The Department for Education

External School Review

Partnerships, Schools and Preschools division

Report for Murray Bridge Special School

Conducted in May 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 external school review 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 Tony Sullivan, Review Officer, Review, Improvement and Accountability directorate and Niki Takos, Review Principal.

School context

Murray Bridge Special School is located approximately 74kms east of the Adelaide CBD in the regional town of Murray Bridge. The school caters for children from reception to year 7.

Murray Bridge Special School has a current enrolment of approximately 23 students placed across 4 classroom settings. The majority of students have attended another school prior to enrolling.

The school is classified as Category 3 on the department's Index of Educational Disadvantage.

The school population comprises 100% students with disabilities, 17% children and young people in care, and 9% Aboriginal students. Over 50% of the student population is diagnosed with Autism.

The school principal has led the school over an extended period of time.

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 3 key areas from the External School Review framework:

Improvement Agenda: **How effectively do teachers use data to plan, monitor, track and assess for improvement in student learning?**

Effective Teaching: **How well do teachers differentiate their planning and pedagogy to meet the varied needs of learners?**

School Community Partnerships: **How effectively does the school engage parents/carers in establishing and supporting student success?**

How effectively do teachers use data to plan, monitor, track and assess for improvement in student learning?

The principal began the review with this statement: "In order to improve learner achievement, growth, challenge, engagement and equity you need to know where the learner is at!" This statement is proving pivotal in guiding the school in a learning-focused direction. At the principal's admission there was a lack of consistency in knowing the starting point for each child and how best to progress each child as a learner. The principal described this as the special educator's 'Achilles heel'.

The school has good demographic data which is used to establish effective class structures based on the presenting needs of students. Strategic planning and additional school resources are used to balance student needs and capabilities across the 4 classes.

The main tools verified for monitoring, tracking, planning and assessing student learning are documented in the school's Individual Learner Developmental Assessment folder. These tools, selected from a variety of relevant sources, assess literacy, numeracy and daily living skills. Assessing, monitoring and tracking student growth was evidenced in individual student data records sighted by the panel. Assessments are conducted in an ongoing manner by each class teacher and used to establish entry points for learning for

individual students. The datasets are comprehensive and provide a detailed map of student progress over time. One teacher new to the school stated: "The data and information I had access to when I arrived here was fantastic".

Information from these assessment records is used to establish SMARTAR goals in each student's One Child One Plan (OCOP). Each child at the school has an OCOP that has been developed and shared with parents in term 2. This was confirmed through conversations with staff and parents, and in sighted documentation. Importantly, the OCOP has direct links to the Australian Curriculum (AC) to ensure that each student is connected to the same learning as every other student across the state. Most of the students are working at the foundation level of the AC. Staff confirmed that goals are shared with school services officers (SSOs) in their class roles, with a teacher stating: "We both need to be on the same page".

Planning for curriculum delivery is primarily centred on the developmental outcomes described in resources from the Down Syndrome Society of SA 'Learning4All' and integrated with the 'Child Protection Curriculum – Right to Know'. The school has been working with these resources for approximately 5 years. Although these are handy resources for teachers new to the school there are 'light' references to the AC. The principal and staff understand that the AC must become central to planning for students. This work must progress with the staff to make explicit links to the AC.

Staff maintain individual student profile folders for every learner. Within each folder the teachers store work samples, photos and evidence produced by students to reinforce their judgement about student performance and growth. These were sighted by the panel and considered a significant backdrop in moderating and evaluating progress when reporting to parents throughout the year. This is recognised as particularly effective practice in showing student progress to parents. Some of the parents interviewed said they had not seen the raw developmental assessment data, or the evidence in the student profile folders. The principal and staff could consider the value of sharing this information with parents to show progress over time.

Staff are beginning to consider Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) as a key assessment tool to monitor and track student progression, working within the foundation year of the AC. The school has made a commitment to the use of this tool and will provide training and access to staff to implement it and gradually phase out some of the assessment from the Developmental Assessment Summary. Student profile folders with their backdrop of evidence will prove to be valuable in transitioning to the ABLES platform. The school is commended for its foundation work in using data to plan and monitor learning. It must now develop tighter connections to the AC in support of a linked, coherent curriculum for students at the school.

Direction 1
Build explicit links to the Australian Curriculum within the school's curriculum and assessment guides to ensure the access and delivery of a rigorous and comprehensive program for all learners.

How well do teachers differentiate their planning and pedagogy to meet the varied needs of learners?

Murray Bridge Special School has founded its approach and emphasis in planning for improved student learning on evidence-based research and an intimate understanding of the needs of its student cohort. The principal stated that 70% of the student cohort is non-verbal. The site improvement plan (SIP) focus is

on developing the skills of students as communicators through a number of documented school approaches:

- skill development in aspects of literacy, that is, expressive and receptive oral language
- pre-reading and reading
- pre-writing and writing, and
- incorporating augmentative and/or assistive technologies to assist the capacity of students to communicate.

'An anxious child is not a learning child' is the school's motto and an evident 'lived experience' across the school. This motto was referenced by staff a number of times throughout the two-day review. Building the capacity of students to be able to communicate is a powerful way to reduce anxiety and raise levels of engagement in learning. Unpredictable student behaviour often manifests from students' inability to express frustration or communicate feelings to others as a result of sensory overload. This is particularly prevalent for students diagnosed with autism, and for those who may be on the autism spectrum. The school is working strategically to modify learning environments and interactions with students in support of student learning and wellbeing. In particular, the class learning environments are designed to facilitate flexibility in meeting the needs of students.

Teachers apply a minimal speech approach with their students in an effort to communicate more effectively with them. Teachers wear lanyards with various visual cues to support student communication with others. Some students have specific visual cues that are used both in class and the yard. The visuals are also differentiated for students via symbols, pictures or photos.

Teachers commented on increased levels of engagement and motivation through visual prompting and choice making. The panel noted that some of the low-tech visuals were from a variety of sources. The panel discussed the preference to have consistency across the school to build a whole-school approach to communication and provide predictability for students as they transition across classes at the school.

Observations in classes also revealed that teachers considered student readiness, different entry points and student success in learning as important steps in a differentiated approach to teaching. It was also noted in classes that students are given a short time (approximately 3 seconds) to process information and respond where necessary. This processing time is an important element in building communication skills. Auslan signs were evident in each classroom, and teachers/SSOs used these signs with students in support of building communication strategies for learners.

Improvement efforts by staff to create a school learning environment where 'minimal speech' is used by adults is in the early phase of development. The evidence behind this approach asserts that simplifying or reducing speech may have positive effects on learning, behaviour, interaction and responses from students.

To maintain the improvement momentum using a 'minimal speech' approach across the school the review panel supports the continued progression of this focus. Staff and parents stated that the school environment had evolved into a calm learning environment since this approach was introduced. The panel noted the calm learning environment in place throughout the review.

A whole-school approach to the implementation of low-tech and high-tech communication systems is considered the 'next step' for the school in connecting learners more deeply with their learning. This will serve to build upon the work already undertaken and further support student engagement, influence and growth in learning. The panel notes that this is included in the SIP as work to be undertaken.

This work cannot be planned and implemented in isolation. Rather, it will require staff to work collaboratively to design and deliver this evidence-based model based on the work of Carpenter, MacDonald, et al. It will also require professional learning, mentoring, observations, support and feedback for all staff as they strive to connect their practices across the school.

Direction 2
Fully implement an effective whole-school communication strategy that incorporates low-tech and high-tech augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) strategies that positively impact student engagement, voice and growth in learning.

Direction 3
Continue to build the capacity of staff to design and deliver learning in a highly coherent way to ensure predictability and success for learners at school.

How effectively does the school engage parents/carers in establishing and supporting student success?

The school has recently worked with parents to consider research in shifting its philosophy and practice – from one of a care-based model to one of learning and wellbeing. The school uses newsletters to both educate and inform parents about these changes. Teachers and parents also communicate via face-to-face meetings and phone calls as needed.

Students spoken to were clear that they came to school to learn, stating: "I come here to learn maths. I know my numbers and left/right" and "I love learning at school". The panel verified that the culture and language of learning was filtering through to the students, an important indicator of school success.

The teachers use a daily communication book that is sent home with each child allowing for the flow of information between home and school to occur. Whilst teachers invite parents to OCOP meetings and interviews, there are some parents who do not or are unable to engage. Accountability for outcomes is maintained through these meetings and biannual reports. Regular access to parents is inconsistent, and often depends on whether a child is driven by taxi to school. Evidence of a variety of staff/school approaches to communicate to parents was provided to the panel.

Parents confirmed that their children were generally happy and their needs were being met at school. They indicated receiving notes, photos and reports from school; however, there was variability amongst parents in awareness of the data tracked by teachers. Parents could tell that their child was progressing through various developmental milestones (for example, writing their name and counting at home).

In building a whole-school communication strategy (see Direction 2 above) for students the school will need to explain, support and engage with parents about this initiative. For it to be implemented successfully for the benefit of all students, the strategy will require coherent implementation across the school. Additionally, if the low-tech and high-tech AAC strategies are established as the predominant communication systems for students, the need for transferability of use to home will become a key factor. This will require the school to engage parents in understanding and supporting this initiative.

The panel understands some of the challenges associated with engaging parents in special school settings. With these in mind, the review panel expects the school to explore other successful school-home communication strategies with a view to implementing 1 or 2 that will apply in this context.

Direction 4
Explore and implement broader strategies to engage parents in the work being undertaken to improve students' capacity to communicate, engage and improve in learning.

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 Murray Bridge Special School.

Effective Leadership: The principal is a passionate leader who is very learner-centred. She has been at the school for many years and maintains an improvement focus. She understands the importance of building the capacity of her staff and has established supportive structures within the school to encourage, support and promote their development as professionals. She has fostered a strong staff team who possess effective skills to deliver quality learning for students at the school. There is a cohesive school culture amongst all staff.

Outcomes of the External School Review 2018

Murray Bridge Special School is demonstrating a culture of improvement through its ability to collect, monitor and track student progress using learning data. There is a clear expectation of learning improvement across the school. Staff work collaboratively to bring about effective changes to pedagogical practice. There is clear capacity building amongst the staff team.

The principal will work with the education director to implement the following directions:

1. **Build explicit links to the Australian Curriculum within the school's curriculum and assessment guides to ensure the access and delivery of a rigorous and comprehensive program for all learners.**

2. **Fully implement an effective whole-school communication strategy that incorporates low-tech and high-tech augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) strategies that positively impact student engagement, voice and growth in learning.**

3. **Continue to support and build the capacity of staff to design and deliver learning in a highly coherent way to ensure predictability and success for all learners.**

4 **Explore and implement broader strategies to engage parents in the work being undertaken to improve students' capacity to communicate, engage and improve in learning.**

Based on the school's current performance, Murray Bridge Special School will be externally reviewed again in 2022.

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 3 months of receipt of this report. Progress towards implementing the plan will be reported in the school's annual report.

Vicki Smith
PRINCIPAL
MURRAY BRIDGE SPECIAL SCHOOL

Governing Council Chairperson

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 91%.

Appendix 2

School performance overview

One Child One Plan Goals

All students who attend Murray Bridge Special School are verified under the department's Students with Disability Policy. Based on the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) every student has 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 2018 One Child One Plan. The goals established are specific and targeted. These are in place for all students.

The school uses a range of assessment tools that enable students to be assessed on the basis of their abilities:

- OCOP goals
- Down Syndrome of South Australia: pre-reading, pre-writing, spell to write sight words
- reading 'Getting Started', and
- Maths and money and self-help skills.

These are assessed on an ongoing basis and records tracked across the year.