



External Validation Report 2008

Key findings

By embracing the quality assurance process, schools better understand their role in accounting for their achievements

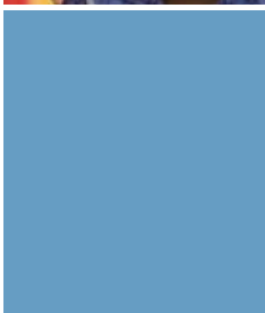
Positive school cultures are enhanced when schools provide a supportive, safe and inclusive learning environment

Collaboration within and between schools improves the quality of student assessment through on-going monitoring of individual progress

Increased strategic involvement of school boards in quality improvement processes builds a shared understanding across the community

Newly developed curriculum has reflected the inclusive cultures of our schools, enabling student achievement

Schools implementing environmentally friendly programs promote good practice across their communities



External Validation Report 2008

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Introduction

This report provides a summary of the findings of the external validation of 27 public schools as part of the three-year cycle of review in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). In 2008, the Lead Validator was Ms Louise Bywaters, and validation was undertaken by panels of staff drawn from across the ACT Department of Education and Training (the Department).

The *School Excellence Initiative* and the accompanying *School Improvement Framework* underpin the review process. The review process focuses on continuous improvement, paying particular attention to student achievement, learning and growth. These two documents assist schools and colleges in assessing their effectiveness and performance in meeting the responsibilities detailed in the *ACT Education Act 2004*, sections 21, 24, 47, 50, 52 and 53.

As part of the review process, schools and colleges systematically monitor and measure their performance against agreed goals. The aim of the process is to embed continuous improvement into everyday practice and improve outcomes for students. Evaluation is undertaken against four domains: learning and teaching, student environment, leadership and management, and community involvement. During external validation, schools and colleges must demonstrate their performance and achievements against these domains. A variety of methods are used to report on progress against individual school action plans.

Each review cycle takes three years, with schools and colleges undertaking an initial survey of stakeholders, annual

self-assessments and an external validation in the final year. This report presents the third round of the validation cycle, with each public school and college having now participated in the process between 2006 and 2008.

In 2008, external validations were conducted between 4 August and 21 August. Validation panel members and the school principals of the 27 schools involved were invited to a series of briefing and training events prior to commencement of the process.

Convened over three days, each panel examined the evidence presented in support of an individual school's self-assessment and validated achievements as reported by that school. Significant achievements and performance were commended and recommendations were made for areas of improvement. Feedback was provided verbally to school personnel as well as in a written report.

As in previous years, the panels were openly welcomed by the schools participating in the validation process. Documented evidence was provided and access to staff, students, parents and other community members was facilitated as requested. The hospitality shown by schools showed their commitment to this quality assurance process as a means of achieving improved student outcomes. Concurrently, some schools were in the process of amalgamation or transition as part of the implementation of schools renewal. School leaders at these schools have been commended on their professionalism and skills in managing the review process and taking their communities into a new phase of service provision.

Once again the validation process was well executed through extensive planning and preparation. Panels and panel chairs understood their roles and responsibilities as did the school principals. The Lead Validator assisted in the design and delivery of the pre-validation process, visited sites and provided advice on the preparation of final panel reports. Panel members agreed that participation was a rich experience and will pay dividends in their future endeavours.

It was evident that the schools validated in 2008 incorporated learnings from the

two previous validation rounds, through improvements in the content and quality of the self-assessments and the range of evidence presented to support their claims.

At the conclusion of the external validation process, all principals and panellists in the 2008 review process were invited to attend a focus-group session to discuss and recommend improvements to the process in the future.

Reflections on the 2008 school self-assessment and validation process

School review and self-assessment reports

The 2008 round completed the first full cycle of school self-assessment and external validation in ACT public schools and colleges. In three years there has been a significant shift in the nature of the school self-assessment and the quality of evidence underpinning it.

Schools demonstrated greater ability to produce quality assurance data about improvements to the programs, systems and services established in the school as well as more evidence-based decision-making processes. Strategic planning based on the evidence collected and strategies that track improvement against that data will become the norm as schools gain both the tools and capacity in this area. Targets that support the achievement of goals at the individual, class and whole school level will ensure measures are in place to demonstrate improvement. A number of schools reviewed this year can provide exemplars in this area.

Accountability data and evidence of improved performance relating to teaching programs are now being presented in a variety of forms, although some are still qualitative in nature. Schools are working with a greater awareness about the necessity to assess, systematically track and collect student learning data for all school-wide programs. Stronger quantitative data is now emerging, making school claims of improvement more authoritative and the provision of evidence more effective.

There is still, however, a heavy reliance on system-collected data to demonstrate school effectiveness and productivity. There is more evidence this year that whole school data is being collected as a means of demonstrating achievement and improvement across age cohorts and across all key learning areas. Moves to work collaboratively within and between schools to improve the quality of student assessment are commended.

The ability to aggregate data from these assessment processes, in order to monitor and evaluate school-wide effectiveness of teaching programs, will be a major achievement and a direct outcome of the school review process.

The provision of evidence as part of the validation process has been refined and presented in an efficient and accessible manner in the majority of schools. Many schools have successfully experimented with presenting evidence in multi-media form. This allows schools to collect and store evidence of the success of strategic directions over the cycle of the plan or program.

While on-going data collection in the teaching and learning process is evident at classroom and whole school level, there is still further work to be done in this area, to develop a culture of evidence-based professional practice. A deeper understanding of the expectations around data and an increased awareness that this is a whole school challenge has established a strong foundation for the next round of school reviews.

Training emphasised schools' responsibility to better engage their boards in the processes of reporting on school plans and policies as a final step in the self-review process. School boards were involved more significantly in this round, ensuring that they were able to extend their governance role in relation to accountability at the community level. Board Chairs signed off self-assessment reports on behalf of boards.

There is further scope to develop the role of school boards in the development of school plans and associated target-setting and resource allocations.

Planning and review

As part of the quality assurance process, and following the validation stage, stakeholders discussed their experiences and ideas for further improvements to the school review process. These discussions, together with other material gathered by the Lead Validator, will further inform the current review of the *School Improvement Framework*.

To rationalise reporting requirements for schools, there is an opportunity to reduce the overlap of work, to refine and combine the work of principals in the provision of the annual school board reports, and the requirements of the school review and validation process. These two processes work in parallel and with some rationalisation and redesign, could be amalgamated into a single process. This would ensure that there is a formative self-assessment process each year which is reported to the board, culminating with a summative self-assessment and validation at the end of the planning cycle.

Schools Directors visited schools when possible during the validation process and provided supplementary evidence. It is suggested that there should be greater

engagement by the Schools Directors in the formative years of school plans and associated internal review processes. The outcomes of the self-assessment and validation process should also inform the performance agreement between the principals and Directors.

Learning and teaching domain

Within this domain, implementation of the new curriculum framework, *Every Chance to Learn*, provided the basis for extensive work by schools in curriculum development, monitoring and assessment.

Much of the evidence provided included school curriculum audits and scoping and sequencing documents that assist teachers to develop teaching programs for individuals and groups of students. A number of schools provided strong evidence of excellent curriculum development work, programming templates, integrated unit audits as well as the development of assessment rubrics and student tracking processes.

Where this alignment work has been done, there were also examples of documentation and commitment to teaching methodologies and programs in specific curriculum areas. This led to greater consistency and reliability across the school, including processes for assessment of student learning.

The reliance on system-collected data in literacy and numeracy remained this year when reporting student learning achievements, although some schools have recognised the need to also have school-wide processes in place.

To ensure a comprehensive curriculum, valid and reliable measuring instruments need to be developed in all Essential Learning areas (ELAs). This would assist

schools to present compelling evidence of achievement across the whole school, and enable reporting in a more specific way to parents and the community. More analytical use of A-E gradings could assist as an initial means of quantifying student achievement across schools.

Schools reported emerging practice in school-wide student tracking systems and whole school records management in relation to student learning data. These systems enable individual student learning outcomes to be monitored over time and enhance a teacher's ability to design effective interventions.

A number of schools reported significant work in supporting student transition through relocation and stages of schooling. There was particular emphasis on good information transfer between schools, particularly in relation to student achievement data. Several schools are developing student profiles, tracking systems and parent alert mechanisms to ensure student achievement information assists with timely program intervention. This work has significantly assisted the transition of students from schools undergoing amalgamation and closure.

Special schools have begun to aggregate student achievement data in relation to goals achieved in Individual Learning Plans. Further work in this area would enable more effective monitoring and reporting of student achievement. Early Childhood Centres will also require some focussed development work in the area of whole school benchmark assessments, given the teaching is focussed on more finely graded developmental learning outcomes. There is also an opportunity to work collaboratively on curriculum development, given the excellent work that has been undertaken in the special schools reviewed this year and the future work of the Early Childhood Centres.

Most schools' plans included goals for improvement to information and technologies as part of their development work. There were many good examples of the integration of technology into the school infrastructure as well as into teaching practices of staff. Teacher training and professional development was cited most frequently by schools as the main strategy for achieving school goals in this area. However, there needs to be more data collection on how this knowledge is transferred into improved student learning outcomes.

Schools that identified environmental education in their plans reported significant achievements through their programs on water conservation, recycling and sustainability. Schools were also implementing many of these programs as models of good practice to students and their families.

Values education programs were a strong feature throughout the school review reports again this year. It was encouraging to see these programs being used to underpin student leadership, well-being, relationships and behaviour management approaches in the schools.

A number of schools have recently reviewed their student welfare policies in line with their values program, developing student centres, counselling and support services. For these schools the next step is to monitor activities and measure the impact of these policy changes on the general well-being and morale of students and staff, and on the reputation of the school within the community.

Student environment domain

Panel reports indicated that there was a strong emphasis on providing a supportive, safe and inclusive learning environment. Of note was the positive

attitude and extended effort to include students with special social, cultural and learning needs. Some good examples of special support programs for students at risk of leaving school early were also reported.

Initiatives around Indigenous student support and their success were of particular note. Individual schools and clusters have worked hard to provide a supportive yet challenging environment with extra coaching through homework centres.

A variety of strategies for making classrooms and the general school environment attractive, positive, friendly and environmentally responsible were described by a range of schools.

Acknowledgement is made of the out-of-class and out-of-hours work on the part of staff, parents and students that enabled extra-curricular, community service and extension activities. The Department may wish to further develop this area and promote the culture of excellence in public schools throughout the ACT.

The use of research and evaluation to inform decision-making in relation to student welfare programs and services was evident in several schools. In the past, many student welfare programs were used with limited evaluation of how they improved student outcomes. Implementing fewer, but more rigorous programs across schools is a suggested strategy to gain maximum value for investment of resources.

Some excellent work has been undertaken in high schools on student services and welfare programs. Restorative Practice is well-embedded in most schools and there is a strong focus on positive staff and student relations in its success. Several schools indicated that the development of a

case management approach to student behaviour management has resulted in more effective follow-up and support of students. Evidence in relation to interventions was collected and used to provide appropriate support and follow-up.

A number of special programs were cited as being successfully implemented to develop the social and emotional capacity of students, and to support the whole school student well-being strategy.

Documenting these programs, as part of the formal and quality-assured curriculum, will ensure they are accessible to all staff. It is also important that new staff receive appropriate training in them.

Many schools used a variety of student feedback mechanisms in their reviews this year. With time and practice, school personnel will become more proficient in using locally designed surveys and tools to gather data for quality assurance purposes. Systematic engagement with students about the quality of their school life experience and learning at the classroom level as well as across the school could be improved.

Schools have widely reported on improvements in relation to student representative councils and their positive contribution to building leadership confidence and skills. Excellent examples of school and cluster initiatives have been presented as outcomes of this work.

Leadership and management domain

In 2008, strategic leadership and management have strengthened. There is more awareness of the value of program evaluation and school review as a key to school effectiveness and improvement than in previous years.

Specific training in the technical aspects of program evaluation and project management would further assist schools in designing action plans that produce quality and timely information about impact and effect.

Many schools have refined their plans to be the driving force of continuous improvement. Schools that were most successful in providing quantitative data about performance improvements had clear targets that were continuously monitored and measured.

Processes should be further refined to enable the monitoring of aggregated achievements against targets. In addition, the relationship between school review, data collection and professional conversations with teachers about student achievement and teaching interventions could be further linked.

A number of schools described strategies for successfully managing the review process at times when staff changes were occurring. These strategies included stronger induction programs, team approaches to performance improvement and closer teacher supervision.

The culture of school review has changed substantially since the inception of the program in 2006. There is now a better understanding of the school's role in accounting for its achievements to its clients and the community, assuring them that the school is managed efficiently and effectively as a result of sound quality assurance processes. More extensive professional development for school leaders and managers in the use of the tools and processes of quality assurance and accountability would help improve data collection and analysis. This would also enhance methodologies in the presentation of evidence. During the latter part of 2008, some valuable work had already been undertaken in this context.

Schools demonstrated considerable work in documenting and maintaining school administration and management standard operating procedures, particularly in relation to curriculum and assessment. Continued focus on improving the school management framework will enable schools to deliver quality and consistent services, ensuring operations are safe and secure. Clients also benefit by having reliable and predictable services.

Community involvement domain

School review reports described a wide range of strategies to include parents and carers in both the academic and social life of the school. It was evident that neighbourhood schools are a vital part of ACT communities, and that there are many ways in which families can participate both in school life and take an active part in community activities through the school. Some excellent strategies were described that welcome new families into schools.

As previously mentioned, the work of moving school and preschool services to a model that serves ACT communities well for the future has involved extensive consultation and negotiation with families. The work of school leaders, including board Chairs, in this area is commendable. School personnel are to be congratulated for their professional and corporate commitment to assisting communities through these complex transitions, especially in preparing for closures, transitions to new sites and the amalgamation of programs and resources.

In a number of schools, parent participation in classrooms was cited as an area for development. The engagement of parents in educational decision-making in relation to their children was encouraged in a number of

ways. Reporting and interview activities were well attended and some schools were encouraging three-way reporting, by including the student in the event.

Many schools are building parent and community volunteer programs that are commendable. Work on parent support training programs and the establishment of protocols for parents and volunteers in classrooms and outdoor learning areas will ensure the quality of instruction and maintain standards of privacy and confidentiality in relation to other children.

High schools reported strengthening ties between community enterprises and educational services through school and industry links initiatives. Of particular note was the high quality of the vocational training being undertaken in special schools.

In 2008, more schools demonstrated substantial effort in seeking out satisfaction data from parents. Some schools were particularly effective at engaging students in talking about their schooling experiences and how they felt about their learning and the teaching service they received. As schools become more proficient at using quality assurance tools and processes to gather data about particular cohorts of students, this will become an even more significant part of the school's review process.

The training that has been put in place for schools during 2008 is an important strategy to assist with this work.

The role of the school boards in relation to the ongoing strategic direction and overall governance of schools still requires clarification for all concerned, particularly for newly appointed principals and board Chairs. Training of board members around the processes of strategic leadership, planning and accountability from a board perspective is important. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of staff and school boards in respect to accountability and school reporting is also recommended.

In 2008, validation indicated that in best-practice schools, the governance role is clear, the partnership between principal and Chair is strong, and the accountability process is robust and sustained over the cycle of the school development period. The board is involved in milestone reporting and discussion about whole school performance. Where this is an event that occurs only at validation, there is disconnection with this process and the board is less able to exercise a governance role in school development and accountability.

Commendations

In 2008, public education in the ACT continues its strong commitment to providing excellence in the learning experiences of its students. The schools are well administered, with teachers and support staff working to high professional standards. The overall leadership of schools is characterised by skilled, competent and cooperative work practice and commitment to improved performance.

Of particular note is the outstanding leadership by school leaders and board Chairs within school communities in the lead up to, and the implementation of, the Schools Renewal program. Managing the complex negotiations and transition planning was done expertly and sensitively.

Substantial curriculum leadership work was undertaken to audit and document the schools' curriculum frameworks against *Every Chance to Learn*. This has ensured staff are programming, assessing and reporting within a new set of curriculum standards.

High quality curriculum development work was undertaken in special education settings, and excellent work was performed in vocational education and training, in particular at The Woden School.

Evidence showed that there was an increase in collaborative work within and between schools to collect and analyse aggregated student achievement data.

There was a greater use of school-generated data for evidence

of continuous improvement. This was particularly evident in information sought from students about the quality of their lives at school, their relationships with each other and the staff, their learning successes and their opportunities for extension and challenge.

There was a strong focus on values-led relationships in schools and the commitment to just and educative student relations and behaviour management policies.

Students' learning experiences were enriched and enhanced by participation in extra-curricular opportunities offered through the significant effort of staff, parents and volunteers.

Schools set an example to students and their families by implementing programs in the school on environmental education, water conservation, recycling and composting.

The Quality Teacher model was enthusiastically taken-up and integrated into the work of schools as they renewed their curriculum.

To ensure all children have the greatest opportunity to achieve, curriculum reflected the inclusive cultures of schools and their respect for the diversity of the community.

Sincerely appreciated is the generosity and professionalism with which school personnel approached the process of school self-review and validation, and their high level of collaboration.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made as possible pathways to school and system improvement in the future:

1. Leadership and management

Clarify the roles and responsibilities of school boards, principals and Schools Directors in respect to accountability and school reporting and ensure these are incorporated into policies, guidelines and duty statements.

2. School improvement framework

Streamline school reporting, incorporating schools' self-assessments into the annual school board reporting process.

3. Evidence-based school practice

Further develop student learning assessment approaches at individual, cohort and school-wide level.

4. Professional pathways

Maintain the strong connection between professional development, teaching performance and the schools' improvement targets.

5. Professional development

Leadership and management development programs should incorporate high level training in strategic planning, school management systems, quality assurance and accountability methodology, including the use of quantitative data in reporting. Training in program management, design and evaluation is also recommended.

6. Data management systems

Research and develop a student data management system that is capable of tracking student progress over the full period of enrolment in public education facilities.

7. Special education and early childhood

Develop a consistent and appropriate curriculum that allows for effective and efficient individual learning plan development, assessment and reporting.

8. School visitors

Develop strategies to attract and welcome parents and other volunteers into classroom activities. This needs to be accompanied by the development of clear protocols regarding their role, access to, and conduct in the school.

Statement of Validation

As the External Validator for the public schools' self-assessment and review process for 2008, I hereby state that the schools listed in Attachment A undertook and successfully completed the process in accordance with the requirements of the *ACT Education Act 2004*, section 24.

I would like to thank the staff in schools for the spirit and generosity with which they undertook the process, and for the excellent work in presenting the achievements and future directions of their schools. This process is challenging and demanding and the schools that presented their evidence this year did so with a professional approach that demonstrated a commitment to quality.

I thank those who participated in panels and in the organisation and management of the 2008 round of validations.

I commend this report for consideration in the ongoing development of quality schools and the quest for excellence in public education in the Australian Capital Territory.

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External Lead Validator

Note:

Master of Arts, Bachelor of Education, Diploma of Teaching, Fellow of the Australian College of Educators, Fellow of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders

Attachment A

Externally validated schools 2008

Primary Schools

Curtin Primary School
Evatt Primary School
Farrer Primary School
Garran Primary School
Giralang Primary School
Hughes Primary School
Jervis Bay School
Kaleen Primary School
Lyneham Primary School
Lyons Primary School
Maribyrnong Primary School
Mawson Primary School
Miles Franklin Primary School
Mount Rogers Primary School
O'Connor Cooperative School
Taylor Primary School
Torrens Primary School
Turner School
Urambi Primary School
Yarralumla Primary School

High Schools

Alfred Deakin High School
Kaleen High School
Lyneham High School
Melrose High School

Special Schools

Black Mountain School
Malkara School
The Woden School