

*Improving Learning*

# National School Improvement Tool

## School Review Report

Darwin Middle School, The Gardens, Northern Territory

Review date: 26-30 March 2019

Principal: Mr Marcus Dixon

*Reviewers:*

Ron Bamford, Lead Reviewer, ACER

Noel Strickland, Co-reviewer, ACER

Dan Murtas, Principal, Katherine High School

Paul Van Holstyen, Principal, Centralian Middle School.

Report date: 2 April 2019

## Company Information

Company	The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd (ACER)
ABN	19 004 398 145
Company Address	19 Prospect Hill Road Camberwell, Victoria 3124 Australia
Website	<a href="http://www.acer.org">www.acer.org</a>
Telephone	+61 3 9277 5555
Fax	+61 3 9277 5500
Contact Person	Pauline Taylor-Guy
Email address	<a href="mailto:Pauline.Taylor-Guy@acer.org">Pauline.Taylor-Guy@acer.org</a>
Direct Telephone	+61 3 9277 5402
Mobile	+61 (0) 447 789 128

## Table of Contents

School context .....	2
1. An explicit improvement agenda .....	3
2. Analysis and discussion of data .....	4
3. A culture that promotes learning .....	5
4. Targeted use of school resources .....	7
6. Systematic curriculum delivery .....	10
8. Effective pedagogical practices .....	12
9. School-community partnerships .....	13
Domain 9 findings .....	13
Commendations .....	15
Affirmations .....	16
Recommendations .....	17
Further details .....	18

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
DET	Department of Education and Training
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
KLA	Key Learning Areas
LMS	Learning Management System
LSA	Learning support assistant
LSO	Learning support officer
LBOTE	Language background other than English
SCSEEC	Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood
SIS	Student Improvement Surveys

## School context

Name of School:			
Year Levels:			
	A. Number	• B. Number interviewed	C. Percentage • $(B/A) \times 100$
School Leaders	4	4	100%
Teachers*	47	44	94%
Teaching support staff	11	6	55%
Parents	N/A	35	N/A
Students	830	120	N/A
Others	N/A		N/A

*\*A minimum of 85% is recommended*

## I. An explicit improvement agenda

The school leadership team and/or governing body have established and are driving a strong improvement agenda for the school, grounded in evidence from research and practice and expressed in terms of improvements in measurable student outcomes. Explicit and clear school-wide targets for improvement have been set and communicated to parents and families, teachers and students, with accompanying timelines.

### Domain 1 findings

- The Darwin Middle School Business plan 2017-2020 list strategic priorities as: Teaching and Learning; Student learning; STEAM; Student wellbeing; Campus development; and Supporting successful students. The plan lists Numeracy, Reading and Writing targets in year 7 and 9. The plan also lists targets for attendance.
- Teachers couldn't articulate the strategic agenda for the school. Staff acknowledge that there are plans in place including the School Business Plan 2017-2020 and the 2019 Annual School Improvement Plan.
- There is limited alignment between the School Business Plan 2017-2020 and the 2019 Annual School Improvement Plan.
- Teachers acknowledged that the strategic plans are discussed among leadership staff and outlined by leadership staff at general staff meetings.
- Teachers are unsure of the outcomes and targets to be achieved by the school as stated in the School Business Plan and Annual School Improvement Plan.
- Most staff are united in their commitment to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- Parents and students believe the school has high expectations for students.
- The school leadership team actively engages in research of best practice as evidenced in the Teaching and Learning Model and the Learning Curves Program.

## 2. Analysis and discussion of data

A high priority is given to the school-wide analysis and discussion of systematically collected data on student outcomes, including academic, attendance and behavioural outcomes, and student wellbeing. Data analyses consider overall school performance as well as the performances of students from identified priority groups; evidence of improvement/ regression over time; performances in comparison with similar schools; and, in the case of data from standardised tests, measures of growth across the years of school.

### Domain 2 findings

- The leadership team is collecting a range of systemic data sets and this includes A-E data, NAPLAN, Pat-R, Pat-M, attendance and behaviour.
- Some teachers are beginning to look at a range of data sets for their own classes.
- There is a focus on achievement for NAPLAN Writing data. Teachers are able to access this data and some teachers have the knowledge to analyse the data at a deeper level to inform student improvement planning.
- Some professional development has been targeted to develop staff awareness with available data sets including NAPLAN, PAT, behaviour and attendance data. This includes learning in the use of appropriate software.
- Professional and Collaborative Teams (PaCT) are sometimes used for teachers to have a student data conversation.
- The time given to PaCT has reduced in 2019 compared to 2018. Teacher have communicated that there is less time to have professional conversations about data.
- Much of the data available at the school is about attainment rather than growth
- The School Board was able to talk about data at the school level, however parents knew the school was doing well but did not have an understanding of data to back up their claims.

### 3. A culture that promotes learning

The school is driven by a deep belief that every student is capable of successful learning. A high priority is given to building and maintaining positive and caring relationships between staff, students and parents. There is a strong collegial culture of mutual trust and support among teachers and school leaders and parents are treated as partners in the promotion of student learning and wellbeing. The school works to maintain a learning environment that is safe, respectful, tolerant, inclusive and that promotes intellectual rigour.

#### Domain 3 findings

- The Good Standing Program is recognised as the whole school approach to behaviour management. Feedback from staff and students suggests there is a need to provide greater clarity and consistency.
- In the 2018 school perceptual surveys, 92% of 345 Students and 82% of 38 parents believe that teachers have high expectations in learning. In the same survey 28% of 345 students and 47% of 38 parents believe behaviour is well managed in the school.
- Most students fed back that they felt safe, challenged to achieve high standards and encouraged to work independently. Students said they were “satisfied” with the facilities and teachers and that they had found it easy to make friends at Darwin Middle School. Students in the high-performance classes reported greater levels of satisfaction than those in mainstream.
- Most staff indicated that they felt supported both personally and professionally and that they are able to ask for guidance from both colleagues and leadership. In general staff felt behaviour management took only a small proportion of their time.
- Some staff indicated they would appreciate greater clarity around allocation of teaching loads and responsibilities.
- The need to develop a strategy to support staff wellbeing is acknowledged by the leadership team.
- Rubrics are designed to encourage higher order thinking and independent learning in students operating above and well above satisfactory. Parents reported that the rubrics are shared, which enables them to support students with assessment tasks.
- Mutually respectful relationships between students and staff have been observed in practice and confirmed in interviews with stakeholders.
- The development of the ‘Learning Curve’ social and emotional wellbeing program suggests that the wellbeing of students is being prioritised.
- There are some well-considered and strategically funded building initiatives.
- The diversity of the school community is celebrated.



- Staff, students and parents indicated that they felt a sense of belonging to the school community.

## 4. Targeted use of school resources

The school applies its resources (staff time, expertise, funds, facilities, materials) in a targeted manner to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of all students. It has school-wide policies, practices and programs in place to assist in identifying and addressing student needs. Flexible structures and processes enable the school to respond appropriately to the needs of individual learners.

### Domain 4 findings

- There is a weekly Student Empowerment Team meeting in which wellbeing staff discuss pastoral care activities, share information and discuss 'students of concern'. These students are case managed within the team. The Assistant Principal then meets with Year Level Co-ordinators to share this, who then share in year level team meetings.
- The school has identified students with additional needs and teachers access this list. Teachers reported a need for additional support around the education of students with additional needs.
- There are three 'tutor' staff who are flexibly deployed to provide support to targeted students. They have a timetable although the timetable can change in response to situations on any given day.
- The 'REAL' Program provides specialist support for students in Year 9 who wish to undertake a vocational pathway. Students reported high levels of academic challenge in this program, that they felt connected to the school and that the program was meeting their current and future needs.
- The school has two Students of High Performance (SoHP) classes in each year level. Students in this program report a consistently high degree of challenge in their learning.
- The school operates after school programs to support students in mathematics and with homework.
- The school has invested significant resources in the development of the Performing Arts Program. This program has grown significantly in size and quality over the last three years.
- Many classrooms are organised in a traditional orientation of desks facing the front. Partial walls have been erected to divide open learning spaces. Teachers at times found these spaces problematic due to noise and access.
- Teachers report difficulties accessing computers at assessment times, with one set of laptops shared across two or three classes.

## 5. An expert teaching team.

The school has found ways to build a school-wide, professional team of highly able teachers, including teachers who take an active leadership role beyond the classroom. Strong procedures are in place to encourage a school-wide, shared responsibility for student learning and success, and to encourage the development of a culture of continuous professional improvement that includes classroom-based learning, mentoring and coaching arrangements.

### Domain 5 findings

- There is a budget for professional learning.
- Professional learning is delivered during whole school professional development days, staff and faculty meetings. These are presented by school leaders and outside consultants. Sometimes teachers are invited to lead this learning. Some teachers are supported to use this new learning to enhance practice.
- Darwin Middle School works in collaboration with the Middle Years Team, who have supported professional learning in the use of data and quality assessment practices.
- Some staff have the opportunity to investigate examples of best practice at schools interstate through 'Learning Walks'.
- Professional and Collaborative Teams (PaCT) have provided a platform for collaboration to develop between teachers, with a predominant focus on planning and assessment.
- In response to a reduction in PaCT time in 2019, staff have self-organised to collaborate and support each other to develop and enhance practice.
- Most teachers are teaching in their specialist field, some of whom are actively involved in professional teaching associations.
- Most staff are aware of the Teaching and Learning Model and its role in planning.
- There is some evidence of teachers using strategies from within the model such as scaffolding and feedback.
- Teachers indicated an eagerness to expand their subject knowledge and develop their practice.
- Most teachers stated that opportunities for peer observation have been beneficial. A few teachers organise to spend time in each other's classrooms.
- Staff experiences of induction are inconsistent. Some new staff are provided with a mentor. Some staff are supported by faculty members to understand systems such as Curriculum HQ and the Good Standing Policy.
- The school works with an interstate recruitment agency to attract teachers to the school.

- Some teachers stated that there could be greater transparency in the way that leadership development opportunities are offered.

## 6. Systematic curriculum delivery

The school has a coherent, sequenced plan for curriculum delivery that ensures consistent teaching and learning expectations and a clear reference for monitoring learning across the year levels. The plan, within which evidence-based teaching practices are embedded, and to which assessment and reporting procedures are aligned, has been developed with reference to the Australian Curriculum or other approved curriculum and refined collaboratively to provide a shared vision for curriculum practice. This plan is shared with parents and families.

### Domain 6 findings

- A 'Curriculum HQ' on the school intranet encompasses all learning areas detailing programs, assessments and resources. This work aligns with the Australian Curriculum.
- The Curriculum HQ forms the basis of curriculum discussion at collaborative 'PaCT' meetings and guides curriculum delivery.
- Curriculum plan is made available to parents if requested. It is not available on the school website or sent home to all parents.
- Teachers participate in whole school sessions which unpack NAPLAN results
- Shared expectations in relation to general capabilities and cross curricula priorities are still to be developed.
- The school participates in a Middle Years Assessment and Standards project to develop a consistent approach to quality assessment practices, including the use of rubrics.
- The school has a structured social and emotional learning program called Learning Curve which is delivered each week during Roll Class.
- Discussion with staff indicated some staff collaborate to deliver consistent teaching and learning experiences.
- Teachers are supported to make the curriculum relevant to the local situation.
- The school has prioritised the delivery of a variety of languages as a response to community feedback.
- Formal semester reports are a statement of attainment rather than showing progress over time or suggesting how parents can assist in learning.

## 7. Differentiated learning and teaching

The school places a high priority on ensuring that, in their day-to-day teaching, classroom teachers identify and address the learning needs of individual students, including high-achieving students. Teachers are encouraged and supported to monitor closely the progress of individuals, identify learning difficulties and tailor classroom activities to levels of readiness and need.

### Domain 7 findings

- Most students report feeling challenged in their learning.
- Teachers use classroom assessment tasks to identify where students are at in their learning. Some teachers also seek to access information on their students by talking to past teachers, talking to parents or reading the student's file.
- Programs are aimed at the 'at level' standard. Different teachers are trialling approaches to differentiate learning for students working above and below this standard.
- Assessment tasks and rubrics provide opportunities for challenge and higher order thinking. Teachers encourage and support students to take advantage of this challenge and students use these rubrics to monitor their learning. This is particularly evident in the 'Students of High Performance' classes.
- Parents report receiving different amounts of information about the learning program and student achievement from different teachers. Some parents have seen the rubrics and use this to understand their child's learning.
- Reports to parents outline student achievement in each learning area and some include general strategies for improvement.
- From perceptual surveying, 55% of 128 parents in 2017 and 52% of 39 parents in 2018 reported that their child's learning needs are being met by this school.
- There is a lack of clarity about processes, roles and accountabilities for students with disability.
- School leadership and some teaching staff identified that parents and students are consulted to ensure reasonable adjustments are made to meet the needs of students with disability. Most teachers were able to identify students with disability in their classes although were not aware of individual learning plans or their role in planning, providing and monitoring adjustments. Teachers were eager for support in this area.

## 8. Effective pedagogical practices

The school principal and other school leaders recognise that highly effective teaching is the key to improving student learning throughout the school. They take a strong leadership role, encouraging the use of research-based teaching practices in all classrooms to ensure that every student is engaged, challenged and learning successfully. All teachers understand and use effective teaching methods—including explicit instruction—to maximise student learning.

### Domain 8 findings

- The school leadership demonstrates a strong understanding of current research on teaching practices relevant to their specific school requirements.
- The Darwin Middle School Teaching and Learning Model has 5 phases in which it describes the kinds of teaching expected across the school. Staff knowledge and use of this model is still developing.
- A poster outlines the student responsibilities towards learning within the Teaching and Learning Model
- The leadership team has indicated that it is currently planning to deliver professional development to staff which will communicate clear expectations concerning the use of effective teaching strategies across the school.
- Team leaders spend time working with teachers on their teaching skills.
- There is evidence of staff providing timely feedback to students using rubrics which outline specific requirements of most assessment tasks.
- School leaders and teachers work to build students belief in their own capacity to learn successfully.
- Some teachers expressed a desire for more professional development on the effective use of their classroom environment.
- Learning intentions and success criteria were observed in some classrooms.

## 9. School-community partnerships

The school actively seeks ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by partnering with parents and families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations. Parents and families are recognised as integral members of the school community and partners in their children's education. Partnerships are strategically established to address identified student needs and operate by providing access to experiences, support and intellectual and/or physical resources not available within the school. All partners are committed to the common purposes and goals of partnership activities. Procedures are in place to ensure effective communications and to monitor and evaluate the intended impacts of the school's partnerships.

### Domain 9 findings

- The school has a very wide range of existing and developing partnerships to support schooling. Just a few of these are described below:
  - A Darwin City Schools Memorandum of Cooperation describe a partnership between schools in jointly developing key school improvement strategies such as visible learning, moderation, data analysis, transition and the quality assessment assurance cycle. While being explicit with strategies, the memorandum is less clear on specific student outcomes sought or review processes.
  - Partnering with parents is evident with regular parent teacher interviews, academic awards nights, communication in weekly newsletters and school board comments. Enhancing parent partnerships to support the school improvement agenda and wider school initiatives, is an indicated aim of the school board.
  - The school is about to launch a partnership with like-minded schools around 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills. This partnership aims to support an intended strategic agenda around student capabilities in Critical and Creative Thinking and Personal and Social development. The school is in the process of developing baseline data for this agenda.
  - A partnership with Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology 'Reframing Mathematical Futures' program provides strategies for a differentiated approach to teaching mathematics. Through pre and post teaching assessment, the partnership annually gauges improvement in mathematics as a result of deploying the agreed strategies.
  - Through a partnership with the Northern Territory Music School, the school has strategically sought to improve student participation. Through additional



resources secured through the partnership participation has risen from 20 students in 2016 to over 120 students in 2019. The success of the partnership was also monitored by the number of students gaining the high standard needed to participate in combined school bands. Currently Darwin Middle School students make up 50% of the total number of students selected.

## Commendations

- There is a strong belief from parents and students that Darwin Middle School has high expectations for students. Students felt challenged in their learning.
- The school leadership team is clearly committed to finding ways to improve student outcomes. This is reflected in an eagerness to learn from research evidence, international experience and from other schools that have achieved significant improvements.
- Staff, parents and students have an obvious sense of belonging to the school community.
- Assessment design enables differentiated outcomes and encourages higher order thinking and independent learning. Rubrics are used to inform students and parents of expectations for assessments.
- Over time Darwin Middle School has strategically resourced the 'REAL', students of high performance and performing arts programs. Students reported that the programs were meeting their current and future needs.
- The school works in collaboration with the Middle Years Team, which has supported ongoing professional learning in the use of data and quality assessment practices.
- The school has developed and embedded a 'Curriculum HQ' resource as the school's overarching curriculum plan, which outlines procedure, content and resources.
- Students are provided with a wide variety of languages from which to study.
- The development of the Darwin Middle School Teaching and Learning Model.
- The partnership with the Northern Territory Music School has seen participation rise from 20 students in 2016 to over 120 students in 2019.

## Affirmations

- The School has prioritised the use of the Planning and Collaborative Teams (PaCT) as a platform for collaboration and to analyse and discuss student data. Teachers value this learning and organise time to discuss their practice in relation to improved student outcomes.
- There is a focus on achievement using NAPLAN Writing data.
- Teachers are beginning to access data from system platforms and some teachers have the knowledge to analyse the data at a deeper level to inform student improvement planning.
- Mutually respectful relationships between students and staff are evident at Darwin Middle School.
- The development and implementation of the 'Learning Curve' program reflects the school's commitment to developing student social and emotional wellbeing.
- The school offers two after school learning programs to support students – a mathematics program which staff have voluntarily organised and a homework centre co-ordinated by the Defence School Mentor.
- Some teachers access information about their students at the start of the year by talking to past teachers and parents, and reading the student's file.
- Teachers at Darwin Middle School speak positively about their previous experiences of peer observation and feedback and actively seek out opportunities to learn from each other's practice.
- The use of 'learning intentions' and 'success criteria' in lessons helps to clarify the intent of each lesson and the requirements of success are understood by all students.

## Recommendations

- Collaboratively develop a Darwin Middle School Strategic Plan 2020 – 2023 that is consistent with school’s vision for teaching and learning, and provides a narrow and sharp agenda focused on student outcomes, by incorporating explicit targets for student achievement that are well communicated to the school community. The plan should clearly articulate the measures and strategies for improvement in a timeline that acknowledges capacity for change. Progress towards targets should be monitored and initiatives and programs systematically evaluated for their effectiveness in producing the desired improvements in student learning and performance.
- Create a data plan that incorporates the full range of school data. Develop processes to broaden analysis of school data to include trends over time, and ensure that through summarising, displaying and communicating, there is a common view of student progress and achievement across the school community. Build leadership and staff data literacy skills. Develop further opportunities for staff collaboration to use student data (including their current knowledge, skills, learning difficulties and misunderstandings) to determine starting points for learning. Further consideration should be paid toward professional dialogue around differentiation using a variety of pedagogical practices and develop strategies to respond to and celebrate differences in cultural knowledge and experiences and cater for individual differences.
- Continue to build a collaborative team culture. Develop a whole school professional learning plan that aligns to the school’s improvement agenda and focusses on performance enhancement, feedback, mentoring and coaching. Further embed the use of the Teaching and Learning Model to increase the use of evidence-based teaching and learning strategies.
- Further develop the curriculum plan for the school, as outlined in the Curriculum HQ and Wellbeing HQ, to reflect the shared vision of the school that has a strong focus on general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities.

## **Further details**

Information about the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) is available at:

[www.acer.org/au/school-improvement/improvement-tools/national-school-improvement-tool](http://www.acer.org/au/school-improvement/improvement-tools/national-school-improvement-tool)