



# Curtin Primary School



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Committed to Quality



## Research regarding School Structure and PALs

Throughout Term 2 and 3, a team of Curtin staff have collaborated to evaluate the impact of the streamed 'PALs' classes on student achievement and wellbeing across the school. Throughout the process, regular discussion occurred with Directorate and external professionals with expertise in the field.

The research involved:

- reviewing contemporary education literature and Education Directorate policy
- seeking perceptions of staff, parents and students, through surveys, anecdotes and interviews
- consultation with high school staff and students about school transition and performance
- analysis of school and NAPLAN performance data
- analysis of data about student behaviour
- implementing tools to determine student attitudes to learning and their motivation.

The results were then analysed to give findings that relate to;

1. Statistical information
2. Perceptions of the school or programs
3. Student learning impacts
4. Student wellbeing impacts.

### What did we find?

1. *The range of cognitive abilities in PALs classes is large and includes students in the average range and mildly, moderately, highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted range. This means the curriculum cannot be compacted consistently to meet the needs of the most gifted students. Research indicates those students who may require the adjustment of a streamed class are in those in the highly to profoundly gifted range and the benefit is the class of like minded students. Many gifted students in mixed ability classes are not exposed to role models or students who challenge their learning, which disadvantages their progress.*
2. *The PALs program has meant teachers at Curtin understand the needs of highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted students. We have many success stories for creating a successful learning and wellbeing environment for individual students. Many of these students have come from out of area schools after negative experiences and thrived at Curtin.*
3. *The PALs classes are viewed as elite by many members of the school community. Rather than being a learning adjustment, the program is viewed as recognition of high performance. This creates disconnection between students.*
4. *As students progress through the school, they become aware of the streamed program. This leads to feeling judged as 'smart' or not and a fixed mindset, which transfers to their achievement, wellbeing, confidence and resilience as learners. In general, those who see themselves as capable have higher achievement and wellbeing.*
5. *There are several students across the school who perceive the PALs program impacts friendships. There are many gifted students in mixed ability classes. These students do not access like minded peers in class, and feel socially isolated as they often do not play outside class groups.*
6. *There are students in PALs classes who find the pace too challenging. Despite often high achievement, the students are stressed but will not move classes and lose friends. This negatively impacts their wellbeing.*

7. *Feeder high schools indicate the large number of students labelled as gifted is problematic for transition and achievement at high school as many students and families expect placement in accelerated learning.*
8. *Student motivation in PALs classes is higher and there are less recorded incidents of disruptive behaviour. This is an inequitable learning environment.*
9. *Enrolment demand means we are no longer able to accept students outside the PEA. This means the number of highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted students is reducing.*

### **What will happen now?**

We believe the current PALs program does not enable Curtin Primary School to provide the best learning environment for students. Therefore, a decision has been made to discontinue the current PALs program of streamed classes from 2018. This decision has been made in partnership with the School Board.

A new school structure will be implemented with the intent of providing a culture in all classes that fosters a love of learning. Emphasis will be placed on developing the dispositions and character traits that enable students to grow beyond Curtin as successful learners and citizens. The new structure will involve;

- 22 classes. The flexibility with student numbers that is created by removing the PALs stream means that we are able to provide the straight grade classes which are regularly requested by the community. The only exception to this is a K/1 class to maintain small class sizes.
- Three classes of each year level who operate similar timetables and have the same specialist times. This will enable teachers to group students across classes in a flexible way to develop specific skills and provide more choices in the program. Teachers will also plan and moderate together each week, which is an evidenced strategy that improves learning outcome through building collective efficacy. Students will also have greater access to friends across classes.
- Implementing a curriculum that integrates learning around a key concept. This approach moves us from simply teaching the Australian Curriculum through an integrated but subject based concept, for example, Australian History, to a rich concept, for example, Perspective. This model enables differentiation for all levels of ability and is particularly successful in providing challenge for gifted learners. During 2017, teachers have created the curriculum with the support of an external consultant with a background in gifted education.
- Extending the learning support program to include gifted students. A new role is being created to monitor the progress of individual students and ensure the provision of extension and enrichment programs.
- Implementing wellbeing programs to bring like minds together around common interests and open ended learning.

We believe that quality teaching in a positive school culture is the most important factor to increase achievement for all students. All of these opportunities will be available to all students in the school.

For many families, this decision will align with your own experience and we know you will be excited about the changes. However, we also understand that for some, your experience means you be concerned about how your child will be supported. In this case, I urge you to make an appointment for a personal discussion with me. This discussion will provide opportunities to explore your concerns in light of our research and begin the process of ensuring the best learning environment for your child 2018. Anyone interested in learning more about the research is invited to attend one of the principal discussion sessions to participate in a general conversation about learning.

Students are at the centre of our work at Curtin. You are encouraged to have a discussion with your child about these changes as relevant to their understanding and the impact on their school experience. Teachers will also discuss the new structure as relevant to their class before students nominate peers for their 2018 classes.

I thank you for your participation in our research, consideration of this new structure. I am excited about extending our dynamic learning environment in 2018.

Yours sincerely,  
Merryn O'Dea  
18 October, 2017