



**PALMERSTON DISTRICT PRIMARY  
SCHOOL**

**External Validation Panel Report  
2007**



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## Introduction

Since the early nineties, government schools in the ACT have undertaken a review of operations in compliance with the Education Act applicable at that time. The *ACT Education Act 2004*, Section 24 continues to require the review of the operations of government schools at least every five years.

The School Improvement Framework calls for schools to set challenging standards and goals and document the growth toward their achievement. To evaluate the school's process of self assessment of performance, the School Improvement Framework included the establishment of a rigorous, normative protocol for external validation of each school every three years.

The self assessment of performance in all aspects of schooling and the external validation process are intended to help the school determine and gauge its progress toward meeting departmental goals, assessing the quality of its programs, its staff, curriculum, students and administration, and assessing the school's performance and its contribution to the advancement of the Department's overall mission.

## School context

Palmerston District Primary School was opened in 1995. It is now the oldest school in the Gungahlin region. The school is a harmonious mixture of people from different backgrounds and cultures. Palmerston strives to promote a quality learning environment, which recognises the uniqueness of each child. Staff support and challenge the students to achieve to the best of their ability and foster a passion for life long learning.

The school has enjoyed a strong reputation in the region as evidenced by community response to the school review surveys. In moving the school forward on a journey of continuous improvement, the school has demonstrated significant strengths in the life of the 2005-2007 School Plan.

- The school now has dual pathways to meet the needs of all students:
  - Palmerston's program for gifted students is unique in the Gungahlin region. Under the guidance of experts in the gifted and talented field, the school has introduced self-contained classes for students in years 1 to 5 identified as gifted.
  - The ACE (Accelerating Core Education) program gives all students, on a rotational basis, the opportunity to work in targeted small groups to develop core literacy and numeracy skills.
  
- The school now has approaches that are consistent across the whole school. These approaches provide a basis for cohesive professional learning for teachers; predictability and confidence for parents; and a spiralling learning program for students. Whole school consistency in teaching and assessment practices is apparent in the flow from the School Plan to Principal's Appraisal, to teacher Professional Pathways, to classroom programs. These practices put Palmerston at the forefront of the department's focus on evidence-based practice. Other schools have approached Palmerston to visit and hear about its evidence-based practices.
  
- Palmerston continues to be generously supported by a committed school community that works to support students in their daily education programs, raise funds for vital school resources, and to provide engaging avenues that foster a sense of community. In 2006 and again in 2007, Palmerston families contributed in the vicinity of 3500 volunteer hours.

## Learning and teaching domain

The main priority identified in the continuing programs area of the Teaching and Learning Domain, was to maintain the school's ICT focus and build on its strengths.

In the new and expanded initiatives of the Teaching and Learning Domain, three interrelated areas were highlighted:

- The staff saw a need to create a whole school approach that would provide pathways to support all students, in particular, high achieving students. It identified a large number of current initiatives already in place that provided for gifted students however, more targeted avenues were required.
- This led to the second initiative, which was to define the school's whole school assessment practices and use this quantitative data to inform directions in literacy and numeracy. A commitment to ensure consistency of assessment approaches was required.
- In 2005 it was also agreed that due to a lack of cohesive curriculum, Palmerston staff would also look for ways to implement a whole school approach to curriculum development. Documentation of literacy, numeracy and integrated curriculum was set as a priority and a plan was to be put in place to ensure that there were adequate resources to meet the whole school commitment.

## Evidence cited and its validation

### 1. Student Achievement

#### Use of Quantitative Data

PDPS has the use of quantitative data practices to inform directions in literacy and numeracy by:

- formulating yearly assessment schedules for literacy and numeracy which provided a comprehensive guide to ensure cohesiveness across classes
- collating whole school assessment data along with Australian Capital Territory Assessment Program, Performance Indicators in Primary Schools and state wide competitions data to direct future planning
- successfully trialling whole school spelling, writing, reading and numeracy assessments
- reorganising Learning Assistance and English as a Second Language resources to implement the ACE (Accelerating Core Education) cyclic intervention program
- teachers committing to whole school assessment practices to inform their class programs, as part of their professional pathways.

## 2. Curriculum

### 2a) Information Communication Technologies

Palmerston District Primary School continues to foster avenues to maintain its profile as a school with progressive and innovative Information Communication Technology practices by:

- upgrading the student network with 130 classroom Personal Computers and 30 new lab computers in 2006 and significantly updating the servers, switches and cables
- developing the school's Information Communication Technology Plan and Information Communication Technology Scope and Sequence K-6 to embed practices and ensure consistency and continuity of Information Communication Technology knowledge and skill development across the school
- installing interactive whiteboards in every classroom and providing comprehensive professional development to enable teachers to use this technology to support student learning
- teachers using Information Communication Technology to assist school assessment practices
- teachers making a commitment to embed Information Communication Technology practices into their learning programs, as part of their professional pathways and to sharing their expertise with colleagues
- students developing multi media presentations using digital cameras, software such as *imovie* to demonstrate their skills and understandings in Information Communication Technology and across the curriculum.

### 2b) Gifted and Talented Program

Palmerston District Primary School is creating a whole school approach to support all students' learning in particular pathways for high achieving students including those identified as gifted and talented by:

- the trialling in 2006 of a year 4 and year 5 gifted and talented class and literacy, numeracy, music and Physical Education extension lessons for high achieving students identified by teacher and parent nomination
- class teachers incorporating strategies for curriculum differentiation from whole school professional learning with Bronwyn McLeod at the beginning of 2006
- adjusting the program following parent and teacher surveys to include the establishment of a Gifted & Talented committee guided by two professional associates and a comprehensive identification process
- the introduction of two self-contained classes for students identified as gifted with continued support from a pedagogical coach, Bronwyn McLeod
- providing open communication channels with the Parents & Citizens and Board resulting in community support for the program.

### **2c) Balanced Literacy Program**

Palmerston District Primary School adopted a consistent whole school approach to literacy through the introduction of a Balanced Literacy Program by:

- engaging the service of a departmental Early Literacy Officer
- providing a range of professional development for teachers
- adopting a two hour literacy block in all classes that incorporates daily reading and writing.

### **2d) Integrated Inquiry**

Palmerston District Primary School adopted a consistent whole school approach to curriculum in other areas by:

- providing staff with an introduction to Kath Murdoch's Integrated Inquiry Framework
- engaging Kath Murdoch as a critical friend
- providing each team with a planning day each term
- using a common planning framework by teachers.

### **2e) Every Chance to Learn Curriculum Framework for ACT Schools**

Palmerston District Primary School has begun adopting the phase 2 draft document *Every Chance to Learn Curriculum Framework for ACT Schools* by:

- executive and specialist team staff members attending Department of Education and Training professional learning sessions on the new draft curriculum framework
- team leaders supporting teachers to become familiar with the document during team planning sessions, through professional discussions and by linking big understandings of their integrated inquiry units to the relevant essential learning achievements
- creating scope and sequence documents in English and Maths by using the format of the New South Wales curriculum documents, *What When and How to teach English / Maths*, that are used by teachers in their planning.

## **3. Teaching and Learning Resources**

Palmerston District Primary School upgraded school resources to support the delivery of effective learning programs by:

- spending significant money on resourcing teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy
- the installation of an interactive whiteboard in every classroom along with professional learning for every teacher
- providing Integrated Inquiry resources for all Pods
- purchase of *Primary Connections* and compilation of associated resource boxes

- staffing of the Accelerating Core Education team beyond the school's allocated points for Learning Assistance and English as a Second Language.

## **Commendations**

The External Validation Panel congratulates Palmerston District Primary School for its significant achievements in the Learning and teaching domain. The school is to be commended for:

- its success in developing school wide assessment procedures especially in literacy, to provide quantitative data to inform future planning for teaching and learning
- the successful development and implementation of the Accelerating Core Education and gifted and talented programs to meet the diverse needs of its students
- its continued commitment to maintaining progressive and innovative Information Communication Technology practices
- its commitment to a whole school approach to literacy through the implementation of a Balanced Literacy Program including a daily 2 hour literacy block
- adopting a cohesive whole school approach to curriculum across other curriculum areas through the introduction of Kath Murdoch's Integrated Inquiry Framework.

## **Recommendations**

The External Validation Panel recommends that Palmerston District Primary School:

- continues its whole school approach to assessment including the use of quantitative data to inform teaching and learning and further develop ways of recording and displaying student progress, particularly in Mathematics
- maintains and continues to build on the innovative Information Communication Technology practices to support student learning
- maintains its commitment to the Accelerating Core Education and Gifted and Talented programs subject to quantitative data about student outcomes and ongoing community consultation and feedback through the School Board
- continues to build on its work to further implement a whole school approach to teaching and learning across all curriculum areas including numeracy
- continues its work aligning its curriculum documents consistent with the system curriculum renewal process
- develops whole school documentation that expresses their beliefs about teaching and learning.

## Student environment domain

In the Student Environment Domain the main areas targeted in the 2005-2007 School Plan were to continue to cultivate safe, supportive and culturally inclusive education environments. The new initiative identified by staff was to develop supportive student behaviour management practices.

### Evidence cited and its validation

Palmerston District Primary School has successfully continued to provide a safe and supportive educational environment and set high expectations for student behaviour and values by:

- the establishment of a Student Wellbeing Committee which has:
  - reviewed the existing policy
  - developed student management plans for class and playground
  - identified and embedded a set of core values in the school
  - introduced and implemented a whole school social skills program which reflects the school's core values
  - continued to implement a P-6 buddy system.

The work of this committee resulted in the development of:

- new policy and procedures for managing student behaviour
  - procedures and programs to support the development of positive behaviours, for example
    - lunchtime games program for students with poor social skills and challenging behaviours
    - rock climbing program for a small group of challenging students
  - individual learning plans or management response plans for specific high needs students.
- 
- identifying a set of core values, known as **Palmerston 'PRIDE'** –
    - Participation**
    - Respect**
    - Integrity**
    - Determination**
    - Empathy**
- 
- successfully embedding these core values into the school's culture through:
    - school assembly and classroom awards
    - classroom displays
    - student management procedures.

- trialling and then introducing across the school the **Second Step** social skills program
- maintaining the P-6 buddy system
- promoting a safe and supportive school environment through:
  - clearly defining boundaries to play areas
  - installing a new sandpit
  - replacing tanbark with a modern soft fall surface under play equipment
  - relocating the Learning Support Unit amongst mainstream classes
  - introducing student access to the library before school
  - developing a pro-active and responsive Student Representative Council.

## Commendations

The External Validation Panel congratulates Palmerston District Primary School for its significant achievements in the Student Environment domain. The school is to be commended for:

- the comprehensive collection of data across the community
- the collaborative process used to identify a set of core values for the school community
- embedding core values in classroom practice, student management procedures, school newsletters and in assemblies
- the successful trialling, evaluation and whole school implementation of the Second Step program
- alignment of Second Step program with core values by initially exploring aspects of empathy
- the successful integration of the Learning Support Unit into a mainstream Pod and the support to staff and students this change facilitated
- the improvements to the physical surroundings so that the school has a safer environment
- implementing alternative programs such as rock climbing and playground games to support the development of pro social skills.

## Recommendations

The External Validation Panel recommends that Palmerston District Primary School:

- conducts a formal evaluation of the impact of the social skills program, *Second Step*, on student behaviour using quantitative data
- continue to support the Parents & Citizen's current initiatives around car park safety and bullying, through to completion
- continues to embed PRIDE into the school's classrooms and behaviour management policies
- highlights and celebrates culturally inclusive events and programs when they occur.

## Leadership and management domain

In the Leadership and Management Domain the school committed to maintain the provision of leadership opportunities for all teaching levels. In addition, new and expanded initiatives included formalising the school's positive student-staff relationships and developing cohesive executive protocols.

### Evidence cited and its validation

#### 1. Leadership Opportunities

Palmerston District Primary School has planned for opportunities for staff at all levels to develop leadership by:

- team leadership and planning - team leaders meet weekly with their teams for professional discussion
- shared release time - All teachers in each Pod are provided with shared release from face to face teaching to enable them to share their professional expertise with their teaching colleagues
- professional learning teams across Pod teams
- an open invitation to level 1 teachers to attend executive meetings
- level 1 teachers taking on roles such as convenors and committee representatives, coordinating external validation documentation and whole-school Interactive Whiteboard professional development.

#### 2. Positive and Productive Relationships

The promotion of sound relationships amongst all staff has been supported by a process that developed:

- Staff / Student Protocols  
The *Staff / Student PRIDE Protocols* aligned with the school's PRIDE values
- Staff Protocols  
*Professionalism at Palmerston* document was analysed against the *Teachers Code of Professional Practice*.
- Executive Protocols  
*Palmerston District Primary School Executive Team Protocols* provide the school's executive team with shared understandings and prove particularly valuable for supporting incoming members, e.g. in an acting capacity.

### **3. Implementation of 2005-2007 School Plan**

Implementation of the 2005-2007 School Plan required management of physical, financial and human resources, and leadership of change processes to achieve the goals as set out in the plan. This has included the introduction and implementation of:

- School-wide curriculum practices
- Gifted & Talented program
- Accelerating Core Education program
- School-wide assessment procedures
- School-wide data collection system
- major review and implementation of Student Wellbeing practices
- introduction of Second Step social skills program
- building of a large student-funded sand pit

### **4. Implementation of System Priorities**

Key system priorities that have been implemented at Palmerston District Primary School include:

- Section O of the new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement
- A-E reporting for students in years 1-6.

### **5. Managing Staff Concerns**

Palmerston District Primary School executive team developed processes that enabled all staff to contribute in order to both clarify and manage staff concerns through the creation of a set of procedures to address staff grievances and decision-making.

### **6. Managing School Finances**

Financial and human resource management has included:

- Major overhaul of reading resources - \$50,000
- Purchase of *Second Step* kits across the school - \$2000
- Building of school sand pit - \$12,600
- Replacement of student computers - 130 classroom computers and 30 lab computers
- Installation of an interactive whiteboard in every classroom - \$120,000
- four member Accelerating Core Education team – only 33 Learning Assistance/English as a Second Language system allocated points.

## **Commendations**

The External Validation Panel congratulates Palmerston District Primary School for its achievements in the Leadership and Management domain. The school is to be commended for:

- identification and promotion of leadership skills through varied opportunities for interested staff and their support through the Executive Protocol
- comprehensive documentation and process to promote a professional and ethical culture across the school
- transparency of decision making in meetings and communication of that process through meeting minutes
- strategic alignment of current priorities and directions with the school plan
- the resources acquired by Palmerston align with the current directions and priorities of the school.

## **Recommendations**

The External Validation Panel recommends that Palmerston District Primary School:

- introduce new staff to the staff/student, staff and executive protocols through their staff handbook and induction programs
- implements a future budget plan for upgrading of Information Communication Technology resources over time.

## Community involvement domain

Given the school community's overwhelmingly positive response to the School Review surveys, the Community Involvement Domain of the School Plan incorporates one initiative only:

- to continue to promote and build on educational successes.

### **Evidence cited and its validation**

Palmerston District Primary School has promoted strong community contribution to its success by:

- voluntary involvement of parents and other community members
- significant fundraising through Parents & Citizens and Student Representative Council
- the formation of committees by the Parents & Citizens
- effective communication through various media
- strong partnerships formed with the school board and its oversight of school finances and the school plan
- successful application for external funding.

Palmerston District Primary School has promoted strong school contribution to its success by:

- informing and supporting parents by providing pathways for communication through parent information sessions
- celebrating children's achievements and their school journey.

## Commendations

The External Validation Panel congratulates Palmerston District Primary School for its achievements in the Community Involvement domain. The school is to be commended for:

- regular contact made by the Parents & Citizens to the parent community via the school newsletter
- promoting and valuing the contributions of volunteers
- actively resolving safety issues in the school
- demonstrated commitment to community involvement through
  - supporting students' learning
  - development of common values (e.g. PRIDE)
  - consultation with introducing new programs to meet the varying needs of the students
  - distribution of parent handbooks for kinder and new students
- opportunities to showcase talent through a quality Arts program
- partnerships with the preschool
- variety of ways student achievement is shared with parents
- meeting the needs of transitional families with the defence force.

## Recommendations

The External Validation Panel recommends that Palmerston District Primary School:

- continue to ensure that important safety issues and concerns are pursued until they are concluded
- partnerships between the school and preschool are maintained through the buddies program to support a positive transition between preschool and primary school
- raises its profile by publicising school achievements in the broader Australian Capital Territory community.

## Key Commendations

The school is to be commended for:

- the successful development of programs and processes to meet the diverse need of its students
- its commitment to a whole school approach to delivering consistent curriculum and assessment practices
- the collaborative process used to identify a set of core values for the school community, and embedding them across the school and community
- the improvements to the physical surroundings so that the school has a safer environment
- comprehensive documentation and processes to promote a professional and ethical culture across the school
- its strategic leadership and management which builds capacity in staff and empowers them to participate in decision making
- the strategic alignment of current priorities and directions with the school plan
- the significant involvement of the community in the life of the school
- providing opportunities to showcase student talent through a quality arts program.

## Key Recommendations

The External Validation Panel recommends that Palmerston District Primary School:

- continues its work aligning its curriculum documents consistent with the system curriculum renewal process
- develops whole school documentation that expresses their beliefs about teaching and learning
- continues to build on its work to further implement a whole school cohesive approach to teaching and learning across all curriculum areas including numeracy
- conducts a formal evaluation of the impact of the social skills programs on student behaviour using quantitative data
- maintains partnerships between the school and other educational settings within their region
- raises its profile by publicising school achievements in the broader Australian Capital Territory community.

## Statement of validation

The External Validation Panel for Palmerston District Primary School thanks the principal, executive, teaching and administrative staff for the support it received over the three days of our visit. Nance O'Brien, the School Improvement Coordinator is to be commended for her exemplary organisation of the school's evidence materials.

The panel members examined all materials provided during the visit spoke with teachers, students and parents, and observed several class and whole school activities.

The members of the panel take great pleasure in validating the work that Palmerston District Primary School and community are doing in providing a quality education environment for the students of their school.

The External Validation Panel completed the Validation process at Palmerston District Primary School on Friday 7 September 2007.

## Panel members and professional positions

David Ferguson  
Teacher,  
Curtin Primary School

Signature

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Matthew Holdway  
Deputy Principal,  
Richardson Primary School

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Carolie Wilson  
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Denise Miller  
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