



ACT
Government
Education and Training

EXTERNAL VALIDATION REPORT 2015

for

RICHARDSON PRIMARY SCHOOL



Introduction: Overview of the Validation process

As part of the Territory's school improvement approach, public schools and colleges in the Australian Capital Territory are required to participate in an External Validation process every four years. This document captures the findings of the panel during this cycle of validation.

In broad terms, the panel sought to determine, through evaluation and validation, the extent to which the school is meeting its agreements, achieving its priorities, and addressing its challenges: in the context of a continuously improving educational environment.

External Validation was conducted over three days and involved a wide variety of data gathering approaches including observations, interviews and documentation. This approach provided evidence for the panel to consider against the nine inter-related domains in the National School Improvement Tool that informed our commendations and recommendations.

Section A: School context

Richardson Primary School is a preschool to year 6 school located in the Tuggeranong Valley. Established in 1984, the school celebrated its 30th anniversary during the life of the current School Plan. The celebrations reflected the school's links to its past as well as showcasing its commitment to their school vision 'success for every student'. There are currently 167 students enrolled in the school, most of which are drawn from the suburb of Richardson. Enrolments have remained relatively stable over the past four years. The school runs a Learning Support Centre (LSC) of 14 students, providing an individual education program for students with a significant learning delay or intellectual disability. Richardson also coordinates a Koori preschool which provides an early childhood education program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 3-5 years.

In 2014 the school Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) was 936 which is below the national average. The panel notes that the ICSEA value can have an effect on school resources and performance and indicates a level of educational advantage based on the educational and occupational indicators of parents.

The school student demographic has remained constant: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students represent an average of 13.5 percent of the population and students from an English As a Second Language or Dialect (EALD) an average of 28 percent of all students enrolled.

There has been instability of personnel at the senior leadership levels in the school since 2011, with the appointment of a new principal, deputy principal and executive officers. The school has actively sought to employ two additional exemplary classroom teachers in the role of Executive Teacher Professional Practice with a key focus on building capacity in teaching practice at the school. The school has also experienced significant staff turnover throughout the same period. In these circumstances, the school has at times found it challenging to embed practices in order to meet some of its targets. The school has actively sought to reduce annual staff turnover through clearly articulated induction processes. Executive staff have also strategically structured teaching teams to ensure continuity of programs, as well as ensuring ongoing professional learning supports.

Key stakeholders reported to the panel that the school is driven by a shared belief that every student is capable of successful learning. Numerous comments from the school community focused on the great value the school staff place on importance of building and maintaining positive and caring relationships among staff, students and parents.

Staff reported that there is a strong collegial culture of mutual trust and support among teachers and school leaders. Teachers have a shared commitment to the improvement of teaching and openness to critique by colleagues. This is reflected in the fact that teachers regularly invite leaders and colleagues to visit their classrooms to observe their teaching and provide constructive feedback.

During the past four years, Richardson Primary School has strengthened its reputation within the community as a school of choice for families. The leadership team has committed resources to improve the image of the school as well as the way it communicates to the community. The panel found evidence of this effort and its success.

Section B: School performance

Richardson Primary School has, as stated in its School Plan, sought first and foremost to improve learning outcomes for students.

Performance Indicators in Primary School (PIPS) data suggests that the school is performing on par with ACT averages in reading and mathematics, with minor variations of students reaching expected growth during their first year of school. In 2013 the school made greater gains in PIPs reading scores than the ACT, but no analysis of the reasons for change was presented to the panel. The school has reduced the number of students making less than expected growth in numeracy from 55 to 21 percent for the same four year period. The actions taken to directly influence these achievements are attributed to the school's response to intervention model which focuses on the implementation of early intervention strategies.

The academic achievement of the students of Richardson Primary School, as measured by National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), has been varied. The school has met some of the ACT Education and Training Directorate's (the Directorate) targets for literacy and numeracy in years 3 and 5 with all targets met in 2014. Most of the school's mean scores in literacy and numeracy have been slightly below the ACT system average, with 10 of 16 within the confidence interval.

In response to Richardson Primary School's writing results being below the ACT system average (but still meeting Directorate targets with consideration of confidence intervals) the school has developed a number of targeted strategies. These strategies are not yet yielding evidence to confirm the success of the adopted approaches but anecdotal information strongly affirms their validity.

Student attendance data over the four years has been consistently at or above the system average. Suspension data indicates that there has been a decrease in suspensions over the life of the Plan.

Satisfaction data indicates that Richardson Primary is a high performing school. Student, parent and staff satisfaction in the school is at or above the overall satisfaction for all primary schools in the ACT.

Students consistently reported high levels of satisfaction especially in the areas of feedback on their progress, talking with teachers about their concerns and the celebration of student achievements. This correlates with the information provided to the panel through interviews with students from a range of year levels.

Parents similarly reported high levels of satisfaction with high expectations of the school, the use of technology in the classroom and the fair way in which teachers respond to student needs.

Teachers reported experiencing extremely high levels of satisfaction from their teaching at the school. Satisfaction levels were significantly above the system average in the areas of overall satisfaction with the school, physical environment, opportunity to participate in decision making and resourcing to support student learning. This marries with the panel's perceptions of staff satisfaction following interviews with a wide range of staff members across different year levels.

Evidence cited and its validation

- NAPLAN and PIPS data 2011 to 2014
- Enrolment data 2012 to 2015
- Stakeholder perception data
- Interviews with students
- Annual School Board Reports 2011 to 2014

Section C: School improvement planning and implementation

Priority Areas

In the school plan, Richardson Primary School identified two priorities for school improvement. These were:

Strategic Priority 1: Improve English and mathematic outcomes for students.

Strategic Priority 2: Advance early childhood practices to increase the quality of educational programs and their delivery for preschool to year 3.

The panel found that the priorities identified were closely aligned to the recommendations of the 2011 validation report.

Strategic Priority 1: Improve English and mathematic outcomes for students

The performance measures identified by Richardson Primary School over the 4 year plan were to meet school targets set by the Education and Training Directorate (the Directorate) in English and mathematics. Strategies employed by Richardson Primary School to work towards this target over the four years included: the introduction of formative assessment practices, cooperative learning strategies, targeted professional learning and consistent pedagogical practices across the school.

In 2012 Action Learning Teams (ALT) were employed with a focus on the development of writing exemplar learning walls and creating writing rubrics in line with the Australian Curriculum. The focus on writing has continued with the development of annotated standard pieces of work to assist with moderation. The school also started using Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) in reading comprehension and mathematics in order to establish baseline data for setting targets for individual cohorts. The use of PAT has continued throughout the life of the Plan however the panel was not provided with targets related to student learning.

Through this improvement cycle, the school grounded its actions towards this priority in research based learning; formative assessment practices outlined by Dylan William and Kagan Cooperative Learning strategies. As a result of this research, the school introduced a number of initiatives to help every student identify what they were learning and why as well as set high expectations for student achievement. These initiatives include; the embedding of learning goals for students, cooperative learning structures, Literacy Place and the use of a core mathematics program - Stepping Stones. A strategy termed 'Walkthroughs' was implemented to increase the

collective accountability across the school in relation to the commitment of key principles as identified in the School Plan.

On analysing the data available, the panel validated that these strategies were evident in every classroom across the school. In relation to meeting targets in English and mathematics, the results have been varied across the four years. The panel noted that in 2014 Richardson Primary School met all of its targets within the confidence intervals for reading and numeracy.

Strategic Priority 2: Advance early childhood practices to increase the quality of educational programs and their delivery for preschool to year 3.

The performance measures identified by Richardson Primary School over the four year plan were to meet school targets set by the Directorate in English and mathematics and improvement in the proportion of students achieving expected or above expected growth in PIPs in Foundation.

In determining progress against this priority Richardson Primary School embarked on developing a new early intervention strategy. This involved introducing a range of initiatives in preschool to year 2. The school engaged with Therapy ACT in direct response to the oral language and gross motor needs of students.

In alignment with the whole school approach to formative assessment and cooperative learning, educators worked to build these practices into the Early Years Learning Framework. Further actions to meet this priority included links with the Koori preschool program. The introduction of the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) 'Who am I?' assessment in preschool and kindergarten has assisted with the identification of students with additional learning needs.

The school recognised that a modified response to intervention approach would help them achieve this priority. The panel was able to see evidence of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) resourcing, use of an expert teaching team, recruitment of experienced staff and in particular small classes.

The panel noted the school did not meet all of its targets relating to PIPs and growth remained consistently under that of the ACT average in reading and below or on par with the ACT average in mathematics. The 2013 and 2014 PIPs data shows that there is an improvement in the percentage of students achieving better than expected growth in mathematics.

Reflections

The panel commends Richardson Primary School on maintaining a strong focus on the two strategic priorities as outlined in their School Plan. These two priorities were grounded in good decision making and responded to the needs to the community.

The school has made excellent use of the formative assessment data gathered by teachers to inform classroom practice. Standardised tests are also administered and could be used to complement and triangulate data on individual student achievement. The challenge will now be to harmonise all data available, including system data, to drive whole school improvement and individual student tracking in English and mathematics.

One of the greatest contributors in addressing both strategic priorities has been the implementation of 'Walkthroughs'. This whole school initiative was designed to gather and provide data about instructional practice and student learning in order to increase collective accountability.

The panel was impressed by the strong focus and collaborative culture present in the school and was able to see how this has helped drive the improvement agenda.

Evidence cited and its validation

- Parent and student satisfaction survey data 2012-2015
- School Plan 2012-2015
- School Board Reports 2012-2015
- School Annual Operating Plans 2012-2015
- Professional Pathways Plans
- NAPLAN data 2012-2014
- PIPS data 2012-2014
- PAT reading and mathematics data 2015
- Student learning goals
- Interviews with staff, parents and students.

Section D: National tools self-evaluation results

National School Improvement Tool

Richardson Primary School ran three consultation stages in 2015 around the National School Improvement Tool. In the first instance, staff completed an independent self-evaluation against Domain One. This was followed by each group collaborating to consensus through discussion and evidence sharing. Staff then worked in small groups to identify commendations and recommendations within this domain. The same process was then applied to the remaining eight domains with staff working in teams to reflect on two domains at a time. This work was then peer reviewed until consensus was reached.

In validating the school's journey against the School Improvement Tool, the panel noted the following.

With respect to **Domain 1: An Explicit Improvement Agenda**, the panel validated:

- *The school leadership group has developed and is driving an explicit and detailed school improvement agenda.*
- *This agenda is communicated in staff meetings, school newsletters, parent-teacher meetings and on the school website using a variety of formats to suit local needs.*
- *The school improvement agenda has been effective in focusing, and in some extent narrowing and sharpening, the whole school's attention on core learning priorities.*
- *There is a strong and optimistic commitment by all staff to the school improvement strategy and a clear belief that further improvement is possible.*

Staff demonstrated to the panel throughout the interview process that they are focused on the school improvement agenda and committed to the outcomes. It was very clear that teachers believe improvement for every child is possible. Since 2013, a clear focus on formative assessment and cooperative learning has been the key improvement agenda. This agenda has been actioned through the establishment of ALT, targeted professional learning and leading learning meetings, keeping all staff engaged and informed.

In reviewing **Domain 2: Analysis and Discussion of Data**, the panel validated:

- *The principal and other school leaders view reliable and timely student data as essential to their effective leadership of the school. There is a documented school plan and timetable for the annual collection of data on student achievement and wellbeing.*
- *The school has ensured that appropriate software is available and that staff have been trained to undertake data analyses.*
- *Time is set aside for the discussion of data and the implications of data for school policies and classroom practices.*

Richardson Primary School places great emphasis on formative assessment on a daily basis. This data informs the learning strategies, planning, student groupings and individual student learning goals across the school. A variety of tools are used, including ACER PAT reading comprehension and math, writing assessment walls, PIPS, Brains Ears Eyes (BEE) Spelling, Count Me in Too, Running Records, Literacy Place and mathematics core program - Stepping Stones. The panel commends the school on the establishment of the school based 'ACER Learning team', who provide support in the analysis and application of the PAT data in the classroom. The panel concurs with the school around the need for consistent processes to share student data and develop clear and measurable targets.

With respect to **Domain 3: A Culture that Promotes Learning**, the panel confirmed:

- *The school ethos is built around high expectations and a commitment to excellence. There is an expectation that every student will learn and achieve positive outcomes.*
- *There is a happy, optimistic feel to the school.*
- *High levels of trust are apparent across the school community. Interactions are focused on the learning and wellbeing of students and on continually improving the school's ability to meet the needs of all students.*
- *Parents, families, school leaders and teachers work together in mutually supportive ways. There is a strong sense of belonging and pride in the school.*
- *A strong collegial culture has been established. Teachers have an overt and shared commitment to the improvement of teaching and an openness to critique by colleagues.*

The panel commends Richardson Primary School for its commitment to a culture that promotes learning. It was unequivocally evident that there is a strong collegial culture of mutual trust and support among all staff members. A high priority has been given to building and maintaining positive and caring relationships between staff, students and parents. An example of success in this area relates to the high attendance rate at school learning journeys. The wellbeing of students and staff has been a deliberate focus, programs include: the mentoring, the buddy program, the breakfast program for students, and the health and wellbeing program for staff.

Another strength in this area has been the establishment and development of 'Walkthroughs', which has been created to build collective accountability to the agreed teaching and learning practices. This is reflected in the fact that teachers regularly invite leaders and colleagues to visit their classrooms to observe their teaching and provide constructive feedback.

The panel determined the following with respect to **Domain 4: Targeted Use of School Resources**:

- *Physical spaces and technology are used effectively to maximise student learning. Learning spaces are organised for whole group work, small group work and individual work.*
- *The school deploys staff in ways that make best use of their expertise (e.g., specialist reading/science teachers).*
- *The principal and other school leaders have introduced programs and strategies to identify and address the needs of students in the school and are sourcing and applying available resources to meet those needs.*
- *The school has developed processes for identifying student learning needs, although there may not always be good school records of student achievement and progress.*

Substantial budget commitments have been made across the life of the Plan to upgrade school furniture in every classroom. A consultative process with school staff and students was used to purchase equipment based on student needs within the school. The panel commends the school for the employment of educators which capitalises on expertise to maximise impact on student learning. The targeting of school resources has included roles, programs and partnerships such as: the response to intervention model, the partnership developed with Therapy ACT to implement the Therapy Assist Program (TAP) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Education Officer.

In reflecting on **Domain 5: An Expert Teaching Team**, the panel validated:

- *The principal and other school leaders see the development of staff into an expert and coherent school-wide teaching team as central to improving outcomes for all students.*
- *Teachers visit each other's classrooms and welcome opportunities to have principals and other school leaders observe and discuss their work with them.*
- *School leaders place a very high priority on the ongoing professional learning of all staff and on the development of a school-wide, self-reflective culture focused on improving classroom teaching.*
- *The school provides opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles outside the classroom.*

The panel acknowledges that the school has found ways to build a school wide professional team of highly able teachers who are encouraged to take active leadership roles beyond the classroom. Strong procedures are in place to encourage a school wide shared responsibility for student learning and success. The panel noted that throughout the life of the Plan, targeted professional learning, based on the school improvement agenda, has been an emphasis and highly supported by the active leadership team.

With respect to **Domain 6: Systematic Curriculum Delivery**, the panel validated:

- *The school has a documented plan for curriculum delivery that includes year level and term plans, but the progression of learning from year to year is not always obvious and the relationship between the pieces of the plan (the year, term and unit plans) would benefit from further clarification.*
- *School leaders talk about embedding fundamental cross-curricular skills such as literacy, numeracy and higher order thinking within all subjects, but there is little evidence that school-wide strategies are in place to drive a consistent approach.*

- *Discussions about curriculum delivery tend to be sporadic and reactive with a year level focus.*
- *Curriculum delivery is designed to meet the needs of the range of students within each year level as well as those with disabilities and other particular needs.*

At Richardson Primary School collaborative planning within year group settings is evident and is responsive to student needs. The school has a commitment to using consistent programs in literacy and numeracy. The panel concurs with the school's desire to further develop a whole school curriculum delivery plan to ensure consistent teaching and learning across year levels with reference to the Australian curriculum.

The panel validated the following with respect to **Domain 7: Differentiated Teaching and Learning**:

- *School leaders explicitly encourage teachers to tailor their teaching to student needs and readiness. This includes the systematic use of assessment instruments to establish where individuals are in their learning and to identify skill gaps and misunderstandings. Teachers also are encouraged to respond to differences in cultural knowledge and experiences and to cater for individual differences*
- *Regular formative assessment data on the achievements, progress, strengths and weaknesses of individual students are used in all classrooms to make judgements about individual needs, to identify appropriate starting points for teaching and to personalise teaching and learning activities.*
- *Reports to parents tend to be summative reports of how students have performed.*

Classroom observations and interviews with teachers indicate there is a strong emphasis on the use of formative assessment. This immediate feedback from students drives and supports the close monitoring of individual progress. This allows teachers to tailor classroom activities in the moment to levels of readiness and need. Future endeavours can now focus on enhancing the collaborative planning, delivery and review of lesson effectiveness.

In examining **Domain 8: Effective Pedagogical Practices**, the panel noted:

- *The principal and other school leaders have accepted personal responsibility for driving improvements in teaching throughout the school. They demonstrate a strong conviction that improved teaching is the key to improved student learning and have clear and well-known positions on the kinds of teaching that they wish to see occurring.*
- *There is a particular focus on improved teaching methods in reading, writing, mathematics and science, and professional learning activities are focused on building teachers' understandings of highly effective teaching strategies in these areas. Clarity about what students are expected to learn and be able to do, high expectations of every student's learning, explicit teaching of skills and content, individualised attention as required, and timely feedback to guide student action are key elements of the school's push for improved teaching and learning.*

The school principal and other school leaders recognise that highly effective teaching is the key to improving student learning throughout the school. All teachers understand and use cooperative teaching strategies to maximise student learning. Across the school, classroom teachers make learning visible through the use of exemplars, wonder walls and learning goals. The Literacy and Numeracy Field Officer and the Executive Teacher Professional Practice are the

identified coaches within the school. Teachers are able to enrol with either coach through self-identification or recommendation from a supervisor. Strengthening school procedures will ensure a more formal approach to the coaching and mentoring strategy.

In examining **Domain 9: School-Community Partnerships**, the panel validated:

- *The school has established one or more partnerships with families, local businesses and/or community organisations with the express purpose of improving outcomes for students.*
- *Each partnership brings staff and students of the school together with external partners such as families, other education or training institutions, local businesses and/or community organisations.*
- *Attention has been given to communication and to the sharing of experiences within the partnership.*
- *There is evidence that the school's partnerships are being implemented as intended.*

Richardson Primary School actively seeks ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by partnering with local businesses and community organisations. Partnerships are strategically established to address identified student needs and operate by providing access to experiences and support not already available within the school community. The panel acknowledges that the next step is to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and their impact on student outcomes.

National Safe Schools Audit Tool

As was the case with the NSIT, all staff (teaching and non-teaching) at Richardson Primary School had the opportunity to review and consider the *National Safe Schools Framework* before giving a personal and honest appraisal of the school's progress across the nine elements. The evidence gathered was then peer reviewed until consensus was reached through rigorous discussion and/or voting.

According to this tool, the key strengths determined as a result of the reflection were:

- partnerships with families and community
- early intervention and targeted support
- a focus on student wellbeing and student ownership
- a supportive and connected school culture
- leadership commitment to a safe school.

According to this tool, areas for improvement determined as a result of the reflection were:

- professional learning
- positive behaviour management
- policies and procedures.

While there were some consistencies between the school's findings from this instrument and those reported in system satisfaction surveys, the panel found the following discrepancies, which will provide areas for further investigation.

- Professional learning in regards to student safety and wellbeing so that staff have the appropriate strategies to deal with personal student needs.
- Positive behaviour management in relation to the school's policy to provide a transparent platform to inform the whole school community.
- Policies and procedures related to the establishment of a group responsible for overseeing the school's wellbeing initiatives and the protocols for the induction of casual staff, new staff and new students and families to the school.

Section E: Commendations and recommendations

Commendations

Richardson Primary School is commended for the following.

1. **The school leadership group has developed and is driving an explicit and detailed local school improvement agenda.** The school improvement agenda has remained consistent over the life of the plan and has allowed the school to focus on core learning priorities.
2. **The school is driving a strong culture that promotes learning.** The principal, school leaders, staff and students are to be commended on the development of a school learning culture that promotes respectful relationships along with student and staff wellbeing. There is a very positive, caring, optimistic and friendly tone throughout the school. High levels of mutual trust among the principal, school leaders, teachers, students and parents are evident.
3. **Effective teaching methods, cooperative learning and formative assessment enact the explicit intention of maximising student learning.** The school principal and school leaders are to be congratulated on the establishment of the use of research based teaching practices in all classrooms. Students are engaged, challenged and learning successfully. The targeted professional learning strategy places a high priority on the continual development of staff in high impact instructional strategies.
4. **The school has applied its resources in a targeted manner to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of students.** Teachers were provided with autonomy over the development of individual learning spaces in alignment with the schools approach to teaching and learning. Rigorous processes have been established to narrow the gaps in student learning and to enhance student progress in shorter timeframes. The panel commends the use of small class sizes, engagement with external agencies such as Therapy ACT and the development of a sound early intervention strategy to address student learning needs.

Recommendations

The panel recommends Richardson Primary School pays attention to the following opportunities for improvement during the next planning cycle.

1. **Develop a strong culture of analysis, discussion and action on data.** The panel noted that Richardson Primary School has laid solid foundations for the effective use of formative data. The school also has developed a comprehensive assessment guidance document that makes clear the purpose and schedule of assessments preschool to year 6. The school is encouraged to develop a school wide data plan that supports the needs of individual students and encourages systemic tracking and monitoring of improvement over time.

2. **Create a coherent, sequenced curriculum plan.** The panel recommends the school develop a clearly documented whole school plan for curriculum delivery. This will ensure consistent teaching and learning expectations and provide a clear reference for monitoring learning across year levels. It is suggested that careful attention is given to the vertical alignment of the curriculum so that there is continuity and progression of learning.
3. **Enhance the promotion of deliberate and strategic partnerships between home and school.** Across the life of the plan a number of links with the school community have been established. It is suggested that the school continue to actively seek ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by partnering with parents and carers.
4. **Extend coaching throughout the school.** Build upon the solid foundations of the existing system of teacher coaching within the school. This approach offers potential to continue to improve teacher practice, student learning outcomes and leadership development by engaging more staff with demonstrated expertise in the practice of coaching others.

