outstanding. The panel was impressed and moved by the ways that parents spoke about how significantly the school supports them and their family by providing such high-quality, learning-focussed schooling for their child/young person. The school develops the whole child/young person, attending in detail to each aspect of their life in order to optimise adult life choices. The school has high expectations for students, it trusts and respects them, and it facilitates students doing things in their own time and way. Parents said the school always pushes students to the next step. This is satisfying for students as they have confidence and pride in "doing school properly".

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 the Gordon Education Centre 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.

Appendix Two

Special School Performance Overview

Attendance

2014: 86% 2015: 90% 2016: 90% 2017 (to date): 90%

Comment on attendance: Attendance at the school is high. Families are very satisfied with the service provided by the Gordon Education Centre and students want to attend. Sometimes the health and wellbeing issues of a student can be complex and result in long-term non-attendance, which impacts on the overall school attendance results.

Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) Goals

All students who attend the Gordon Education Centre 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 2017 NEP. The school uses a range of assessment tools that enable students to be assessed on the basis of their abilities. These include LitCon (literacy), Achievement of Australian Curriculum achievement standards (modified), and continuums for literacy, numeracy and communication development

SACE

In 2016, 44 modified subjects were attempted as part of Modified SACE Plans and, of these, all were completed successfully. All of Stage 2 students successfully completed the requirements of the Modified SACE in 2016.

OUTCOMES OF EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW 2017

At the Gordon Education Centre there are both high expectations and a culture of improvement. Each student experiences challenging and engaging learning that is being sustained over time. Effective teaching actively engages learners and provides stretching and developmentally explicit tasks.

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

1. Deepen and broaden engagement with community resources, agencies, other services and institutions to complement teaching programs and post-school pathways.
2. Strengthen the culture of continuous improvement in the school through the use of data and evidence-based discussions.
3. Apply an evidence-base to identify site improvement priorities, develop targets, and identify ways to measure outcomes.

Based on the school's current performance, the Gordon Education Centre 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.



Rob Baron
PRINCIPAL
GORDON EDUCATION CENTRE



Governing Council Chairperson

Students and families know that students are getting high-quality learning opportunities, and outcomes that are different but commensurate with their neuro-typical peers in a mainstream school. The positive self-view that this develops in a student positions them powerfully for adult life. However, options for life outside of and beyond school is the major concern for each student at Gordon Education Centre. The school is well-placed to explore ways it can strengthen its *What's happening next?* initiative by reaching out even more into the community beyond the school.

Direction 1

Deepen and broaden engagement with community resources, agencies, other services and institutions to complement teaching programs and post-school pathways.

How well does the school make data-informed judgements about student learning?

Through this line of inquiry the panel explored the degree to which teachers systematically analyse and interrogate data to identify trends, draw conclusions, and identify actions needed to provide support at the individual, cohort, class and school level. The panel noted that multiple datasets are being collected across the school. Examples of data that teachers collect include:

- Literacy data
- Progress towards SMARTAR goals
- Plotting students against continuums for literacy, numeracy and communication development
- Behaviour analysis data
- Student learning dispositions
- 5 point scales
- PBS 3 tiers of behaviour
- Modified SACE achievement data
- Individualised baseline data collection for units of work
- Achievement of Australian Curriculum achievement standards.

Teachers use data in intentional ways, to individualise learning design by identifying concepts needing to be taught. Students are grouped according to these needs and teachers move students between the groups according to their conceptual take-up.

The individual development of each student is supported by a Negotiated Education Plan (NEP). This plan is developed in collaboration with the family, and addresses learning and life skill goals within the relevant domains of communication, physical and social development, and self-regulation in learning and life. These domains are whole-school learning improvement priorities and the school seeks to individually progress each student's development through each of these domains. The life skill aspirations each family has for their child are reflected in at least one of the NEP goals. The school takes broad goals of parents and scaffolds them into smaller incremental steps. A point of development for the school is in relation to student influence in learning. The panel found that student input into their NEP is limited, even in the senior years. The school could consider the value of activating the agency of students in their own learning by strengthening their voice in the setting of goals for their schooling. The panel interviewed the Gordon Education Centre Student Representative Council (SRC), a group of 9 students, one representing each class. The students were confident and showed metacognition about their rights as students to quality learning, growth in their learning, and the learning process itself. One student said: "I like the way the Principal and teachers teach us how to work properly, what to do and what not to do". Another said: "When I first came here I couldn't read much at all. Every teacher has taught me to be a better reader. I read at school and outside of school now. I love it".

The individual NEP goals are designed within the SMARTAR goal framework. This framework ensures that each goal is specific, measurable, achievable, timed, acknowledged by family, and reviewed. Progress towards achieving the goal is reviewed, recorded and reported against each term. Data about each student's progress and next steps in their individual plan for learning is recorded into 'LITCON'. This is an electronic application which has the capability to generate a range of reports about individuals, including their current NEP, and a set of current improvement graphs, which demonstrate individual increments of learning growth over 4 terms in aspects of reading, writing, listening and speaking. 'LITCON' also facilitates a continuum of literacy data which accumulates for each student in every aspect of literacy, and is able to be shared

between teachers, year-by-year. Teachers also provide, at the end of each year, a Student Passport for the next year's teacher, which passes on information about behaviour triggers, strategies for management, general student background, and current NEP goals. Teachers told the panel that the development and their implementation of LITCON has significantly influenced the rigour and academic intentionality of their practice.

There is highly consistent whole-school use of data aligned to the Australian Curriculum in the 3 school priority areas (communication, physical and social development, and self-regulation in learning and life). The expectation of teachers to use this data is overt and consistent. The leadership expectation is that teachers are accountable for students achieving their NEP goals. However, data is not used at levels beyond the individual student, such as collations of data about groups of students or at a whole-school level. Leadership expressed a reluctance to collate and use data beyond the level of the individual student.

The panel concluded that at Gordon Education Centre staff have developed nuanced and sophisticated ways to demonstrate the learning growth of each individual student. The school has its own language of data, which it uses with skill and integrity to report learning growth to families, and to internationalise teaching. Much of the data is qualitative and descriptive, and staff under-value this data, not recognising the role it is playing in the rigour of their work. There is a reluctance by the school to quantify the data, or to aggregate and triangulate sets of data, because of a belief that this could 'distort' and lead the school to 'wrong conclusions'.

A significant point of development for the school is to deepen its data culture by both exploring ways to quantify some of its qualitative information about each student, and by supporting teachers to work with their datasets by collating and analysing data collaboratively in their team. This will develop teachers' skills in using an evidence-base to evaluate the impact of their teaching practice.

Direction 2

Strengthen the culture of continuous improvement in the school through the use of data and evidence-based discussions.

How embedded and planned are the systems and practices for self-review?

Through this line of inquiry the panel explored the ways that the school uses multiple measures to evaluate its effectiveness through regular and strategic self-review and to reflect on its improvement focus and plan for action.

The panel found that the school is very committed to continually improving its practices in the interests of improving the learning and wellbeing of its students. A teacher said: "The school looks for things that will benefit the site". The school is working in line with the Partnership priority of improving pedagogy and is using STEM as a focus for this across the school. The STEM initiative is being rolled out in the school in a series of trials. Furthermore, the school has adopted a focus on *Positive Behaviour Support* (PBS) in the interests of developing consistent, whole-school behaviour practices for its students who each have significant, often multiple, disabilities. Consistent behaviour practices are particularly essential for the safety and wellbeing of staff who work in close contact and intensely with these high-need neuro-atypical students. The school so far has researched the practices of PBS by providing some interested staff with training sessions and visits interstate to see the practices in action in a mainstream school setting. As well, the school is working to improve its numeracy practices by working in the space of *Natural Maths*. Training has been provided, and the Numeracy Coordinator has responded to the stated needs of staff by producing a set of *Natural Maths* learning tasks which can be used successfully with Gordon Education Centre students. There is intent that *Nuricon* is to be embedded in the practices of teachers for all students from Reception to Year 7. Some staff have been trained in *Mind Matters*.

Staff work in like-year level teaching teams and have regular staff meeting time and autonomy to use resources for collaborative planning and teaching. They share resources and also any knowledge gained through other training they may have opted into. Individual student data is sometimes used in these meetings in team problem-solving around a student who is in crisis. There is also a cross-year level staff team for each school priority of communication, physical and social development, and self-regulation in learning and life.

Staff reported that it is the culture of leadership at the Gordon Education Centre to fully support the professional growth of each person. Staff are able to access training and development as they choose. Performance and development is provided by a meeting each term with a teacher (for SSOs) or a school leader (for teachers). At this meeting, three personal goals that have been identified by the staff member are set/reflected upon. Teachers reference their goals against the *AITSL Standards for Teaching*.

The panel found that teachers are keen to work in the 'teaching' space of the self-review cycle (review-plan-teach) and seek support with 'planning' for 'teaching'. However, the panel found little awareness in teachers of the need to work in cycles of self-review, and to ensure their planning is more rigorous and their teaching more intentional through regularly reflecting on the impact of their teaching. This is despite the application of a strong review cycle with NEPs, which are reviewed each term and include SMARTAR goals. Greater use of data by both the school and teachers for informed decision-making will be helpful in setting directions, actions and measuring success.

The panel found a lack of coherence between training and development and site improvement priorities. Each element operates to varying degrees in relative isolation from the others. A point of development for the school is to more closely link teacher professional learning to the Site Improvement Plan through evidence-based self-reviews.

The panel concluded that the school works relentlessly to improve the schooling outcomes of its students. It achieves this through hard work, high moral purpose, and highly individualised attention to the needs of each student and their family. However, whilst there is strong evidence of self-review in the NEP process, the panel concluded that the school's improvement agenda could be enhanced by a greater focus on site improvement planning and the use of evidence to drive decision-making.

A key point of leverage for the school is to facilitate self-review at levels other than that of each individual student, in order to identify key improvement priorities, set targets, plan and implement strategies, and to evaluate the impact of improvement actions.

Direction 3

Apply an evidence-base to identify site improvement priorities, develop targets, and identify ways to measure outcomes.

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

During the review process, the panel verified the following effective practices that are contributing significantly to school improvement at the Gordon Education Centre.

Leaders articulate high expectations for student learning and achievement and for teachers and SSOs as professionals. The school has a very strong focus on learning. All stakeholders know that the core business of the school is student learning growth and they value this. The school is coherent in its mission and values. Student learning is the heart of the school's core business. The school is unapologetic and unrelenting in its expectations for quality student learning. Staff are strongly collaborative and collegially supportive around this shared moral purpose. Staff reported a strong sense of sharing and support in challenging situations with students.

Teachers regularly monitor the progress of each student against their learning plan and review and adapt plans accordingly. The school has developed its own electronic system for tracking the literacy growth of its students. It is aligned to the Australian Curriculum Developmental Literacy Continuum and is a developmentally appropriate literacy continuum for students with significant intellectual disability. This system is called 'LITCON'. As well, the school has developed its own electronic reporting system and uses it to identify each student's relevant achievement standards in 7 areas of the Australian Curriculum (all learning areas are covered by the school except languages other than English). Parents told the panel that they were very satisfied with the quality of information about each learning area that was provided in the report, and that the school attends rigorously to ensuring quality Australian Curriculum access by their child/young person.