

ASHBURTON CHRISTIAN SCHOOL SPECIAL CHARACTER REVIEW

AUGUST 2019

1. INTRODUCTION

Ashburton Christian School is a Year 1 to 10 non-denominational Christian School established as a Private School in 2009 and Integrated in 2011. It currently has a maximum roll of 120 students from diverse denominational social and ethnic backgrounds. The School serves Ashburton and its surrounds.

The Christian Schools Trust has a responsibility under Section 416 Part 33 of the Education Act to preserve the Special Character of the School. It works with the Ashburton Christian School's Trust and the Board of Trustees to do this.

The Proprietor (The Christian Schools Trust) and the Board of Trustees have agreed a Memorandum of Understanding which includes a three yearly, Proprietor commissioned, Special Character Review.

A review template is also agreed between the parties.

The last review was in 2016.

REVIEW STRUCTURE

Reviewers are Mark Larson (CEO for The Christian Schools Trust) and Miriam Fisher (ex teacher Hillview Christian School and currently faculty member at Laidlaw College involved in initial teacher education).

1. To scope the review, the reviewers considered the Board's Charter and how it gives effect to the Special Character of the School and the Proprietor's expectations of such.

Review focusing questions were developed on Strategic Objectives in the Charter and agreed with the Principal as below.

1. **Bi-Cultural heritage**-How is the school addressing the development of a faithful Biblical response to the treaty of Waitangi firstly at a philosophical level?

2. **Servanthood** – How has the Special Character of the School has informed the design and implementation of:

- Whole School Service Programmes
- Service Programmes linked to Units of class work

3. **Curriculum Development** – How the School has transitioned to concept based learning and how the Special Character of the School has informed this. Key Competencies are becoming a central part of the curriculum and will inform assessment practices going forward. Have the Key Competencies been placed within a faithful Biblical framework?

2. The Principal provides reviewers with a range of documentation around the implementation of the objectives in the Charter for processing prior to the site visit.
3. The Board completes an attestation document.(attached)
4. Parents are surveyed. The survey includes generic questions which were also included in the Parent Survey during the 2016 review and some questions based on the Board's current Charter objectives. (results attached)
5. The reviewers spent one day – 12th August – on site. The on-site programme included:
 - Interviews with the Principal
 - An interview with the Board Chair
 - Visits to classrooms and discussions with groups and individual students
 - Interviews with various staff
 - Interview with the Office Administrator
 - A site tour

List of evidence collected attached.

Note: While the review builds on previous reviews and regular self-review the Board undertakes around its Special Character, this Special Character review is a “snap shot”. Its findings and recommendations therefore need to be considered within the context of wider regular evaluative processes by the Board and Proprietor that support the Special Character of Ashburton Christian School.

THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS TRUST (CST)

The Christian Schools Trust is delighted to serve Ashburton Christian School, the Ashburton Christian Schools Trust and the wider Ashburton community through being the Proprietor for the School. It has been privileged to be associated with the School since its inception and the benefits of Ashburton Christian School being part of a network of Proprietor Schools including Middleton Grange School, Rolleston Christian School and Aidanfield Christian School is evident.

Ashburton Christian School is a regular agenda item at CST meetings. The Christian Schools Trust endeavours to have one of its meetings in Ashburton each year (although it has not quite achieved this in recent times).

David Bayne serves as a CST trustee.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

1. The Board is blessed with an experienced passionate and active Board Chair who maintains a good profile in the School and takes a thorough interest in many aspects of School life.

2. Board meeting processes have matured with the development of robust meeting processes and supporting documentation.
3. There is an experienced stable group of Proprietor Appointees with a good mix of skills.
4. Some promising new parents have been elected during the 2019 elections.
5. The Board has been very supportive of the review process.
6. The Proprietor notes that the Board has refreshed and re-signed the Memorandum of Understanding between CST and the Board of Trustees.
7. The Board have an active part of the Christian Education Network and encourages the Principal to make the most of partnerships with like-minded schools.
8. The Proprietor has worked with the Board to submit a Change of Class Application to go through to Year 13 and increase the maximum roll to 345.

The work of Andy van Ameyde as adviser to the parties is acknowledged as invaluable. It is noted too that the Board has had rigorous discussions about how preference of enrolment will work with the enrolment of older students if the application is successful.

9. The Board has joined the local Community of Learning and supports the Principal in playing an influential role in this work.
10. The Board has become a signatory to the Code of Practice for International Students which gives the School a platform for providing more diverse education experiences and for evangelism and mission to international students.
11. The Board maintain modest expectations around buildings for the campus which has enabled continued growth in space at affordable rates.

PRINCIPAL

1. The Principal has now become quite experienced and is evidently much loved and respected. He has led the School through its pioneering phases providing wise thoughtful and discerning leadership at all levels. He is highly professional, a deep thinker, well networked, energetic and sacrificial in the generosity with which he serves.
2. He embodies on behalf of the Board the good employer role and frequently goes well above and beyond good employer standards in providing superior support and care for staff as needed.
3. The Principal is increasingly recognised as a leader of leaders in the wider Christian education community. He is respected as a deep thinker with a wide range of theological skills to support his leadership. Of late he has worked in the New Zealand Association for Christian Schools context to scope opportunities to develop resources to support Christian schools in their bicultural journey. The prospects here are very exciting and for the first time the Principal has helped address the important questions for Christians which underpin this journey.

The growth of the School has challenged the Principal to find an appropriate balance between presence and visibility in the day-to-day life of the School with the need to work behind the scenes in developing systems and processes to support growth. The Principal is required to be out of the

School more often. If the Change of Class application is successful this challenge will rise to an even higher level developing a Senior Leadership Team structure becomes mission critical work. The Board will need to work closely with the Principal so that both parties can develop a common mind on how they want Principal visibility to look as the School grows larger.

4. The Principal has evidently benefited from, and been refreshed by ,his recent sabbatical. Sabbatical work significantly strengthened the quality of the Change of Class application.

5. Sexuality education – The reviewers sighted confidential document prepared by the Principal for the Board – this is an outstanding piece of work.

STAFF

1. It is noted that the School is enjoying professionally strong and stable staff who demonstrate their Christian character in many ways.

2. Distribution of staff responsibilities seems to be working well. The Principal noted that his growing range of responsibilities have meant that he has not had so much time to focus on Literacy and there has been some slippage in this area.

3. A clear appraisal process is in place. To what extent Special Character themes are embedded in appraisal processes seems to be a matter of individual choice. The Principal is keen to ensure that appraisal is elevated above mere compliance to having a strong focus on professional growth. (which will include Special Character)

4. The Principal ensures there is appropriate induction for new staff into the Special Character of the School. Professional development in Special Character is reliant upon Principal initiative and he has acknowledged that better strategies and processes need to be put in place.

5. There is some “nervousness” amongst staff about the impact of growth on the Special Character of the School and the culture of the School.

6. The Office Administrator is a real taonga. She has skills, energy, discernment and a caring disposition that go well beyond what one generally sees in such a position. The School is indeed blessed to have her.

7. Good thinking is occurring ahead of the need for a larger senior leadership team.

PARENTS

1. The Principal reported that relationships between School and home are generally of a high quality.

2. Survey – 33 respondents

Responses to the survey questions 1 to 9 (see summary attached) largely reflect this. In most questions 80% or more of parents either strongly agreed or agreed with the propositions

Question 8 “The School equips staff to deliver its Special Character effectively” – there were a significant group of parents who were unsure and this is likely to be a communication issue rather than a gap in equipping staff well.

Question 7 “The School has positive leadership and a clear direction” – approximately 50% agreed and 45% strongly agreed. The Principal noted that as the School has grown and he has got busier outside the School his visibility has suffered and this will be reflected in these responses.

15% of respondents were unsure if the “School standards of learning and achievement are high”. The Principal reflected that this may be related to less time he has to be hands on with core teaching and learning.

3. 37% of respondents were unsure if “The School has excellent pastoral care” – The interpretation of the expression “pastoral care” may raise unrealistic expectation in parents’ minds as to what the School will deliver. This could be worth some further discussion.

4. 18% were unsure “The School allows for diversity of thinking around the question faith and living”.

5. Questions 12 to 16 looked at particular current strategic objectives and it was clear that communication with parents around these is a work in progress. A number of parents reported positively and a significant group appeared unsure in each of these questions.

OBSERVATIONS RELATED TO THE FOCUSING QUESTIONS (from Miriam)

I visited ACS on 12th August and spent a day there speaking to 13 students and 4 staff members with a special focus on how the Christian Character is expressed, how the bi-cultural journey is going and, to a lesser extent, how the service aspect of the curriculum is being realised.

Special Character:

Observations

- Students overwhelmingly expressed confidence in their teacher (and staff’s) personal Christian conviction. In response to the question ‘*Do you think your teacher/ the staff here are Christians?*’ taurira responded with comments like:
 - I asked her if she went to church and she did.
 - She tells us stories about when she became a Christian.
 - All her words are Christian.
 - She talks about Jesus and she is kind.
 - They always bring Christian stuff into subjects and it is part of who they are.
 - They talk about God, they go to church.
 - Teachers have their own devotions. The way they teach and who they are shows they are Christian.
- As the students became older there was also a correlation between how the teachers behaved towards others as evidence of their Christian convictions.
- Older students appreciated the fact that Christian learning was not done in a ‘silo-ed’ fashion but was integrated into world studies, science and writing.
- When students were asked about what characteristics make ACS a ‘Christian School’ they often brought up the Christian focus of assemblies, the use of class devotions, learning Bible verses, being kind and helping others and conversations about God being part of the normal fabric of classroom learning.
- Classes, especially in the junior school, featured a lot of displays that gave evidence to the Christian learning and interactions that were going on in lessons. These covered Biblical themes and characters alongside more thought-provoking displays of ‘*What is God Like?*’, ‘*What are People Like?*’ and ‘*How Can People and God Walk Together?*’
- In conversations with teachers, they expressed a deep joy in being able to teach in an environment where they were free to frame conversations, learning and interactions in authentic Christian ways. They talked about the pleasure of being able to pray for children and confront relationship and

ethical issues with a Biblical framework. Teachers also appreciated the ability to shape curriculum to include Christian ways of thinking and engaging with topics.

- Teacher's pointed to the school leadership and board valuing them as whole people and encouraging them to live a life that valued and supported their roles within churches, their community and their families.
- One teacher talked about the deep bond that being Christian gave the staff so that in areas of conflict there was still a sense of being in the work together. Staff genuinely support one another and share work. She would love to see even more collaboration in the special character aspects to further deepen and enrich the teacher and student journeys.

As an observer I think that ACS has created a culture where Christianity and a Christian-focus is both a natural and deeply embedded part of classroom practice. Students feel confident in that their teachers are living out a genuine and authentic faith and they are part of a school environment that is shaped in behaviour and kaupapa by a Christian narrative. Teachers placed a high value on their ability to authentically live out their faith with the children in their care and the fact that this is what makes ACS the school it is. Parents can enrol their children at ACS with a genuine confidence that the education and the learning environment are consistently expressing a Christian ethos.

Thoughts:

I asked older students if they would describe themselves as Christians and how the school supported them in this journey. While they generally gave positive responses to the support they received one student who was not 100% confident to describe himself as a Christian felt he could do with more apologetics style teaching to help him wrestle with why he can be confident with the claims of Christianity and the Bible. This could be an area to consider at intermediate level to compliment the good work being done in the senior school to look at the big questions in world studies.

Bilingual Journey:

Observations

- All students I spoke to about the use of Māori and language learning talked about the specialist teacher who came in and worked with them. They were enthusiastic about sharing the topics they were covering.
- The infant classes in particular had excellent displays that included days of the week, karakia, instructions...
- Students tended to observe that the specialist teacher only did Māori learning with them, but they also pointed to the use of karakia and waiata in assemblies.
- They described themselves as getting more confident at using Te Reo and in pronunciation.
- Older students observed that some teachers had more confidence than others in using Te Reo but felt their teachers were working to give greetings and praise in Te Reo.
- Teachers spoke about the benefits of the wrap-around approach of receiving the PLD with the specialist teacher in class as well as receiving purpose-built support from Melissa in staff meetings.
- Teachers acknowledged a growing openness in the community towards the bi-cultural journey.
- They praised the fact that the journey felt authentic for the staff and students rather than being a box-checking requirement.
- From year 3 upwards teachers had also participated in rich research into an aspect of NZ history, which they then taught all the way through the school and this was seen as a valuable experience for them as practitioners as well as the deeper learning it offered students.
- The decision by students to include Ta Rore's book as part of their production on the themes of forgiveness is further evidence of student learning and engagement in this area.
- In terms of the specialist teacher time of PLD teachers also expressed that having not just language but culture and context as an important part of their learning.
- Teachers are entering into places of greater ownership of their Te Reo journey by the school move to get each class to led karakia and waiata at assemblies. This has moved the responsibility from

one teacher to being something all teachers are able to do and is great evidence of confidence and ownership by the staff at ACS.

While the use of Te Reo is still more of a stretch for some than others the feeling of positivity towards learning and having a go is something ACS can feel very proud of.

Thoughts

- Older students were able to talk about some treaty learning and they linked this to their concept-based learning that had gone on. However, they did not feel they had discussed this in a Christian context or that the work of partnership was linked to gospel commitment. I wonder if exploring the treaty and the importance of justice, unity, honour etc as Christian convictions for developing a framework for treaty and bi-cultural relationships and reciprocity could be a meaningful next step for staff and students.
- For staff, exploring how the bi-cultural journey and special character can have a genuinely authentic conversation could be a next step in terms of shaping teaching and learning in this space.

Service Focus:

Observations

- I spoke to less students and staff members about this aspect due to time constraints and also the ability of younger students to engage with this discussion.
- All the students I asked spoke about their service being based at Princes Court and involving spending time with or attempting to build relationships with elderly and dementia residents.
- Students also talked about senior students fundraising projects, and mufti days although they weren't aware where the funds went.
- Students discussed litter collection and one student linked this to the importance of creation care as a mandate for Christians.
- Generally when students were asked why they did service or what was important about it they articulated a sense of how these 'good works' were a witness to others and also linked them to good Christian character or being the 'right thing to do.' When pushed a little further they sometimes made a connection to modelling the life of Jesus.

Thoughts

In terms of the service elements of ACS I commend the fact that all classes have taken part in some aspects of community service with all students. I wonder if there is space to explore a deep conviction that rises not from a sense of 'ought' but as a response to being rooted in a sense of God's overwhelming generosity and generosity occurring as a natural result of this.

I would love to encourage ACS to continue to think about an explore ways that service could also be linked to students passions and skills and personal areas of conviction. For example students passionate about plastic waste and sewing might choose to make reusable bags from recycled fabric and offer these to businesses to use as an alternative to plastic. Students who are passionate about relationships might interview staff at Princes Court and see if there are ways that students could meet these needs in more meaningful ways...

How do teachers and students work together to integrate their skills and passions in a way that creates service that may extend beyond the boundaries of one-off commitments and shape how students interact with the world outside of school time?

General comments

- Students from ACS appeared to be confident and happy at school and when interacting with staff and other students.

- Classroom teachers communicated with students in caring and respectful ways and the class environments felt positive and safe.
- Environments were colourful and there were many examples of students' work in a variety of subject areas on display.
- Grounds were clean and the building, land and play spaces are generous, warm and inviting.

BOARD ATTESTATION (see attached)

Points of note:

- Ongoing discussion around Preference of Enrolment as the School roll grows and takes on older students.
- The Board will be implementing an Enrolment Scheme if the application is successful.
- The need for more comprehensive 10 Year Property Plan is noted and this is a work in progress.
- An updated Principal Job Description and Special Character Appraisal criteria for the Principal are being worked on.
- Some work related to the Special Character of the School scheduled for between meetings needs to be done more quickly.

GENERAL

1. The reviewers were treated with great hospitality and thoroughly enjoyed their day in the School.
2. Staff morale and commitment to the Christian character of the School is high.
3. Not only has the School campus matured in many ways but so has the culture systems and processes around the School.

REPORT ON PROGRESS AGAINST RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SPECIAL CHARACTER REVIEW REPORT IN 2016 (see attached)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Change of Class and Maximum Roll Increase application carefully considered the impact of such changes on the Special Character of the School. This is to be commended and is most encouraging. If the application is successful Proprietor and Board will need to monitor growth carefully to ensure it enhances rather than compromises Special Character. The visibility of the Principal will become more challenging to maintain and will likely look different - the BoT needs to discuss this with the Principal.
- 2, Some suggestions are attached to this report for Board consideration around the Principal Job Description.

3. Communication with parents needs further attention to ensure they understand and engage with the bicultural and service goals in the Strategic Plan.

4. Investigate possible reasons for the higher percentage of respondents in the survey who were unsure in questions relating to:

- Equipping of staff to deliver Special Character
- Standards of Learning and Achievement
- Pastoral Care
- Diversity of thinking around Christian faith and living.

5. Miriam has recorded “Thoughts/Next Steps”. These are not formal recommendations but may inform ongoing professional conversations.

6. The CST will commission a further review in 3 years time.