



**Diocese of Toowoomba
Catholic Schools**

St Thomas More's School, Toowoomba

**Quadrennial school review
Executive summary
April 2018**





Foreword

Although much has been written about school reform in past decades — national reports, studies, descriptions of findings — insufficient attention has been given to the important relationships among the adults within the school, and to a consideration of how the abundant untapped energy, inventiveness and idealism within the school might be encouraged.

Roland Barth, Harvard Graduate School of Education

The philosophical approach to the review is based on Appreciative Inquiry, a well-established approach used by organisations varying from international corporations to not-for-profit social organisations. Appreciative Inquiry begins with the assumption that there are good things happening in the organisation and identifying these. It then moves to what people see as areas needing attention, improvement or change. The key principle is that these are placed in the context of what the organisation does well, so it moves beyond a problem-solving agenda to an improvement agenda.

Appreciative Inquiry aims to bring ownership to the school. The review team heard 'the story' of the School through its stakeholders, and this informs the key findings and improvement strategies that the review team has recommended. Exactly how the School addresses the key findings and improvement strategies is left for the school to determine, but it is mandatory for the school to address them over the following four years.

Methodology

The review was conducted from Monday 23 April, Tuesday 24 April and Thursday 26 April 2018.

Reviewers

Suzanne Cavanagh, Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office (TCSO) Senior Education Leader (SEL), Chair

Jim Midgley, TCSO Director: Teaching and Learning

Norman Hunter, Consultant

Aaron Wells, Principal: St Joseph's School, Chinchilla

The review consisted of structured interviews of the following school community members:

- Principal
- Assistant Principal Religious Education
- Assistant Principal Administration (Acting)
- Teaching and Support Staff
- Students (5 & 6 Leaders)
- Parents
- Parish Administrator

Excellence in Catholic Education

The reference document for the review was 10 October 2017 draft of the 'Excellence in Catholic Education Domains and Components'. A supporting background document was the seven principles of the 'Diocese of Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office Excellence in Catholic Education'.

Domain 1: Mission and Identity

1.1 Religion Curriculum

1.2 Religious Life of the School

Domain 2: Teaching and Learning

2.1 Students and their Learning

2.2 Curriculum Structure and Provision

2.3 Pastoral Care and Student Wellbeing

Domain 3: Continual Renewal

3.1 School Improvement Culture

3.2 Community Partnerships

Domain 4: Sustainable Resourcing and Stewardship

4.1 Staff Wellbeing

4.2 Use of Resources Facilities and the Learning Environment

Prologue

The review team thanks the leadership team, staff, students and parents for their trust in openly identifying what they believe the school is doing well, and where they believe it needs to improve.

Having spent three days in St Thomas More Catholic Primary School, the review team is confident that overall the school is travelling well, with a stated priority on improving teaching and learning. The school is well-placed to build on the improvement agenda that has been established and is now in various stages of being implemented.

The review team is impressed that the improvement agenda is owned by the staff, and that it is both evidence-based and specifically geared at the context of the school as identified by the leadership team and the staff.

The review team has identified many strengths and affirmed them, along with a number of important improvement strategies for particular areas in the life of the school. Some of these have been evident for some time, and they now need attention. They are not solely the province of the leadership team: it is over to both the leadership team and the staff to consolidate and strengthen the improvement agenda which has begun so well, and which shows real potential to impact positively on the lives of the students.

Domain 1: Mission and Identity

1.1 Religion curriculum

Findings

The school has an explicit and coherent program for the delivery of Religious Education which is drawn from and aligned with the Toowoomba Catholic Schools Religion Curriculum. All the units are annually reviewed and each term the teachers meet with the Assistant Principal Religious Education during a Professional Learning Team meeting to ensure the focus of the unit is consistent school wide. The current whole school focus is on ensuring academic rigour and aligned assessment. The school's Learning Area Programs (LAPS) in Religion provide teachers with clear expectations of the teaching and learning to be covered each term.

Teachers are working towards including the General Capabilities and Cross Curriculum Priorities of the Australian Curriculum to cater for diverse needs of children. Modifications and adjustments (for personalised planning) are built into teacher planning to address student needs. The school is a trial school for the Diocese in the Personalised Planning for Learning process.

The feedback from some older students in the most recent RADii data suggests that they are only moderately engaged in their Religious Education lessons. Staff have generated discussions to ensure that academic rigour is satisfied while also highlighting learning experiences that are likely to engage students in Religious Education in ways that are more meaningful to them.

Explicit in the School Learning Teaching Framework is a clear expectation around the provision of learning experiences to be inclusive of all students' needs. The current religious education program and classroom practices reflect the diversity that students and their families bring to the school. This perspective is firmly supported by parents (inclusive of several of those with children with learning difficulties) who believe that the school values are celebrated in the everyday activities of the school.

The religious character of the school is evident and positively perceived by all members of the community. The school values of Faith, Hope, Joy and Justice are clearly articulated by students and found to be visibly present across the school in and around the classrooms, within and outside of focused lessons.

Improvement strategies

Ensure that the discussions by Professional Learning Teams of ways to engage students more actively in the RE program result in changes to classroom practice and are reviewed for effectiveness.

Involve current staff and community members in collaboratively revisiting and updating the Vision and Mission Statements so as to align them with the views on teaching and learning reflected by the present staff and leadership team. Ensure that these views are research-based.

Encourage and support staff access and ownership of their Professional Learning in RE so that it doesn't fall to one person or the leadership team to set the religious education PL agenda.

1.2 Religious life of the school

Findings

Religious Identity and Culture

The school's leadership team support and ensure that prayer, liturgy and local rituals express and reinforce the ethos and charism of the school. Currently school officers do not attend staff prayer given its scheduled time.

The school is currently exploring a way to create an outdoor prayer space.

Evangelisation and Formation

The school provides relevant and appropriate experiences to celebrate Jesus Christ. Many parents interviewed appreciate the respect shown to them by feeling welcomed and included in prayer and liturgical celebrations regardless of their own faith. School liturgies are noted for their focus on belonging and for being stimulating and joyous experiences. Many staff and students interviewed comment on the richness of the school celebrations and the importance that the Catholic rituals play in maintaining the ethos and positive culture of St Thomas More's.

Prayer and Worship

The school community actively engages in daily personal and communal prayer. There are prayer spaces in each classroom.

Social Justice and Action

The school invites members of its community to engage in the planning of policies, structures and practices. The Parish Leader is a member of the School Board, as well as a Parish Representative, and good relationships exist between the parish and the school.

The school community is regularly invited to provide input via surveys, School Board and P&F meetings and newsletter requests.

A number of parents suggest that communication could be improved to take greater advantage of parental input, interest and skill.

Improvement strategies

Find ways to be more inclusive of all staff in celebrating and praying together on a regular basis.

Upgrade the communication from school leadership to all community members so that all are more effectively and equitably informed.

Domain 2: Teaching and Learning

2.1 Students and their learning

Findings

There is a specific improvement agenda each year and in recent years there has been a strong focus on the leading of learning in the school. The leadership team identify an area for focus and provide professional development and share findings on areas of concern. There is comprehensive evidence of data walls used in analysis of student achievement in NAPLAN years and in reading across the whole school. The SUNLANDA tool is used to conduct an analysis and share areas of concern with teachers. At this stage the analysis process does not allow for school wide collaborative agreement on the provision of agreed strategies to address the areas of focus.

The NAPLAN data shows that Year 3 are achieving at levels significantly higher than the State mean in all domains. In Year 5 they are less impressive except for writing. In relation to the National mean, the year 3 results are again higher while than Year 5.

The current focus on the Reading Improvement (RIS) is perceived by all teachers to be worthwhile, well supported and as having a positive impact on how reading is taught and subsequently, student achievement. All teachers are engaged and are at various stages in attempting to implement the high impact strategies. Year 6 Students report that their teachers are "doing something differently this year" and that guided reading has a focus on aspects of reading and comprehension. They articulate that their teacher is focused on teaching specific aspects of reading for understanding and meaning making.

Recent expectations around *teacher clarity* are having a positive impact in the classes that are diligently implementing the high impact strategies of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria, drawn from the Visible

Learning framework. Teachers (around 40% of the classes – across Key Learning Areas other than English) who routinely display Learning Intentions and Success Criteria for the benefit of their students, agree that it makes a significant difference to the students in terms of knowing the intent, what needs to be learned, and the method for determining if they are achieving the goals. Students report that this practice has made a big difference to their ability to engage with and monitor their learning.

Learning culture

Findings

The school values students varying cultural backgrounds and is engaged with the implementation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander plan.

Parental engagement with the academic progress of their children is mainly limited to report cards at the start of term three and end of term four. Parents report that some teachers are very efficient at providing regular communication about the child's learning progress or behavioural concerns. It is not evident that this is consistent across the school.

Teachers and students identify that caring for each other and sport are the aspects of school life that are most celebrated at St Thomas More. Some teacher awards on assembly reflecting academic achievement and an annual award for a year 6 student at the end of each year are the examples given of academic achievement being valued. Parents and Parent representatives confirm that they are kept informed about the school agenda (area of focus) but are not familiar with the students' academic achievements.

It is not evident that high achieving and highly motivated students are being 'stretched out' in day to day class lessons.

There is a clear and apparent desire from all teachers to continue to learn and improve in their profession. There is an unequivocal commitment to seeing their students succeed.

Research indicates that the recurring theme that most impacts on the level of student academic achievement is collective teacher efficacy. At this stage it is not clear that the shared beliefs and understandings of staff about teaching and learning have been articulated and drawn together into action that everyone supports.

Improvement strategies

Collaboratively investigate possible reasons for the less impressive NAPLAN performance after Year 3 and decide on collective action to address this.

Continue to build the integration of the Reading Improvement Strategy into staff teaching practice.

Teacher clarity to students, in particular the Success Criteria and Learning Intentions, is having a positive impact on student engagement. Continue to support teachers with implementation of this policy and expectations and investigate further other Visible Learning strategies that support teacher clarity to students.

Begin a process of working toward a school-wide approach of updating parents on their children's progress during the term. This might include personal catch-ups, written notes, email or telephone conversations.

Collaboratively develop structures and conversations that will enable collective efficacy to flourish. Research makes clear that collective efficacy will be built and strengthened through continuing discussions among staff that work towards common school-wide agreed values and beliefs about students and their learning.

Collectively address the way high achieving and highly motivated students can be stretched out in classes as a natural component of lessons.

2.2 Curriculum structure and provision

Findings

Documentation of the new Saint Thomas More Learning and Teaching Framework (2017) is comprehensive and relevant. It is in tune with the school mission and vision and reflects the leaderships team mantra of 'playful and purposeful' pedagogy.

Systematic curriculum delivery

The Learning Area Programs present an explicit, coherent, sequenced plan that makes clear what must be taught and what students need to learn.

There is a realisation from all parties that the school does not overtly celebrate academic learning and achievement to the extent that it could. Conveying high academic expectations appears to be left to the attitude, competence and beliefs of the individual teacher. Research suggests that what a school celebrates reflects what is valued in a school. When teachers convey high expectations, the students respond with high expectations for themselves.

Improvement strategies

Find ways to publicly celebrate and communicate students' academic learning and achievement, including rewarding persistent effort by students who work conscientiously but may not achieve at the highest standard.

2.3 Pastoral care and student wellbeing

Findings

Most Parents believe that their children are privileged to be part of this "caring school family". Parents are explicit in their statements that their child with special needs is well cared for and understood.

A new behaviour management policy and procedure are being implemented. It is yet to be fully internalised and operationalised by all staff. Rater data and parent comments demonstrate that some parents are yet to be convinced that bullying is dealt with appropriately. Complaints management and procedures for providing feedback on follow up after issues are also currently being finalised and published.

Teachers, Students and Parents state that inclusion and support for each student, regardless of needs, are stand-out features of belonging to this school.

Improvement strategies

Ensure that the new policy and procedures on behaviour management are finalised and fully implemented including communication to the parent body.

Ensure that bullying is being addressed as effectively as possible. Check for parent perceptions of how this is going.

Domain 3: Continual renewal

3.1 School improvement culture

Findings

Collective teacher efficacy

It is clear that a school-wide focus on improving teaching and learning through the Reading Improvement Strategy is supported by staff and is being embedded. Teachers, students and parents show awareness of the RIS and understanding of it. Teacher aides also express enthusiasm for the initiative and say they would appreciate further professional learning on ways they can support teachers in taking it forward.

It is also clear that a significant number of teachers have begun implementing principles of the Visible Learning teaching strategies, in particular, Learning Intentions and Success Criteria. It is impressive that Year six students identified these principles as happening in their day to day lessons. Visible Learning is not yet embedded across the school, and other principles of Visible Learning are not evident at this stage in its development.

The focus on teaching and learning is evident across the school. At this stage it is not evident that this is being linked with the Catholic tradition and ethos of intellectual pursuit.

Teachers share expertise, planning and moderation of assessment through Professional Learning Teams (PLTs), which are Year Group based, and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which are more situational and needs-oriented, across Year Groups. Collegial activities such as peer observation, peer coaching and walk throughs have occurred at times. These are not yet embedded in the professional life of the school.

School Culture

Professional learning is encouraged for staff. Staff indicate that the leadership team is supportive of professional development requests provided these are attuned to the strategic plan and other stated strategic priorities. Professional learning activities are supported in the school budget.

Student achievements and successes in sport are celebrated at assemblies. Celebration of academic achievements and other successes by students are less evident at this stage.

A culture of collaboration and teamwork is in place through PLTs and PLCs. It is not evident that these are yet being used to build coherence vertically through the school from Prep to Year 6.

Parents indicate that the school leadership and staff are approachable and that they are treated with respect. Some indicate that issues raised are taken seriously and addressed quickly and effectively. This is not a consistent view across the parent body.

Improvement strategies

Investigate ways to strengthen the efficacy of teacher aides by providing further professional development for them on the Reading Improvement Strategy.

Build on the strong beginning to Visible Learning pedagogy by engaging more teachers in using learning intentions and success criteria with their students. Collaboratively decide on the next step(s) in implementing the Visible Learning framework across the school and begin building them into school-wide pedagogy.

Make clear links in the school culture between academic learning and achievement and the Catholic tradition of valuing intellectual pursuits.

Collaboratively develop a school-wide approach to active peer collegiality, including the leadership team, in activities such as observation and feedback on lessons or sections of lessons, peer coaching, walk-throughs and other relevant variations devised by the school.

Decide on ways to publicly reflect the balance of what the school values and believes when student achievements are celebrated at assembly and other rituals. Ensure that academic achievement by students is regularly celebrated, and where appropriate link it with the Catholic ethos and tradition.

Ensure that issues raised by parents are addressed in a timely manner.

3.2 Community partnerships

Findings

Partners

Parents convey appreciation at their relationship with the school leadership and staff. They find their relationship with the school comfortable and welcoming.

The Parents and Friends Association fundraises in consultation with the Principal, and some pride is expressed by P&F members on the contributions they have made, including air conditioning and play equipment.

Parents consistently express appreciation for the meetings with teachers and the parents and students at the start of the year, when the parents have the opportunity to tell the teacher things they see as important about their children. They see this as a strong commitment from the school in treating parents as partners in their children's education.

Some parents receive regular communication from class teachers about their children's progress, often suggesting ways the parents can help the children in any difficulties the children may be experiencing at school. These parents are particularly appreciative of those teachers' efforts in communicating with them, some linking it to a sense of professionalism by the staff.

Some parents whose children have left the school and are now at high school indicate that their children were well prepared for the transition by St Thomas More and are doing well.

Parents consistently express appreciation for the Principal's visibility and are impressed with his commitment to knowing the students and parents, including remembering their names.

Student Needs

External agencies and other resource people are accessed by the school. These include an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, a scientist from CSIRO to link with the school in the near future, links in STEM and instrumental music with St Joseph's, and a paediatrician who consults with the school when treating students who attend St Thomas More. A member of the armed forces was at the school during the review, speaking to the students on the day before ANZAC Day.

Some students and parents attend Mass at the parish church. Thirty students are participating the sacramental program in the parish of whom twenty-four attend St Thomas More's School. Six families regularly participate in the life of the Parish.

Improvement strategies

Continue to nurture the strong relationships that currently exist between parents and the school.

Seek to strengthen communication between teachers and parents by encouraging more teachers to use email or other modes to keep regular contact with parents on the students' progress. If possible make this a school-wide practice.

Domain 4: Sustainable resourcing and stewardship

4.1 Staff wellbeing

Findings

School Culture

The annual orientation of staff in the school Vision and Mission statement lays the foundation and highlights the values and beliefs central to the school. It is evident that school staff have an understanding and appreciation of the school vision and mission statements. The articulated values of hope, faith, justice and joy are prevalent in school documentation and policies, appear visually around the school, and are regularly referenced by staff in discussions with panel members.

The school has a number of strategies in place to enhance the wellbeing of students. Students highlight the value of the Peer Support and the Year 6 Buddies programs currently under review. The school is currently finalising a revised Student Behaviour Support Plan, which includes strategies to support students in making positive behaviour choices and minimising instances of bullying within the school.

The school's Annual Action Plan clearly articulates the school priorities for the year and has clear links to associated professional development to upskill and support staff in achieving these priorities. Opportunities for additional professional development are identified through individualised teacher goal setting processes. There appears to be overwhelming support for the implementation of the Reading Improvement Strategy, with many staff members stating that they are starting to see a tangible benefit not only for the students in terms of their academic growth but for themselves, professionally.

Nurture and Empowerment

Cyclic self-appraisal and collegial goal setting processes are evident for staff and are aligned with the individual needs of the teacher and the strategic priorities of the school. The collection of student data and subsequent production of data walls has the potential to lead to a deeper clarity on student achievement levels.

An eagerness is shared by school staff to implement and embed the use of Information and Communication Technologies in teaching and learning. There appears to be a sense of excitement and anticipation for the upcoming e-learning lighthouse project. At this stage it is not yet evident that there is a coordinated approach to the use of ICTs in a school wide approach to pedagogy.

Caring for the individual

The school utilises several resources and strategies to enhance the health and well-being of students. Along with internal school programs, the school utilises the Daniel Morecombe Curriculum and the Life Education Program to instil in students the necessary behaviours for a healthy lifestyle.

It is noted by parents, staff and students that the offering of specialist lessons by the school in Physical Education, Digital Technology and Music is highly valued by the school community.

The Digital Technology Lessons are referred to by students as "awesome", and the sporting opportunities available are seen as a positive point of difference for the school.

A perception is held that communication systems within the school are not always effective in building clarity and trust amongst the school community. Some staff indicate that communication between classroom teachers and parents can be inconsistent across year levels and between teachers.

Improvement strategies

Work towards schoolwide agreement on a coordinated approach to teacher communication with parents during term time.

Utilise different communication methods as appropriate for last minute changes to arrangements or urgent matters, events and organisational details.

4.2 Use of resources, facilities and the learning environment

Findings

Resources

The school uses a range of data gathering tools to identify and respond to student needs. This data is then used to allocate resources to meet the needs of students. This year a new Learning Support Model has been introduced which is providing more in-class support.

Student performance data is being used strategically to ensure that the allocation of teacher aides is providing the most impact.

Some staff indicate that the school is well resourced. At the same time the reading resources are becoming quite aged. An investment in new reading materials would further support the implementation of the Reading Improvement Strategy.

The school is investigating more effective ways to address the needs of individual learners. It is currently engaged in a project that is focussed on personalised planning, with the goal to implement a model that may also be emulated by other schools.

Facilities and Learning environment

The newly revised School Master Plan clearly articulates a vision and pathway to support the expansion of school facilities to facilitate the addition of a third stream of enrolments. This plan shows a deep commitment to improving the educational environment to maximise student learning. It is evident that there is considerable excitement being generated in the school community for the plan and the future growth of the school. Some concerns have been raised regarding the current financial resources and the ability to adequately fund and support this growth.

Improvement strategies

Some staff indicate that the school is well resourced. At the same time the reading resources are becoming quite aged. An investment in new reading materials would further support the implementation of the Reading Improvement Strategy.

Act to bring the school income (school fees, building fund and other levies) in line with Diocesan minimum expectations. Ensure that appropriate communication on this occurs with parents.

Conclusion

The three day school review at St Thomas More Catholic Primary School, Toowoomba, has been an uplifting experience for the review team. We find a school with many strengths, along with a small number of important areas that need to be addressed.

The Catholic ethos is strong and inclusive, with involvement from the community, particularly parents. Parents also state that they feel welcomed at the school, and that the leadership team and staff are generally approachable and act on parent concerns. Relationships between staff and students are relaxed and respectful with an obvious caring dimension, as are relationships between the leadership team and students. Relationships among staff, and between staff and the leadership team are also important, and should be consistently nurtured and strengthened.

A priority of improving teaching and learning with an evidence base is clearly evident, with all staff enthusiastically supporting the Reading Improvement Strategy and committing to building it into their pedagogy. The improvement agenda is further strengthened by the significant number of teachers who are adopting the Visible Learning teaching and learning framework, with both teachers and students stating that they are seeing improved learning in their classrooms as a result.

The review team wishes the school and its community well in deliberating on the report, prioritising the improvement strategies, continuing to strengthen all that is working well, and acting to address those areas identified as needing attention.

Epilogue

St Thomas More's Catholic School is at a juncture to appreciate the findings of the review and move forward with the identified improvement strategies.

The staff is a student centred community wanting to improve student outcomes and develop their professional skills through evidence based practice. This journey has begun but will grow with the combined efforts of all staff.

The community is ready to take on the dynamic challenge of working together to strengthen the teaching and learning agenda.