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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background information

This report summarises the findings from the 18 schools that were reviewed in 2017. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was contracted by the ACT Education Directorate to conduct the reviews and write the report. The report summarises the strengths of the schools reviewed and provides recommendations for consideration to support schools and whole of system improvement.

In 2017, as in 2016, schools were externally reviewed using the process articulated in *the People, Practice and Performance: School Improvement in Canberra Public Schools – A Framework for School Performance and Accountability*. The National School Improvement Tool (NSIT), which is a nationally–agreed framework with nine Domains of school practices, was used as the primary tool to conduct the reviews. ACER was again engaged to conduct the review process in 2017 following a public tender. Three accredited ACER consultants chaired the panels. The review process consisted of a desktop audit of key school documentation, a school visit, and the completion of the *ACT Education Directorate External Review Report* for principals to use as a basis for the next five-year school-based improvement cycle. Principals were also provided with a copy of the *NSIT Review Report* for immediate feedback and internal use.

Findings of the 2017 reviews – system performance

With respect to the NSIT, there is clear evidence that the ACT schools reviewed in 2016 (17 schools) and in 2017 (18 schools) are generally functioning at a *High* level across all nine Domains. The number of schools demonstrating practice at the *High*, and occasionally, *Outstanding* performance levels in the NSIT framework is commendable. When compared with schools ACER has reviewed across Australia, the performance of ACT schools remains at a high standard. One school reviewed this year is receiving Directorate support to overcome challenges that have arisen over time.
Strengths: Domains 3, 4, 8, 9

ACT schools are performing highest in Domains 3, 4, 8 and 9 of the NSIT. As in 2016, **Domain 3: A culture that promotes learning** received the highest number of commendations and affirmations in 2017, providing evidence that it continues to be the strongest performing area of practice in the Directorate. Commendations in review reports focussed on how well schools support the social and emotional wellbeing of students and provide safe and inclusive learning environments. Teachers and their leadership teams are highly regarded in school communities. Teachers work collaboratively to support and learn from each other and staff morale is generally high.

Highly effective practice is also evident in:

**Domain 4: Targeted use of resources;**

**Domain 8: Effective pedagogical practices; and**

**Domain 9: School Community Partnerships.**

There is substantial evidence of schools applying their resources in a targeted manner to meet the learning needs of students. Schools use a range of diagnostic data tools to identify learning needs and there is strong evidence of a range of programs in place. Schools continue to invest in improving the learning environment (both externally and internally) and budgets, in the main, are aligned to school priorities. Schools are prioritising the use of digital technologies to support learning, although integration varies from classroom to classroom. (**Domain 4**)

Schools reviewed in 2017 included 11 primary schools, three P-10 schools, three early-childhood schools, and one high school. Agreed approaches to the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics are more clearly evident in the schools reviewed in 2017 than in 2016. Directorate-wide programs have supported this improvement. This Domain continues to be strong in the system, as schools demonstrate evidence of an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement in teaching practices. The practice of Visible Learning strategies, including the use of learning intentions and success criteria are evident, although schools are at different stages of implementation. (**Domain 8**)

Schools actively seek ways to build external partnerships with local community organisations, health services, and businesses to support common goals, student wellbeing and learning.
Schools recognise the importance of parents as partners and are focussed on introducing effective ways of engaging them as first educators and communicating regularly. Three-way conferences and Learning Journey celebrations are now regular practice in most schools, particularly primary schools. Schools are exploring innovative ways of connecting parents to the school and their child/ren’s learning, recognising that traditional approaches are not always effective due to time constraints for families. (Domain 9)

Areas for improvement: Domains 2, 5 and 6

The Domains with the highest proportion of schools with descriptors in the Medium performance levels are Domain 2: Analysis and discussion of data; Domain 5: Expert teaching team; and Domain 6: Curriculum delivery. Domains 2 and 6 were also identified in 2016.

Domain 2: Analysis and discussion of data

There is considerable variability in how data sets are collected, analysed, and stored, and this inconsistency extends to the depth of understanding of data concepts at all levels in schools. Consequently, analyses of school performance data are not always systematic, accurate, and longitudinal. This area has been previously identified, and ACER acknowledges the work underway in the Directorate to address this.

Domain 5: Expert teaching team

Schools do ensure that teachers have access to Professional Development, although few have an explicit professional learning plan aligned to school priorities and monitored for impact. Nor is there evidence of highly reflective professional cultures in which teachers are provided with feedback on their work on a regular basis with formalised coaching aligned to identified need.

Domain 6: Curriculum delivery

Whilst curriculum planning in schools generally shows alignment to the Australian Curriculum, there is significant variability in the quality of the planning. Work is still being undertaken to map the Australian Curriculum to ensure adequate coverage across all Key Learning Areas. Making moderated judgements against the achievement standards is also providing a challenge for schools. The area has been previously identified, and ACER acknowledges the significant work executed in 2017.
Findings for Domains 1-7

Comprehensive and systematic processes are in place in the ACT Education Directorate that have aligned strategic planning procedures with school performance improvement. All schools have extensive whole school strategic planning and reporting documentation. Strategic plans have not always come from a shared vision, and alignment was sometimes lost between the key priorities and strategies in subsequent annual plans. These annual plans were often broad, resulting in distraction from core improvement work. The setting of meaningful targets is a challenge for some leaders and there is variability in how data sets are analysed to establish targets. ACER notes the Directorate’s continued strengthening of this area. (Domain 1)

Most schools have developed and are implementing assessment schedules. Pre, and post-tests are used to monitor progress, and panels found evidence of teaching teams meeting regularly with leaders using disciplined dialogue conversations when monitoring student progress and making judgements about individual learning needs. Many teachers were able to articulate the strategies they were using to cater for their diverse learners. This review cycle, when compared with 2016, observed more evidence of student personal goal setting and learning intentions, as well as the use of success criteria to support personalised feedback. (Domain 7)

System–wide improvement recommendations

Findings from both the 2016 and 2017 school reviews point to the same key areas for improvement, predominantly in the systematic collection, understanding, and interpretation of data at all levels of the system to inform educational practice and set targets, and the capacity of schools to develop appropriate targets and actions in their Strategic Plans and Annual Action Plans. These findings also reflect the overall conclusions of the 2017 ACT Auditor-General’s Report No4/2017.

It is suggested that the Directorate continues to build on the strengths identified in the 2016 and 2017 reviews. This report makes seven main recommendations from the school reviews relating to Domains 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Recommendation 1. Domain 1: An explicit improvement agenda

It is recommended that the Directorate gives consideration to the greater provision of Professional Development, progresses impact measures for principals, and continues to
support school leadership teams to build capacity in developing improvement plans that reflect practice at an *Outstanding Level* in Domain 1.

**Recommendation 2. Domain 2: Analysis and discussion of data**

It is recommended that the Directorate continues to progress work on the implementation of the School Administration System (SAS) to support school leaders in implementing a process, and software, for system and school-wide collection, analysis, and discussion of systematically collected data. Data should be used throughout the school to identify gaps in student learning, to monitor improvement over time, and to monitor growth across the years of school. Data sets should include school, cohort, class, priority groups, and individual performance, A to E Key Learning Areas, and behavioural and wellbeing data, to enable better analysis and more focussed school target setting and informed decision-making.

**Recommendation 3. Domain 4: Targeted use of resources**

It is recommended that professional learning in how to use ICT to maximise student learning is an ongoing priority, and that schools are supported in the use of appropriate software to maintain centralised school records of individual student needs, achievements, and progress, ensuring that this information is shared across year levels in systematic ways. Predominantly schools allocated resources effectively and strategically, although very few were maintaining centralised records. It is understood that the trial and subsequent implementation of the new SAS will further support leaders to better allocate resources in areas such as funding, facilities, materials, and staff time.

**Recommendation 4. Domain 5: Expert teaching team**

It is recommended that professional learning plans reflect both system-wide and local school priorities. In particular, learning activities should be provided (and evaluated for impact) to develop skills and knowledge in: interpreting and using data as a tool to build differentiated teaching strategies, planning and setting targets, and improving teaching practice. Additionally, teachers should be supported to establish self-reflective cultures, characterised by observation and feedback processes aligned with formalised coaching models.

**Recommendation 5. Domain 6: Curriculum delivery**

It is recommended that schools be supported to develop curriculum scope and sequence documents for all Key Learning Areas with accompanying processes in place to ensure all Key Learning Areas of the Australian Curriculum are addressed across years of schooling.
Building the capacity of teachers to use the learning continua as the reference point for the development of the relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions at particular points of schooling (General Capabilities) should be a priority for the system. Schools should also be supported in how best to make moderated judgements on an A to E scale against the achievement standards.

**Recommendation 6. Domain 7: Differentiated teaching and learning**

It is recommended that the Directorate continues to place priority on improvement in this Domain. Professional learning in this area should develop skills that will help make sound judgements about individual needs, and how to personalise teaching and learning activities.

Learning activities would initially focus on understanding, interpreting and using data (including readiness levels, interest, and learning profiles) to inform their differentiated teaching and learning strategies and to check for learning.

**Recommendation 7. Domain 8: Effective pedagogical practices**

It is recommended that the Directorate supports schools in developing evidence-led, demonstrably effective, pedagogical frameworks aligned with school and individual professional learning plans and observation and feedback processes, with measures in place to monitor impact.
FINDINGS

Findings from the 2017 system review process

Reviews provide an opportunity for schools to reflect as a community on the achievement targets set down in their Strategic Plans and in partnership with colleagues and external reviewers, identify areas of strength and those in need of further development. Once again, this year review panels sought to determine, through evaluation and validation, the extent to which schools are addressing their challenges, in the context of a continuously improving educational environment.

The review involved a variety of data gathering approaches including a desktop review of key documentation. School visits and collection of evidence form a critical part of the process, providing review panels with the opportunity to engage in focussed conversations with key stakeholders. This approach provided evidence for the panel to consider against the nine inter-related Domains in the NSIT; this evidence informed affirmations, commendations, and recommendations in the review reports. These review reports provide schools with input towards clear directions for the future.

System performance

Introduction

This 2017 report will contribute to an overall picture of all schools’ performance against the NSIT as part of a five-year process of review, as outlined in People, Practice and Performance: School Improvement in Canberra Public Schools – A Framework for School Performance and Accountability.

The report summarises the strengths of the 18 schools reviewed in this cycle, as well as the 35 schools reviewed to date in partnership with ACER. It also provides recommendations for consideration to support school and whole of system improvement.

Background Information

The scope of this year’s reviews encompassed 18 schools: 11 primary, three P-10 schools, three early childhood, and one high school. Schools were from the Belconnen, South/Weston, Tuggeranong and North/Gungahlin networks and the reviews took place in Term 3, 2017. The School Review process consisted of: a review of key school documentation by review panel members, including a Summative Report developed by the school principal, a two to four-day school visit, and the compilation of a School Review Report to be published on the
school website. A second report for internal school use was also prepared by the panels, providing a shaded rating against descriptors in each of the nine NSIT Domains.

Review panels this year, once again, consisted of an external (ACER) school review consultant and an ACT principal. Three review panels operated, one for 10 schools, another for seven, and the third conducted one review. This year, principals whose schools are due to be reviewed in 2018 were provided with the opportunity to observe a review in progress and to attend some of the scheduled interviews during the school visit. Directors School Improvement, were invited to attend the oral feedback presentations in their schools, and staff of the Directorate School Improvement Branch office observed some interviews and feedback sessions.
Findings and recommendations: National School Improvement Tool

As in 2016, ACER’s National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) was used for the external review of current practices in 2017. The NSIT consists of nine inter-related Domains which bring together findings from international research into the practices of highly-effective schools. A key feature of the NSIT is the set of performance levels, Low, Medium, High, and Outstanding. These levels enable reviewers to make evidence-based judgements about where schools are on their improvement journey.

There is clear evidence that the ACT schools reviewed in this cycle are generally functioning at a High level across the nine Domains of the NSIT. This finding is further supported when comparing the performance of these ACT schools with other ACER reviewed schools across Australia. The achievement of Outstanding performance levels in some schools in this review is also commended, as ACER review consultants rarely highlight this level of performance. One school reviewed this year is receiving Directorate support to overcome challenges that have arisen over time.

For each Domain of the NSIT, the strengths and areas for improvement have been identified. System recommendations have been made for some, but not all, of the Domains.

Domain 1: An explicit improvement agenda

Strengths

The continued strong performance of schools in this Domain reflects the ongoing comprehensive and systematic processes put in place by the ACT Education Directorate to align strategic planning procedures with school performance improvement. All schools reviewed, both in 2016 and 2017, have extensive whole school strategic planning and reporting documentation in place. Generally, key priorities have been consistent across the life of the plan. The review panels found evidence of regular discussion of the improvement agenda with staff and school Boards, and teachers were focussed on improvement and student success. The requirement that strategic planning and reporting documentation is available on school websites supports transparency.

Areas for improvement

Strategic Plans did not always emanate from a shared vision. Panels found a lack of clear alignment between the key priorities and strategies for improvement as identified in Annual Action Plans in some schools. Annual plans were often broad and included ‘operational
work’ which, at times, distracted from core improvement work. This also resulted in variation and interpretation by teachers of the improvement agenda. A lack of continuity in leadership teams often negatively impacted on improvement plans remaining aligned and fully enacted.

The setting of relevant aspirational, yet realistic, targets is a challenge. Directorate NAPLAN targets have changed between 2014 and 2017. There was limited understanding in schools as to how these targets were established. School-based targets were generally founded on NAPLAN perception survey data or PM Reading benchmarks, but rarely on A to E performance levels for Key Learning Areas.

The schools reviewed in this report often based targets on a guess about what might reasonably be achieved in a particular timeframe; indeed, the setting of long-term targets presented a challenge for schools. For higher performing schools, an analysis of performance against like schools was not always considered. Panels also observed variability in how data sets were analysed to establish annual targets. Teachers were often unclear about school targets.

All schools in this review cycle were provided with the same recommendations for this Domain, as follows:

- Annual Action Plans should be developed in the context of a school vision and expressed in terms of narrow and sharp improvements sought in student performance and include challenging, but realistic targets, with timelines which are rigorously actioned.

**Recommendation 1:**

It is recommended that the Directorate gives consideration to the greater provision of Professional Development, progresses impact measures for principals, and continues to support school leadership teams to build capacity in developing improvement plans that reflect practice at an *Outstanding Level* in Domain 1.

**Domain 2: Analysis and discussion of data**

**Strengths**

Evidence collected from schools reviewed in 2017 shows that the strengths in this Domain remain consistent with those in 2016. Leadership teams are paying attention to data collection and analysis and endeavouring to build the capacity of teachers to engage in disciplined dialogue about the use of data to inform teaching. The requirement for schools to report
annually on performance has focussed attention on data. Most schools have schedules for the collection of a range of diagnostic and standardised test data.

Areas for improvement

The graph for this Domain shows a much flatter distribution of descriptors across the four levels than other Domains. There is considerable variability in the schools reviewed as to how data sets are collected, analysed, stored, and reported. There is also variability in the level of understanding of how to analyse, interpret, and use data. Consequently, analyses of school performance data sets are sometimes only at surface level. Deeper analyses of data to determine the performance of students from identified priority groups, for example, was not often evident. Many schools do not systematically collect and analyse behaviour, wellbeing, and attendance data. Discussion of information that can be extracted from behaviour and work habit reports is not regular practice.

Although most schools have developed assessment schedules, they had not, in the main, developed and documented a plan for the systematic collection of a range of student outcome data. This is similar to the findings from 2016. Inconsistent data collection has an impact on schools’ ability to systematically measure trends in growth or regression. In the absence of a Directorate-wide central storage system, schools are developing their own tracking tools to store individual student data. When the new SAS is fully implemented it will provide a single data repository for managing datasets and enable internal data analytics to be performed.

Most schools in this review cycle were provided with a recommendation in relation to the use of data. These recommendations focussed predominantly on:

- the development of a systematic plan for the collection, analysis and use of academic, attendance, behavioural, and wellbeing data;
- refining data plans to include teacher judgements on the achievement standards, and;
- building the capacity of staff to engage in data analysis to inform teaching.

Recommendation 2:

It is recommended that the Directorate continue to progress work on the implementation of the SAS to support school leaders in implementing a process, and software, for system and school-wide collection, analysis, and discussion of systematically collected data. Data should be used throughout the school to identify gaps in student learning, to monitor improvement over time, and to monitor growth across the years of school. Data sets should include school, cohort, class, priority groups, and individual performance, A to E Key Learning Areas, and
behavioural and wellbeing data, to enable better analysis and more focussed school target setting and informed decision-making.

**Domain 3: A culture that promotes learning**

**Strengths**

In this Domain, all schools were commended or affirmed, providing evidence that it continues to be a strong performing area for the ACT Directorate. Panels noted that schools had made a significant investment in the social and emotional wellbeing of students, an area often prioritised in key system-led strategic planning documents. A range of social and emotional learning programs including Bounce Back, Growth Mindset, and Kids Matter support this focus on wellbeing. A number of schools have also invested in professional learning for staff in Trauma, Understanding and Sensitive Teaching (TRUST). Restorative practice is the lead approach for social and emotional learning. Generally, behaviour is not a significant issue for many of the schools reviewed in this cycle, although targeted recommendations were made in a small number of schools.

Schools work to maintain learning environments that are safe, respectful, tolerant, and inclusive. Panels observed predominantly purposeful and intellectually rigorous learning in caring classroom environments. Staff support each other, and morale is generally high across the schools reviewed.

There is an emerging focus on building partnerships with families, recognising the importance of parents/carers as first educators. Three-way conferences and Learning Journey celebrations are now regular practice in most schools, particularly primary schools. Consistently, parents reported high degrees of trust and confidence in schools.

**Areas for Improvement**

Fewer recommendations were made in school reports for this Domain compared with other Domains. These focussed on ensuring schools have systematic processes for managing behaviour as well as effective communication strategies with staff and families.

**Domain 4: Targeted use of school resources**

**Strengths**

This is a high performing Domain across schools reviewed in both 2016 and 2017. There is substantial evidence of schools applying their resources in a targeted manner to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of students.
There was strong evidence of a range of programs in use to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties and for those with English as an Additional Language (EAL/D). Individual and small group intervention as well as in class support was evident. Some schools have research-based, highly effective and targeted programs for highly able students.

Schools use a range of diagnostic tools to identify and respond to need. Panels noted an increasing use of the Response to Intervention model, although schools varied in how they implemented it.

Schools have invested significantly to improve the learning environment for students, both externally and internally. In primary schools particularly, classrooms are nearly always presented as vibrant, welcoming and purposeful learning environments. Budgets are aligned to priorities.

Areas for further improvement

There is less robust evidence of systematic processes for recording and monitoring the identification, intervention and progress of student and priority group needs. Schools are working towards school-wide processes as they develop systematic testing schedules and intervention models. Schools continue to struggle to maintain and monitor these types of records across students’ life at school.

Schools are prioritising the use of digital technologies to support learning. Use of Chromebooks, iPads and ‘bring your own device’ (BYOD) and Google Apps is evident, although there is significant variability from classroom to classroom in how well these are used to maximise learning.

Recommendations to schools for this Domain focused on:

- continuing to strengthen professional learning in the use of digital technologies; and
- developing school-wide processes for identifying student learning needs and keeping records.

Recommendation 3:

It is recommended that professional learning in how to use ICT to maximise student learning is an ongoing priority, and that schools are supported in the use of appropriate software to maintain centralised school records of individual student needs, achievements, and progress, ensuring that this information is shared across year levels in systematic ways. Predominantly schools allocated resources effectively and strategically, although very few were maintaining centralised records.
It is understood that the trial and subsequent implementation of the new SAS will further support leaders to better allocate resources in areas such as funding, facilities, materials, and staff time.

**Domain 5: An expert teaching team**

**Strengths**

Schools continue to place a very high priority on professional learning that is aligned to the school or system improvement agenda. There is strong evidence that principals highly value the importance of building expert teaching teams and most schools have regular small team and whole of staff meetings which focus more on professional learning than school organisational matters. The use of Professional Learning Community teams to support gaining new knowledge and skills through the sharing of practice is evident. These are used in different ways in schools. Most schools have professional learning schedules. School leadership teams work to recruit staff with specific expertise for their school setting and provide opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles.

**Areas for improvement**

The challenge remains for schools to implement more systematic ways of using and interpreting data to drive the focus of professional learning, find ways to observe each other’s practice, and provide constructive feedback aligned to demonstrably effective pedagogical practice. Teachers are mostly open to constructive feedback, but schools rarely have deeply embedded practices in relation to this to support teacher professional growth. Walk-throughs are used in some schools and informal mentoring, modelling, and coaching is evident. Some schools do have formalised coaching arrangements in place to support key priorities for improvement. The most structured approach is for new teachers where classroom observations, feedback and mentoring processes are formalised.

Linking feedback, modelling, and coaching to effective pedagogies and monitoring its impact would be more meaningful for teachers, as opposed to current practice in most schools where feedback is often quite general with links to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) or Quality Teaching Model (QTM).

In this Domain recommendations were provided for nearly all schools and focused on:

- developing formal school professional learning plans reflective of data-informed whole school, teacher, cohort and individual teacher professional learning needs;
• building a culture of self-reflection through peer and leader classroom observations and feedback;
• formalising coaching arrangements.

Recommendation 4:
It is recommended that professional learning plans reflect both system-wide and local school priorities. In particular, learning activities should be provided (and evaluated for impact) to develop skills and knowledge in: interpreting and using data as a tool to build differentiated teaching strategies, planning and setting targets, and improving teaching practice. Additionally, teachers should be supported to establish self-reflective cultures, characterised by observation and feedback processes aligned with formalised coaching models.

Domain 6: Systematic curriculum delivery

Strengths
Panels found evidence of curriculum delivery aligned to the Australian Curriculum. Scope and sequence documents have been developed for English and mathematics, most consistently in primary schools. Time allocations in weekly schedules reflect prioritisation of English and mathematics. Teachers work in teams to plan the curriculum.

Areas for further improvement
The graph shows a relatively even distribution of the descriptors across two of the four levels. This reflects the variability in quality curriculum planning. In schools with high levels of accountability and common approaches, planning was generally of a higher quality. Integrated units for Key Learning Areas other than English and mathematics, were often developed using the Understanding by Design (UbD) approach. This is the most common approach in primary schools. An inquiry-based pedagogical approach often underpins these units although it is not always well understood and enacted. Most schools are yet to develop tracking processes to ensure the vertical and horizontal alignment of curriculum and to identify potential gaps. There is most potential for gaps across Key Learning Areas when they are integrated and where there are no scope and sequence documents.

Schools are also grappling with how to make moderated judgements on an A to E scale against the achievement standards. School social and emotional learning programs are often not connected to the Australian Curriculum. Behaviour and work ethic is always reported on but rarely moderated or analysed.
In this Domain, recommendations were provided for nearly all schools and focussed on:

- developing coherent, sequenced plans;
- reviewing planning across all Key Learning Areas to identify potential gaps; and
- embedding the General Capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities.

**Recommendation 5:**

It is recommended that schools be supported to develop curriculum scope and sequence documents for all Key Learning Areas with accompanying processes in place to ensure all Key Learning Areas of the Australian Curriculum are addressed across years of schooling. Building the capacity of teachers to use the learning continua as the reference point for the development of the relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours, and dispositions at particular points of schooling (General Capabilities) should be a priority for the system. Schools should also be supported in how best to make moderated judgements on an A to E scale against the achievement standards.

**Domain 7: Differentiated teaching and learning**

**Strengths**

School performance levels in this Domain were generally in the High levels in this review cycle. This was also identified as a strength in the 2016 reviews. However, it was noted in the 2016 report, that these results were likely to have been impacted by the inclusion of Special Schools, where modified learning based on an individualised curriculum occurs. In 2017, schools reviewed were predominantly primary (or pre-school to Year 10) and early childhood. This again could provide a slightly distorted performance overall for the system.

Most schools have developed, and are implementing, assessment schedules. Pre, and post-tests to check on progress are used, and panels found evidence of teaching teams meeting regularly with leaders using disciplined dialogue conversations when monitoring student progress and making judgements about individual learning needs. Many teachers were able to articulate the strategies they were using to cater for their diverse learners. In this review cycle, more evidence of student personal goal setting and learning intentions was observed, as well as the use of success criteria to support personalised feedback.

**Areas for improvement**

A number of schools have multi-age groups for English and mathematics. Some teachers understood and catered for the diverse needs within each sub-group.
However, a reliance on this grouping as the only differentiated practice was also evident. Using the achievement standards or individual student data, for example, to differentiate teaching and learning was less visible, particularly in high schools.

Recommendations to schools for this Domain focussed primarily on the use of data to differentiate teaching and closely monitor the progress of individual students.

**Recommendation 6**

It is recommended that the Directorate continues to place priority on improvement in this Domain. Professional learning in this area should develop skills that will help make sound judgements about individual needs, and how to personalise teaching and learning activities.

Learning activities would initially focus on interpreting and using data (including readiness levels, interest, and learning profiles) to inform their differentiated teaching and learning strategies and to check for learning.

**Domain 8: Effective pedagogical practices**

**Strengths**

There is continued evidence in 2017 of a strong commitment to the ongoing improvement and development of effective pedagogical practice. Through participation in programs such as Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALLs) and the recently implemented ACT Directorate numeracy program, more explicit pedagogical frameworks are emerging. The use of First Steps and the Middle Years Mental Computation programs are evident in all schools, although they are at different stages of implementation.

The practice of Visible Learning strategies, including the use of learning intentions and success criteria, are evident in all schools reviewed in 2017. Again, schools are at different stages of implementation. However, there is a commitment to embedding these strategies in classrooms and schools across the Directorate. Students can describe what they are learning and why they are learning it, particularly in English and sometimes in mathematics.

**Areas for improvement**

There is evidence of schools implementing a number of literacy programs rather than focussing on effective pedagogical practice in literacy. As leadership teams change, new programs are often introduced, and teachers described this as overwhelming, and causing confusion in terms of expected practice.
Schools generally do not have an evidence-led explicit pedagogical framework. Rather, they have statements about teaching, often pertaining to the use of a specific program and predominantly focussed on the teaching of literacy and numeracy. There is less clarity about the approaches to the teaching of science, for example.

Some schools have focussed on improving feedback to students about their learning, but in others, feedback to students varied both in type and detail.

Recommendations for this Domain were provided for nearly all schools and focussed on leadership teams using data and being explicit about the types of effective teaching they expect in all classrooms.

Recommendation 7
It is recommended that the Directorate supports schools in developing evidence-based demonstrably effective, pedagogical frameworks aligned with school and individual Professional Learning plans, and observation and feedback processes, with measures in place to monitor impact.

Domain 9: School community partnerships

Strengths
There is clear evidence that ACT schools continue to function at a *High* level across this Domain. Schools actively seek ways to build external partnerships with local community organisations, health services, and businesses to support common goals, student wellbeing and learning. Schools recognise the importance of parents as partners and are focussed on introducing effective ways of engaging them as first educators and communicating regularly. Three-way conferences and Learning Journey celebrations are now regular practice in most schools, particularly primary schools. Schools are exploring innovative ways of connecting parents to the school and their child/ren’s learning, recognising that traditional approaches are not always effective due to time constraints for families. Some schools have strong partnerships with Directorate high schools and with local universities as a way to improve opportunities and outcomes for students. Some partnerships are formalised through Memoranda of Understanding. Early Childhood Centres often have formalised partnerships, made possible through the availability of a Community Services Officer.
Areas for improvement

There is little evidence of schools formally reviewing partnerships for their effectiveness. The desired student outcomes as a result of partnerships were not always clear. Schools would benefit from making these outcomes explicit, establishing procedures to monitor and evaluate intended outcomes for students. Ensuring the sustainability of partnerships continues to be a need in schools. Recommendations for this Domain focussed on the importance of monitoring and evaluating partnerships.
REVIEW PROCESS

The ACT Education Directorate is commended for its continuing comprehensive process to support schools in reflecting on the effectiveness of their Strategic Plan and subsequent Annual Action Plans.

The review process in 2017 consisted of the following key elements:

1. The preparation of a School Summative Report for review panels by schools in which they reflected on achievements and challenges in implementing their Strategic Plan.
2. The formation of panels which included an ACER lead reviewer and an ACT principal reviewer.
3. A desktop review by the review panel of key school documentation as evidence against the nine Domains of the NSIT.
4. A two to four-day school visit by the review panel to gather further evidence of performance against the nine Domains of the NSIT and interview stakeholders.
5. The production of two reports: the published School Review Report and; the NSIT Review Report for internal school use.
6. Feedback from principals about the process.

Appendix B further outlines elements of the review process.
Conclusion

The ACT External School Reviews in 2017 have highlighted a number of relative strengths and areas for improvement across the Directorate. There is much to celebrate. Evidence from both the 2016 and 2017 ACER findings indicates that the ACT School System is functioning at a High level. School leaders and teachers are generally applying effective strategies in safe and inclusive learning environments, developed through deliberate and considered planning processes.

Supporting schools reviewed in collecting, analysing, and using data to develop new Strategic Plans, expressed in terms of improvements in measurable student outcomes with explicit, realistic yet challenging school-wide targets will be a key driver to improved outcomes for all students in ACT schools.

Recent ACER research about effective school systems identifies the importance of systematic, focussed and aligned approaches to build the capacity at every level of the school system. This includes data-led, targeted professional learning which is monitored for impact, with opportunities for formal coaching and mentoring, as well as development of specific skills and knowledge.
APPENDIX A – Graphs for each Domain

The following graphs show the number of times or frequency (as a percentage) the descriptor was highlighted by the school review panel team.

*Legend: 01 the first descriptor in the rating ‘Outstanding’ to L5 which is the last descriptor in the rating ‘low’.

1. Domain 1: An explicit improvement agenda

![Domain One: An explicit improvement agenda graph]

2. Domain 2: Analysis and discussion of data

![Domain Two: Analysis and discussion of data graph]
3. **Domain 3: A culture that promotes learning**

![Domain 3: A culture that promotes learning](image)

4. **Domain 4: Targeted use of school resources**

![Domain 4: Targeted use of school resources](image)

5. **Domain 5: An expert teaching team**

![Domain 5: An expert teaching team](image)
6. Domain 6: Systematic curriculum delivery

7. Domain 7: Differentiated teaching and learning
8. Domain 8: Effective pedagogical practice

![Domain 8: Effective pedagogical practice](chart)

9. Domain 9: School – community partnerships

![Domain 9: School - community partnerships](chart)
APPENDIX B – Review process details

School Summative Reports
The context of the school’s progress provided in these reports, along with evidence gathered during the visits, enables a line of sight and the contextual complexities of each school to be understood quickly by review panels.

The quality of the 2017 reports varied significantly. Despite guidelines about which data sets to include, schools provided very different sets which varied in terms of quality and depth of analysis. In some cases, no analysis was provided, or it was not entirely accurate. This resulted in review panels having to analyse the data sets and collect further information from the Directorate or use the MySchool website. There was also variability in how schools reported progress on their priorities. This ranged from highly detailed and reflective reports to very brief and sketchy information. The preparation of summative reports in close proximity to a scheduled school visit and review, was a time-intensive process for principals.

School summative reports also included a self-evaluation against the NSIT. As in 2016, review panels often found large discrepancies between a school’s self-evaluation and the findings of the review panel. Predominantly performance levels were inflated, with schools rating themselves higher than review panels; often school ratings were reported at Outstanding levels. This may have been a result of varying levels of understanding of the kinds of evidence required to ascertain performance levels on the NSIT. In schools where performance levels were inflated, some principals were sensitive about the affirmations, commendations, and recommendations in the review report. In these circumstances, considerable time was devoted to building understanding and acceptance.

Panel composition
In 2017, as in 2016, panels consisted of a dedicated ACER external review panel member and an experienced ACT principal. The decision to have multiple principals involved was influenced, as in 2016, by the desire for quality professional learning for each participating principal, as well as acknowledging the importance of peer review. The principals’ knowledge of ACT schools and the review processes was invaluable.

Desktop review of key school documentation by the review panel
Schools provided a significant number of key documents as evidence for each Domain of the NSIT. These documents were separate to the School Summative Report. This evidence supports review panels in understanding the context of each school and in determining
potential lines of inquiry prior to the school visit. Most schools clustered this documentation for each Domain to make it easier for review panels. Predominantly, there was an abundance of information. Its usefulness varied depending on how the school structured the organisation and presentation. Provision of relevant documentation will improve as principals become more familiar with the NSIT review process, descriptors and quality evidence.

School visit

Following recommendations from the 2016 report, the timetable template was refined, and this resulted in improved efficiency and more robust and frank discussions because interviews (with staff) were mostly held individually. This supported review panels in gaining a clear line of sight for each of the Domains. In 2017, more time was allocated for large schools (four days), which allowed for a greater number of stakeholders to be interviewed. Two-day reviews continue to be demanding, as there is very little time to develop the draft NSIT report ready for the oral feedback session at the end of the second day.

Review Reports

Schools reviewed in 2016 and 2017 were provided with ACER’s draft NSIT Review Report as a document for internal use, and ACER provided the Education Directorate with a Directorate Review Report. The review reports included the shading of descriptors for each Domain, as determined by the findings of the review panel. Evidence statements support the findings for each Domain. Commendations, affirmations and recommendations are also provided. Feedback from principals indicates that these reports are highly valued and useful in developing the school’s next review process Strategic Plan. They also provide a summative picture of the strengths and areas for focus for each Domain.

The development of the Directorate Review Report is time consuming for review panels. Sections B and C of the review report require schools to analyse their data and report against their priorities in the School Summative Report. If written well, these sections require minor adjustments for the Directorate Review Report. However, these sections required significant rewriting by the review panels for nearly all schools due to the variability in quality of information provided. There is also duplication of information in the NSIT Review Report and the Directorate Review Report.
Feedback

Principals reviewed in this cycle, principal panel members and principal observers were asked to provide feedback about the 2017 process. This feedback has shaped some of the System Process recommendations.

Feedback from principals of schools being reviewed indicates high levels of confidence in the review panels, ranking members 4 or 5 out of 5 on a five-point scale. These principals also found the information about the review process provided by the Directorate to be very useful. The principals of schools reviewed in 2017 reported that the school visits were thorough, and gave the school the opportunity to celebrate its achievements. They describe the reports provided to them as detailed and presenting an accurate reflection of the school’s journey.

Principal panel members described the opportunity of being on a panel as excellent professional learning; an intensive but rewarding experience. Some commented on the importance of doing more than one review to deepen their understanding of the NSIT and engage more confidently in the process.

Principal observers found the opportunity a useful insight into the process, describing it as an evidence-based process, collaborative and with valuable feedback provided to the school community.

Suggestions for improvement

If the School Summative Report is to remain part of the review process, then it is recommended that:

- data sets are pre-populated by the Directorate to ensure consistency;
- the capacity of principals and their leadership teams to analyse these data sets for the report is further developed and;
- the Directorate provides an exemplar.

It is also recommended that:

- Schools be supported in determining the additional documentation they provide as evidence.
- Two-day visits be expanded to two and a half days with the oral report presented on the third morning to allow reviewers sufficient time to prepare the oral report.
• The self-evaluation using the NSIT should not be a requirement for the review, but used by schools to monitor progress in an ongoing way. Similarly, the NSSAT could be used annually by schools, but not be included in the review report.

• Panels consist of one external review member and an ACT principal with experience in reviewing who would review multiple schools, thereby reducing the mentoring load for external reviewers. Principals who are being reviewed in the following year could become a third panel member, providing an immersion experience prior to their own school review.

• Consideration be given to Directors School Improvement as a third reviewer for at least one review per cycle.

Strategic planning processes

Principal reports that current Strategic Planning, Annual Action Planning, Annual Action Reports and Board reporting includes duplication. Streamlining of processes to ensure the Strategic Plan remains the key focus for schools would support them in ensuring that their improvement agenda is effective in focussing and to some extent narrowing and sharpening attention on core learning priorities.

Suggestions for improvement

It is recommended that the accountability of the school be expressed in Board reports which focus on the progress of achievement of the whole school planning targets, together with a report on the progress of the Strategic Priorities. This report could be produced every six months, based on the availability of data in that period. The first report could be prepared in early Term 1 utilising end of year report data, and in Term 3, following Semester 1 report data and the release of NAPLAN results. At the end of the Strategic Planning period, the Board could receive an analysis of the progress of the school over the planning period in preparation for the construction of the new plan. As the school is demonstrating its accountability to its community through this public reporting process, there would not be a need to provide Annual Action reports or a Summative Report in preparation for its review. This will relieve some current workload on principals, at the same time empowering principals and their Boards.

Panels also observed significant leadership change in the life of Strategic Plan. Having a shorter timeframe for Strategic Plans would enable better target setting and greater likelihood that the school leadership team will be stable for the duration of the plan.