04 School types
This chapter provides further description and analysis of review schools by School Improvement Unit (SIU) school type, as introduced in Chapter 1 and detailed in appendix A. The SIU school types consider and bring together school year levels (primary, secondary or combined), with enrolment numbers (fewer than 50, between 50 and 1000, and more than 1000 students) and location (Department of Education and Training [DET] region and Education Queensland [EQ] zone). In contrast, special schools and outdoor and environmental education centres (OEECs) are identified with sole reference to their function.

The chapter, which should be read in conjunction with the findings relating to all review schools, will focus on the following five school (or centre) types that diverge most from the other school types:

- combined
- remote
- very small, rural primary
- special schools
- OEECs.

These school types have been selected because of their distinctive characteristics within the Queensland context, or owing to their small numbers when compared with the majority of mainly urban schools. The less common status of these schools could mean that their unique features might be obscured within the larger dataset of 2015 review schools wherein urban primary schools are dominant. Considering each school type in turn, this chapter first focuses on the different environments within which these schools operate and the issues and challenges to which they are subjected. It then highlights the school improvement practices evident in each school type. While these sections are relatively brief in this, the SIU’s first, annual report, as more schools of each type are reviewed in subsequent years this analysis will be expanded.

4.1 Combined schools

Combined schools deliver schooling across primary and secondary school levels. This SIU school type includes schools of distance education, but excludes schools located in remote locations (although some remote schools may also offer combined schooling). Six per cent (n=23) of the 369 schools reviewed in 2015 were classified as combined schools. Similarly, five per cent (n=58) of all Queensland state schools are combined schools. Half of the combined schools represented within the 2015 school reviews were Prep to Year 12, and the other half were Prep to Year 9 or 10. While these schools were reviewed across all regions except North Queensland, in 2015 they were predominantly in Darling Downs South West region (41 per cent of all combined schools reviewed – see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Combined schools, by region, 2015 review schools

Considering the enrolment of combined schools reviewed in 2015, 22 per cent had more than 1000 students enrolled (considered very large schools) (see Figure 4.2) and 28 per cent had more than 100 teachers. Most of the combined schools reviewed had between 100 and 500 students, and between 11 and 20 teachers.

Figure 4.2: Combined schools, by enrolment, 2015 review schools
Despite its size, there is a school-wide commitment to every student’s success at Redlynch State College.

When speaking about the college’s explicit teaching agenda, teachers are able to articulate the college’s focus on quality teaching and improvements in student reading and attendance. Across the college there is a drive for improved student outcomes, and this focus is informing the work of school leaders and teachers.

The college has created a supportive environment for students, with systematic strategies in place to identify student learning and wellbeing needs. These programs are prioritised in the school budget. Extension, core and consolidation classes have been established to better meet student learning needs.

College leaders encourage teachers to tailor their teaching to student needs and readiness. This includes the systematic use of assessment instruments to establish a baseline for individuals in their learning, and to identify skills gaps and misunderstandings. Plans demonstrate how the different needs of students are being addressed, and how multiple learning opportunities are provided.

Students with disabilities generally attend mainstream classes, with adjustments to their learning and assessment programs implemented. Indigenous students are well supported and their progress is monitored through individual education plans.

The school has a range of community partnerships in place; each designed to address student needs and enhance student outcomes. The college puts considerable effort into understanding students’ needs, identifying appropriate partners to address those needs, and planning the details for successful community partner engagement.
4.2 Remote schools

Remote schools were those defined as remote using the EQ zones definition, unless they were special schools or OEECs, regardless of year levels or size. 14 per cent (n=177) of all Queensland state schools are defined as remote schools. Similarly, 10 per cent (n=38) of all schools reviewed in 2015 were classified as remote schools. Almost half of the remote schools reviewed were primary schools, and the remainder were combined schools of either pre-Prep or Prep to Year 10 or Year 12. These schools were found exclusively in the DET regions of Central Queensland (39 per cent), Darling Downs South West (25 per cent), North Queensland (22 per cent), and Far North Queensland (14 per cent) (see Figure 4.3).

Remote schools were generally small (see Figure 4.4) having fewer students and teachers than schools in other SIU types. 43 per cent of the remote schools reviewed had fewer than 50 students, and the same proportion had fewer than five teachers.

Remote schools were more likely to have higher rates of Indigenous student enrolment than other school types. Four remote review schools had Indigenous enrolments that comprised 50 to 70 per cent of the student population. In seven remote review schools, at least 70 per cent of the student population was Indigenous.

A number of commonalities were able to be identified across the remote schools reviewed.

Remote schools were more likely to experience staffing issues than other school types. While many remote schools had adequate funding to support increased and specialist staffing requirements, they were often unable to source the appropriate teaching staff owing, in large part, to their geographic remoteness. The sharing of specialist staff among local school clusters was a common strategy used to ensure the continued quality of student learning.

Remote schools, like all schools reviewed, consistently espoused high expectations, that is, that all students would learn successfully and that student attendance, behaviour, engagement and outcomes would be exemplary. Students, parents and community members recognised and appreciated this high level of commitment. They spoke positively of their local school’s high expectations and of staff commitment to improving student learning.

These remote schools displayed a strong focus on student and staff wellbeing. Some schools dealt with significant issues, such as frequent non-attendance. For example, one remote school had more than half its student population attending less than 85 per cent of the time. Remote schools also dealt with issues of student disengagement, as their remote location was sometimes associated with fewer prospects for future employment or continued study.

Community members, parents, staff and students remained proud and highly supportive of their remote schools. The strong sense of community was clearly evident throughout the remote schools reviewed in 2015. There were high levels of community satisfaction registered across remote schools. Remote schools had active Parents and Citizens’ Associations (P&Cs) that provided financial contributions and significant levels of support to their schools.

All remote schools had formed strong community partnerships. These networks connected them to the police citizens youth clubs, universities, local industry organisations and local businesses. In some remote schools, strategic partnerships with local businesses helped students transition to training and employment.

Collaborations between local cluster schools were a strong feature within the remote school reviews. Cluster school relationships aided remote schools through the sharing of effective and emerging practice, including school moderation, curriculum planning, professional learning, collegial networking, pedagogical strategies, and the co-development of assessment frameworks and other forms of documentation. Collaboration was also apparent with local feeder schools, both to and from the remote school. This further assisted students easing the transition between educational providers.
At Springsure State School, a strong commitment and expectation from staff that all students can learn are helping to drive improvement.

School leaders are directing the school’s explicit improvement agenda and monitoring targets. There are high expectations for attendance and behaviour, and well-established routines enhance the positive tone of the school.

There is mutual respect among the staff, students and school, community, and a strong sense of belonging. A pastoral care program is embedded across the secondary school and clearly articulated processes are in place to support student engagement and behaviour management.

Students, parents and the wider community are complimentary about the school. School-wide processes support student learning and the role of the school within the community.

The school has established strong, positive relationships with many stakeholders. They are reciprocal in nature, focused on improving the academic success and wellbeing of the students.

4.3 Very small, rural primary schools

By definition, very small, rural primary schools were those schools with 50 or fewer students. These were located in the DET regions of Darling Downs South West, Central Queensland, North Queensland or Far North Queensland (see Figure 4.5). If the EQ zone was metropolitan or provincial, these schools were classified as urban primary schools. Approximately seven per cent (n=24) of all schools reviewed in 2015 were classified as very small, rural primary schools. Similarly, nine per cent (n=120) of all Queensland state schools were classified as very small, rural primary schools.

By definition, very small, rural primary schools were those schools with 50 or fewer students.

Figure 4.5: Very small, rural primary schools, by region, 2015 review schools

Owing to their student enrolment level, all the very small, rural primary schools reviewed in 2015 had fewer than five teachers. Ten of these schools had low levels of Indigenous student enrolment (less than five per cent), while the other 13 schools had Indigenous student enrolments of between six and 30 per cent.

Very small, rural primary schools were more susceptible to student enrolment movement than other SIU school types. In their reviews, it was clear that very small, rural primary schools sought both to understand the impact of transience on student achievement and to identify the challenges presented by the regular introduction of new students into the school and subsequent enrolment growth. Very small schools were also highly impacted when students left the school, especially if they were from families where multiple children attended the school. Very small, rural primary schools also demonstrated the strong use of evidence-based interventions to support learning, especially through the development of individualised, differentiated learning experiences for their students.

High levels of staff and parent satisfaction were noted in the review reports of these schools. They regularly sought feedback from parents and were open to suggestions from parents as to how to better address issues of concern and interest. Parents spoke well of their very small, rural primary schools and there was a high level of trust evident across their communities. Parents and families were valued partners and worked cooperatively with school leaders and staff in the achievement of school goals. Parents, students and staff spoke highly of the positive learning culture in their schools. However, some very small, rural primary schools were challenged by the limited number of parents available to actively engage with teachers as partners in furthering their children’s learning.
School leaders also developed partnerships with families, community organisations and local businesses in order to access resources for improving student outcomes. Review reports from these schools often noted evidence of current and committed partnerships operating with clusters of neighbouring schools. These links were designed to increase levels of engagement and to enhance student outcomes. Leaders in very small, rural primary schools were active members within their local school clusters. The teaching principals often lamented the lack of time to engage in instructional leadership practices involving team or peer teaching.

Owing in part to the small numbers of teachers in each school, many instances of teacher collaboration were noted within and across schools. The individual expertise of members operating effectively within teaching partnerships was clearly evident.

Because of their size and geographic location, very small, rural primary schools were, at times, heavily impacted by natural disasters, which greatly affected school operations. A review team noted that in one rural primary school, the school community had experienced a significant level of adversity because of bushfires and cyclones. Staff and the wider community indicated that these events, apart from massive individual and community dislocation, significantly impeded the progress of the school’s improvement agenda. P&C members were actively involved in the school’s recovery and had contributed $5000 towards improved school facilities.

The size of these schools limited the ability of aggregate data to represent their needs while informing planning and decision making. Owing to small school enrolments, National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) reports may be of limited value in tracking school performance trends. More positively, school leaders and teachers are more likely to have a detailed understanding of each student’s learning needs and to be able to respond accordingly.

Ubobo State School has established a learning culture characterised by the expectation that all children will be successful in their learning.

The tone of the school reflects a commitment to purposeful, successful learning. Staff, students and parents share respectful and caring relationships.

All staff members are held in high regard by their peers, the students and their parents. Staff morale is consistently high.

The community is positive about the school’s involvement in regional events and support of local organisations. The school has established a range of partnerships with families and community organisations with the express purpose of improving student outcomes.

The school has established strategies for identifying individual student learning needs and works collaboratively to create effective school-wide solutions which meet those needs.

Effective teaching is modelled at the school, and the school is involved in principal-to-principal mentoring with a number of other local small, rural schools. Ubobo State School also provides ongoing support to these schools and is planning for local cluster small school moderation processes.

An annual moderation process with a larger school in Gladstone will further enhance teaching and learning practices at the school.
4.4 Special schools

Under the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006, a special school is defined as a state school with educational programs and services appropriate to the needs of persons with a disability. Special schools constituted three per cent (n=12) of 2015 review schools, and three per cent (n=42) of all Queensland state schools. While the majority of these were combined schools, offering instruction from Prep to Year 12, there was a small number of special schools with primary- or secondary-only instruction.

Special schools can be found in every DET region except Far North Queensland. They are supervised by one specialist assistant regional director and one lead principal based in Metropolitan region. The majority of special schools reviewed in 2015 had between 100 and 200 students, and between 21 and 30 teachers.

As special schools operate like all Queensland state schools, their data have been considered as part of the broader 2015 review report set. In recognition of their unique contexts and challenges, their school improvement practices are also considered separately in the section below.

A special school is defined as a state school with educational programs and services appropriate to the needs of persons with a disability.

4.4.1 Leadership

The main leadership issues identified within special schools were similar to those identified across all Queensland state schools. These concerns involved:

- the regular turnover of staff
- the need for clarification, communication and evaluation of the roles and responsibilities of leadership team members, including uncertainty about new school structures and positions within schools
- communication between staff
- sharing understanding of each individual’s contribution to the improvement agenda.
A small number of special schools had challenges recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers with special education qualifications, and had a high level of staff turnover. The opposite dilemma existed in some schools, where staff remained with the school for a number of decades. At times, this affected workforce flexibility and skills levels.

Throughout the school reviews, there was extensive evidence that school leaders saw that melding teaching and support staff into an expert and cohesive teaching team was essential to the improvement of student learning outcomes. School leaders had high expectations of teaching and of the management of student behaviour. They worked closely with teachers to improve their capacity by modelling effective practice, evaluating and providing feedback to teachers on a regular basis, while maintaining an overall strategic focus on student learning. However, there were some instances where school leaders were not energetically leading their teaching team.

In the special schools reviewed in 2015, leadership teams were driving an explicit and narrowly focused improvement agenda … while a few schools articulated a broad range of improvement.

The improvement priorities most frequently identified within the special school reviews were:

- behaviour management
- reading/literacy
- the collection and analysis of data.

In the special schools reviewed in 2015, leadership teams were driving an explicit and narrowly focused improvement agenda. While a few schools articulated a broad range of improvement priorities, others were much more focused, with strong links being made between the department’s strategic plan, the school’s strategic plan and the school’s annual implementation plan (AIP). One school was in the process of revising the AIP to promote fewer improvement priorities to allow for greater focus and intensification of effort.

During their reviews, school leaders regularly articulated a commitment to developing school-wide approaches to improvement. As they wanted to see improvements in student outcomes, school leaders allocated teachers to provide additional support and introduced whole-school expectations regarding the improvement priorities (for example, in assessment and pedagogy). There were very few school leadership teams that, having confirmed a commitment to school improvement, lacked a coherent and explicit improvement agenda.

For the most part, leadership and school staff were committed to providing quality teaching and learning, and to addressing obstacles to school improvement. Some school leaders regularly reviewed the alignment of their school priorities with the improvement agenda. In some schools, everyone was invited to become involved in the process. That is, all teachers and parents could contribute to the articulation of the key priorities of the school and contribute to their achievement.

In many special schools, the improvement priorities were disseminated throughout the school community. These were communicated in various forums, such as staff, parent and P&C meetings, and in school and staff newsletters. Some of these schools also shared data, showing progress made towards the priority goals in their school newsletters and websites. Overall, staff were kept aware of documented priorities, and there was significant evidence that AIPs were driving the classroom work of teachers in most special schools. Progress towards school priorities was monitored regularly by leadership teams through the collection and analysis of relevant data.

School culture

Special schools subject to review in 2015 generally had high levels of attendance, but these levels were not as high in some schools. Inconsistent collection of data, monitoring and follow-up action were also noted within some special school review reports. There was some evidence of explicit strategies to address non-attendance where this was an issue.

Reviewed special schools generally adopted behaviour frameworks to develop school-wide, shared responsibility for student management, and to foster developmental cultures that promoted learning. Teachers and teacher aides demonstrated a strong commitment to implementing these behavioural frameworks and believed in their ability to achieve the desired outcomes. In some reviews, students described their pride in their school, an understanding of school rules and the school’s strong commitment to their learning.

In many special schools, school rules were explicitly taught, widely communicated and evident in practice. Students, teachers and parents generally spoke well of their schools, and school staff were largely satisfied that student behaviour was well managed. However, there were isolated events noted where student behaviour impacted negatively on both staff and students. One special school provided tip sheets that converted the school rules into suggestions for parents, providing consistent language and processes for appropriate behaviour that could be used at home. This was highly valued by parents.

Special schools regularly collected data on student behaviour, and then used this information to guide decision making and inform behaviour support, such as the explicit teaching of positive behaviours.
School and parent communication involved two-way processes enacted through a variety of means. Examples of important sources of information noted within the reviews included communication books, newsletters, personal contact, individual learning plans, email and school web pages. However, some special schools were yet to engage with social media formats to strengthen school and parent communications. For the most part, parents expressed satisfaction with formal semester reporting and their ongoing discussions with classroom teachers. One school offered a monthly parent group session where guest presenters discussed topics to support student and parent wellbeing.

In special schools reviewed in 2015, there was evidence of a strong sense of pride and belonging in schools among staff and students, including high levels of trust between parents, staff and school leaders. Schools were also largely characterised by positive and respectful relationships between staff, students and parents.

Special schools had developed a positive culture that reflected school-wide commitment to purposeful learning and provided active learning environments. Most schools were calm and encouraging, and classes were orderly and purposeful. There was evidence of whole-school approaches to establish high expectations for learning, and for safeguarding teaching and student wellbeing. In many schools, principals and staff were united about, and explicitly dedicated to, their core objective: to improve the wellbeing and learning of all students in the school.

Parents and community members were welcomed within schools. During the reviews they spoke highly of students, staff and the programs offered by the school. Special schools had strong links within their communities and there were many examples of effective partnerships with educational institutions, businesses and other organisations.

Teachers and teacher aides said they were proud of their schools and achievements. SSOs identified sound to high levels of staff morale in reviewed special schools. Wellbeing committees, consisting of teaching and non-teaching staff, had been established for the purpose of supporting social and emotional wellbeing. Chaplains and guidance officers coordinated a range of wellbeing activities to support students and families in special schools. Parents generally spoke highly of this support.

School funding and budgets

School budgets for special schools within the 2015 reviews were mostly well aligned with local and system priorities, and school leaders considered the priorities from the school improvement agenda when developing their budgets.

Utilising data

Schools had schedules for the collection and analysis of various data to identify baselines for student learning outcomes. Documented data collection and analysis plans informed the allocation of human and physical resources and the implementation of pedagogical programs. However, there was evidence within the reviews that, in some schools, there were no data collection plans and only a limited range of data were being collected, and they were neither informing school decision making nor providing targets or timelines for monitoring student learning growth.

As in all Queensland schools, teachers in special schools enjoyed varying levels of data literacy. Special schools were prioritising the development of teacher expertise in data analysis to better inform effective teaching and learning.

Special school leaders regularly articulated the belief that reliable and focused data regarding student learning were pivotal to the success of their school improvement agenda. Schools continually monitored and used a range of data to evaluate school decisions, including the identification of areas for further improvement. This also included an evaluation of how well schools were tracking towards the achievement of their improvement agendas. This information was often disseminated throughout the schools and informed teaching and learning decisions.

Teachers used data systematically to identify starting points for teaching and to track individual student learning over time. Data were routinely discussed and reviewed in order to consider the effectiveness of teaching, and to inform any adjustments to teaching strategies. For example, in reading, the data identified whether a student was an emerging or conventional reader and provided clear direction for helping the student to attain the next stage of learning.

The reviews showed that data were used to modify and inform future teaching focuses for individual students. Staff regularly reviewed and discussed data when considering the effectiveness of teaching strategies for students. However, in some special schools this was still an emerging practice.
4.4.2 Learning
School leaders held the clear expectation that staff would understand and address the learning needs of all students. In the reviews, schools had often established processes to systematically identify and then respond to these student needs. There was also evidence of whole-school, class and individual solutions devised for addressing student needs. Learning expectations for each student were documented on individual curriculum plans (ICPs), and they were collaboratively developed with input from parents and carers.

School leaders were noted as engaging in data conversations with teachers to brainstorm, discussing and analysing differentiation strategies to improve student outcomes. Reviews indicated that teachers appreciated feedback from school leaders that enabled them to improve such practices. Teachers developed expertise in identifying and monitoring the improved learning of a range of learners. This was achieved through whole-school focuses on implementing, recording and monitoring assessment. Pedagogical strategies were selected and implemented to meet the specific learning needs of individual and particular cohorts of students.

Within the review reports, teachers reported that the feedback students received enabled them to understand what actions were required to further improve their learning. Student targets for learning were often recorded and displayed within classrooms, and were communicated to parents, carers and other stakeholders in a clear and informative manner.

4.4.3 Teaching

Curriculum
Many special schools were working towards the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. In particular, they were unpacking the general capabilities for students accessing the curriculum below the Prep level in age-appropriate ways and contexts for the range of students in special schools.

Assessment data were used across special schools to guide judgments regarding individual student learning needs, to identify starting points for teaching, and to individualise learning for students. Students in special schools were assessed using standardised, diagnostic and school-based evaluation tools. These instruments were also used to identify crucial skills gaps in learning. While teachers have developed expertise in identifying, recording and monitoring assessment, they were at different stages in being able to interpret assessment data.

Review reports indicated that teachers supported collaborative curriculum planning and would welcome further opportunities for collaboration. Teachers indicated that they worked with peers, within cohorts or co-teaching teams, to develop plans for instruction and delivery. Members of the leadership team undertook most of the monitoring of curriculum plans in collaboration with teachers.

In some schools there was a strong alignment between the school’s curriculum plan, class unit plans and classroom teaching. Students were regularly assessed in relation to curriculum expectations. There was evidence that teaching and support staff constructed learning experiences that were engaging and challenging for all students. Schools had documented curriculum frameworks informed by various mandated curriculum, assessment and reporting plans. Overall, in many special schools, there was a proactive learning culture focused on preparing students for classroom success and for meeting life and work challenges after school.

Pedagogy
Special schools were embracing cultures of continuous professional learning. These included a variety of activities, such as classroom-based learning, and mentoring and coaching arrangements for school leaders, department heads and teachers. Teachers often collaborated by sharing successful learning experiences with colleagues. Professional learning activities were broadly aligned with both school improvement agendas and individual staff professional learning plans. These plans detailed a range of targeted and planned learning activities closely linked to school priorities. Overall, there was evidence of a strong commitment to continuous improvement of teaching practice.

There was also some evidence of the consistent implementation of teaching strategies across classes as a result of using pedagogical frameworks. However, not all schools could demonstrate this development.

New and beginning teacher induction
Although school induction programs were mostly provided to new staff at the beginning of the school year, they were not provided in a consistent and systematic way across different semesters or schools. Some schools provided an induction booklet and informed new staff of compliance needs and school improvement priorities. These beginning programs were more often supplemented by less formal practices.

Teacher aides
As evident in professional learning plans, schools worked on building the capacity of teacher aides, as well as their teaching staff. During the reviews, teacher aides expressed satisfaction with the professional learning they had received.

Classroom teachers were supported by teams of committed and dedicated teacher aides, as well as by therapists. Well-developed processes in schools for matching teachers and teacher aides with classes were evident. The specialist skills and interests of teachers and teacher aides were also considered when allocating staff to teaching areas. Teacher aides reported that they had access to professional learning in areas related to student priorities, but that they would like to develop their skills further. They felt highly valued by their school communities, including by parents, teachers and students.
4.4.4 Learning environments

Special schools worked to provide attractive and stimulating learning environments through well-presented and appropriate facilities and grounds. Classrooms had a positive tone and were orderly and visually engaging. However, review teams did note one instance where the physical location of the special school could create significant issues for the management of students with significant disabilities.

Special schools, in consultation with their school communities, gave priority to understanding and addressing the needs of their students. Behaviour data and individual student data were used to assist in decision making for the deployment of staff and the formation of class groupings. There was evidence in the special school reviews that both human and physical resources were being used in a flexible manner to support the delivery of the improvement agenda. School leaders reviewed and adjusted the allocation of staff and other resources while monitoring and supporting staff wellbeing.

Special schools have significant information and communication technology to address the learning needs of students. There was evidence that these resources were used effectively, but that some staff may require training to further capitalise on their use for classroom learning. In addition, a few staff identified technology issues as affecting their ability to be effective.

Schools had implemented some unique school-based programs, including horticulture, recycling and manual arts, to broaden students’ life experiences and to enable their transition to post-school life. In addition, schools provided access to vocational pathways and offered a variety of relevant vocational education programs, including certificate courses in hospitality. With community support, schools raised funds to assist student participation in extracurricular activities, such as interstate excursions.

4.4.5 Partnerships

Schools actively sought to enhance student learning, wellbeing and behaviour by partnering with parents and families, other education and training institutions, and with local businesses and community organisations. Parents reported that they were well informed about their schools. Their involvement included volunteering at camps and sporting events, attendance at social events, such as concerts and dances, enjoying contact with teachers, and providing input into ICPs.

Schools had established relationships with other special schools and schools to which their students transitioned. Schools worked closely to support each other. Staff in special schools provided other special schools with professional learning opportunities and worked together to transition students to and from schools. School leaders, in some review schools, expressed interest in further improving school-to-school professional relationships.

Partnerships with local businesses, community organisations and individuals delivered a range of learning benefits to students through opportunities, such as student work experience, and access to additional staff expertise and school resources. Organisations, including charities, worked closely with families and schools to support students in transitioning to post-school life.

4.5 Outdoor and environmental education centres

OEECs are institutions where the state provides adjunct educational instruction to students enrolled at state schools. As centres rather than schools, OEECs do not form part of Queensland state schooling statistics and school counts. They make up around two per cent (n=8) of 2015 reviews and represent two per cent (n=26) of all Queensland state schools and OEECs. OEECs can be found within all DET regions. They are supervised by the region they are located within. OEECs tend to have few teaching staff, with the majority of centres reviewed in 2015 having fewer than five teachers.

OEECs are institutions where the state provides adjunct educational instruction to students enrolled at state schools.

As OEECs are reviewed by the SIU, their data have been considered in the analysis of the broader 2015 review report dataset. In recognition of their particular circumstances, their school improvement practices are considered separately in the section below.

4.5.1 Leadership

OEECs had established models of shared leadership and teamwork that drove their improvement agendas. There were deliberate strategies in place to develop leadership skills across OEECs. These provided teaching staff with the opportunity to take responsibility for curriculum innovation and school partnerships.

OEEC leaders were committed to success for all, and encouraged teachers to tailor teaching to student needs and readiness.

At review, it was apparent that OEECs had experienced a number of staff issues. Recent staff turnover in some OEECs had resulted in a reduced capacity for them to fulfil their strategic priorities and maintain their usual operation. There was only limited evidence of workforce planning. One OEEC had teaching staff who were mostly graduates, with little school experience. Another OEEC had a number of long-serving ancillary staff, with specific and localised expertise, who were due to retire in the near future. To address such issues, OEECs need to attract and develop the best possible teachers as a priority.

OEEC leaders, to varying degrees, monitored their centre’s performance. Their findings were shared with staff, visiting teachers and parents through a variety of means, such as posters on display around centres. OEEC leaders were committed to success for all, and encouraged teachers to tailor teaching to student needs and readiness. OEEC leaders supported teachers and their development by leading professional learning activities within their centres. OEEC leaders consistently saw the development of staff as central to the further improvement of student learning outcomes.
OEEC staff were open to and sought collegial feedback. There were multiple, ongoing opportunities noted in the reviews for staff to provide formal and informal peer feedback. Reflective practice occurred through informal discussions with teaching staff at the conclusion of programs. However, these professional discussions tended to focus on visiting teacher feedback collected through online surveys and operational matters, rather than on observed pedagogical practice.

Teachers were enthusiastic about and committed to the facilitation of safe, engaging programs, and they articulated desires to improve their teaching. They were committed to finding ways to improve their education services and this was reflected in their desire to learn from colleagues and peers. As a result of these professional learning collaborations, teachers were confident and eager to share, and to learn how to improve their current teaching practices. Teachers in many OEECs also participated in regular reflection days to ensure that their practices were safe and effective.

The improvement agenda

In many of the OEECs reviewed in 2015, school leaders pursued a sharply focused improvement agenda. For example, in one OEEC, staff expressed a shared belief in the centre’s vision, a common understanding of the improvement agenda and a sense of optimism about the centre’s current strategic direction. There was clear alignment between the priorities documented in the strategic plan, AIP, pedagogical framework, professional learning plan and centre budget. The improvement agenda was embraced by all staff who were able to articulate the agenda during the school review. Although OEEC planning documentation outlined areas for specific improvement and explicit strategies for meeting them, clear targets to measure performance were not always evident.

Through consultation, leaders identified a number of priority areas as central to their improvement agendas. Some centres had established models of shared leadership and teamwork to drive their improvement agendas, program development and facilitation. A few OEEC leaders expressed a commitment to school improvement, and were reviewing their own practices and operations to inform the development of their explicit improvement agendas. However, some explicit improvement agendas were yet to be fully developed.

Improvement priorities were outlined in the planning documents of all centres, and these focused on areas such as team building, enhancing the engagement of learners and embedding indigenous perspectives within the agendas. One centre’s improvement priorities were focused on systematic improvement of teaching and learning in order to develop student resilience. In another centre, the OEEC leaders identified two areas for improvement: increasing the number of partnership schools, and the student time committed to critical thinking. However, the key priorities for improvement were yet to be fully developed and shared with staff.

OEEC culture

OEECs demonstrated a strong focus on establishing cultures where all students were expected to fully participate and learn successfully. The OEEC contexts were such that there were very few behavioural problems evident. When behaviour problems did present, there were clear processes for managing them. OEEC staff generally employed the visiting school’s processes for managing inappropriate behaviour, if required. Staff reported that, when behaviour problems arose, they were generally used as ‘teachable moments’ and a ‘shared scenario’ was processed as the basis of a learning opportunity. This process led to fewer incidents of actionable behaviour.

A consistent approach to behavioural expectations and a common language for dealing with them were evident. Many OEEC staff were able to clearly articulate an expectation that all visiting students actively participated, cooperated with and respected self, others and place. Behaviour data was collected by OEECs. However, there was little evidence that the data were analysed or used to inform practice.

There was strong evidence throughout the review reports of centre-wide commitments to constructing learning experiences for students that were accessible, challenging, respectful, engaging and safe. Different cultural needs were catered for by OEEC staff. Before schools visited OEECs, significant time was taken to ascertain the learning needs of different cultural groups in the visiting school. These were then addressed through differentiated teaching strategies.

The provision of such safe, high-quality outdoor learning experiences was valued by teachers from visiting schools. This was evident in the feedback collected at the end of each school visit. The varied cultural backgrounds of students were valued, and OEEC leadership teams and OEEC staff worked to build the social and cultural competence within their centres. They had well-established processes and practices to ensure that student and staff safety was central to all activities.
Feedback from visiting teachers was extremely positive about the services provided by OEECs. There were high levels of satisfaction with OEECs and their provision of expert knowledge. Visiting teachers at one OEEC spoke of the program’s capacity to enrich student learning and of the centre’s willingness to respond to the needs of the school.

Staff morale as recorded by the SOS was generally high in OEECs. A key priority was given to student and staff wellbeing in OEECs. Most OEECs had processes in place to provide both academic and non-academic support to cater to their individual needs.

Utilising data

OEECs collected data on student learning, visiting teacher feedback and visiting parent experiences. Data were collected online, as hard copies, and by digital survey tools. Collected data were reviewed by OEECs at the completion of each program to address any reported issues. Exit data collected through surveys were used by OEEC teachers to monitor visiting teacher satisfaction and student learning, and to reflect on programming effectiveness. Data were collected and analysed at centre, group and individual student levels to track student progress. There was evidence in some OEECs that data were used to monitor the effectiveness of programs, to inform OEEC decision making, and the development of higher order concepts, programming and practices.

Exit survey results are available to staff at the end of each school visit or program. The level of analysis of these data varied across staff, as did the degree to which it then impacted on teaching practices. Some teachers felt that these data did not provide sufficient evidence to inform teaching practice. Throughout OEECs, there was limited evidence of professional learning aimed at building the formal data literacy of staff. Despite this, data were shared and discussed informally on a regular basis, and any issues identified through discussions were addressed in a timely manner. Some OEECs were in the process of trialling the collection of student learning data to evaluate and inform teaching. In other OEECs, data use to build a culture of greater self-evaluation and deeper reflection was less apparent.

4.5.2 Learning

Before schools visited the centre, designated program coordinators communicated with the visiting school to establish if there were any students with special needs attending the camp. Strategies to optimise participation by these students, including contingency plans, were discussed and developed by OEEC staff before the school visit. Staff from visiting schools also played a significant role in the provision of support for individual students.

OEEC staff were able to provide examples of how programs had been modified to optimise the participation of students with special needs. If students arrived at a camp without this prior identification and pre-planning, OEEC staff were still able to improvise and adapt programs to meet the special needs of students.

Throughout the review reports there was a strong indication of OEECs’ broad commitment to ensuring and enabling success for all students. OEEC leaders and staff placed a high priority on ensuring the learning needs of all individual visiting students were identified, acknowledged and planned for through pre-visit processes.

Pre-camp documentation allowed teachers to identify students with individual needs so that OEEC teachers could plan appropriate and challenging activities. Teachers employed a range of strategies, including differentiated teaching, to support the individual needs of students.

OEECs also had in place a number of alternative programs to cater for students with diverse needs and levels of capability. These programs were mostly documented. Teachers were encouraged and supported to monitor cooperatively the experiential learning of individuals, identifying learning challenges or difficulties and adjusting activities to suit their developmental level, ability and needs. Teachers worked to ensure that all students, including high-achieving students and students with disabilities, were engaged and motivated to learn through the teaching and learning strategies offered at OEECs.

Teachers encouraged and assisted students to monitor their own learning. Some teachers used goal setting to promote student reflection on and ownership of their learning, although this strategy was not consistently enacted within or across OEECs.

4.5.3 Teaching

Curriculum

Some OEECs had assessment and reporting policies available on their websites. Policy documents did not necessarily outline assessment strategies, and there was little evidence of assessment processes being linked to their curriculum intent. Across the review reports there was limited evidence of systematic approaches to evaluating student learning. Teachers reported that they found evaluation processes difficult, owing to the short duration of learning activities at OEECs.

There was a high expectation across most OEECs that classroom teachers participate in collaborative planning through pre-visit processes with OEEC teachers. This strategy was implemented to clarify learning intent, identify individual student needs and verify education experiences. For these OEECs, collaborative planning processes and reflective teaching cycles were designed to support the identification and consistent use of high-quality pedagogical practices. Support was provided to OEEC program coordinators through the provision of time and resources to work with visiting teachers in order to clarify learning objectives, identify and monitor student knowledge and understanding, and develop programs responsive to the needs of the school and its students.

In all OEECs reviewed, there was deliberate focus on constructing learning experiences that were locally relevant, accessible, engaging and challenging for all students. OEEC staff also placed a priority on adopting a strengths-based approach to recognising, valuing and building on existing knowledge and skills of students, even in the relatively short time period of the program or activity. They also made use of their unique and engaging learning environments, such as farms and beaches.

Documented curriculum plans in OEECs identified a student learning focus for developing personal and social wellbeing capabilities, such as teamwork, resilience building and leadership. There was also some focus on the development of cross-curricular skills and personal and social attributes. In some OEECs, curriculum plans were supported by high-quality resources that had been developed and displayed to maximise student learning. Programs had also been developed that targeted the learning areas of the Australian Curriculum, such as science, that schools had found more challenging to address.

In some OEECs, recent professional learning had been provided to build staff understanding of outdoor education curriculum models. Leaders within those OEECs focused on curriculum as the basis of targeted professional learning activities and ongoing discussion.
Pedagogy

OEECs’ professional learning plans identified broad opportunities for the professional learning and growth of staff. Individual teachers spoke positively of the opportunities for collaborative work and to engage in peer coaching. Performance plans for each staff member were mostly documented and aligned with the OEEC’s explicit improvement agenda. The professional learning of staff was generally targeted at teacher upskilling to specifically address the learning needs of presenting students.

Highly effective teaching was recognised as the key to improving student learning. There was a commitment to continuous improvement in teaching practice across OEECs, with one OEEC offering professional learning sessions for staff that covered a range of pedagogical frameworks. The implemented pedagogical frameworks were contextualised to suit the individual OEEC and its particular client base.

OEEC leaders were familiar with current and effective teaching practice research within environmental and place-based education. Instructional feedback from OEEC leaders was constructive and delivered to teachers in a timely manner.

Induction for new and beginning teachers

A high priority was afforded to attracting and developing high-quality teachers. In addition, there were comprehensive induction programs in many OEECs that provided new teachers with guidance and support. The documented induction processes included clearly defined stages and timelines for developing technical skills, and standard operational procedures for adventure-based activities. Experienced teachers mentored and supported the development of the required skills in new teaching staff. However, not all OEECs had a formal induction program with a clear focus on pedagogical practices, curriculum content, and the development and management of programs.

4.5.4 Learning environments

Attractive, purposeful and distinctive learning environments were a key feature of the OEECs reviewed. Student engagement and safety were of paramount significance and were accounted for in all planning and programming decisions. Physical resources and the surrounding environments were used to maximise student learning and diversify program offerings. OEECs applied their resources in a targeted manner to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of students and staff.

OEECs gave a very high priority to understanding and addressing the needs of their client schools. OEECs provided learning opportunities that used high-quality, specialised outdoor resources that schools were unable to provide. The reviews noted that facilities and equipment were well maintained.

Human resources in OEECs were deployed in ways that best addressed the learning needs of all students, while also making the best use of available staff expertise and interests. In some OEECs discretionary funds were used to employ additional instructional staff to ensure student group sizes remained manageable, and to maximise student opportunity and engagement.

4.5.5 Partnerships

Within the school reviews, there was evidence of a number of collaborative teaching and learning partnerships with external educational institutions. OEECs demonstrated strong relationships with schools by accessing their programs in leadership, and also with universities via engagement in joint research projects. OEECs also maintained their positive working relationships with universities through the supervision of pre-service teachers.

OEEC partnerships within their communities were successful and appeared to be adequately resourced and sustainable. For example, partnerships with the Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing enabled staff and students at one OEEC to access additional physical environments and learning spaces. In turn, students worked to conserve the integrity of the environment. Another OEEC had been establishing and maintaining strategic relationships with a large number of private landholders so they could traverse and access camp sites on private properties to minimise the long-term impact of activities on permanent camp sites and lease areas.

OEECs with farms had significant partnerships that contributed to the effective day-to-day operations, and enhanced learning programs for students. These included partnerships with the RSPCA and local councils who provided education officers to deliver specialised components of learning programs.

OEEC P&C associations were comprised mainly of community members who contributed to the strategic direction of OEECs and promoted the wellbeing of OEEC staff. Community engagement strategies facilitated input into local decision making and improved communication and feedback processes between the OEEC and its local community. P&C associations provided advocacy opportunities, funding through the ability to access grants, and guidance to support the improvement agenda of OEECs.
This chapter has provided a detailed description of the school types that diverge most from the dominant school types (for example, urban primary schools) within the larger dataset of 2015 review schools. Combined schools, remote schools, very small, rural primary schools, special schools and OEECs are distinctive due to the different environments in which they operate and the issues and challenges to which they are subjected.

As this chapter has illustrated, many of the school improvement activities noted within these school types were also evident within the more dominant school types. However, there were a number of aspects that made these school types unique. For example, very small schools were more susceptible to environmental and enrolment impacts, and remote schools had strong community partnerships, including strong cluster school relationships.

Chapter 5 presents the next steps in school improvement for Queensland state schools, primarily the importance of planning, staff capacity and data to guide school improvement and increase student achievement.