

EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW

Partnerships, Schools and Preschools Division

Report for Riverland Special School

Conducted in April 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 Vonnie Dolling, Review Officer, Review, Improvement and Accountability Directorate and Lorna Fenech, Review Principal.

School context

Riverland Special School is a Reception to Year 12 and above school, with students ranging in age from 5 to 20 years, located 230 kilometres east of Adelaide in the town of Berri. At the time of review, the school enrolment was 66 students, and enrolment has been steady over time, peaking in 2011 with 75 students. Students come from families living throughout the Riverland and Upper Mallee, with more than 60% of students travelling more than 10 kilometres to access the school. DECD provides transport assistance, including bus, taxi or car cost reimbursement for students at the school. The school does not have a defined ICSEA and is classified as Category 4 on the DECD Index of Educational Disadvantage. It operates as part of the Berri and Barmera Partnership of local sites.

Of the current 66 students, 54.5% (36) are verified as students with an intellectual disability, 42.4% (28) are identified with Global Developmental Delay, and 28.8% (19) are verified as being on the Autism spectrum. Some students may also have a physical or sensory disability. Students are organised into eight class groupings. The school population includes 21% (14) Aboriginal students, three young people in care, and approximately 58% of families eligible for School Card assistance.

The school Leadership Team consists of a Principal in the second year of her first tenure, having acted in and shared the Principal role for some years prior, and a 0.9FTE Coordinator with responsibility for Vocational Education and Training.

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 three key areas from the External School Review Framework:

Effective Teaching: How effectively are teachers supporting students in their learning?

Improvement Agenda: How well are the results of data and evidence translated into targeted actions?

Student Learning: How effectively is student learning growth monitored and evaluated?

How effectively are teachers supporting students in their learning?

During the onsite visit, the Review Panel observed a school and staff who showed that they valued building positive relationships with students. The panel acknowledges that the school is a complex educational setting and, at times, this may mean that staff are managing challenging behaviours. The panel met with a group of students who modelled positive relationships with one another and reported that one of the best things about the Riverland Special School was the "friendly awesome teachers". The Review Panel met with most School Service Officers (SSOs) employed at the site, and was provided with evidence of a strong partnership approach between teachers and SSOs in meeting student needs. A group of twelve parents and carers met with the Review Panel and gave a positive picture of the way that the school supports students as part of a family. These parents also spoke about informal information sharing through the use of the diary, and regular conversations and phone calls that supported their connection to the school.

The Review Panel noted that the school provides a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities for students to learn and grow. These include the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Girl Guides, authentic Work Experience opportunities and appropriate camping experiences. It was reported to the panel that over the period of the school involvement in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (21 years), 122 students have participated, achieving 98 Bronze, 37 Silver and 10 Gold Awards. The school supports students enrolled in this award with the provision of targeted resources, such as in-school time and a staff role to coordinate student involvement.

Presentations to the panel by all teachers involved in delivering the Modified South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) at Riverland Special School showed that planning included student needs and interests, focused on post-school options, and provided challenge to those students involved. The teachers and SSOs involved in the SACE program were clearly intentional in the learning opportunities they provided to support students to complete their SACE.

In the process of developing these varied opportunities for students, the school has engaged with and developed good partnerships with agencies and organisations in the community. These include local councils, Riverland Recycling Centre and Berri TAFE. The Principal's presentation included information about the school's journey into developing the arts, currently through a rock band and singing group, as well as through participation in film-making competitions in 2015 and 2016. This focus has emerged from initial participation in a 2009/10 Dance Project, jointly supported by Country Arts SA and Restless Dance Theatre. Two of the students, with whom the Review Panel spoke, identified the singing group as being amongst the best things about the school.

During teacher focus groups, individual teachers provided the panel with a wealth of information about their planning, programming and work with students. Some teachers are working in pairs and the Review Panel heard that, when classes are shared, there is planning that considers discrete responsibilities for each educator. The school has in place a 2012 Whole School Curriculum Framework, based around curriculum organisers that have minimal links to the Australian Curriculum. The panel observed that this is used in a variety of ways by teachers when planning their units of work. The framework did not enable the panel to verify that there is appropriate curriculum and tracking structures in place to manage learning across the school. Conversations with teachers reinforced the absence of curriculum mapping. In some cases, use of the Riverland Special School Curriculum Framework, means that teachers are planning from learning areas for children from birth to age 3, described as part of the Early Years Learning Framework. The Australian Curriculum, Students with Disabilities advice has a purpose *to support teachers in meeting their obligations under the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006) to ensure that all students with disability are able to participate in the Australian Curriculum on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful and dignified learning programs. It builds on the general Student diversity advice and applies to all educational settings and contexts, including specialist schools and support classes.* (<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/studentdiversity/students-with-disability>)

Appropriate education support may mean that, for some students, the planning and course content is drawn from the general capabilities learning continua, relating to the curriculum; for example, Literacy, Numeracy, ICT competence and Personal and Social competence. The general capabilities are an integral part of the Australian Curriculum: *Through a focus on the general capabilities of Literacy, Numeracy and Personal and Social Capability in particular, students with disability can access teaching and learning programs drawn from age-equivalent learning area content that is relevant to their individual learning needs.*

The Review Panel facilitated the staff meeting to further the Lines of Inquiry and, through the processes used, it was evident that staff recognise the need to implement a coherent high quality curriculum. The Review Panel concurs with staff in that the provision of time and structures for teachers to share and reflect on their practice is essential. It is imperative that beliefs about learning are articulated and guide curriculum planning and pedagogy, and that there is opportunity for leaders and teachers to engage in educational dialogue and debate that shapes whole-school policy and informs practice in implementing a curriculum that is coherent from the perspective of the learner as they progress through the school.

Direction 1

Develop a whole-school learning continuum document that links to SACE and year level requirements for Australian Curriculum learning areas, and uses the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities of Literacy, Numeracy, Personal and Social Capability and ICT capability, so that expectations of what is taught in bands of schooling across the year is informed and clearly understood.

How well are the results of data and evidence translated into targeted actions?

Riverland Special School has a vision 'that all students have suitable and successful post-school pathways'. Parents and carers, with whom the Review Panel spoke, cited the sense of community, as well as acknowledgement of students as individuals who are encouraged to do their best, as strengths. Parents confirmed that the school works with the student about moving into the 'outside world' and looks for new ways that work. The Review Panel saw and heard evidence of the place of the school's Now and Next Transition Planning, which begins the year before students move into the SACE. All teachers were asked about steps or expectations that are in place for each year level or cohort to support the vision, and, for students prior to the Senior Years, the panel did not receive a clear response. The Principal's presentation gave an overview of gaining staff commitment to the school's purpose, motto and vision and teachers reported talking about the School Improvement Plan at staff meetings.

The Principal shared with the panel information about the school's trial of the Intensive Interaction communication strategy for some students at the school, which has been building over the past couple of years. Intensive Interaction is a communication initiative that focuses on building relationships using the child's communication and was reported by staff and one family as having made a difference to some students. The mother of one girl reported that her daughter is now in an improved position for learning as a result of this initiative. The school is monitoring progress using the Intensive Interaction Record Sheet, including the 'Response to Interaction' continuum, and additionally using the *Checklist of Communication Competencies (Triple C)*, alongside this approach to identify participating students. The Triple C is designed to use with teenagers or adults with little or no speech, and is not suitable for those who communicate with more than 50 spoken words, manual signs and/or pictures. Intensive Interaction requires the skilled participant to assume the use of intentionality and the Triple C monitors this, but does not include literacy or a pathway to additional assessment.

The twelve students who met with the Review Panel in a focus group all communicated using speech. During classroom walkthroughs, the panel observed some students using Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODD) Communication Books, saw documentation relating to student use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and throughout the onsite visit had verbal and non-verbal interactions with quite a few students. *A focus on literacy is considered essential for all students, regardless of ability as the ability to communicate enables learning across the curriculum, the school day and life outside of school. Language, verbal or non-verbal, is critical for the development of literacy skills. In many cases, developing literacy skills supports the development of communication skills and vice versa; this is the case for students who use augmentative and alternative communication as well as for students who use speech to communicate.* (<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/studentdiversity/using-the-general-capabilities>)

During the staff meeting, teachers worked individually, and in groups, to identify a consensus of elements that had improved student learning over recent times. All groups identified Intensive Interaction as an improvement lever. The panel heard that Intensive Interaction is relevant to a small group of students, currently nine, and moderation practices need to be developed and applied with a level of rigour to maximise the impact of the initiative. Intensive Interaction and the use of the Triple C are included on the 2017 Site Improvement Plan (SIP), as part of the Communication and Language priority. It is important that leaders and teachers regularly engage in such critically reflective inquiry and use ongoing review processes to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and strategies.

During conversations with the panel, individual teachers reported that they were able to raise new ideas and felt supported by leadership to trial these. This was reinforced by the Principal, who shared that "People are coming up with 'Let's do this or that'..." During the parent forum, a 2016 trial of class Dojo in one class was described. Parents reported that it had been helpful but has not continued in 2017. There was no evidence of processes used to evaluate trialed ideas. The Review Panel was provided evidence that the staff had engaged with the ESR Framework prior to the on-site visit. Enthusiastic and motivated staff are a powerful resource, and it is critical to mobilise this energy in a planned and strategic approach to improvement. This necessarily includes using evidence-based information to target resources and actions that lead to improved student learning outcomes. The school was not able to provide the panel with a picture of whole-school performance.

Families who were represented at the parent forum, shared a very positive view of the ways in which the school is supporting their child to learn. Rigorous, systematic and transparent processes of self-review will ensure that the school knows what's working and why, and support the school in living their motto of 'celebrating ability'.

Direction 2

Embed regular and strategic self-review processes for staff to collaboratively analyse data and evidence to inform priorities and targeted strategies across the whole school.

How effectively is student learning growth monitored and evaluated?

It was clear to the panel that teaching staff are a dedicated group of professionals with a passion for their students. The evidence provided to the panel demonstrated that teachers had worked hard to create their own structures to monitor and evaluate student progress. Teachers shared data with the panel, collected through a range of standardised and diagnostic instruments, that is used in monitoring progress and to inform planning and instruction. Each teacher showed individual and varied ways of collecting, organising, recording and using students' achievement data. These included individually designed spreadsheets, paper-based recording systems and checklists, photographs, floor books (in the Early Years), SACE folders and other work samples. Some teachers had created rubrics to assess students' achievement and progress toward particular learning goals and shared these with the panel. A school-wide strategy, initiated late in 2015, is the use of Student Portfolios to store evidence of student learning. The teacher description of the use of these folders was as a hard copy repository of evidence from a range of sources, and they did not discuss their use to plan for targeted teaching.

The school has a current Assessment Sequence in Reading and Viewing, but it was not obvious for which students particular assessments applied. Teachers referred to some on the list but others, such as PM benchmarks, were not mentioned as useful or being used. In order to engage in 'constructive analysis that turns raw data into information that enables explanations, comparisons and determination of what is making significant difference to be made' (ESR Framework), schools must first have a robust and agreed set of assessments in place that form part of the system that monitors progress of individuals and cohorts and plans and implements interventions.

There is a cohort of 14 (21%) students who identify as Aboriginal, and the school did not provide any evidence for tracking of learning outcomes for these learners. All students at Riverland Special School are identified as being part of a priority group and information gathered at the staff meeting, regarding effective monitoring of student learning, reinforced a critical next step for the school. Groups of teachers recorded "continuum/consistency across the school", "needs to be more consistent", and "needs similar assessment across the school", as ways forward to support improvement.

In 2016, the school undertook to use the Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) assessment in two assessment periods. These assessments have been designed to describe skills and abilities that teachers can observe in everyday school and classroom contexts and interactions with students, presently available in English Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing, and for Personal and Social General Capability. Teachers reported that ABLES provided evidence of the monitoring and evaluation of student learning growth and some teachers considered that it had the potential to support targeted student learning. Students do not participate directly in assessment, and so, together with a whole-school assessment framework, ABLES provides a means for triangulating data and tracking student growth and achievement over time. At present, there is no one school-based recording system that supports teachers to view data relating to student achievement in a continuous way.

Direction 3

Develop a whole-school assessment framework and accessible recording system to track student growth and achievement at individual, cohort and whole-school level, and build coherence with observations recorded using ABLES.

Goals set in the Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) process represent key outcomes for learning growth for students. As part of this process, goals at Riverland Special School are generally set under the categories of Communication, Living/Personal and Behavioural/Social, although the panel saw an example of

Personal/Social. Consideration might be given to aligning individual learning goals with age-equivalent curriculum content, which would support using the teacher observations from ABLES to provide a comprehensive picture of a student's strengths and abilities and inform planning for learning. Currently, the three student goals are reviewed at least once a year. When asked about the regular NEP Review cycle, teachers gave mixed responses. Through the staff meeting processes, some staff expressed a view that they would like to see dedicated time in staff meetings to discuss student learning that had happened over the year, particularly between current and previous teachers, to inform NEP goals and planned learning outcomes. The Review Panel agrees that this would support collective responsibility for continuous learning, and that leaders and teachers developing systems and structures to ensure effective teaching and monitoring of learning progress is a critical factor for enhancing school effectiveness.

The panel looked at a range of NEP documentation and considered a number of goals that had been set for students. Although some individual student goals were Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely, Agreed and Reviewable (SMARTAR), in some cases, the NEP document also included a curriculum overview, which appeared to provide a range of other goals for the students. The long-term goals sometimes included outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework which confused the distinct purpose of a negotiated education plan as different from curriculum planning and reporting. The format of the reports that the panel looked at did not make it easy to follow the progress of students towards the goals that had been set for them. Some of the parents with whom the Review Panel spoke, commented that they found the Riverland Special School's report format a little "overwhelming".

The Riverland Special School's purpose 'to provide excellence in special education for students with disabilities' requires moving all students' learning forward with high expectations and intentional teaching. The Principal shared with the panel her view that, "We must never underestimate their (students) ability to exceed our expectations". Keeping student learning at the centre of planning and review processes and using student achievement data to monitor and evaluate how effectively students are achieving over time, are critical in supporting all learners to be challenged to meet and exceed expectations.

Direction 4

Build teacher capacity in the use of SMARTAR goals to support improved learning outcomes through high expectations.

OUTCOMES OF EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW 2017

Riverland Special School works in partnership with a range of agencies and organisations to provide authentic and engaging learning opportunities for students. The effectiveness of the school relies on teachers working as individuals or pairs, and the school demonstrated limited success in developing a whole-school approach or contemporary coherent curriculum for learners. The school monitors progress of individual students through the Negotiated Education Plan. Processes in place to monitor achievement and growth of student learning did not enable the school to report a picture of whole-school performance.

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

1. Develop a whole-school learning continuum document that links to SACE and year level requirements for Australian Curriculum learning areas, and uses the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities of Literacy, Numeracy, Personal and Social Capability and ICT capability, so that expectations of what is taught in bands of schooling across the year is informed and clearly understood.
2. Embed regular and strategic self-review processes for staff to collaboratively analyse data and evidence to inform priorities and targeted strategies across the whole school.
3. Develop a whole-school assessment framework and accessible recording system to track student growth and achievement at individual, cohort and whole-school level, and build coherence with observations recorded using ABLES.
4. Build teacher capacity in the use of SMARTAR goals to support improved learning outcomes through high expectations.

Based on the school's current performance, Riverland Special School will be externally reviewed again in 2018.



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.



Carolyn Trifonoff
PRINCIPAL
RIVERLAND 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 Riverland Special School has verified that the school is compliant in all applicable DECD policies, with variations that are relevant to a Special School focus.

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 86%.

Appendix Two

School Performance Overview

Attendance

2014: 87.9% 2015: 86% 2016: 86%

2016 data shows that attendance in the secondary school was 89.2% and for the primary years 83.6%.

Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) Goals

All students who attend Riverland Special School are verified under the DECD Students with Disability Policy. Based on the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) every student has a rightful access 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 at least three goals that they are working towards over the academic year.

SACE

In 2016, 8 subjects were attempted as part of Modified SACE Plans and of these, 6 were accredited with C or better grades. One-hundred percent (4) of Stage 2 students, who were potential completers, successfully completed the requirements of the Modified SACE in 2016.

At Riverland Special School, the SACE is completed over four school years.

