

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT  
OFFICE FOR EDUCATION

## EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW

### REPORT FOR ATHELSTONE R-7 SCHOOL

Conducted in June 2015



**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 overarching review question is "How well does this school improve student achievement, growth, challenge, engagement and equity?"*

*This External School Review has evaluated:*

- *the school's self-review processes and findings,*
- *the school's achievement data and progress over time,*
- *the outcomes of the meetings and interviews with representatives from the school, and*
- *parent and student views about the school.*

*The External School Review included an analysis of the school's key policies and procedures.*

*The support and cooperation provided by the staff and school community is acknowledged.*

*This External School Review was conducted by Lyn Arnold, Review Officer, Review, Improvement and Accountability and Helen Tunney, Review Principal.*

**Policy compliance**

*The External School Review process includes verification by the Principal that key DECD policies are implemented and adhered to.*

The Principal of Athelstone Reception to Year 7 School has verified that the school is compliant in all applicable DECD policies.

Implementation of the *DECD Student Attendance Policy* was checked specifically against a documented set of criteria. The school has implemented comprehensive tracking and intervention processes, and found to be compliant with this policy. In 2014, the school reported attendance of 94.3%, which exceeds the DECD target of 93%.

**School context**

Athelstone Reception to Year 7 School is located in the foothills 12kms north-east of Adelaide. The enrolment in 2014 was 319 students and is a similar number in 2015. The school is classified as Category 7 on the DECD Index of Educational Disadvantage, and has an ICSEA score of 1064. The Athelstone Junior Primary School and Athelstone Primary School were amalgamated into the current Reception to Year 7 school in 2013.

The school population includes 4% Students with Disabilities, 31% students with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD), and 17% of families eligible for School Card assistance.

The school leadership team consists of a Principal in his third year at the school, a Deputy Principal Reception to Year 7, and a Coordinator, Quality Teaching and Learning.

### **Lines of inquiry**

*During the review process, the panel focused on three key areas from the External School Review Framework:*

<b>Student Learning:</b>	<b>How well are students achieving over time?</b>
<b>Effective Leadership:</b>	<b>To what extent is a positive and focused approach to improvement and change evident?</b>
<b>Effective Teaching:</b>	<b>To what extent does the school cater for the varied needs of learners?</b>

### **How well are students achieving over time?**

Analysis of 2014 student achievement data shows that 85% of Year 3, 85% of Year 5, and 85% of Year 7 students met the DECD Standard of Achievement (SEA) on the NAPLAN Literacy-Reading test.

Scores for the NAPLAN Numeracy test report that 80% of Year 3, 81% of Year 5, and 85% of Year 7 students achieved the DECD SEA.

In 2014, 56% of Year 3 students, and 40% of Years 5 and 7 students achieved scores in the higher proficiency bands for reading. These results represent a consistent pattern over the past five years for Years 3 and 5, and a steady increase in Year 7 over the same period from a historic average of 32%. Retention in the higher bands improved in 2014, from an average of 55% to 65% for Years 3 to 5, and 49% to 70% for Years 3 to 7.

With respect to numeracy, the proportion of students in the higher bands is not as high as in reading. In 2014, 35% of Year 3 students, 21% of Year 5 students, and 17% of Year 7 students scored in the higher proficiency bands, and this is characteristic of results over the past five years. While retention in the higher bands from Years 3 to 5 shows a promising improvement for future results, with 60% of students being retained, there was a decrease in Years 3 to 7 retention from an average of 43% to 33% in 2014. The school is aware of this trend. Discussions with leadership and staff, together with observations of student work, confirmed the Review Panel's belief that there is the capacity for more students to achieve in the higher proficiency bands and to be retained in these bands over time in both literacy and numeracy. The school is in agreement with this finding and, having previously focused on literacy, the school has numeracy as a key priority on the Site Improvement Plan (SIP), which includes measurable targets for improving student performance in the top two proficiency bands.

Given the school's improvement priorities are based on literacy and numeracy supported by quality teaching and learning, together with the relatively recent merger of the junior and primary schools, the Review Panel explored the effectiveness of the leadership in fostering a culture of learning, and teachers' capacity to cater for and meet the needs of all learners across the site.

### **To what extent is a positive and focused approach to improvement and change evident?**

The school's improvement plans are sound and have been implemented effectively. The school has a clear vision, mission, and set of values, together with student-centred, measurable and relevant targets that are not only documented but also observable in action across the school.

Since the junior primary and primary schools merged in 2013, the school has developed and worked towards whole-site consistency in reading, handwriting, spelling, data collection, and student wellbeing approaches. The school is currently developing site agreements for writing, differentiation and numeracy. Simultaneously, the school has established a data and intervention team and a highly visible intervention data wall, together with agreements about the data to be collected and how it will be analysed and used to inform teaching and learning.

All staff have engaged in school-based, tailored professional learning in literacy, the examination of NAPLAN and whole-school data, and explored strategies for whole-staff action, data collection and

reflection, in addition to developing capacity to implement the Australian Curriculum (AC) and related formative and summative assessment practices.

Through discussions with teachers, the Review Panel found that they understand the school agreements, and implement these in their practice. In particular, they have a sound understanding of evidence-based pedagogies for developing reading skills, and perceive the support and resources provided as highly effective in realising improvements in students' reading.

The students we met with were highly positive, and excited by learning. They are articulate about their learning, and are very clear about how things have got better for them in the school because of the leadership and the way teachers now work with them. In particular, they talked about the success of the anti-bullying approach, the POOCH decision-making model, student leadership portfolios, and the positive influence of the Principal on the culture of the school.

Parents perceive the school as providing a high quality education for their children. They talked of valuing the changes at the school and the immensely positive impact the Principal has had on the school since his appointment. They also reported feeling fully informed about, and supportive of, the improvement agenda being undertaken.

Although the staff came together only two and half years ago, the teachers are highly professional, and now present as a committed and effective teaching group. An attitude of joint ownership and responsibility has been developed through on-site professional learning opportunities, the development of active professional learning communities (PLCs), and a willingness to embrace change, even though initially this may have been confronting or uncomfortable for some. This shift in culture is a credit to all involved but improvement has not come without effort. Staff report they are, and have been, working persistently to achieve the desired outcomes but, also individually and collectively, express a deep professional satisfaction and sense of accomplishment.

A particular strategy that has supported collective responsibility is the de-privatisation of student learning outcomes through the development of data walls. The continued implementation of this strategy forms part of the 2015 SIP, and the Review Panel view this as a highly effective approach within the school's context as it reinforces accountability and collective responsibility for taking action to address identified areas of improvement.

That said, there is the opportunity for the school to expand the focus of de-privatisation on student learning outcomes to include the de-privatisation of teaching practice. The leadership have taken the first step towards this by conducting performance management meetings in small groups. In providing opportunities for teachers to share their successes and challenges in designing and assessing aspects of the AC or meeting a particular child's learning needs, the culture of collective responsibility and action for achieving success can be further amplified. While classroom peer observation is a widely adopted approach, a dedicated session, once or twice a term, for everyone to share a successful strategy or teaching approach and seek support or ideas for meeting a teaching challenge, can be a constructive alternative to motivate and stimulate change in a supportive and collegial way.

#### **Direction 1**

**Maintain and further develop a positive culture of improvement by providing regular opportunities for teachers to share and promote evidence-based practices and generate approaches collaboratively for improving student learning outcomes.**

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

Teachers set individual targets for their students, and value the use of data for making decisions about student learning. While the collation and analysis of this data adds a new dimension to their work, it is considered valuable information. Consequently, there is evidence of data being embedded fully into the planning and design of teaching and learning programs, and the identification of students requiring intervention.

As a result, decisions made by teachers are student-centred, and the movement of students in and out of Wave 2 interventions is tracked regularly, ensuring students 'graduate' from interventions into mainstream teaching programs in a timely manner.

While not consistently embedded practice at the time of the external school review, there was evidence of rubrics being used in some instances to help students benchmark their learning and progress. The use of rubrics is a constructive practice that should be continued and developed further. In talking with students, however, it became evident they generally do not understand their assessment grades or how to improve their academic performance. There were several instances where students reported they think they are doing 'okay' because of their report last year [NB. the mid-year report for 2015 was due to be distributed at the end of the Review week so last year was their most recent reference point]. There also was confusion about what was outlined in the rubric and how it corresponded with the awarded grade. One group, for example, had an extended conversation during the Review Panel's interview about why some students got a 'C' and others an 'A'. They explained that addressing all success criteria earns an 'A', and that not addressing them is a 'B' or 'C'. A student then noted that one work sample didn't get any marks for 'paragraphs' and was awarded a 'C', but there were paragraphs evident in the work. The group then hypothesised why: the paragraph was not written neatly, not enough paragraphs, or not enough information in the paragraphs. Their conclusion was that it was 'a mystery'.

What this example highlights is that sharing, developing, and negotiating the success criteria with students is a valuable step that will help avoid confusion and focus student attention on what they can do to improve their achievement grade.

The involvement of students in authentic ways in the design of assessments and rubrics that explicitly outline success criteria will support students in making informed decisions about where to put their time and energy for optimal achievement and progress outcomes.

#### **Direction 2**

**Improve student outcomes by supporting them to benchmark their learning and achievement and meet identified success criteria by sharing assessment criteria with students in transparent and explicit ways.**

In relation to assessment and reporting, parents also spoke of the school's written reports not providing useful information. Comments included that the reports have been hard to read, and that comments did not always match the grades awarded. The leadership team are aware of the issues raised and are seeking to address inconsistencies in reporting to parents.

There also was discussion about the status of the third term parent-teacher interviews. The critical issue appears to be that parents want the opportunity to take action and support their child during the year should the need arise, rather than discovering their child was not doing as well as expected in the end-of-year report.

Effective partnerships with parents support successful learning outcomes for students, and the information gained from the assessment and reporting process is valued by the parents. The raising of these issues provides an opportunity for the school to explore ways to support proactive and ongoing interactions, particularly between the distribution of mid and end of year reports. Further, inviting parents to provide feedback on reports and providing information on how to interpret reports should prove beneficial.

#### **Direction 3**

**Build on current assessment and reporting processes by exploring with staff and the parent community effective ways to share student learning progress and achievement with families in a timely manner.**

The Review Panel also explored ways in which teachers are supporting differentiation and intellectual stretch and challenge within learning programs. Students see the relevance of learning. Learning intentions are shared with students by teachers and this is reflected in the students' understanding of what they are learning and why, and the links they make between school and the wider world. In particular, in age-appropriate ways across the year levels, students expressed a sense of belonging within their school, as well as the local and global community.

Differentiation in teaching and learning is an emerging practice, and is identified as a focus for improvement. In order to move this improvement focus forward, the school will benefit from creating opportunities for staff to discuss and explore what differentiation looks like at Athelstone Primary School. From these discussions, a school agreement outlining what they do, how they do it, and why, will provide a

sound structure for future development. With respect to differentiating in ways that provide opportunities for intellectual stretch and challenge, the focus should be on smart goals, quality and complexity of thinking, and sophistication of ideas and concepts, rather than the quantity of work produced or how neatly work is presented. The school's approach also should acknowledge that intellectual challenge is not just for high achievers. Intellectual challenge should be provided to all children at an appropriate level in accordance with their level of ability. Specifically, teachers should ensure that students are provided with opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills in diverse and meaningful ways that maximises their learning.

The Review Panel also noted that feedback to students about their learning and progress was variable across classes. Individualised feedback to students helps them identify strengths and areas for improvement. Teachers, therefore, should provide consideration for differentiation of the intended and, at times, unintended messages their verbal and written feedback provides to students. For example, "good use of connectors" or "you backed up your reasons with explanations" sends a different message about what is valued to "nice work", "neat work, well done".

**Direction 4**

**Support the staff in the development of a common understanding and consistent practices for differentiating teaching and learning for all learners.**

**Direction 5**

**Increase the number of students achieving the SEA and higher levels of proficiency by engaging students in higher order and critical thinking skills, and the setting of individualised learning goals that support and promote intellectual stretch and challenge.**


## OUTCOMES OF EXTERNAL SCHOOL REVIEW 2015

Athelstone Reception to Year 7 School is tracking well in that student achievement data and other evidence is used to inform decisions and actions at the individual student, class and whole school levels, and effective leadership provides strategic direction, planning and targeted interventions.

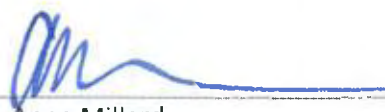
The Principal will work with the Education Director to implement the following Directions:

1. Maintain and further develop a positive culture of improvement by providing regular opportunities for teachers to share and promote evidence-based practices and generate approaches collaboratively for improving student learning outcomes.
2. Improve student outcomes by supporting them to benchmark their learning and achievement and meet identified success criteria by sharing assessment criteria with students in transparent and explicit ways.
3. Build on current assessment and reporting processes by exploring with staff and the parent community effective ways to share student learning progress and achievement with families in a timely manner.
4. Support the staff in the development of a common understanding and consistent practices for differentiating teaching and learning for all learners.
5. Increase the number of students achieving the SEA and higher levels of proficiency by engaging students in higher order and critical thinking skills, and the setting of individualised learning goals that support and promote intellectual stretch and challenge.

Based on the school's current performance, Athelstone School R-7 will be externally reviewed again in 2019.



Tony Lunniss  
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REVIEW, IMPROVEMENT AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY



Anne Millard  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL  
IMPROVEMENT

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.

Timothy McLeod  
PRINCIPAL  
Athelstone R-7 School

Governing Council Chairperson