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Bethlehem College

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Education institution number: 77

School type: Composite

Total roll: 2108

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Tauranga

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Bethlehem College - December 2023

Special Review Report – Bethlehem College Confirmed Report

Context

Bethlehem College was founded in 1988 as a private school, becoming a state-integrated, special character school in 1999. Located in the Tauranga suburb of Bethlehem, the composite school has over 1900 students on its roll and provides education for students in Years 0 to 13.

The school operates under the umbrella of the Christian Education Trust, which also oversees a range of businesses and educational entities including five early childhood centres and a tertiary institution. Under this Trust's governance, sits Bethlehem College Limited (the proprietor board). The Bethlehem College School Board provides

the stewardship of the school, and includes members drawn from the proprietor board.

The mission of the school is stated as a commitment to “*providing Christ-centred, biblically based education that prepares our young people for a life of effective service and leadership*” with a vision to “*be a Christian learning community of excellence where lives are transformed.*”

Background

ERO’s review of Bethlehem College was already in progress when concerns were brought to the attention of the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) and Education Review Office (ERO). These concerns related to an addition to the school’s *Statement of Belief* relating to marriage (Clause 13) outside of its *Integration Agreement*. The statement of belief helps to define the school’s special character. In the case of Bethlehem College, staff and students’ families are required to make a commitment to the *Statement of Belief* as a condition of enrolment and employment. On 17 June 2022, the Ministry of Education instructed the school board to remove clause 13.

In July 2022, there were several complaints shared with ERO in relation to experiences of homophobic bullying while at the school. The school’s Board of Trustees chose to withdraw Clause 13 from its *Statement of Belief* following discussions with the Ministry of Education, although subsequently in September 2022 wrote to its parent community confirming that these beliefs continued to be core to the fabric of the school.

ERO evaluates and reports on the education and care of young people in the schools, including the extent to which the school provides a safe and inclusive environment for all students.

As a consequence, ERO expanded its focus for the review to include:

- an assessment of the school’s policies, systems, and procedures – in particular, the extent to which these accommodate and protect the rights of all learners at the school
- the school’s systems and practices in respect of types of bullying and provision of anti-bullying programmes, including homophobic and transgender bullying

- an assessment of learning programmes, including the delivery of relationship and sexuality curriculum
- interviews and focus group discussions with current students
- how well the school has managed complaints from former students and their families
- a review of stand downs, suspensions, expulsions and exclusions policy and procedures for recent years, and how these have been implemented
- an assessment of teacher registration processes
- an analysis of the results of the NZCER student survey that the school shared with its community.

During its engagement with the school through 2022, ERO collected and sighted extensive documentation about the operation of the school. This material was deemed as insufficient in identifying accommodations by the school for students in respect of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. ERO reported to the school on its general findings and recommendations in November 2022 and then subsequently in March 2023. On both occasions, the school contested these findings and the basis on which they were formed.

Obligations of state-integrated School Boards

Under Schedule 6 of the Education and Training Act 2020, and the Integration Agreement entered into between the proprietor and the Minister of Education through authority delegated to the Ministry, state-integrated schools are entitled to the maintenance and preservation of the school's special character and stated beliefs. At the same time, there is an obligation on Boards of Trustees of state-integrated schools, as with all state schools, to ensure that they give effect to the primary objectives in governing the school as stated in section 127 of the Education and Training Act 2020.

It is ERO's position that while the school has the right to state their beliefs in line with their Integration Agreement, every school must take all reasonable steps to eliminate racism, stigma, bullying and any other forms of discrimination including towards those in respect of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and in relation to marital status. Special character values and beliefs must not as such contribute in any way to a breach of relevant student rights set out in the Education and Training Act 2020, the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990, the Human Rights Act 1993 or the National Education and Learning Priorities. The school board is equally required to take all reasonable steps to ensure that it is inclusive, accommodates

diversity and protects the identity of those students who are enrolled with the school. This includes having appropriate pastoral supports in place that attend to the wellbeing of all students.

As a state-integrated school, it is the responsibility of the school's proprietors, board, and senior leadership team to ensure that all reasonable steps are taken to reconcile their general legal obligations with their underlying beliefs, values and special character as provisioned for in their *Integration Agreement*.

The Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand) requires all teachers to have a commitment to learners that includes promoting the wellbeing of learners, protecting them from harm and promoting inclusive practices. Teachers are required to work in the best interest of learners by being fair and effectively managing their assumptions and personal beliefs. It is the school's responsibility to support and guide teachers to meet these expectations and standards.

Special Review

The function of ERO is to provide assurance to the school, wider community, and the Minister of Education that the above obligations are delivered through the policies, systems, staff guidance, training, and the practices of the school.

At a meeting with the school's presiding member and their representatives on 5 May 2023, ERO's Chief Review Officer made the decision to undertake a Special Review of the school under section 463 of the Education and Training Act 2020, looking specifically at the extent to which the school is taking all reasonable steps to ensure that all students, including LGBTQIA+ students are physically and emotionally safe and are adequately provided for through policies, systems, guidance, staff training and practices within the school. Special reviews may report on issues raised by external sources.

These reviews are conducted using a flexible evaluation approach aimed at addressing a specific question. Based on several initiatives by the school through 2022, one of the purposes of this review was also to gather evidence to determine the extent of the progress the school is making towards achieving a safe and inclusive environment for all students.

The review involved ERO interviewing a range of current and former students, staff, and parents. On site meetings were held with the school board and senior leadership team during the week of 19 June 2023. Through the course of the review, several individuals also approached ERO to talk about their experiences of the school. ERO also received a wide range of written correspondence from the school's wider community in relation to the purpose of the review.

Findings

ERO's findings are that Bethlehem College has yet to achieve the balance between the preservation of its stated beliefs and meeting its obligations in respect of section 127 of the Education and Training Act 2020, and the National Education and Learning Priorities.

For many teachers, staff and parents, Bethlehem College provides a positive educational experience for learners, where they feel a strong sense of community. A large group of students feel the school provides a positive and safe learning environment.

In contrast, a small number of current and former students that ERO talked with felt harmed and deeply hurt by their experiences at the school. These students believed that they had been specifically singled out and subjected to bullying and targeted because of their sexual orientation.

It is ERO's judgement that the school has yet to fully develop a culture that characterises respect, embraces diversity, and provides safety for all students. The group of young people that do not conform to the school's special character experience a lack of acknowledgement and inclusion as a result of the way policies and practices operate in the school.

There is limited acknowledgement within the school's key policy statements, guidelines or training materials which recognises or considers how the school meets its obligation to support LGBTQIA+ students in the context of the school's stated special character.

A range of school community members, both past and present, who approached ERO expressed strong support for Bethlehem College, its values, and a deep commitment

to the school's Christian special character. However, they also voiced concern for how these aspects were currently being enacted and implemented by leaders and the board in the everyday life of the school, particularly in relation to those students who do not conform with the school's interpretation of the stated beliefs.

The school board and leadership need to be more deliberate about how they build a positive culture that embraces difference and celebrates diversity. Having a clear strategic focus in planning to provide a safe and inclusive environment for every student, specifically those who do not conform to the school's expressed beliefs, should assist the school to progress towards achieving its responsibilities.

Staff attitudes and practices

Most staff interviewed by ERO believed that they promote inclusive practices, and effectively manage their assumptions and personal beliefs (particularly in relation to LGBTQIA+). Some staff and former staff reported to ERO that there were a small number of teachers who, in their views, do not meet these expectations.

They felt that the school's stated belief in respect of gender and marriage was divisive and contributed to a culture within the school which limited its acceptance of diversity. They also believed that this led to structures and practices that failed to provide adequately for LGBTQIA+ learners.

Professional learning and development and expectation setting for staff

It is ERO's judgement that professional learning and development (PLD) for teachers and staff does not sufficiently support those who need to build their capability to effectively manage bias and accept diversity.

Staff identified that there was a range of PLD opportunities that focus on and align with the school's strategic priorities, but PLD that gives staff strategies and skills to address bullying, support diversity, and student emotional wellbeing was needed but not provided.

Explicit guidance and expectation setting from senior management is required through professional development, about how staff will work in the best interest of

students including their accountabilities for LGBTQIA+ students.

Pastoral care systems

Leaders recognised that changes were needed to the school's pastoral care provision as it did not adequately support all students and meet the needs of vulnerable groups. Following an internal review, a restructured pastoral care system was introduced at the beginning of 2023. The new system is intended to provide students with suitable guidance and counselling and increase opportunities to build connections with key staff.

Once the provision is fully implemented and embedded, leaders should prioritise the evaluation of the new pastoral and care process to understand the impact it is having on those learners who do not conform with the school's expressed beliefs.

Independent advocacy

In 2022 ERO raised that the school had not provided access to independent and/or external avenues and advocacy services for students who need support.

ERO encourages leaders, as part of the ongoing review of pastoral support, to continue to provide better information to students about ways they can safely and independently seek support, including accessing external advocacy services.

Increasing student agency and voice

Leaders have increased opportunities for students to share their voice and views. A student wellbeing survey conducted in August 2022 shows that while the school's values and expectations are well understood by most students, they are not fully or consistently enacted in the daily life of the school. Several groups of students did not agree that a positive, supportive, and collaborative culture is being experienced by everyone. Selected extracts from the wellbeing survey have been published, however, the complete summary and analysis of results have yet to be shared with the school community.

The board and school leaders need to effectively address the areas where students do not agree that the school is delivering its vision and desired outcomes. Learner input is crucial to inform school approaches to develop inclusive practices.

ERO suggests further wellbeing surveys would provide information to school leaders about the extent to which the school has demonstrated positive culture of acceptance.

The December 2022 teacher wellbeing survey confirmed that teachers have a strong sense of commitment towards care, support, and respect for students through their teaching. Many teachers expressed a clear understanding of the school's vision and special character but did not agree that the school leaders and the board interpreted and applied them in an effective and fair way.

The majority of teachers surveyed stated the school does not have practices that support students who are exploring their gender identity.

Delivering on the breadth of the Health Curriculum

The design and delivery of the health curriculum requires strengthening. It does not sufficiently deliver the full breadth of the required aspects of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Some individual components of the current programme have merit, but a robust health education curriculum delivered in depth to students in regular classroom environments is not evident.

Senior students indicated their interest in exploring contemporary health issues more deeply. Parents surveyed about the health curriculum expressed their support for the delivery of a programme that covered relationships, sexuality, bullying, decision making, equity and respect for all.

The school's review of health education provision should seek to improve how young people are supported to enact responsible attitudes and values. A thorough review of the key learning areas of mental health, relationships and sexuality education is needed to ensure that it is helping to create a safe and inclusive physical and emotional environment for all.

Internal review

Effective internal review processes are not sufficiently evident, and staff are yet to develop a shared understanding of evaluation for improvement. The new initiatives and programmes aimed at improving safety and care for students need stronger support to effectively implement and embed across the school. Leaders and the school board need to closely monitor and review the impacts and effectiveness of new programmes and initiatives in a systematic way.

Next Steps

This Special Review report sets out next steps for leaders and the school board to fully develop a culture that characterises respect, inclusion, and safety for all students.

- Reconcile the preservation of the school's stated beliefs and values with its obligations and responsibilities as a state integrated school.
- Build on the current strengths of the school to fully develop a culture that characterises respect, inclusion, and safety for all students — particularly those who do not share or conform with the stated beliefs and special character of the school.
- Clarify expectations for teachers and provide targeted professional development to support staff to work in the best interest of students including their accountabilities for LGBTQIA+ students.
- Strengthen the school's review and evaluation practices to better determine the impact of changes to health education, bullying prevention, pastoral care processes and programmes have on enhancing the safe, caring, and inclusive emotional and physical environment for all students. Use this information to inform decisions about priorities and planning.
- Continue to develop the health education programme and delivery to ensure it covers the breadth and depth of *The New Zealand Curriculum* intentions and expectations.
- Review areas of potential discrimination and prejudice in school policies and practices, particularly in relation to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.
- Continue and extend ways to gather a range of voice through regular surveys of students, families, and staff, about social and emotional wellbeing, safety, and

inclusion. Fully respond to all the findings of these and previous surveys and address the needs of groups who are not well served by the school culture.

- Consider and address the feedback from NZCER to the principal dated 19.8.22 regarding the reasons why some students feel the systems and practices are not always working for them.
- Establish an independent complaint mechanism for students who feel they cannot raise concerns within the school.

Recommendation

The Bethlehem College school board and the proprietors board (Bethlehem College Limited) should seek to achieve a suitable balance between giving effect to its stated beliefs and meeting its obligations in respect of section 127 of the Education and Training Act 2020, Human Rights Act 1993 and the National Education and Learning Priorities.

Future Action

ERO will continue to work with the school in its evaluation for improvement cycle to improve outcomes for all learners. ERO will support the school in reporting their progress to the community. A further report will be published on ERO's website in due course.

Shelley Booysen
Director of Schools

12 December 2023

About the School

The Education Counts website provides further information about the school's student population, student engagement and student achievement.

educationcounts.govt.nz/home

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