ACT Government
Education

EXTERNAL REVIEW
REPORT for
BLACK MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

2016

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Contents

Introduction: Overview of the School Review Process

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

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

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

Section A: School Context

Black Mountain School was opened in 1955 and is a secondary school, located in O'Connor in Canberra. The school caters for year 7- 12 students with a range of mild to severe intellectual disability (ID) and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), requiring a special education program and facilities. The school entry eligibility criteria were broadened in 2013 to include students with mild intellectual disability (MID). This has altered the profile of learners for the school, and resulted in an increase from three to thirteen primary feeder schools.

Throughout a student's placement at Black Mountain School the focus is on successful transition to post-school life. Black Mountain School provides a functional curriculum attending to social, life and work skills in order to facilitate students' participation in a full and satisfying post-school life.

Prior to 2012, students were able to remain at Black Mountain School until twenty years of age. New graduation guidelines implemented from 2012 removed the necessity for students to remain at school beyond twenty-six semesters (except under exceptional circumstances). With the lowering of the graduation age at the school to align with all other ACT colleges, there has been a slight decline in student enrolment numbers.

The school has a current enrolment of 97 students, with sixteen full time classes in operation. A range of criteria including cognitive capacity, social interactions, health needs, emotional and/or mental health needs, sensory processing and behavioural complexities determine student placement in classes rather than age and year level. Student enrolments consist of 88.7 percent from the ACT and 11.3 percent from NSW. Four percent of the student population identifies as English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D).

Nearly 64 percent of the students use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) to either replace verbal communication or to supplement verbal communication. This has led to the application of a whole-school strategic approach to AAC during the life of the plan. Students with mobility needs who are wheelchair- reliant make up nearly 20 percent of the population. Students identified as sensory seeking students make up 28.9 percent of the population.

Since 2012 there have been significant changes to the leadership profile of the school. The leadership team consists of: one School Leader A (SLA); one School Leader B (SLB); three School Leader C (SLCs). Throughout this planning cycle, a number of the leadership team members have been acting in positions. The school has 20 teachers and 26 Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). A number of staff members work part-time. A number of paraprofessionals, Australian School Based Apprentices (ASBAs) and trainees form part of the staff team at the school.

Other impacts on the school over the past four years include the 2014 ACT Education Directorate decision to remove school-based nurses and have schools manage student health-related information and support. This initiative, known as Healthcare Access at Schools (HAAS), altered significant aspects of Black Mountain School procedures. The establishment of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) and attendant Scheme (NDIS) as a way of planning for and dispersing appropriate care for Australians with disabilities has also resulted in changes to the way Black Mountain School staff work with families and ancillary care providers.

Section B: School Performance

Black Mountain School measures its performance via data sets most keenly able to describe success in this educational setting: National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) are not part of the school due to the diagnoses of students and their levels of cognitive impairment. As a result, Black Mountain School has developed a range of process data which it feels allows the school and its community to have confidence in the quality of the educational programs in place.

The key student learning data sets used in this context are:

- student Individual Learning Plan (ILP) achievement data
- Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) data
- year 11 & 12 curriculum and post-destination data
- data from Compass classes.

Student ILP achievement data

ILP goal achievement is central to the school's understanding of its effectiveness, as it encapsulates the highly individualised learning programs in place. ILP goals emerge from consultations with families and carers and are drawn from catalogues in the Black Mountain School functional curriculum. Goals are expressed as capacities and these are monitored rigorously by teaching and support staff. Reporting on goal achievement occurs frequently and is formally described in mid-year and end-year reports.

Black Mountain School aggregates and analyses the goal achievement for students as represented in the ILPs. The school can report improved rates of attainment in relation to the AAC goals, and the possible impact of HAAS.

TABLE 1: ILP goal achievement 2012-2015

	EYR 2012	EYR 2013	EYR 2014	EYR 2015
Percent of student ILP goal achievement	66.2%	66.2%	70.7%	63%
Percent of AAC-focused ILP goal achievement	46%	62%	69%	63%
Percent of HAAS student ILP goal achievement (n=12)	NA	NA	71%	58%

The school has identified a dip in goal attainment in 2015 which it has ascribed to increased levels of rigour being applied to the assessment of capacities shown by students, and the simultaneous implementation of HAAS – a major change in the school.

ILP data is rich and nuanced at Black Mountain School. The review panel noted that teachers are recording their observations of student capacities in various ways: benefit might be gained by settling on a single or preferred method in the next planning cycle. Further, there is potential for the school to identify significant capacities at the whole of school level and to report on goal attainment against those capacities in future student learning data sets.

ABLES data

In 2016, Black Mountain School has had full access to ABLES – a suite of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting resources specifically suited to the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. At the time of this review, the trialling of the ABLES instruments is in its early stages (up to two students in each class are being plotted against the tool) although there are promising signs of appropriateness. It is anticipated that ABLES will provide the school with a richer data set with which to describe student learning and progress.

Year 11 & 12 data

The senior secondary learning program at Black Mountain School is customised for students and graduation certification is generated by the school and not the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies (BSSS). During this planning cycle significant work has been undertaken by Black Mountain School to develop BSSS-approved registered (R) units reflecting key goals contained in student ILPs – preparation for work, workplace health and safety, workplace communication. It is the intent of the school leadership team to gain BSSS endorsement during the next planning cycle.

Post-school destination data is a challenge for Black Mountain School as the tracking of graduating students is difficult. Anecdotal evidence takes the form of parent/carer feedback to the school.

With increased numbers of students who have mild intellectual disability, the school hopes to increase the number of graduates who gain employment – open or supported.

Compass data

The Compass cohort at Black Mountain School (students with mild intellectual disability and/or disengaged students from other school settings) has broadened the school's ability to draw upon nationally recognised learner achievement data as the class programs are beginning to align to the Australian Curriculum. The school leadership team has identified that with further work in this area, Black Mountain School will be able to track progress over time, thereby providing staff with feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching.

Stakeholder perception data

Stakeholder perception (staff and parent/carers) of Black Mountain School individual and comparative performance over time has been measured in the School Satisfaction Survey and school modules and the Australian School Climate and School Identification Measurement Tool (ASCSIMT). Due to the cognitive impairment of Black Mountain School students it has not been

possible to obtain student stakeholder perception data, although the school leadership team can see potential for this to change in the future, as the student profile changes.

The system survey data provides many points of congruence with other self-assessment tools, such as the NSIT and the National Safe Schools Audit Tool (NSSAT). In particular, staff report high levels of satisfaction with the school's approach to differentiation for students. An area of relatively lower satisfaction for staff is internal communication, which in 2015 sat at 57 percent, as compared to 67 percent for all specialist schools. This area has been a major focus in 2016.

Parents report high levels of satisfaction with the school's expectation of students and consistently outstanding levels of satisfaction with the school's ability to meet the learning needs of their children (rated at 100 percent in 2015 with a sample size of 32). Communication is also rated as a school strength by parents – again, with 100 percent satisfaction rates in 2015.

Demographic data

The school has maintained high levels of student attendance across this planning cycle: attendance rate averages for years 7-10 have been at or slightly above 90 percent; and average attendance rates for years 11 and 12 have been 88 percent each.

Black Mountain School has implemented close and regular monitoring of attendance and the panel found evidence of sophisticated knowledge of absence causation. This can be attributed to the high quality communication that exists between school and family.

The school's philosophy in relation to behaviour and suspension of students reflects a deep appreciation of the individual student presentation and disability. As a result, suspension rates are low. Over the life of this planning cycle five students received suspensions totalling 79.5 days. The school leadership team attributes this to better targeting of programs to meet individual needs and the maintenance of strong referral systems to outside specialist agencies.

The school collects and monitors process data in order to assess the effectiveness of its improvement strategies. An example of this is the development of professional learning community indicators to support collaboration between teachers; and the development of the Coaching, Observation, Mentoring and Programming and Performance (COMP) framework which aligned teacher practice reflections with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards for teachers via resources and tools. Other measures capture the effectiveness of teacher-parent interactions (via formal and informal contact times) and the level of student involvement in community based instruction.

The panel observed that the work of the school leadership team might benefit from identifying a systematic way of capturing key indicator data sets that they would like to see maintained over the life of the upcoming planning cycle: this would allow for an effectiveness 'pulse' to be taken at regular intervals and would assist in having a highly responsive improvement agenda.

Evidence cited

- Student ILP goal achievement data
- ABLES data
- Year 11 and 12 student data
- Compass data
- Peer support program data

- ASCSIMT tool 2014-2015
- School Satisfaction Survey trend data 2013-2015
- Sample behaviour plans
- COMP data
- ASBRs 2013-2015 (including attendance and suspension data)
- PLC capacity indicators document
- PLC exercises (staff) – hot dotting exercise

Section C: School Improvement Planning and Implementation

Priority Areas

Black Mountain School identified three distinct priorities for their 2013 - 2016 Strategic Plan. These priorities were determined after analysis of the 2012 External Validation report recommendations and commendations, and consultation with key stakeholders in the school community. All priorities focus on developing staff and community capacity in order to improve student outcomes.

The three original priorities were:

- Strategic Priority 1: Supporting successful transitions for all students
- Strategic Priority 2: Improve capacity of all staff by establishing a professional learning community
- Strategic Priority 3: Strengthening staff professional practices to improve quality outcomes for all students

In the third year of this planning cycle, the school community amalgamated two strategic priorities into a revised priority – 'Improve capacity of all staff by establishing a professional learning community.'

The following table summarises the strategic priorities and key improvement strategies undertaken by Black Mountain School over the life of this school plan.

TABLE 2: Strategic Priorities and key improvement strategies 2013-2016

Strategic Priorities	*Supporting successful transitions for all students*	*Improve capacity of all staff by establishing a professional learning community*	*Strengthening staff professional practices to improve quality outcomes for all students*
Key Improvement Strategies	Implement agreed and consistent systematic transition processes for sharing and recording student information from feeder schools	Strengthen coaching and mentoring practices of all staff	Build processes and practices that ensure a commitment to effective, continuous and constructive feedback to be given to all staff

	Implement consistent systematic practices for recording and sharing student information from year to year	Restructure school systems and processes to build opportunities for collaborative practices	Implement whole school approaches to student wellbeing and positive school cultures
	Strengthen transition supports to increase post-school engagement	Restructure the school environment to strengthen opportunities for staff collaborative practices	Ensure a curriculum linked to the Australian Curriculum is implemented across the school
	Establish systematic practices that enhance identified students' use of AACs	Build a curriculum that meets the full range of needs for students with intellectual impairment	

Achievements

The school has maintained a focus on its improvement strategies through regular monitoring and analysis and it has sought to involve all stakeholder groups in that process.

Strategic Priority 1: Supporting successful transitions for all students

As a result of improvement strategies undertaken over the past four years, Black Mountain School can demonstrate improved student transitions at key points in the journey. The school has systematised practices and aligned its documentation with a view to capturing critical information about student learning needs as they join the school, move from one year to the next, and as they graduate. This documentation is embedded in the school-wide framework of teacher practices, COMP, and is evident at all levels across the school.

The school review process noted the importance placed on understanding the health-related needs of students at Back Mountain School. The advent of HAAS and the attendant imperative that staff know about significant health impacts reiterated the need for improving information sharing not only with feeder schools, but between Black Mountain School staff.

Every student's journey at Black Mountain School is focused on their life after they graduate: this is evident in the Personal Future Action Plans (PFAPs), ILPs and a suite of preparatory learning experiences such as work experience, community-based instruction and social enterprise initiatives such as the SixDegrees Café Garden Gallery.

The student and family experience of graduating from Back Mountain School has been significantly affected by the introduction of the NDIS. The panel heard families speak of the difficulty of having to wait until after graduation before new supports could be accessed, despite having children who require sustained lead time when facing changed circumstances. The school has actively worked to inform and support how students move into the next phase of their lives.

Black Mountain School has embraced AAC as a means of enriching not only the communication capacities of its students, but as a means to allow students a voice at their school. The

responsive device-driven system has also been taken up by families with over 75 percent reporting familiarity and use at home.

Black Mountain School met the majority of its targets in relation to this priority. Of particular note is the high level of teacher satisfaction (at 100 percent since 2015) with new and systematised transition practices for supporting students at transition points. The school review panel also noted that as the planning cycle has progressed, the school's performance in relation to the meeting of targets has itself improved and many indicators show significant satisfaction levels.

One target that was not able to be reported as met was the school's ability to increase parent satisfaction levels in relation to student intake transition: the school leadership team identified that there has been a break in the data set as a result of changed questions in parent surveys. The review panel, however, found very high levels of satisfaction in this regard when speaking with parents: parents felt that the support they received when they enrolled their son/daughter was outstanding.

Evidence cited

- Strategic Plan 2013 - 2016
- Strategic Plan target achievements document
- Annual Operating Plans (AOP) 2013-2016
- ASBRs 2013-2015
- HAAS-related implementation documents
- COMP documents relating to sharing of student learner needs
- School Satisfaction Survey data sets 2013-2015
- Interviews with parents

Strategic Priority 2: Improve capacity of all staff by establishing a professional learning community

During this planning cycle, Black Mountain School has adopted a number of processes and practices consistent with a professional learning community: collaboration between teachers has been encouraged and facilitated; locally-appropriate ways of unpacking practice have been enacted; and a Executive Teacher (Professional Practice) position is helping to drive data-centered professional discussions.

The school deliberately altered its physical environment in order to allow teachers to work more collaboratively. Attention was paid to allocating teaching spaces and timetables so that pairs of teachers might team-teach. The review panel also observed the powerful effects of teachers sharing strategies for the realising of individual learner goals.

The culture of collaboration that has emerged during this planning cycle is further evidenced by the willingness of teachers to engage in the sharing of their practice at teacher meetings. The school leadership team encourages teachers to capture their teaching in video form and to use that footage as part of shared practice.

In this context, and having a mind to the pace at which professional learning community practices were implemented in the school, the school leadership team consolidated a range of

school-wide processes into the omnibus COMP. This framework supports teachers in their engagement with school administrative functions as well as their professional growth.

The review panel found evidence of embedded mentoring practices consistent with the school's commitment to building teacher capacity in what is a highly specialised setting. Leaders mentor teachers and teachers are mentoring LSAs. What was less clear was the existence of a recognised form of coaching for the teaching staff. The school may find that uncoupling the administrative from the professional growth elements of COMP will make the distinctions clearer for all and allow for targeted coaching to occur.

Part of growing teacher expertise has been the work on receiving feedback on professional practice. This improvement strategy has been linked to the AITSL teacher standards. As a result, there has been an 18 percent increase in the proportion of staff who believe they receive effective, continuous and constructive feedback about their work.

Within this priority area sits the significant work that has been undertaken to attend to student wellbeing and the building of a positive school culture. The school's student population presents challenging and complex learner needs often made visible in behavioural terms. Black Mountain School has embedded Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), including access to a socio-emotional toolbox, targeted professional learning, PBS plans for identified students, and exploring programs such as SoSAFE. One of the success stories attributed to the positive school culture that now exists at Black Mountain School is the re-engaging of previously non-attending students.

Staff perception of the school's culture as one where they are appreciated and valued has increased significantly during the life of this school plan: their sense of being appreciated has risen from 63 percent to 90 percent; and their feeling of being valued has increased from 86 percent to 98 percent. The school leadership team attributes this to increased opportunities for having their work shared and their challenges unpacked in a collaborative manner. In that sense, they draw a link between the implementation of a professional learning community and greater levels of staff satisfaction.

Strategic Priority 3: Strengthening staff professional practices to improve quality outcomes for all students

The final key improvement strategy against this priority is the implementation of a curriculum that meets the needs of all students. Black Mountain School has created a new set of classes, Compass, as a response to the broadened range of students enrolling at the school. Units of work are now being developed with links to the Australian Curriculum, but which build upon the school's effective functional curriculum. The school's leaders continue to explore and refine how to configure a curriculum-based response to student need, and this work will continue into the next school planning cycle.

Black Mountain School met the majority of targets set for this priority area in the first two years of this planning cycle. Stretch targets feature in 2015 and 2016; and data from 2015 suggests that there have been challenges in meeting those targets – particularly in relation to staff satisfaction with internal communication, which went from 71 percent in 2014 to 63 percent in 2015. The review panel found anecdotal evidence that the impact of major changes such as HAAS could have contributed to this result.

Of note is the mild dip in the achievement rates of short term ILP goals achieved by students: the overall achievement rate went from 71 percent in 2014 to 63 percent in 2015. The school's

2015 ASBR describes significant strengthening of the rigour applied to goal writing and assessing across the school, suggesting increased standards were being applied.

Evidence cited

- Strategic Plan 2013-2016

- Strategic Plan target achievements document

- AOPs 2013-2016

- ASBRs 2013-2015

- COMP documents relating to professional practice, professional pathways

- School Satisfaction Survey data sets 2013-2015

- Interviews with teachers and LSAs

Reflections

Black Mountain School acknowledges and has responded to the uniquely challenging environment it occupies: school improvement in this context must factor in the intellectual and physical profiles of its students, the changing national and jurisdictional policy impacts (the NDIS, the Australian Curriculum and HAAS, for example) and local challenges such as staff turnover.

The panel found evidence of impact in school improvement planning processes and data sets describing the effectiveness of key improvement strategies. It also found evidence of significant improvement in the culture of the school and this is allowing the leadership team to continue to explore research-based practices in support of improved student learning outcomes.

Section D: National Tools Self-Evaluation Results

Black Mountain School applied the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) in a process of self-evaluation with five key groups over two years (2015-2016). The five groups included the leadership team, classroom teachers, LSAs and trainees, paraprofessionals and the School Board. Feedback from stakeholders was aggregated by the leadership team and strengths and areas for growth were identified.

National School Improvement Tool

The combined time reviewers spent in conversations with the principal, leaders, teachers, students, parents and board members was approximately twenty-five hours. Another twenty-four hours was spent on review, moderation, writing and preparation for school leadership team feedback. A combination of individual and small group interviews with staff members, students and parents/carers were held.

The panel noted the following in relation to the **Explicit Improvement Agenda** domain.

- *The school has developed an agenda for improvement in partnership with parents and the community and school leaders can describe the improvements they wish to see in student behaviours and outcomes. This agenda is communicated in staff meetings, school newsletters, parent-teacher meetings and on the school website using a variety of formats to suit local needs.*

- *The school leadership team is clearly committed to finding ways to improve on current student outcomes. This is reflected in an eagerness to learn from research evidence, international experience and from other schools that have achieved significant improvements.*

- *There is evidence of a school-wide commitment to every student's success and staff of the school tell stories of significant student improvement.*

Comments and Findings

- The school has developed a strategic plan and subsequent AAPs and has identified three key priorities in this planning cycle: supporting successful transitions for all students; improve capacity of all staff by establishing a professional learning community; and improving social capital through increasing all staff's engagement in whole school collaborative systems and structures. The third priority was amalgamated with the second priority during the planning cycle.

- There has been a strong focus on improving the capacity of all staff and teachers speak of this focus.

- The core focus of the school is the transition of students to post school life. From enrolment onwards, both teachers and parents focus on this long term goal for each student and speak of this as one of the school's priorities.

- There is evidence that the school has tirelessly explored processes and tools to support the key improvement agenda of transition.

- Staff and parents alike describe significant gains made by individual students in relation to their short and long term goals and these stories of success are shared and celebrated.

Within the **Analysis and Discussion of Data** domain, the panel verified the following.

- *There is evidence that the principal and other school leaders view reliable and timely student data as essential to their effective leadership of the school.*

- *Time is set aside for the discussion of data and the implications of data for school policies and classroom practices. These discussions occur at whole-school and team levels. The school can illustrate how data have been used to identify priorities, take action and monitor progress.*

- *Tests may be used by some teachers, but generally are not used as part of a whole-school assessment strategy.*

- *An ad hoc approach exists to building staff skills in the analysis, interpretation and use of classroom data.*

- *Software may be used for the analysis of school results, including the performances of priority groups, but analyses generally do not extend to studies of improvement or growth.*

Comments and Findings

- In the context of a school with an enrolment of students with complex and high level disabilities, it is recognised that the school cannot routinely use systemic assessment (e.g. NAPLAN) and common diagnostic tools to measure student academic progress.

- Student achievement of goals, as identified in the ILPs, is aggregated to show the proportion of goals met. The school leadership team is monitoring this indicator and setting targets for improvement from year to year.

- The school leadership team is cognisant of stakeholder perception data.

- Teachers are collecting and documenting, at regular intervals, observational data to track each and every child's progress towards identified ILP goals. Some teachers have developed localised processes to capture this observational data to support them in reporting student achievement.

- The school is trialling the ABLES program to support teachers in diagnosing student performance. When expanded to a school wide process, this will provide a systemic way of tracking student improvement.

- Some diagnostic test instruments are being administered with moderate disability student groups.

- Teachers regularly discuss with each other, with executive and with families the implications of their observational data and relative progress towards goals.

With respect to **A Culture that Promotes Learning** domain, the panel noted the following.

- *Parents and families are valued as partners in student learning, and parents, school leaders and teachers work together in mutually supportive ways. There is a strong sense of belonging and pride in the school.*

- *A strong collegial culture has been established.*

- *There are very few obvious behavioural, attendance or engagement problems and behaviour management takes up very little, if any, time of school leaders and classroom teachers.*

- *Class 'busy work' is kept to a minimum, and an attempt is made to ensure that all students are engaged in challenging, meaningful learning.*

- *Staff morale is generally high.*

Comments and Findings

- High levels of trust between parents and the school are evident and parent satisfaction survey data is consistently very high.

- There is regular communication between parents and teachers through daily communication diaries and parents speak highly of this.

- There is clear evidence that, through the implementation of PFAPs and ILPs that students are learning successfully, in their own ways at their own pace against the capacities of the Black Mountain School functional curriculum. The next challenge for the school is ensuring that there are high expectations for academic learning aligned to the Australian Curriculum.

- Through the implementation of the Positive Behaviour Learning model, the school has a systematic process for modelling and monitoring expected behaviours and responding to behavioural concerns.

- Through the whole of school AAC process, the school is ensuring that students, despite complex disabilities, have an alternative way of 'having a voice' in the school.

- Small class sizes attend to need and engagement.

- Teachers have an overt and shared commitment to the functional development of each child and they support each other, shoulder to shoulder in this journey.

- There is evidence throughout the school of a learning environment that is safe, respectful and highly inclusive.

- The impact of two significant initiatives (HAAS and NDIS) is visible in the school and there is evidence that the leadership team has worked hard to manage the effect of these on staff and families.

The panel noted the following in relation to the **Targeted Use of Resources** domain.

- *The principal and other school leaders have introduced programs and strategies to identify and address the needs of students in the school and are applying available resources to meet those needs.*

- *A range of initiatives (e.g. across-class and across-grade groupings is being implemented to make more effective use of available resources to enhance teaching and learning. The school deploys staff in ways that make best use of their expertise.*

- *The school has developed processes for identifying student learning needs, although there may not always be good school records of student achievement and progress.*

- *Programs to meet individual learning needs are prioritised, where possible, in the school budget.*

- *Physical spaces and technology are used effectively to maximise student learning. Learning spaces are organised for whole group work, small group work and individual work.*

Comments and Findings

- The school has initiated a workplace reform process in consultation with the Directorate to create new LSA positions and role descriptions in order to create a more responsive staffing model that meets the complex needs of learners at the school.

- An Executive Teacher (Professional Practice) position has been created to support the school's priority of improving the capacity of teachers.

- The school has invested in the purchase of iPads for staff to support them in more easily documenting the multiple observations of students that need to be recorded.

- The school has been proactive in the recruitment of specialised highly trained teachers, recruiting from interstate and overseas.

- The school has funded/sourced funding for the establishment of a therapy equipment gym.

- Coordinator positions have been created, e.g. Community Recreation Coordinator to enrich the experiences of students.

- The school has dispersed its executive team throughout the school to support teachers individually and in teams and to grow capacity.

- The creation of cross-grading groups is an example of concentrating resources to student need.

- Through the Therapy in Specialist Schools Action Research Project, the school has taken a lead in exploring how best to access and partner with allied health professionals, widening this resource in the school.

- The school has placed a very high priority on identifying and addressing students' functional learning needs and this drives resource allocations, programs and processes.

Within the **An Expert Teaching Team** domain, the panel verified the following.

- *There is evidence that the principal and other school leaders see the development of staff into an expert and coherent school-wide teaching team as central to improving outcomes for all students.*

- *There is a documented professional learning plan and the school has arrangements in place for mentoring. Teachers visit each other's classrooms and welcome opportunities to have principals and other school leaders observe and discuss their work with them.*

- *Attention is paid to strengths and weaknesses in the school-wide team, with strategies in place to recruit staff with particular expertise, to train staff to address particular needs, and to support staff who find it difficult to commit to the school's improvement agenda.*

- *The school provides opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles outside the classroom.*

Comments and Findings

- An Executive Teacher Professional Practice supports the professional growth of teachers.

- A whole of school approach to observation and feedback that is effective for Black Mountain School is emerging. Teaching in classrooms is recorded and then teachers, in small groups, view and reflect together as a way of learning from each other.

- Teachers meet individually with an executive team member weekly or fortnightly and discussions often involve exploration of strategies that will work best. Executives are mentoring teachers on an individual basis.

- The school has developed a suite of documents and processes (COMP) to support teachers in their professional learning and requirements.

- Professional learning aligned to the school's 'Pedagogical Toolbox' is evident.

- Teachers are supporting each other in their professional practice through regular discussions at staff meetings. Teachers bring to these meetings either strategies that are working for them, or bring challenges and staff discuss these in a mutually supportive way.
- The school has placed a very high priority on developing the capacity of teachers who often come to the school without formal qualifications in special education. The thoroughness of school documentation around evidence based teaching practices for students with disabilities, is evidence of a commitment to this learning.

In the domain **Systematic Curriculum Delivery**, the panel noted the following.

- *School leaders talk about embedding fundamental cross-curricular skills such as literacy, numeracy and higher order thinking within all subjects, but there is little evidence that school-wide strategies are in place to drive a consistent approach.*
- *Discussions about curriculum delivery tend to be sporadic rather than being driven by a leadership team with a whole-school approach.*

Comments and Findings

- Black Mountain School has developed a school wide functional curriculum framework and this framework has been implemented systematically throughout the school. Within this framework there is some evidence of some literacy and numeracy outcomes and general capabilities which could be mapped to the Australian Curriculum and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (AusVELS) as a starting point for curriculum reform.
- There is a trend of increasing numbers of students with moderate disability enrolling in the school. As a result there is evidence of some curriculum planning by teachers of these students, which include some content descriptions and general capabilities from the Australian Curriculum.
- Families and staff interviewed by the review team believe in the functional curriculum that is in place in this school. There is evidence that the curriculum is working towards the meeting of post school functional curriculum goals as identified in the PFAP and ILPs.
- The leadership team continues to grapple with its collective ability to describe student learning against the Australian Curriculum, in particular where student neuro-capacity does not reach foundation levels.

In consideration of the domain **Differentiated Teaching and Learning**, the panel found the following.

- *Differentiation is a feature of every teacher's practice.*
- *School leaders explicitly encourage teachers to tailor their teacher to student needs and readiness. Teachers are also encouraged to cater for individual differences by offering multiple means of representation, engagement and expression.*
- *Reports to parents and carers include details of how learning opportunities have been tailored to individual needs and of the progress individuals have made.*

- *Planning shows how the different needs of students are addressed, and how multiple opportunities to learn are provided, including multiple pathways for transition.*

- *Reports to parents show progress over time and include suggestions for ways in which parents can support their children's learning.*

Comments and Findings

- The very highest priority for the school is identifying and addressing the functional needs of each and every student. Highly individualised learning against the functional curriculum is evident for each student, beginning with the PFAP, and further articulated through the ILP (and the attendant four goals).

- Goals are set at the individual student level. Progress towards individual goals is tracked and reported upon.

- In some groups of classes, students are moved across classes in order to group them with other similar students learning a similar skill.

- The ABLES trial is an example of the school seeking a consistent assessment tool with which teachers can drive an even more targeted and differentiated teaching and learning program for each child.

- Teachers provide detailed feedback about student learning on a daily basis and this is particularly critical for families of non-verbal students.

- Mid-term and yearly reports provide comprehensive evidence of an individual student's performance against the goals of the ILP. They also give invaluable advice to families, many of whom use this feedback to assist their decision making with regard to external providers. Families also use this information to adopt working strategies at home.

The panel noted the following regarding the domain **Effective Pedagogical Practices**.

- *School leaders spend time working with teachers to improve their teaching practices, including modelling, evaluating and providing feedback on classroom teaching.*

- *School leaders are committed to continuous improvement in teaching practices throughout the school and expect team leaders and teachers to identify ways of doing this.*

- *Clarity about what students are expected to learn and be able to do, high expectations of every student's learning, explicit teaching of skills and content, individualised attention as required, and timely feedback to guide student action are key elements of the school's push for improved teaching and learning.*

Comments and Findings

- The school leadership team keeps abreast of research on effective teaching practices for students with disabilities.

- The school has an explicit and documented pedagogical toolbox that makes clear the teaching strategies expected to support the needs of students with complex disabilities.

- Teachers are supported in building their expertise in the use of these strategies through professional learning, self-reflection and mentoring. The toolbox is explicitly unpacked for staff as part of an acknowledged induction, and ongoing professional development program.

- Teachers use a range of strategies to provide feedback including verbal reinforcement, error correction, non-verbal responses, student reflection and task analysis.

- The pedagogical toolbox effectively supports the delivery of a functional curriculum. There is evidence of outstanding teaching practices for students with high and complex disabilities. The challenge with the changing profile of students will be in identifying which teaching strategies for reading, writing, mathematics and science will be effective at Black Mountain School.

- High expectations of learning aligned to the functional curriculum program is evident.

In the final domain **School-Community Partnerships**, the panel found the following.

- *The school leadership team makes deliberate and strategic use of partnerships with families, local businesses and community organisations to access intellectual, physical and/or other resources not available within the school for the purposes of improving student outcomes.*

- *Each partnership brings staff and students of the school together with external partners such as families, other education or training institutions, local businesses and/or community organisations.*

- *Attention has been given to communication and to the sharing of experiences within the partnership; however, there may be no formal plan for reviewing the partnership's outcomes and effectiveness.*

- *There is evidence that the school's partnerships are being implemented as intended.*

Comments and Findings

- The school has developed a very broad range of partnerships with external providers (health, social, community and vocational) aimed at strengthening the opportunities for Black Mountain School students at school and beyond. In particular, partnerships which support post-school transitions are well established, sustainably resourced and effective. An example of this is the partnership with the Yarralumla Nursery which provides students with real-world work and vocational skill development.

- The partnership with families is an outstanding feature of the Black Mountain School culture: families are central to school procedures and families report very high levels of satisfaction with the school.

- Recent investment, underpinned by the support of effective partnering, in the area of social enterprise, is already paying dividend.

- The school wide Community Based Instruction (CBI) program, a tenant of the functional curriculum, is delivering authentic learning opportunities out in the community in a range of settings.

- Long standing partnerships with Merici College and Radford College for peer support programs continue to benefit students of all three schools.

- Through the Therapy in Specialist Schools Action Research Project, the school has partnered with allied health professionals, with a view to aligning individual therapy needs of students with the specialised services available. This is another example of the school effectively reaching out beyond its own capacity for the holistic benefit of its students.

National Safe Schools Framework: School Audit Tool

Black Mountain School completed a self-evaluation using the National Safe Schools Audit Tool (NSSAT) in 2016. Five groups: the leadership team; staff, parents and carers, School Board and students completed the self-evaluation. Staff and the leadership team completed the NSSAT tool individually and then conducted a moderation process as a team. Three parents provided individual responses and 19 students completed a modified version with support. The school leadership team then collated and analysed the stakeholder responses for each of the nine domains. The school determined that in eight of the nine domains the school was 'doing well'. The domain 'Professional Learning' has been identified as an area for further action. The panel noted that the results from this survey align to the findings of the NSIT for Domain 3, 'A culture that promotes learning'.

Section E: Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

Black Mountain School is commended for the following.

1. Black Mountain School places each child at the centre of everything they do. From the enrolment interview through to post school transition, every student's unique functional and socio-emotional needs determine the nature of their education. A very rich suite of enrolment and ongoing observational data informs the development of each child's PFAP and individual plans. Teachers collect observational data on progress towards the identified goals of the plan frequently. This in turn informs their practice and the way they report progress to families. Teachers clearly understand the functional and socio-emotional learning needs of each child in their room and do so for a very neuro-diverse student population.

2. A cornerstone of the school's philosophy is the rich partnering with families. Parents begin the conversation about the design of the functional educational program for their child on enrolment, and stay with the school throughout its refinement and adjustment processes. Parents speak of the explicit feedback provided to them about their child's progress each and every day, and they commend the school for the nuanced feedback that they as parents can then share with therapists, specialists and other care providers.

3. A very strong collegial culture has been established and staff stand shoulder to shoulder to care for each other in the conduct of their work in this complex setting. The leadership team places as a very high priority on supporting the wellbeing of staff. As a central element of this support, they are highly visible and accessible. Professional trust between teachers is evident across the school. This is illustrated by the way teachers come together and can openly share the challenges they face in their classrooms and seek advice on best practice to help progress a student against a particular goal.

4. The staff display a deep sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of all students. The school Board describes the school and its staff as being 'radically inclusive'. The school is providing a very supportive environment for students with complex needs and challenging behaviour and there are many stories of transformative student journeys.

5. The school leadership team has astutely managed its workforce as part of the total resourcing it can bring to bear on the delivery of a high quality education program for its students. The allocation of staff to particular groups of students is deliberate and aligned to expertise and 'best fit'.

6. The school supports teachers to manage their workload and meet expected requirements in a very systematic way through COMP, a 'one stop shop' of information, procedures, policies and practices. Regular meetings between individual teachers and their designated executive support teachers are held to, not only meet the administrative requirements, but to grow them professionally as well.

7. This school believes in the value of reaching out and finding partnerships of benefit and these are inextricably linked to the school's reason for being which is to prepare students for life after school.

Recommendations

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

1. The school, in partnership with other schools that enrol students with disabilities, and in consult with appropriate staff in the Directorate, develop and implement a whole of school curriculum plan aligned to the Australian Curriculum and AusVELS where appropriate. As a starting point, the school is encouraged to map the current school program to the Australian Curriculum to determine which elements of this curriculum program is already aligned. Engage all staff in professional learning about the Australian Curriculum and AusVELS.

2. Recalibrate the balance between care and curriculum at Black Mountain School placing a stronger focus on the intellectual needs of all students. Widen the high expectations that are evident for the functional and socio-emotional growth of students to include a stronger focus on academic achievement. As the school implements a whole of school curriculum plan that is aligned to the Australian/AusVELS curriculum, ensure all ILPs include goals that are clearly linked to academic outcomes from these approved programs.

3. Develop and implement a whole of school data plan that is pertinent for Black Mountain School, which takes into consideration best practice for students with disabilities. This plan should support the school to monitor improvement over time in academic, attendance and behavioural outcomes, as well as student well-being. More specifically these data sets should include literacy, numeracy, ILP student achievement over time, ABLES, transition as well as the required systemic collections. The school leadership team should continue to support staff in analysing and interpreting student data to inform planning, assessment and reporting.

4. Continue the current focus on building an expert teaching team. Embed a model for teachers working together and learning from each other's practices, that is supported by formalised coaching arrangements and is appropriate for the classroom context of Black Mountain School.

5. Continue to develop school-community partnerships that are strategically established, sustainable, formalised and reviewed at regular intervals to support students at Black Mountain State School.

6. Consider the development of a more explicit improvement agenda in the next planning cycle that has a sharp focus on improvement in measurable student learning outcomes. Ensure that progress towards targets is monitored and that initiatives and programs are evaluated for effectiveness in producing the desired improvements in student learning and performance.

Section F: Record of School Review Process

The following people were members of the external School Review Panel for Black Mountain School conducted on 2-3 and 5 September 2016.

Name:	Christina Rogers	ACER:	Lead Reviewer
Name:	Julie Murkins	School:	Principal, Lake Tuggeranong College

As chair of the Panel I endorse that this is a true and accurate record of the findings from the external School Review process.

Name:	Christina Rogers		
Signature:		Date:	23 / 09 / 2016.

As Principal of Black Mountain School I accept the School Review Report on behalf of the school community.

Name:	Frank Fogliati		
Signature:		Date:	4 / 11 / 2016