EXTERNAL VALIDATION REPORT 2013

for

NARRABUNDAH EARLY CHILDHOOD SCHOOL
Record of Validation Process

The following people were members of the external validation panel for Narrabundah Early Childhood School, conducted on Monday 29th and Tuesday 30th July 2013.

Name: Christine Powell  School: Campbell Primary School
Name: Ben Hall  School: Amaroo School
Name: Paul van Campenhout  Section: Information and Knowledge Services

As chair of the panel I endorse that this is a true and accurate record of the findings from the external validation process.

Name: Christine Powell
Signature: [Signature]  Date: 21.8.13

As principal of Narrabundah Early Childhood School I accept the Validation Report on behalf of the school community.

Name: Robyn McLean
Signature: [Signature]  Date: 22.8.13

As co-director of Quality Learning Australia, external validators for the conduct of validation process in ACT public schools, I concur that the panel acted within the guidelines set by the ACT Education and Training Directorate.

Name: Jane Kovacs
Signature: [Signature]  Date: 22.8.13
Section A: School context

Narrabundah Early Childhood School (NECS) was opened on the site of the former Narrabundah Primary School which was closed in 2008. After extensive renovations, the new school opened to the community at the start of the 2009 school year.

Narrabundah Early Childhood School was designed as a unique and innovative setting and continues to be so in the ACT and nationally. The site was designed to support the early development of children and their families from pre-birth to year 2 and houses all the organisations and services required to make that journey as smooth as possible. The school is an active regional hub that continues to provide integrated services for the Narrabundah and wider ACT community. These include the Communities at Work programs (infants, toddlers, playschool, preschool, out of school hours care), Education and Training Directorate programs (3 year old and 4 year old preschool, Koori preschool, Kindergarten, year 1 and year 2). Health services include MACH Nurses and midwives and Family Support Services (Paint and Play, Move and Groove, Story Time) are supported by the school’s Community Coordinator. NECS is the only school in the ACT that includes the Health Directorate within its integrated service model.

The External Validation (EV) panel recognises the challenges presented to NECS leadership team in operating in such a unique arrangement and commends their dedication to the creation of a strong, cohesive culture that values the contributions of all organisations and services in the development of the whole child. The panel were quickly immersed within the open, friendly and inclusive culture when initially visiting the school and all subsequent visits and analysis demonstrates that this is a key factor in the school’s ongoing success.

NECS did not qualify for the funding and budget that would normally support the initial year of operation of most new schools, instead NECS inherited the budget and equipment from the previous school. This added to the challenge of trying to establish a new identity within the community. The panel recognises the challenges presented to NECS in the creation of the school and the disadvantages of its inherited budget arrangements. The panel also recognises that the former primary school had its share of challenges within the community and that perceptions of quality followed the creation of the new school that have been challenging to work against.

To aid the change in public perception, an entirely new leadership team and staff were instituted at the site in 2009 and that team has since remained largely stable through to 2012 with the addition of a deputy principal to the leadership team. The school opened with 12 staff in 2009 and have currently 19 staff. The contribution of the new deputy principal has added to the breadth and depth of teaching experience already evident at NECS.

Student population at NECS, while small (137 children in 2013), has shown consistent growth throughout the life of the school. This Early Childhood School does not have priority placement boundaries; however the school gives preference to children resident in the suburb of Narrabundah. Analyses of the demographics at the school indicate a marked demographic shift since 2009. Over the past three years the Indigenous Australian population in the school has dropped from a peak of 39 children in 2009 to 16 children in 2012. Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE) enrolments have seen a similar decrease from a peak of 31 to 20 children in 2012, and 29 in 2013.
Children transition from NECS after the completion of year 2 into year 3 at Red Hill or Forrest Primary Schools if they live in the school’s priority enrolment area. Children who come from out of priority enrolment area can transition to Yarralumla Primary School, or to their local school.

**Section B: School performance**

NECS adopted the Early Childhood Schools Framework to guide their planning philosophy and the development of four Annual Operating Plans. The school leadership team revised each plan to adjust to the needs of the school and align their goals with changes to the national improvement agenda.

Student learning is the main focus for NECS as articulated in the schools guiding documents. Opening NECS as a new school required many school based systems of operating to be designed. These included whole school assessment practices and curriculum programming documents. Since the beginning of the school improvement cycle, NECS has developed a comprehensive assessment schedule that includes internally derived benchmark goals and literacy/numeracy “Quilts” aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework. Complementing the schedule, GradeXpert is used as a central database for collection of student performance statistics. Data sources, particularly in reading, have provided opportunities to monitor and analyse children’s performance over time in an effective and coherent process.

The panel validated evidence which indicates:

- Children reaching expected ETD reading benchmarks have risen across each of the Kindergarten to year 2 cohorts. NECS has maintained this upward trend of performance consistently since 2009. Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPs) reading data corresponds to benchmark data and indicates considerable value added growth.

- A robust Individual Learning Plan (ILP) process for children not reaching ACT ETD expected benchmarks has been established. This requires teaching staff to comprehensively plan for differentiated learning experiences based on children’s individual’s needs. The performance of these students is then addressed via “Focus on Children” meetings to monitor progress of individuals. The school’s ILP outcomes would benefit from written formal analysis, thus providing more information for all educators.

This provides clear evidence that the approach adopted by the school is working successfully to address areas of child need in reading. The panel congratulates NECS on the comprehensive approach on reading. The panel recommends that this comprehensive approach be used to embed the Australian Curriculum, with particular emphasis on all English and Maths outcomes, in the coming years.

Systemic satisfaction surveys serve as a central insight into stakeholder perceptions. The panel noted evidence indicating that the NECS staff feel connected to the direction and goals of the school. The staff satisfaction data reinforces the strength and cohesion of the school culture despite the various challenges faced with the nature of the management structures. The school leadership team recognises the particular challenges it faces in collecting substantial and meaningful data sets as the majority of evidence collected was derived from a small and statistically invalid sample group. Having stated this, the clear trend with parents and carers demonstrate highly satisfied results with NECS.
Unfortunately, ETD student data tools do not collect from children of these age cohorts. Exploring additional data collection methods, particularly for children, may assist the school in gaining more meaningful insights into stakeholder perceptions.

NECS undertook the mandatory National Quality Standard assessment and rating process in 2012 in the preschool and childcare areas. This raised substantial challenges for the school in that the preschool and childcare sites receiving different overall ratings. The NECS preschool service received an exceeding national standards rating. The process provided the leadership team with valuable feedback that will inform the next strategic planning cycle.

Children at NECS do not take part in NAPLAN testing. However systemic data collated from the two feeder schools, Red Hill Primary and Forrest Primary indicates that the majority of children who previously attended NECS reached or exceeded national benchmarks when tested in year 3 NAPLAN.

**Evidence cited and its validation:**

- Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPs)
- National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating report
- Reading benchmarks and GradeXpert data analysis
- School Satisfaction Surveys
- School Board Reports
- Annual Operating Plans
- Individual Learning Plans

**Section C: School improvement planning and implementation**

**PART 1: Improvement planning**

The NECS commenced operating as an early childhood school in 2009. At this time, the school faced a raft of challenges which led to the school executive developing operating plans annually as their school improvement cycle, rather than a four year School Plan. Since the school improvement cycle began in 2009, each of the Annual Operating Plans has been derived from the core elements embedded within the ACT Early Childhood Framework. High Quality Learning, Integrated Service Delivery, Family Support and Integration are the priorities upon which NECS school improvement has been crafted. Without a four- year School Plan the panel recognises that the basis of the school’s priorities has remained constant however have been refined each year based on data collected from various forms of reflective practice.

The panel congratulates the NECS leadership team and staff on their integration of these core elements and remaining true to its intentions. These include specific focus on:

- improve literacy and numeracy outcomes of children
- establish high quality governance of the school
- strengthen transitions process within and across the school and network.

The panel recognises that NECS has remained true to the Early Childhood Schools Framework (initiated in 2008) as the cornerstone of the school’s approach to core business and future planning and development.
The panel acknowledges that as an early childhood school, the improvement agenda has been driven by external factors. The introduction of the National Quality Standard (NQS) Framework and its associated compliance agenda has required a whole school community focus at a time when the school has been focussed on working through other important establishment issues. The focus on the preschool sector of the school was required in order to be prepared for the realities of operating under the NQS framework and national compliance. The panel congratulates the Leadership team on the proactive way they embraced the NQS and merged with their other key priorities.

The planning process included engaging the community in developing the NECS philosophy statement, vision, value and logo.

The school has invested time, energy and resources into embedding the concept of professional learning communities (PLC). Teams of teachers engage areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The PLC concept has been adopted to deploy key tasks of school improvements.

Evidence cited and its validation

- School Evaluation Evidence Matrix
- National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating report
- School Satisfaction Surveys
- School Board Reports
- Annual Operating Plans
- Professional Learning Community documents

Section C: School improvement planning and implementation

PART 2: Improvement actions

Priority 1: Improve literacy and numeracy outcomes of children

The panel confirms that the school leadership team identified improving literacy and numeracy outcomes of children across the service have been a major focus for NECS. Across the improvement cycle, the focus has been on developing children’s oral language from birth to eight year olds. The panel congratulates NECS in adopting this holistic approach and acknowledges this will provide a solid foundation for future improvement within the school.

Performance Measures:

- 100 percent of children reach their respective year level benchmark
- 100 percent of learning goals are achieved in all children’s Individual Learning Plans.

Evidence of actions includes the following:

- A school wide focus on the development of oral language and reading
- Professional learning to build capacity of all educators to use system endorsed resources eg: First Steps Reading Resource
- A comprehensive assessment schedule has been designed and implemented including literacy and numeracy “Quilts” based on EYLF
- Rich data analysis on children’s reading outcomes using the ACT ETD benchmarks merged with GradeXpert to track and monitor achievement
- An early reading intervention process using Individual Learning Plans is used in partnership with “Children Focus” meetings to raise children’s reading benchmark results
- Pedagogical analysis is measured against the Early Years Learning Framework
- Coaching model has been introduced, with School Leader B and Assistant Manager working with educators
- Parents are engaged in the education of their children through Story Time, Groove and Move learning opportunities.

The EV panel identified that NECS regularly interprets data provided by Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPs). Although PIPs results shows that child achievement begins and finishes below the ACT mean, there is much evidence supporting the value added growth for NECS children in reading. The panel identifies the significant growth of PIPs reading results in 2011 as being a highlight in child achievement. Reading levels across the school, which are evaluated against the Directorate reading benchmark standards, also demonstrate learning outcomes in this area have improved. School based time-series data clearly articulates sustained growth of children in reading with the majority of year 2 reaching or exceeding the ACT benchmark. To further support this process Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) are created for differentiated learning to cater for children’s individual needs. The school leadership team monitors this progress during “Children Focus meetings”. This approach demonstrates a comprehensive strategy to track progress and to support children to achieve against identified system criteria.

The school’s ILP outcomes would benefit from formal data collection and analysis to ensure that future interventions are as effective as possible and to be used in demonstrating NECS operating plan achievements.

The EV panel acknowledges the enormous amount of strategic planning required to implement this approach to quality learning. The panel congratulates NECS on the comprehensive focus on reading. The panel recommends that this approach, even though time and resource intensive, be used to addressed English and Maths as comprehensively in the coming years.

Evidence cited and its validation:
- literacy planning documents
- South Weston Schools Network Writing Exemplar Project
- Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPs)
- National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating report
- Reading benchmarks and GradeXpert data analysis
- School Satisfaction Surveys
- School Board Reports
- Annual Operating Plans
- Individual Learning Plans.
Priority 2 – Establish high quality governance of the school

The panel recognises NECS is operating in a highly complex and challenging organisational structure involving three services: Communities at Work (Childcare provider), ACT Health and the Education and Training Directorate. It is important to note that each service has different governance, operational and accountability structures and while operating under one roof, the Principal does not have leadership jurisdiction of the non-ETD teams. The panel acknowledges the work of the school leadership team in establishing a collaborative working environment. They have achieved this by committing to structures that embrace strong working cross-service relationships and by permeating their marketing material which highlights their integrated services model.

Performance measures included:
- national accreditation using the National Quality Standards Framework
- parent satisfaction with services
- Early Childhood Schools Initiative Evaluation Framework.

Evidence of actions include the following:
- Professional Learning Communities operate across each of the services
- development of a shared philosophy "Being, Belonging, Becoming", vision and values statements that unite the range of services offered
- shared working areas and common staff rooms to promote a team approach
- engaging in whole staff meetings twice per term focusing on cross service needs
- representatives from each service attending extended executive meetings with a focus on the whole school improvement agenda
- combined teams professional learning focused on the National Quality Framework.

The panel noted that a sub-committee was formed to work collaboratively with all educators in the school to address NECS needs in accordance with the National Quality Framework. Using this model, the school achieved considerable success in engaging people in reflective practice and allowed them to allocate school improvement tasks to certain teams. This was acknowledged in the preschool NQS overall rating - exceeding the National Quality Standard.

The panel congratulates NECS for their commitment to, and implementation of, the Early Childhood School Framework. NECS is the only ACT Early Childhood School in the ACT to operate as a fully integrated services model by continuing to engage with ACT Health services. The Early Childhood Initiative Evaluation Framework will provide NECS with data that may be used to confirm and improve approaches to early childhood education; and to ensure that they are in line with ETD directions.

The school leadership team recognises the particular challenges it faces in collecting substantial and meaningful data sets as the majority of evidence collected was derived from a small and statistically invalid sample group. Having stated this, the clear trend with parents and carers demonstrate highly satisfied results with NECS.

Evidence cited and its validation:
- National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating report
Priority 3 – Strengthen transition processes within and across the schools within the network.

NECS set itself two key actions against this priority. Firstly, develop an external year two to year three transitional program with network primary schools. Secondly, maintain an effective pathway between child care service to the formal mainstream preschool setting.

The panel validates the strong retention from three year old preschool to four year old preschool. The retention rates over the last two years have increased to all students in 2012. There is significant decline in continuing enrolments from preschool into kindergarten. The school has highlighted this as an area of concern and will require attention in future school plans.

Performance Indicator:
- retention of students.

Actions included:
- Inner South Early Childhood network meetings
- created Early Childhood School SLB network
- front foyer display communicating different transitional pathways
- moderation sessions to share assessment evidence
- establishing working relationships with network primary schools.

The panel acknowledges the school’s involvement in creating deeper connections within the South Weston network. The network model has focused on moderation activities and analysing key transition data between each of the schools. The South Weston Schools Network Writing Exemplar project signifies a dedication to working alongside network colleagues to improve student learning outcomes along all transition points.

The school leaders are actively involved in the Early Childhood SLB networking group. Their key focus is on discussing issues relevant to leading educational growth across all Early Childhood settings. This demonstrates a commitment to the Early Childhood School model for the ACT.

The panel validated the work of the school in improving transitional pathways from childcare to mainstream preschool setting. It was noted that retention rates between 4 year old Preschool to Kindergarten has increased from 29% in 2009 to 45% in 2013.

Evidence cited and its validation:
- South Weston Schools Network Writing Exemplar Project
- School Satisfaction Surveys
- School Board Reports
- Annual Operating Plans
- Individual Learning Plans
- Meeting minutes
**Section C: School improvement planning and Implementation**

**PART 3: Reflection**

The establishment of a new (birth to year 2) education setting, with no previous examples to draw upon has been a challenging task. The ACT ETD Early Childhood Schools Framework required all the organisations coming into the setting to “break new ground” by developing an integrated service model against three core elements identified – High Quality Learning, Integrated Service Delivery and Family Support and Participation.

Many challenges have faced the principal and the school staff in implementing this change. Engaging a small number of staff to work using a new framework adds to the complexity of opening a new educational facility. Such challenges have arisen from the reality that they are not recognised as one service and continually face barriers in the governance of the school that restrict integrated service provision. The Principal has demonstrated strong leadership in unifying each of the services to provide a coherent shared school identity. The panel congratulates the school for overcoming these issues creating a strong vision and culture across the service.

The establishment of a new school has involved the creation of a number of new systems to enable educators to build common understandings and expectations. This validation process has reinforced the school’s understanding of the vigilance required in collecting evidence and data to support the identified priorities within the school plan.

The school has embraced a number of federal initiatives that have impacted on the service directions and delivery. The introduction of the National Quality Framework and the Australian Curriculum has required the school to commence the long process of implementing these whole school reforms.

The roll out of the Early Years Learning Framework has provided a vehicle for staff to address teaching and learning at NECS. The panel sighted evidence that alongside this rollout, the staff in Kindergarten to year 2 have commenced working with the Australian Curriculum. The panel acknowledges the proactive approach and flexible thinking of the school leadership team to prioritise school needs and realign their school improvement journey.

Overall, the panel has found that NECS has faced enormous challenges since opening in 2009. The Early Childhood School Framework was only visionary. The implementation of it had many governance hurdles which had to be overcome simultaneously with providing quality education for all children. The panel is aware that the school is in the early stages of a long journey and it wishes to acknowledge that the school has succeeded in its holistic educational approach due to the dedication of staff from the various organisations involved in the service. The evidence indicates that processes and procedures now firmly in place will ensure continued sustained growth.

**Evidence cited and its validation:**

- School Annual Operating Plans
- Interviews with school leadership team
- School Board Reports.

*Section C: School improvement planning and Implementation*

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- School Annual Operating Plans
- Interviews with school leadership team
- School Board Reports.
**Section D: Commendations and recommendations**

The panel recognises the complexity of the Narrabundah Early Childhood School site. The panel would like to acknowledge the successes of NECS during their first five years of operation.

**Commendations**

Narrabundah Early Childhood School is commended for:

**An Integrated Service Model**

Families at NECS have access to a comprehensive array of programs that support children’s early learning and that build family and community capacity. Services from different government and community agencies are linked so that each family has easy access to the programs they need. The school staff is commended for their commitment shown in continuing this provision.

**Embedding the “Belonging, Being, Becoming” vision**

Relationships are important at NECS. It is evident that families feel a sense of ‘belonging’ to NECS as identified in the Early Childhood Schools Framework and the Early Years Learning Framework. All staff across the service have focused their energies in ensuring that members of the Narrabundah community feel this affinity to the school. The panel commends the staff, Board, P&C and external agencies in working together to ensure that the “Belonging, Being, Becoming” philosophy underpins all that occurs in the school.

**Navigating Complex Management Structures**

The panel commends the school leadership team, staff and the entire NECS community on the holistic way they have incorporated the model of varied service delivery into a cohesive, collaborative and supportive philosophy. The shared philosophy has built a strong sense of common identity and belonging within the school which will be a solid foundation for continued school improvement.

**Improvement beyond NECS**

The first measurable cohort of students that began with the school in preschool in 2009 and has since transitioned to mainstream cluster primary schools indicate positive Year 3 NAPLAN results for reading and writing. These results validate the approach to literacy at NECS and provide a strong indicator that children leaving the school will continue to transition to their next stage of education effectively.

**Recommendations**

The panel recommends Narrabundah Early Childhood School:

- Document P-2 curriculum in line with the Australian Curriculum and the Early Years Learning Framework. This will ensure sustainable teaching and learning practices are embedded in the school culture and meet national curriculum expectations.

- Replicate their approach that has been used successfully to improve reading outcomes to encompass other areas of the Australian Curriculum with a particular focus on English and Mathematics. This will develop consistency in practice and better understanding of children’s learning and achievement across a range of subjects and contribute to the improvement of outcomes in numeracy and literacy.
• Develop the capacity of staff to analyse and respond to academic data to improve learning outcomes. Having established strong mechanisms for data collection, there is an opportunity to build a rich culture of evidence based practice where data informs pedagogy in an ongoing and meaningful way.

• Review strategies used to celebrate, communicate and promote the quality learning outcomes with the Narrabundah community. This could include expanding the range of stakeholder perception data to validate the effectiveness and gauge the impact of programs, policies and practices across the school. This will complement the existing strong community culture and improve retention across key transitional points in particular Preschool to Kindergarten.