Supporting School Improvement

Diagnostic Reviews

Murray Bridge Special School

DIAGNOSTIC REVIEW REPORT

September 2012

Australian Government

SMARTER SCHOOLS

Government of South Australia
Department for Education and Child Development

Table of Contents

Supporting School Improvement

The *Supporting School Improvement (SSI) - Diagnostic Review* is one component of the DECD strategy to implement the Communities Making a Difference National Partnership. This initiative aims to raise achievement levels and redress the performance gap for students in low SES schools by promoting and supporting the development of effective whole school approaches to literacy teaching and learning.

The Communities Making a Difference National Partnership requires all states to conduct diagnostic assessments of all schools in low SES communities. In South Australia, this will see all low SES schools engage with diagnostic reviews during 2010-12. The SSI diagnostic review processes build on the Supporting Improved Literacy Achievement (SILA) project which commenced in selected DECD schools in 2009. Diagnostic reviews involve site, regional and central office personnel in working collaboratively in each school to identify practices that support improvement and improve student learning outcomes.

As the focus of the diagnostic review is improvement, the process is informed by the DECD Improvement and Accountability Framework (DIA*f*) using an appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry seeks to identify, extend and build on effective practices in each context. Diagnostic reviews consider practices related to literacy outcomes using the DIA*f* 2012-14 Validation Focus Areas of Quality Teaching, Learner Outcomes, Curriculum Coherence and Leading Improvement.

Diagnostic review processes involve gathering input from staff, parent and student representatives and the examination of student achievement data, opinion surveys, school planning processes and demographic data. The key focus of the *Supporting School Improvement (SSI) - Diagnostic Reviews* is to support school improvement at the local level. In addition, the diagnostic reviews provide DECD with strong evidence from schools and regions to identify more effective ways to provide high quality improvement for all.

Each school will receive a diagnostic review report highlighting commendations and recommendations to assist them plan for and continuously improve literacy outcomes. Support will be provided through regional support staff and the range of resources made available through the Communities Making a Difference National Partnership. This may include Regional Leadership Consultant mentoring, access to the Principal as Literacy Leader (PALL) program or student mentoring strategies. The Regional Director/Assistant Regional Director will monitor the implementation of diagnostic review recommendations through regional performance management processes and in discussions with site leaders.

Diagnostic review report

The diagnostic review report seeks to provide a valid snapshot of communication/literacy teaching and learning at Murray Bridge Special School. It reflects teaching in the school and how this affects student learning outcomes. The purpose of this report is to provide commendations and recommendations that will support opportunities for continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

The report is designed to have value for all audiences concerned with improving student outcomes in communication/literacy at Murray Bridge Special School. However, the most important audience is the school itself. Hopkins, (2001) highlights '*school improvement is not about a dependency culture but about the school doing something for itself, which it wants to do*'[1]. Hence the report is to support and provide future direction for the school to action.

The diagnostic review team commits to compile a draft report with clear recommendations within three weeks of the completion of the SSI Review process. After team editing and feedback, the final report will be forwarded to the Director, Site and Regional Improvement & Accountability. Following approval, the report is disseminated to the Regional Director and Principal. The Review Chair will brief the Principal and school staff with the purpose of initiating the improvement process.   The Principal will share the report with the Governing Council and school community as appropriate.

How the school engages with the report is the critical next step. With support from the regional team, the school decides what changes it will make in teaching and learning and how to amend the Site Improvement Plan to reflect review recommendations.   The regional team will consider how they can best support the school as it works to strengthen literacy learning.

The report is structured under four areas that are key levers for school improvement. These are *Quality Teaching, Learner Outcomes, Curriculum Coherence* and *Leading Improvement,* as described in DECD Improvement and Accountability framework (DIAf) Validation Process for schools 2012-14[2]. These areas have been selected from current research as drivers of improvement.

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[1] *David Hopkins(2001) 'School Improvement for Real' Routledge Farmer ISBN 0415230764*
[2] *www.decd.sa.gov.au/quality*

A number of common terms are used in the report. The following table provides a guide to these terms:

Common Terms	Approximate % of Occurrence
All	100%
Almost all	> 90%
Most	75-90%
Majority	50-74%
Many	40-49%
Some	25-39%
Small/limited number/few	< 25%

The review process

The SSI diagnostic review process includes the following components:

- Consideration of a range of school documentation and student data including demographic and achievement data
- A two day site visit where the diagnostic review team members seek information and opinions from students, staff and parents
- A third day involving the review team in intensive deliberations and the preparation of a draft report detailing commendations and recommendations for improvement to be used as the basis for the final diagnostic review report.

Roles and responsibilities

School staff will:

- Be involved in a three day site diagnostic review process focussed on communication/literacy
- Attend a follow up staff meeting to discuss commendations and recommendations
- Work to enact report recommendations
- Report on progress, directions and issues through school improvement planning, monitoring, performance meetings and the school's Annual Report.

The Principal is responsible for sharing commendations and recommendations with the school community.

The SSI diagnostic review officer will:

- Be responsible for coordinating the diagnostic review process
- Provide the principal with ongoing information in preparing for the review and verbal feedback about commendations and recommendations at the conclusion of the 3 day review process
- Provide pre review information to staff and Governing Council
- Chair the review and develop the school report in line with evidence gathered by team members during the review process
- Debrief the report with the principal once the report has been approved by the Executive Director Preschool and School Improvement
- Provide an overview of commendations and recommendations to the staff

- Report to the system emerging issues, blockers and enablers.

The Regional Director will:

- Support the diagnostic review process by participating and/or nominating regional staff for the review
- Support school improvement and monitor progress through line management and reporting structures with principals
- Ensure the school has ongoing support from the Regional Leadership Consultant, the Performance, Analysis and Reporting Consultant, relevant Aboriginal Education personnel within the regional office and curriculum consultants.

Implementing the recommendations

The SSI team acknowledges there are a number of significant recommendations within this report and support will be required for successful implementation in the school. Once the report is approved for release the following will be available as support:

1. The Chairperson will prepare an Executive Summary of the Report and provide an electronic copy of both this summary and the full report to the Principal and Regional Director.

2. Wherever possible, the Chair (or proxy) of the SSI team will visit the site to release the report and brief the Principal. Following this, the Chair will brief the staff (using the Executive Summary) in the presence of the Regional Director or delegate. Through negotiation with the Principal, the SSI Diagnostic Review Officer (or proxy) may brief the leadership team and/or Governing Council.

3. The Principal will ensure full copies of the report are made available to staff and Chairperson of Governing Council.

4. The school community will be informed of the outcomes of the SSI diagnostic review, through an article based on the Executive Summary, in the next appropriate newsletter. The principal may wish to seek support from the Regional Director and/or the SSI Diagnostic Review Officer in preparing this statement (a sample is provided in the SSI Site Leader Information pack).

5. Continued support will be provided to the school through regional office personnel. This can involve a range of resources that may include mentoring through the Regional Leadership Consultant, the Principal as Literacy Leader (PALL) program Regional Curriculum Consultants and Performance Analysis and Reporting Consultants. Leadership may also connect with central office staff in responding to the recommendations and undertaking improvement planning.

6. A critical task for the school will be the redevelopment and targeting of the Site Improvement Plan to incorporate review recommendations.

7. Integral to the improvement process will be the use of DIAf resources for ongoing self review, data analysis and reflection to ensure that the momentum for improvement is sustained, directions monitored and support targeted.

8. Ongoing reporting and communication to the community and Regional Director about the achievement of the recommendations and progress towards improvement targets will be the responsibility of the Principal.

MURRAY BRIDGE SPECIAL SCHOOL

The school review

The SSI diagnostic review process was undertaken at Murray Bridge Special School on 17th, 18th and 19th September, 2012.

The SSI diagnostic review process included the following components:

- Consideration of a range of school documentation (including Site Improvement Plan, staff information, opinion survey data, student reports, behaviour management records and policies) and student data including demographic and achievement data.
- A two-day site visit where the diagnostic review team members sought information and opinions from students, staff and parents. The site visit included:
  - a tour of the school by the principal
  - a presentation by the principal and key staff of the site context and history
  - information to staff by the SSI diagnostic review officer
  - 4 interviews with individual staff members
  - 2 focus groups (with SSOs and the leadership team)
  - 2 observations (of students but with a staff member)
  - 2 interviews (with Governing Council chair and a representative from Families SA)
  - 3 hours of observations with students in classroom settings using the follow-a-student process
  - a staff survey developed for the SSI process.
- A third day involving the review team in intensive deliberations and the preparation of a draft report detailing commendations and recommendations for improvement to be used as the basis for the final diagnostic review report.

Site team composition

The diagnostic review team members were:

- Jenny Turner, Diagnostic Review Officer, Quality, Improvement & Effectiveness, Chair
- Marg Beagley, Diagnostic Review Officer, Quality, Improvement & Effectiveness
- Joanne Beinke, Disabilities Consultant, Murray and Mallee Region
- John Vanderhorst, Staff Representative, Murray Bridge Special School
- Phil Fitzsimons, Peer Principal, Murray Bridge High School

School context

Background

Murray Bridge is a rural town with a population of approximately 19,400 people and is the major centre on the Murray River north of Lake Alexandrina. Prior to European settlement the area was inhabited by the Ngarrindjeri Aborigines. Murray Bridge was established when a road bridge (how the city got its name) over the Murray River was completed in 1879. It was followed in 1886 by the Adelaide-Melbourne railway line which guaranteed that the city's importance as a vital link across the river was assured. Today the city is the centre of a major agricultural district which is driven by chicken raising, pig breeding, tomato and snow pea growing and the Murray River is a popular tourist attraction within South Australia.

Murray Bridge Special School is situated in Murray Bridge, 75 kilometres east of Adelaide in the Murray Mallee area and Rural City of Murray Bridge. It is part of the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) Murray and Mallee Region. The original Murray Bridge Primary School was opened in 1881 and the Murray Bridge Special School was established later on the same campus. It previously catered for students from Reception to Year 12 and in 2012 the secondary component was disestablished so the school currently enrols students from Reception to Year 7.   Murray Bridge Special School is identified as a Category 3 school on the DECD Index of Disadvantage, and has not yet been allocated an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value.

Murray Bridge Special School provides a specialist learning environment at a cross regional level for young people with disabilities, disorders, spectrums and syndromes. To be eligible for enrolment at the school a young person must be referred by a DECD Early Childhood Psychologist, a school Psychologist, or a DECD Speech Pathologist. Young people assessed as eligible may be enrolled at the school from the age of five years and then graduate to a secondary setting at the conclusion of Year 7. Students travel to Murray Bridge Special School from residential areas such as Murray Bridge, Meningie, Mount Barker, Littlehampton, Woodside, Tailem Bend, Strathalbyn, and Lameroo to access the learning, health, and personal care packages offered by the school. Most students graduate to the Disability Unit at Murray Bridge High School.

Student enrolment / support

Since the beginning of the year, Murray Bridge Special School enrols only students from Reception to year 7, and at the time of the diagnostic review the enrolment of the school was 24. These enrolments include three Aboriginal students and 13 students approved for School Card.

Enrolment data in Figure 1 below indicates the changes in enrolment numbers since 2009. These fluctuations are dependent on students in the district needing to access the school's specialist teaching programs, meeting the DECD enrolment criteria and the type of appropriate facilities available.
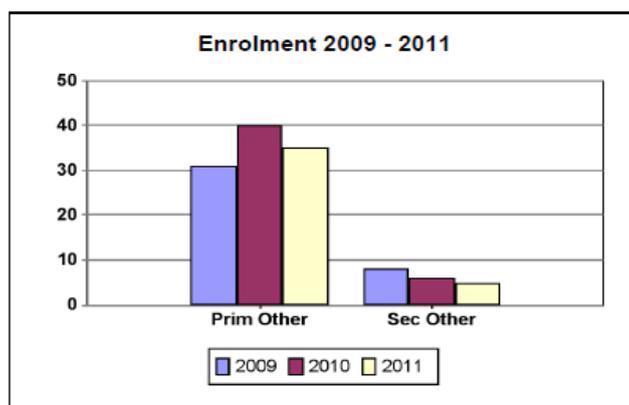

Figure 1

All students currently enrolled are identified as students with disabilities and have an IQ of fewer than 55 points. Within this cohort a large number of students have significant intellectual and physical disabilities and only seven students are able to communicate verbally. Enrolment data collected since 1999 indicates the complexity and range of disability of young people enrolling at the school will continue to increase. From 2007-12 there has been a significant increase in the enrolment of primary aged young people living with autism spectrum disorder and who have a significant intellectual disability. The enrolment data for the school in 2011 reflects national and international trends which suggest out of four young people with disabilities it is likely three will be male and one female.

All students have an Individual Learning Plan. Staff is deployed flexibly according to the assessment outcomes of the students' learning needs and wellbeing. Staffing is also deployed specifically to support the life skill development and personal care needs of some of the students.

Staff profile

At the time of the review Murray Bridge Special School had seven teaching staff and seven ancillary staff. Most of the teaching staff members have been at the school for five years or less and approximately 50% of the teaching staff is permanent. The leadership team includes the principal and a "quality staff mentor". The "quality staff mentor" is a Step 9 teacher with wide ranging experience in working with students with disabilities.

Assets and grounds

Murray Bridge Special School is co-located with Murray Bridge Primary School and they are known locally as the 'North Schools'. Facilities consist of a solid brick construction and 2 prefabricated buildings. There are small play areas outside each learning area and one larger playground within the site. Outside play areas are fully shaded. Students have access to the gymnasium in the R-7 school.

There has been a recent upgrade of learning spaces to better meet the needs of students, particularly for those identified as being on the Autism spectrum. Classrooms are now low sensory learning spaces with minimal furniture, bare windows with dark tinting, and have soft coloured uncluttered walls.

Murray Bridge Special School has DECD approved security fencing around the perimeter which has supported a planned, positive and safe improvement in the level of students' learning through self-initiated or supported exploration, curiosity, socialization and risk taking.

Report discussions and commendations

The Communities Making a Difference National Partnerships *Supporting School Improvement (SSI) - Diagnostic School Review* was conducted at Murray Bridge Special School on 17th, 18th and 19th September, 2012.

During their time at the school, the review team experienced a warm welcome from the principal and staff. The team was impressed with the school organisation and the quality of arrangements made in preparation for the diagnostic review. The principal provided a comprehensive pack of information to the team together with documented policies and procedures for the school. These proved to be invaluable to the team members in developing an informed understanding of the school and the particular learning needs of its students.

Murray Bridge Special School presents as a caring and supportive learning environment for students. The tone of the school was purposeful, positive and respectful. Relationships with staff and between students and staff were positive. Staff responded positively to students, who appeared happy and calm.

As a result of the changed cohort of students since 2011 (now R-7), the principal and staff have taken the opportunity to revisit their mantra and the practices to support its implementation. The review team was impressed with the intellectual rigour of leadership in reflecting on, and redirecting their practices. Using cutting edge research[3] about the requirements of students with complex needs, the principal and staff have examined their practices and redesigned their programs to more effectively meet the learning needs of the students in their care. Staff has needed to take some risk in changing its practice. This has involved a whole school approach to a child focussed environment which is calm, quiet and non – coercive. By engineering the environment, staff is able to support students in their learning goals. This entails having low sensory learning spaces with minimal furniture, bare windows with dark tinting, removal of 'white'[4] noise and soft coloured uncluttered walls. Staff has endorsed a minimal speech approach[5]. Facilities have been altered to accommodate this philosophy of less stimulation to encourage students to communicate more[6]. For these changes in practice to occur, the principal and

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[3] *Carpenter Barry, Professor, MacDonald Jim Dr, Nielsen Lilli Dr*
[4] *White noise-music TY in background, adults the major form of over stimulation…we become the white noise Dr Jim MacDonald*
[5] *Potter C and Whittaker C (2001) Enabling Communication in Children with Autism, Jessica Kingsley Publishers*
[6] *Dr Jim MacDonald*

staff have had a schedule of whole school training and development, redeveloped programs based on research, used staff meetings as professional learning communities where further professional learning occurs, and have created the position of "quality staff mentor" to work alongside staff in implementing new practices. The staff is to be commended for the way in which it has collectively identified and implemented the programs and procedures which now exist in the school.

Staff and the leadership team clearly value the professionalism of the whole team and the individual roles within that. There is a sense of engagement and optimism between the staff in their focus on making the learning of the young people in their care, relevant and challenging. There is an open learning culture which fosters continued research and challenge to regular practices.

In line with the student learning focus, there is clarity about the learning goals for individual students in each of the areas of cognitive, communication, gross and fine motor skills, social, emotional development and daily living skills. Each student has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) with personal goals (in support of a Negotiated Education Plan) according to their disability, but based on their ability. Staff explained that information in the ILP is more comprehensive and useful to them.

The principal has been proactive in gaining funding grants to bring more resources into the school. The available resources and facilities are all focussed on providing support for individual student learning.

Relationships between parents and the school are generally positive. The school has been proactive in initiating daily communications with parents. Staff communicates with parents about their child via a communication book. The review team applauds the use of the book to effectively communicate with parents on a daily basis.

The Occupational Health practices within the school were observed to be exemplary. There are clear procedures for infection control, manual handling and for security.

The review team acknowledges that Murray Bridge Special School has many challenges and commends the principal and staff for their commitment, philosophy and preparedness to change practice, to create a safe learning environment and to better meet the needs of the current student cohort.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: QUALITY TEACHING

That the leadership team and staff of Murray Bridge Special School work together to:

a. further develop the case management process to:

   i. provide an opportunity for staff to share information about individual students

   ii. collectively plan improvement strategies which are complementary for all identified areas of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP).

b. include the achievement of student communication level information in the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) as a way of ensuring that skills are further developed where possible.

Recommendation 2: LEARNER OUTCOMES

That the leadership team and staff at Murray Bridge Special School work together to inquire into existing student engagement levels and explore the use of the SSA Engagement Profile and Scale tool to measure indicators of engagement for students.

Recommendation 3: CURRICULUM COHERENCE

That the leadership team and staff at Murray Bridge Special School work together to review Individual Learning Plans (ILP) so they are reflective of all aspects of the Murray Bridge Special School Communication Model, the proposed outcomes for each student and the assessment tools to use.

Recommendation 4: LEADING IMPROVEMENT

That the leadership team and staff at Murray Bridge Special School work together to:

a. reformat the Site Improvement Plan (SIP) to identify and focus on priorities for student learning and improvement and that realistic student targets are set.

b. formalise the performance management processes to support and monitor individual staff development

Literacy Communication Overview

Murray Bridge Special School has a focus on learning. Of the twenty four students enrolled, only seven are verbal communicators at this stage. All students have unique, complex learning profiles of one or more disabilities and require a high level of differentiation and specific and specialised teaching approaches. Carpenter et al state *" in relation to the group of learners we describe as having 'complex needs' we must seek to build an inclusive curriculum….around adaptation, modification and design….that will be relevant to each learner"[7]*

Students at the school have been assessed as having an IQ less than 55 and have a range of communication skills. Leadership, in the site self study presentation and staff in focus groups and interviews highlighted that the school uses seven levels of communication to identify the language/ communication/literacy levels of students at the school. The levels are as follows:

Level 1   Pre-Intentional Behaviour - not controlled but reflects a general state-hungry, sleepy- equated to between 0 and 3 months of age

Level 2   Intentional Behaviour - others interpret the needs from behaviours such as body movements, facial expressions - equated to between 3 and 8 months of age

Level 3   Unconventional Communication - does not use symbols but uses non socially acceptable gestures and movements-equated to between 6 and 12 months

Level 4   Conventional Communication - while not using symbols students use acceptable forms of communication - eg nodding, pointing-equated to between 12 and 18 months of age

Level 5   Concrete symbols - symbolic communication begins here - for example, pictures, objects, gestures can be used to communicate-equated to between 12 and 24 months of age , but not as a separate stage

Level 6   Abstract symbols - speech, manual signs, braille - not physically similar to what they represent-equated to 12 and 24 months of age

Level 7   Language - symbols are combined into two or three combinations according to grammatical rules - begins around 24 months of age

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[7] *Carpenter B (2002) 'Enabling partnerships: families and schools' in Carpenter B, Ashdown R and Bovair K (eds) Enabling Access effective teaching and learning for pupils with learning difficulties. London: David Fulton, publisher*

For eligibility for enrolment at the school, students have an initial assessment by a DECD psychologist or Speech Pathologist. At that time, the level of communication is determined. From there, a learning goal is determined for each student and a program is planned. Programs in the school are based on Snapshot of Development[8], SERU Developmental Scales[9] and Functional Scheme from Lilli Neilson,[10] (a tool for assessing the levels of a learner who, irrespective of age and/or handicap has developed to a level between birth and 48 months) depending on the skill and understanding level of the student. Currently, at the school there are students at all levels of communication. This has implications for the consistency and appropriateness of curriculum used.

Literacy is the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms. Literacy incorporates a range of modes of communication including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing. It is not a single set of skills but a way of interpreting, responding and expressing ideas through a variety of modes in a range of contexts.

Literacy teaching, particularly in a special school setting, requires deliberate planning, explicit teaching and differentiation supported by varied communication tools and methods depending on the communication needs of each student.

Current research into the teaching of literacy to students with disabilities indicates that teachers need to embrace the notion of non-conventional literacies. There is a need to make a variety of forms of literacy available to individual learners with deliberate, personalised and differentiated technology and teaching practices. Zimmer (2007) in her research on literacy learning for students with disabilities states that *"processing information is often easier and more effective when presented through a variety of modalities such as sight, sound, touch and movement."*[11]

Communication skills are the priority for Murray Bridge Special School in their focus to have students become functionally literate. Verbal language is not the preferred communication style of most students at the school. This means for some students, using other communication strategies readily identified and understood in the local and broader

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[8] *Snapshot of Development by Shelley Edwards and Bethany Steward*
[9] *SERU Developmental Scales-DECD Special Education Unit Developmental Scales*
[10] *Functional Scheme-Lilli Neilson*
[11] *Zimmer N (2007) "Communication to Literacy" presentation to school leaders at Cranleigh School ACT Australia*

community. These include using a communication tool such as Interactive Intervention, "*an approach to teaching the pre-speech fundamentals of communication to children and adults who have severe learning difficulties and/or autism and who are still at an early stage of communication development"*[12]*,* using hand signs and gestures, using body language, gestures and eye contact, sounds and utterances, using drawings, using sign translation and using assistive technologies such as PECS. All staff at the school, including SSOs, have had training in Intensive Interaction and use the methodology effectively across the school, where appropriate.

Resources including digital resources

The school is well resourced. Each learning space has purpose built resources, whether they are mobile of fixed. Where possible, resources are placed in cupboards to avoid over stimulation. Students were observed getting out a particular resource and, when finished with it, putting it away.   Technologies for communication and learning are particularly valuable and important for students in Special Schools. Recently, iPads and touch screen computers have been purchased for use with students. In keeping with the considered delivery of curriculum to students, it is planned that staff will be trained in the use of these resources for students at the school, before they are placed into classes for student use. Programming and planning for each individual student is based on the goal to be achieved and the use of the best resource to support the student. Staff are supported in their planning through discussion with the "quality staff mentor" and in staff meetings. The review team strongly encourages the staff at the school to continue to explore further avenues to use technology for student use, in particular, to aid their communication.

Literacy Achievement Data Analysis

It is not appropriate for students at the school to participate in National or State assessments. Staff at the school has a clear documented and published Assessment, Learning Goals and Reporting Cycle. Assessment tools used include Snapshot of Development (2008)-the Functional Skills Assessment (0-48 months) and SERU Developmental Scale and Resource Folder.

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[12] *Intensive Interaction-pre speech fundamentals of communication*

Recommendations: Quality Teaching

Quality teaching demonstrates intentional, responsive and effective learning design that engages and extends all learners.
(Adapted from the TfEL Quality Tests)

That the leadership team and staff of Murray Bridge Special School work together to:

a. further develop the case management process to:

   i. provide an opportunity for staff to share information about individual students

   ii. collectively plan improvement strategies which are complementary for all identified areas of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP).

b. include the achievement of student communication level information in the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) as a way of ensuring that skills are further developed where possible.

Quality teaching, responsive to the needs, abilities and interests of learners is the entitlement of all students. The provision of targeted and inclusive teaching in all classrooms is the best intervention action we can provide. As per their mantra, staff at Murray Bridge Special School aim to provide a non coercive learning environment which limits external stimuli so that students can focus on their learning goal.

Quality Learning Environment

Facilities:

The main building is a purpose built facility, as are the two portable buildings, which can be divided into separate learning areas with adjoining areas for specific learning objectives- outdoor play, withdrawal and sensory rooms. Classrooms have minimal furniture and limited visual stimuli except for instructions for using the facilities or a timetable of lessons for the day on the walls. All classrooms have an interactive whiteboard. Moveable resources are clearly labelled and housed in cupboards within the classroom. Sensory rooms included some movement resources and labelled resources on the walls. It is clear that the sensory rooms are used with specific goals in mind rather than as general withdrawal rooms. Resources with particular purposes have been purchased and are easily accessible, without contributing to the stimuli in the classroom.

Resources:

The use of contemporary assistive technologies such as iPads and downloaded applications provide broad experiences and personal choice to support students to learn and communicate. Popular culture technology such as iPads, Interactive Whiteboard programs and flip cameras provide normalisation for students who are able to access them. There are currently many students, when communicating with their peers, who find the use of technology liberating and enabling. In the tour of the school, the principal talked about having made a purchase of moveable touch screen computers and iPads as they are more suitable for the students at the school, given each is a single unit and can be removed quickly should a student become violent or need to use the resource away from others. Currently staff is exploring the need to reduce the number of icons on each screen for students who can become obsessed and over stimulated with them.

Interactive whiteboards are in each classroom.

Teaching programs:

In the "follow a student" process and in the school tour and student observations, the review team observed mainly independent student activities ranging from practising skills, some basic reading aloud, using sensory materials, following instructions, students using resources to indicate their learning. These included students putting letters of their name next to relevant photographs, cutting with scissors as a motor exercise, performing a purposeful physical action course, private playing with their own materials, for example, a length of ribbon and in daily living activities such as eating. Some students spend time in their "own world" and do not take account of their surroundings or of other people. The teacher (facilitator[13]) would gently guide the student towards the focus of the lesson. The team observed planned lessons and some intentional teaching - either reinforcing prior knowledge and skills, having students practise skills or giving clear directions.

Classroom practice:

The review team observed a calm, quiet and non – coercive child focussed environment in all learning areas and engineering of the environment so that young people are specifically supported in their learning goals. Staff has endorsed a minimal speech approach[14]. When talking to students, staff members were calm and did not use more than one instruction at

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[13] *Facilitator-all staff are facilitators as per Jim MacDonald's philosophy of students in control of their own learning. Staff act as a guide or facilitator*
[14] *Potter C and Whittaker C (2001) Enabling Communication in Children with Autism, Jessica Kingsley Publishers*

a time. There was waiting time for students before a request was repeated. Staff talked directly to individual students and used their name. Students understood routines and the behaviour expected of them. Facilities have been altered to accommodate the philosophy of less stimulation to encourage students to communicate more[15]. For these changes in practice to occur the principal and staff have had a schedule of whole school training and development, redeveloped programs based on research, used staff meetings as professional learning communities where further professional learning occurs, and created the position of "quality staff mentor" to work alongside staff in implementing new practices. This has been a "brave" initiative for staff to challenge traditional assumptions and practices Special Schools in the past.

Expectations:

Students at this level often develop so slowly that expectations must be realistic. Achievement occurs in small steps and is celebrated. Staff did indicate that individual achievement is monitored on an ongoing basis and is reflected in student information maintained by class teachers and is communicated to parents daily. Often it is necessary to encourage students to move out of their comfort zone educationally, only when they are comfortable emotionally and physically**.** The review team was made aware of a student whose verbal skills regressed once he felt comfortable at school. The challenge for staff is to ensure a balance of familiar experiences with new learning to ensure good preparation for changing circumstances. This will be particularly important in preparing students for the transition to secondary schooling.   Staff at Murray Bridge Primary School make decisions about which of the major learning focus areas need to be addressed on a regular basis for students. Each student has an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). The ILP outlines learning goals in the areas of cognition, communication, gross and fine motor skills, social and emotional and daily living skills. Decisions about learning foci need to be made in the light of the other areas and adjustments made according to a student's disability.. The review team recommends that **the case management process is further developed in the school to provide an opportunity for staff to share their information about individual students** and **collectively plan improvement strategies which are aspirational and complementary for all areas of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP).**

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[15] Dr Jim MacDonald

While the progress of some students is restricted through their disability, the aim is for them to initially attain some basic communication skills to assist them. More able students are provided with a range of visual and physical stimuli to further develop their skills.

The review team is cognizant of the difficulty in determining what is a "high expectation" for these students and that

> *"Low expectations can be institutionalised when we prejudge students' capabilities based on their group membership."*[16]

The review team is also aware that determining an aspirational goal for students at Murray Bridge Special School is often problematic.

> *"When we expect that we have an impact on student achievement, we are right. When we expect that we are impotent, we are also right."*[17]

The importance of maintaining a continuous assessment program based on identified developmental goals is vital. The school uses a range of agreed school wide tools for doing this. The review team **recommends that staff include the communication level information in the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) as a way of ensuring that skills are further developed where possible.**

Staff work consistently from their teach-learn-assess cycle, with the Individual Learning Plan as a working document. They understand the developmental aspects of their students' learning and the need to make adjustments for their learning. It is important that the revelation of new learning is not always confined to being expressed in the students preferred mode of communication. *"The curriculum incorporates rich and varied modes of making and communicating meaning"* [18] and "*there are many ways to see and interpret the world…The limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition."* [19] The review team suggests that staff at Murray Bridge Special School discuss student achievements, goals and targets and challenge and support the pursuit of high standards.

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[16] *Geoff Masters ACER 2011*
[17] *Douglas Reeves TfEL Framework Guide 2.4 2010*
[18] *SA TfEL Framework Guide 4.4*
[19] *Elliot Eisner SATfEL Framework Guide*

Recommendations: Learner Outcomes

Effective learning environments make learning central, encourage engagement and enable learners to increasingly understand themselves as learners.
Adapted from OECD CERI Report 2012

That the leadership team and staff at Murray Bridge Special School work together to inquire into existing student engagement levels and explore the use of the SSA Engagement Profile and Scale tool to measure indicators of engagement for students.

For those students who require additional support beyond their classroom program, effective whole school policies and practices that build on the quality of teaching and ensure safe and orderly learning environments are fundamental. This requires teachers to use a continuous cycle of assessing, planning and differentiated teaching to cater for the range of abilities, aptitudes and interests of all students. It further requires site level practices to enact increasingly intensive, targeted and focused support to ensure students achieve. All students at Murray Bridge Special School require additional support beyond their classroom program.

Student engagement:

" *Engagement is the bridge between the student and their learning target. Without engagement, there is no deep learning (Hargreaves 2006), effective teaching, meaningful outcome, real attainment or quality progress.*"[20]

Students with disabilities are not a homogenous group. At Murray Bridge Special School more than half the students identified as being on the ASD[21] spectrum. There was little evidence of student to student interaction. Students living with Autism do not all have the same characteristics. Autism is the most common condition in a group of developmental disorders (ASD). It is characterised by impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and/or non verbal communication, and unusual, repetitive behaviours or narrow obsessive interests. Often students with Autism have other co-existing conditions.

The sensory needs of students living with Autism affect their behaviour and relationships in different ways, which significantly impact on their learning. They do have complex learning patterns, extremes of behaviour and a range of other social and medical needs as do other students with disabilities.

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[20] *Carpenter Barry 2010 Engagement Ladder www.sstrust.org.uk*
[21] *ASD-Autism Spectrum Disorder*

During the tour, the principal presentation and in student observations, engagement levels differed significantly between students. Lessons were planned and teachers were actively working with students. In some classes, support staff were working with individual students on a predetermined task. In other classes, support staff were generally assisting in whole class activities. The review team observed some students following instructions and responding to questions in their preferred communication form. Students were mostly compliant. Some were not. For teachers of students with disabilities, it is difficult to plan and program to accommodate their individual complex learning patterns and needs, if working in a group. To engage each individual student, there is a need to personalise and connect learning. Carpenter[22] suggests that there are seven engagement indicators. They are: awareness (responsiveness), curiosity, investigation, discovery, anticipation, persistence and initiation. These indicators are outlined in the SSA Engagement Profile and Scale Tool[23] used in many schools. Most students were observed in the first two stages of engagement. This may have been due to their level of disability. The review team recommends that the leadership team and staff **inquire into existing students engagement levels and explore the use of the SSA Engagement Profile and Scale tool to measure the seven indicators of engagement for students.** Information gained from this process will enable teachers to increase and monitor engagement levels and deepen the learning for each student.

Relationships-attendance and retention:

Relationships at Murray Bridge Special School are positive. Interactions between staff and students and staff and staff are respectful, calm and relaxed. There is little idle conversation and students are acknowledged and guided calmly in their learning activities. Positive verbal praise and "high fives" where appropriate are commonplace. Students are generally compliant.

Student attendance is not generally an issue at the school. Most students travel to school by taxi or bus. Some student absences are due to medical reasons. Following the student reaching what would normally be year 7, students generally transition to Murray Bridge High School. There is an individual transition program for each student, based on their need The review team acknowledge the commitment of staff in providing the best learning options for the students in their care.

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[22] *Carpenter Barry et al: The Rules of Engagement. www.SENmagazine.co.uk*
[23] *SSA Trust-Engagement profile and scale sourced from http://complexld.ssatrust.org.uk/project-resources/engagement-profile-scale.html*

Recommendations: Curriculum Coherence

The Australian Curriculum is presented as a continuum that makes clear to teachers what is to be taught across the years of schooling. It makes clear to students what they should learn and the quality of learning expected of them as they progress through school.
Australian Curriculum 2011

That the leadership team and staff at Murray Bridge Special School work together to review Individual Learning Plans (ILP) so they are reflective of all aspects of the Murray Bridge Special School Communication Model, the proposed outcomes for each student and the assessment tools to use.

The Australian Curriculum: English, consists of three interrelated strands including literature, literacy and language.

> *" Students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society."[24]*

ACARA is committed to the development of a "high quality curriculum for all Australian students." ACARA also states that in acknowledging the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005) there is an understanding that in providing rigorous, relevant and engaging learning and assessment opportunities there may be a need to make some adjustments to the complexity of the curriculum content, to the instructional processes and to assessment strategies for students with disabilities.

At Murray Bridge Special School, adjustments have been made to the curriculum to accommodate the learning needs of the students. For students at Murray Bridge Special School to become literate they must build on their first language. Communication is described at Murray Bridge Special School as including thinking, listening, interpreting, ability to speak, ability to read and view and the ability to write and represent. Communication is either expressive or receptive. Much of the communication by young people at the school includes unpredictable, anxious behaviours such as eye movements, gestures and/or sound. Staff at the school interprets these forms of communication and

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[24] *ACARA Australian Curriculum 2012*

assists students to develop their range of communication strategies to enable them to access the curriculum.

The Communication model used at the school is based on 'English Language and Literacy (birth –Age 8)'[25]. and includes the stages of development - awareness, exploration, inquiry, utilisation and application. Specific communication goals are identified for each student based on their ability and for most students, development of these skills includes the teaching of pre-speech fundamentals. Regular review of these goals is appropriate to ensure that students continue to develop their skills if they are able. Staff maintains ongoing achievement data for each student.

Because of the level of communication of most students, mainstream curriculum (currently SACSA) is difficult to adapt for use with students at Murray Bridge Special School. Beginning with data provided from DECD psychologists entry assessments which identify developmental outcomes, the school has identified cognition/ ways of playing, fine and gross motor skills, communication, social and emotional needs and daily living skills as being the key areas for learning for students at the school. There is clear leadership about emerging pedagogies based on research and to respond to the changing student culture in the school. As per research, learning areas have low sensory input. All classrooms have two way mirrors - this enables staff to observe each other while teaching as well as to then provide feedback to each other about student behaviours. Classrooms have minimal furniture, bare windows with tinting and items to allow rocking, swinging and swivelling. There are soft areas to encourage self regulating behaviour-for example a ball pit. Classrooms have a sense of space. This is consistent across the school. Curriculum used includes Snapshot of Development (Snapshot), SERU Developmental Scales and Resource Folder (SERU),and Functional Skills Assessment Learning Assessment (FSALA). Classrooms have been established to support the implementation of the six developmental outcomes in a safe, secure and positive environment. The review team understands that currently there is Australian Curriculum draft material to use for students with disabilities. It outlines pre speech curriculum and is aimed at further developing these skills. Currently, ACARA is seeking feedback from the education community to assist in formalising this curriculum. Given the research, practice and understanding of staff at the school, it would be useful if the staff communicated with DECD Special Education staff to share their knowledge and experiences, to gain information about adjusting the Australian Curriculum and to participate in the ACARA consultation process.

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[25] *DECD English Language and Literacy Birth-Age 8, consultative draft August 2010*

Collaborative culture:

School culture reflects the things staff, students and parents value; it reflects the way staff and students within the school generally relate to one another, share ideas and work together on a daily basis to get things done. It includes the shared view of directions and values, priorities, commitments and feelings of loyalty and personal worth within the school. At Murray Bridge Special School the focus is on learning. It is clear that staff take their responsibility to provide the best learning opportunities for students at the school, very seriously. There is a highly collaborative culture at the school. Staff has positive working relationships with each other and with students. This is evidenced by the establishment and maintenance of a professional learning community which meets during staff meeting time to share their knowledge and for support.

Shared agreements:

There are whole school agreements about the mantra, the use of Intensive Interaction and other communication tools, decluttering the classroom, using minimal speech, forms of assessment and the collection of data, documentation required for each student, using an Individual Learning Plan as a comprehensive part of a Negotiated Education Plan and the use of communication books which are sent home with students daily. Individual Learning Plans include goals in the areas of cognitive, communication, fine and gross motor skills, emotional and social development and daily living skills. These working documents form the basis for individual curriculum planning for each child within the whole school agreements. New staff is inducted into the cultural norms and individuals are supported by the "quality staff mentor" in their classroom practice. Staff knows and understands the mantra - "*an anxious child is not a learning child.*"[26] and their practice is aimed at reducing anxiety for students.

Consistent and coherent:

Agreed whole school approaches are documented and consistently implemented across the school. With learning and practice, the Murray Bridge Special School Communication Model[27] was written, initially as a response to the Early Years Literacy Plan. The review team recommends that when leadership and staff **review Individual Learning plans that they are reflective of all aspects of the Murray Bridge Special School**

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[26] *Professor Barry Carpenter*
[27] *Murray Bridge Special School Communication Model-a key component of the SIP and Individual Learning Plans*

Communication Model, the outcomes for each student and the assessment tools to use.

Continuously improve:

Murray Bridge Special School promotes a culture of inquiry led by the principal. The school uses the DIAf Self Review process annually and has established a policy review cycle. There is intellectual rigour which is a part of conversations, professional learning community dialogue, and in participating in professional learning related to the school. In the principal presentation and in conversations during the three day review, it was obvious that there was a focus on students and their learning and that staff were committed to examining their behaviour to support the further progress of student learning. Documentation of skills gained and understood is consistent across the school.

Quality relationships:

Goodwin (2009) [28] points out that "*questions related to the quality of relationships - in particular the level of trust and respect teachers have for one another – were the best predictors of school performance.*"

The review team noted that relationships at the school are positive and consistently supportive and constructive. Formal arrangements to foster this positive interaction and shared practice include the use of a day book, professional dialogue in staff meetings, buddy system for staff, and whole staff meetings twice per term. There is clarity about the roles and responsibilities of all staff. Information about students is readily available both formally in folders in the learning area and through face to face conversations. The "quality staff mentor" works with staff in supporting consistent practice across the school. Optimistic and cooperative relationships exist between teaching staff and SSOs. Staff shares a strong sense of belonging to the school as a motivated and dedicated team who have the students' best interest as central to their work. Many staff talked about their pride in being part of the Murray Bridge Special School and their commitment to the future of the school.

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[28]), 'Culture: the 'secret sauce' of school improvement' *Changing Schools Summer 2009 MCREL Research Insights CS viewed 6 July 2010 at www.mcrel.org/pdf/.../0125NL_09_CS60_01_culture_secret_sauce.pdf*

Recommendations: Leading Improvement

"… the leadership goal is no longer to develop a vision, build a good school–community relationship, or to manage the school or department efficiently. The new goal requires leaders to do all those things in a manner that improves teaching and learning."
Viviane Robinson 2004, "New Understandings of Educational Leadership".
Set: Research Information for Teachers, no. 3, pp. 39–43

That the leadership team and staff at Murray Bridge Special School work together to:

a. reformat the Site Improvement Plan (SIP) to identify and focus on priorities for student learning and improvement and that realistic student targets are set.

b. formalise the performance management processes to support and monitor individual staff development

"Leadership … must start with a personal commitment; a deeply felt sense of urgency about the need for improvement. When accompanied by leadership skills and knowledge, this commitment can lead to real increases in a school's capacity to offer effective literacy instruction to all students." (Torgesen, Houston & Rissman (2007) p 9[29]

The review team commends the leadership and staff for their commitment to the students at Murray Bridge Special School. This is evidenced by their interactions, by their policies and procedures and by their classroom practice.

Agreed directions:

Working within the context of DECD and regional improvement plans, site priorities need to clearly focus on the most compelling areas for improvement of student learning outcomes at school and classroom levels.

Murray Bridge Special School site priorities are clearly communicated to the community. The Site Improvement Plan 2012-2014 identifies four areas that focus on staff practice but ultimately impact on student learning. They are Professional Learning, Excellence in Learning, Wellbeing and Learner Engagement and Wellbeing. In each of the priority areas, the question is raised about what staff needs to do to improve the learning for students and young people at the school, whether it is increasing theoretical knowledge of staff or engineering the environment to meet the needs of student learners. Targets are linked to staff performance rather than student improvement. The review team

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[29] Torgesen, J, Houston D, & Rissman L (2007)Improving literacy instruction in middle and high schools-a guide for principals. Portsmouth, NH: RMC research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

recommends that **the Site Improvement Plan is reformatted to identify and focus on priorities for student learning and improvement and that realistic student targets are set.**

The culture of a school is built, influenced and supported by the key processes of performance management, professional development, meeting processes, decision making processes and staff inclusion practices. They are underpinned by trust, respect and team work. Systems and practices which foster professional relationships focussed on professional development and school improvement are a priority for leadership and staff.

Performance Management:

Staff indicated that the leadership team was very supportive and available to assist in any way. There is strong instructional leadership in the school. The employment of a "quality staff mentor" has enabled new initiatives to be implemented and supported in practice Staff knowledge is high.   All staff, including SSOs, are encouraged to continue their learning and indications are that staff are willing to do this and see it as a prime responsibility towards the students and the learning programs at the school. Leadership is shared, where appropriate across the school. Performance management processes are flexible. Individual staff are encouraged to share with a buddy although the "quality staff mentor" does work with individual staff on their classroom practice. The review team recommends that this is a prime opportunity to **formalise their performance management processes to support and monitor individual staff development.** This ensures that staff understands their value to the school and the students, and enables them to set realistic personal goals, review their progress against those goals and learn how to give and receive feedback about performance. Given that the "quality staff mentor" works closely with staff, decisions could be made about classroom observation as being a tool for providing feedback to staff.   Information gained from this process can then assist in determining the appropriate professional learning and skill building for staff to address school priorities and respond to emerging student needs.

Governance:

The school has been pro-active in forging partnerships with parents/caregivers. Communication is frequent, open and honest. Given that the students come from a wide geographical area it is often difficult to meet physically with parents/caregivers on a regular basis. Parents/caregivers involvement in the formal aspects of the school, for example,

Governing Council has become problematic, with only a few very committed parents/caregivers able to be involved. The school is looking at alternatives to a formal meeting, to meet membership requirements of DECD for Governing Councils, which might be more suitable for interested parents/caregivers. Some of these are: possibly joining with the Murray Bridge North R-7 Governing Council, meetings by phone or using technology such as Skype, meeting away from the school and expanding the membership to include community members.   The review team suggests that consideration is given to the uniqueness of the school community and the need to have students at the school and their special needs as the highest priority before making further decisions.

Transition:

When students enrol at the school a transition process is negotiated with the family to meet the needs of both the school and the student. This includes, students moving out of the school - either into mainstream schools or another Special Education Unit, moving away from the area or moving into secondary school. It is important that the transition for students is as smooth as possible. Students living with Autism, in particular, often have difficulty in making changes. Preparation for any future changes should be a part of the program for students in the development of daily skills and a part of the Individual Learning Plan. The review team suggests that partnerships with the Murray Bridge Secondary School are strengthened to enable sharing of resources – human and material, sharing an understanding about the practice in the school, sharing information about students and in preparing a relevant useful transition program for beginning secondary students.   This could be done on a regular basis and include Regional staff working in both sites.

Murray Bridge Special School has experienced a significant cultural shift toward a focus on learning during the past years. The establishment of common belief systems and processes of inquiry, reflection and shared and informed decision making have been perceptively managed by leaders to create these significant changes that are owned by the school community. The implementation of practices based on cutting edge research about education for students with disabilities, is to be commended.   As staff continue to use research to guide their practice, the responsibility of the leadership to continue to consult, plan and engage staff and parents in significant and momentous changes is critical. Stoll et al (2004) state:

It is equally important to understand the change process, which is highly complex and can be fraught with difficulties. Understanding and managing change means learning and handling uncertainty, relationships and conflict.[30]

The review team commends the leaders for their intelligent and perceptive change management processes to date. Murray Bridge Special School presents as a school of excellence for students with disabilities and the community.

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[30] *Stoll, L et al 2004 It's about Learning (And It's About Time) what's in it for schools? Routledge Falmer New York*

COMMONLY USED ACRONYMS

Acronym	Meaning
ACARA	Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority
ACEO	Aboriginal Community Education Officer
AET	Aboriginal Education Teacher
AIO	Aboriginal Inclusion Officer
AL	Accelerated Literacy
AP	Assistant Principal
APAC	Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum
APAS	Aboriginal Program Assistance Scheme
AR	Annual Reporting
ARD	Assistant Regional Director
AST	Advanced Skills Teacher
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
BER	Building Education Revolution
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
COAG NPs	Council of Australian Governments National Partnerships
CPSW	Christian Pastoral Support Worker
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations
DER	Digital Education Revolution
DIA*f*	DECD Improvement and Accountability Framework
ESL	English as a Second Language
GC	Governing Council
HOTS	Higher Order Thinking Skills
HPI	Hourly Paid Instructor
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio Education Advantage
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
IP	Improvement Planning
IT	Information Technology

Acronym	Meaning
LC	Leadership Coach
LOTE	Languages other than English
Low SES	Low Socio Economic Status
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCLB	No Child Left Behind (USA Federal Initiative)
NEP	Negotiated Education Plan
PALL	Principal as Literacy Leader
PARC	Performance Analysis and Reporting Consultant
PM	Performance Management
PR	Performance Reporting
QIE	Quality, Improvement and Effectiveness
RD	Regional Director
RLC	Regional Leadership Consultant
SAALP	South Australian Accelerated Literacy Program
SACE	South Australian Certificate of Education
SACSA	South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework
SHIP	Students with High Intellectual Potential
SILA	Supporting Improved Literacy Achievement
SIP	Site Improvement Plan
SLP	Site Learning Plan
SMARTA	Strategic/specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-based, Time-referenced, Agreed
SR	Self Review
SRC	Student Representative Council
SSI	Supporting School Improvement
SSO	School Services Officer
STAR	Students at Risk
TER	Tertiary Entrance Ranking
TfEL	Teaching for Effective Learning