The Department for Education

External School Review

Partnerships, Schools and Preschools division

Report for Palmer Primary School

Conducted in October 2018

Review details

A priority for the Department for Education 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 government schools.

The framework underpinning the 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 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.

We acknowledge the support and cooperation provided by the staff and school community. 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.

This review was conducted by Greg Graham, Review Officer, Review, Improvement and Accountability directorate and Paul Harmer, Review Principal.

School context

Palmer Primary School caters for children from reception to year 7. It is situated 55kms from the Adelaide CBD, and is part of the Murraylands Partnership. Enrolment in 2018 is 29 students, and has been steady over the last 5 years. The school is classified as Category 3 on the department's Index of Educational Disadvantage. The school's ICSEA score is 986.

The school population includes 20% Aboriginal students, 17% students with disabilities, no students of EALD background, 2 children in care and 66% of families eligible for School Card assistance,

The school leadership team consists of a principal in the 3rd year of her tenure at the school. There are 3 teachers, including 1 in the early years of their career.

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 2 key areas from the External School Review framework:

Student Learning: **To what extent are students engaged and intellectually challenged in their learning?**

Effective Teaching: **To what extent is assessment used to inform curriculum planning and instruction?**

    To what extent does the school cater for the varied needs of learners?

To what extent are students engaged and intellectually challenged in their learning?

Palmer Primary School's vision statement seeks for its students 'to be powerful lifelong learners who have the skills to thrive in and help shape their broader community...' This is supported by 2 of the school values of 'excellence' and 'always trying'. To achieve this vision, one of the school objectives is to '...ensure all learners are provided with an engaging, differentiated, problem-rich learning experience that fosters resilience and creativity...".

Palmer Primary School is somewhat unique in having the majority of its enrolled students coming from outside the township, where families choose to come to the school. A characteristic of the school is that 55% of the students have only been attending the school between 12 months and 2 years.

One of the strengths of the school is the relationships developed between the school staff, students, parents and wider town community. The school is described by parents as a "family oriented school", where everyone is considered and "children are happy here". The school has "a safe school environment – friendly, no bullying and supportive of each other".

Staff provided a variety of perspectives and practices in offering challenging learning opportunities in their classes. Strategies include problem-solving tasks, where students need to transfer knowledge from one area to another, recording different ways to get answers, offer take-up or 'think time', extension

questions, and higher-year level work. All staff agreed about a tendency to support students working at a lower level of achievement over those in the mid and high range of ability. Staff recognised it as an area for future development to ensure that stretch is offered to all students.

Students were asked about how challenging the work was, and indicated that about 50% of the work given over an average week was 'hard' or challenging, with a bias towards the work being easy. Some of the more able students didn't feel challenged with their work. When asked how their teacher could help them improve, one of the responses was to 'make it more challenging'. However, parents interviewed felt that their children are challenged in a variety of ways across the school, ranging from classroom work to homework tasks.

The use of learning intentions and goal-setting strategies varied across the school, using a number of approaches that include maths lesson goals, desktop goal cards to written goals in books. In most instances, goals were intentional, with a content focus. Student involvement in goal-setting was evident; however, not all students knew their goals and the links with their learning. The school has incorporated the concepts of Growth Mindsets and the Learning Pit within the learning process to support students in achieving their learning goals. Students spoke of these concepts, which were displayed on wall charts in classrooms. Teachers recognised that goal-setting is a 'work-in-progress', with further work in moving from content-driven goals to goals focusing on the general capabilities.

Student influence and decision-making about their learning was limited. Teachers provided examples where students were given options in project presentation and research topics. Students confirmed these examples and added things like choice in maths activities and sitting with friends. Students talked about the Palmer Student Council (PSC) and how they are involved in decision-making relating to school events and fundraising activities. Staff recognised that further work is needed on involving students in decision-making to engage them and personalise their learning.

Opportunities for students to be intellectually stretched in their learning results from the development of tasks that provide different perspectives, many entry points, pathways and exit points, and are designed for students to do the thinking. Planned work within year levels and learning areas in the development of transforming tasks is important work for the school to undertake. The school would benefit from development and embedding of common understandings relating to intellectual stretch and challenge, which can become embedded practice, and are known, understood and supported by students, staff and community.

Direction 1
Embed common understandings and agreements around intellectual stretch, challenge and rigour into daily classroom teaching and learning.

To what extent is assessment used to inform curriculum planning and instruction?

Literacy and numeracy are 2 curriculum priorities of the school's site improvement plan, with the main concern of having a 'consistent approach to quality instruction and assessment'. To accomplish this, Objective 4 states that: 'Teaching and Learning programs will be informed by individual student data'. Strategies undertaken include targeted staff professional development in pedagogical practices in literacy and numeracy, and development of a continuum to plot student capabilities.

Based on data, observation and feedback, it is clear that the school worked on a literacy focus targeting reading across the school, resulting in a Literacy Agreement that included non-negotiable actions taught in daily literacy blocks.

NAPLAN and PAT data are used to inform gaps in teaching, and provide evidence of student growth at parent/teacher interviews. School services officers valued the use of data to assist them in verifying intervention support and learning growth. This information is regularly shared amongst staff and recorded as part of the student's One Child One Plan.

Data analysis of student Running Records identified low growth rates in fluency, decoding and phonetic recognition, and initiated changes of practice both in the classroom and intervention processes. Introduction of MiniLit and MuiltiLit programs has improved the growth rates of identified students.

Analysis of writing achievement data identified inconsistency of practice across the school, which led to the introduction of the 7 Steps to Writing strategy. Staff all agreed that this program has seen a shift in teaching practice, with improved student understanding, language and vocab in all forms of writing. The use of success criteria in curriculum planning was evident to the panel, with work on developing a whole-school writing rubric that incorporates elements from the literacy and numeracy progression scales.

Formative and *summative* assessment strategies are used across the school. Staff acknowledged that summative tests, such as Running Records and sight words, were used a lot to establish and record levels of achievement. Formative assessments are generally ongoing and used at the beginning or end of a unit of study.

Staff indicated that they are starting to share the data, and found that students were interested and often talked about their results. Teachers confirmed that further work is needed in record-keeping of conversations and conferences between students and teachers to ensure continuity of learning and follow-up.

Students interviewed have an awareness of 'where they are at' with their work through discussions with their teacher on their test scores. The 'traffic light' colour-coding of achievement results is well-understood by students, with all confirming that 'green is good' and yellow and red means you 'have to work harder'. One student indicated that discussing his PAT data with his teacher enabled him to see his strengths and weaknesses. Class charts and reading records allow students to track their reading levels. Parent interviews are another forum where students' achievements are discussed.

The school uses information from a variety of datasets to support and plan for student learning. Opportunity exists for further work in expanding the use of assessment to cater for all students, starting with a consistent understanding of formative and summative assessments, its use across the reception to year 7 spectrum, and how it can support the improved learning of all students through task design. The next phase of the school's future planning would be to continue work on explicit assessment criteria, task design and moderation that incorporates feedback processes to and from students.

Direction 2
Strengthen and embed the whole-school assessment processes to include student voice, qualitative data and evidence-based feedback processes reception to year 7.

To what extent does the school cater for the varied needs of learners?

The Priority 3 Objective of the school's site improvement plan is to 'Strengthen our understanding of the balance between explicit teaching and student-led inquiry', and will be characterised by 'understanding the AC general capabilities of critical and creative thinking'.

The principal indicated that a recent positive aspect has been the adoption of the Gradual Release Model of learning, which provided a structure for combining both explicit and inquiry-based learning for both teachers and students. Combined with the work of the partnership in Benchmark Assessments (BAS) and Levelled Literacy Intervention (LLI), this has been the catalyst for pedagogical changes to cater for the unique context of the school and its students.

The principal stated that the mission of the school is to 'raise the bar' as indicated by the work undertaken over the past 2 years, especially in literacy. Using the Big 6 Framework for teaching reading, and the 7 Steps to Writing as the platform for change, all staff are involved in workshops across the partnership and within the school. Teachers commented on the benefits of this professional learning offered, enabling them to work together and share with colleagues from other schools.

There is intervention support across the school, with formal programs such as MiniLit and MultiLit focusing on literacy. School services officers have been involved in several professional learning programs, such as Jolly Phonics, Understanding Autism, Dyslexia and trauma training. Wellbeing intervention strategies are also used to support the social and emotional needs of students. Examples of work done by the Christian Pastoral Support Person and adult volunteers presented comments from students on the impact on their learning.

Given the diversity of student abilities, the school had been strategic in the planning of class structures and the placement of children in classes to accommodate their academic and social needs. Differentiated teaching practices varied, with staff recognising that the context of the school and the student profile enabled differentiated approaches to learning to 'be part of our program'.

The school operates 8 literacy groups, with 'literacy champions' to cater for students' needs. Group membership is interchangeable and based on student progress. Students recognise the different groups and indicate that "we do different work from the big kids". Teachers acknowledge that improvements in catering for the learning needs of middle and high-achieving students need to be further explored.

Students interviewed indicated that the level of work offered was a mixture of hard and easy, with a bias towards being easy. Older students recognised that some lessons, such as spelling and reading, followed routines in which children progressed through a list of activities. Other lesson tasks, such as project work, enabled students to select how they were to present their learning. Students agreed that teachers were explaining the work clearly and said their teacher only provided clues or prompts when the work was challenging, which made them think harder and 'work things out ourselves'. Students said teachers make the work interesting by using prompts such as videos, songs, computers and games.

Student input is an investment that can be a powerful tool for improving performance. Scaffolds for learning are enhanced when students are assisted to develop metacognition and the language of learning. Teachers at Palmer Primary School are beginning to engage in opportunities for moderation of teacher judgement using professional opportunities offered, linking data for planning and moderating learning tasks. Students can be brought on-board with these processes, involving them in evaluating their own work using transparent and co-constructed success criteria, and developing student voice in task design. The positive school-wide learning culture has students and staff well-placed to take these next steps.

Direction 3
Improve and personalise student engagement in learning by strengthening the role of student agency in the learning process.

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

During the review process, the panel verified the following effective practice is contributing significantly to school improvement at Palmer Primary school.

Palmer student council and the actions of student voice in both school events and their personal learning is a strength in the school. The structure allows all students to have input into their learning through weekly goals and student driven curriculum. A recent and currently developing initiative is the introduction of a bell to be rung once a student has achieved their goal. Palmer student council are raising funds for the purchase of a bell. Two school leaders were able to clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of the council, displayed a strong sense of school pride in all that they do, and identified with the school motto: 'Small School Enormous Opportunities'.
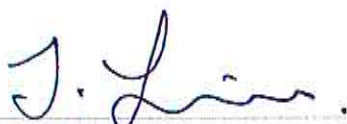
Outcomes of the External School Review 2018

Palmer Primary School uses self-review processes regularly and strategically to determine the impact school strategies and practices are having on student achievement.
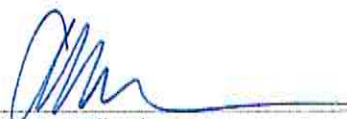
The principal will work with the education director to implement the following directions:

1. Embed common understandings and agreements around intellectual stretch, challenge and rigour into daily classroom teaching and learning.

2. Strengthen and embed the whole-school assessment processes to include student voice, qualitative data and evidence-based feedback processes reception to year 7.

3. Improve and personalise student engagement in learning by strengthening the role of student agency in the learning process.

Based on the school's current performance, Palmer Primary School will be externally reviewed again in 2021.

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Appendix 1

Attendance policy compliance

Implementation of the Education Department student attendance policy was checked specifically against documented evidence. The school was found to be compliant with this policy.
The school attendance rate for 2017 was 90.1%.

Appendix 2

School performance overview

The external school review process includes an analysis of school performance as measured against the Department for Education Standard of Educational Achievement (SEA).

In considering the data below, there needs to be some caution in making a judgement due to the low numbers represented in the student cohorts at the school. The data below represents a summary of aggregated data for Palmer Primary School over the years 2014 to 2017. This is done for 2 reasons: to overcome the anomalies that may occur in any one year, and to minimise the possibility of identifying individuals in any small cohort of students.

Reading

In the early years, reading progress is monitored against Running Records. Between 2014 and 2017, the trend for years 1 and 2 demonstrated that 27% (3 of 11) of year 1 and 36% (5 of 14) of year 2 students achieved the expected SEA.

Between 2014 and 2017, the reading results, as measured by NAPLAN, indicate that 92% (11 of 12) of year 3, 83% (10 of 12) of year 5, and 78% (11 of 14) of year 7 students demonstrated the expected achievement under the SEA.

Between 2014 and 2017, 33% (4 of 12) of year 3, 58% (7 of 12) of year 5, and 21% (3 of 14) of year 7 students, achieved in the top 2 NAPLAN reading bands.

Between 2014 and 2017, for those students who achieved in the top 2 NAPLAN proficiency bands in reading, 75% (3 of 4) of students from year 3 remain in the upper bands at year 5, and 33% (1 of 3) of students from year 3 remain in the upper bands at year 7.

Numeracy

Between 2014 and 2017, the numeracy results, as measured by NAPLAN, indicate that 75% (9 of 12) of year 3, 92% (11 of 12) of year 5, and 78% (11 of 14) of year 7 students demonstrated the expected achievement under the SEA.

Between 2014 and 2017, 25% (3 of 12) of year 3, 33% (4 of 12) of year 5, and 14% (2 of 14) of year 7 students achieved in the top 2 NAPLAN reading bands.

Between 2014 and 2017, for those students who achieved in the top 2 NAPLAN proficiency bands in reading, 33% (1 of 3) of students from year 3 remain in the upper bands at year 5, and no students from year 3 remain in the upper bands at year 7.