School Self Assessment Report

Community and Culture

Self Assessment Team: Peter McNamara, Lara Hvala

Section 1: Executive Summary (1 to 1½ pages)

Gawa Christian School is a remote Indigenous Christian College situated on the northern tip of Elcho Island. Our school offers education for Transition – Year 10 students. It has a Transition – Year 3 class operating and a Year 4 – 10 class. It also has a preschool program running with volunteers. The school is supported by the community who encourage mainstream schooling in conjunction with the teaching of traditional languages and Indigenous Culture. It has a fluctuating enrolment of approximately 50 students. Enrolments have continued to fluctuate during each term depending on shifting communities, funeral commitments and the capacity to house everyone in the houses that are in Gawa. On average, students are present for approximately 65% of the time. Over 2008 and 2009, no students attained the National Benchmarks.

Gawa Christian College has adopted the School Improvement and Renewal Framework (SIRF) produced by Catholic Education Northern Territory. Gawa acknowledges the excellent work that Catholic Education has done in producing this piece of work and thanks Catholic Education for providing open access to it. It is with the same collegial and collaborative process that Gawa Christian College has worked through this process at a local level.

Through a self assessment process which included interviews, written answers, discussions, observations, reflection and activities within and surrounding the school the community, a picture of how the community and culture was obtained within the Key Area of Community and Culture. The Key Area includes the values and beliefs within Gawa’s school and community environment and which in turn weighs positively or negatively on everything that occurs.

Gawa strengths include a warm welcoming learning environment which serves the Christian community by providing a Christ-centred education. The passion of the staff and the happiness of the students are quickly evident. The safe and engaging learning environment challenges students to make inroads into the areas of deficit in their learning journey.

Many aspects of this community enhance the opportunities for learning and these include the cultural diversity which is clearly evident across the school and community, the nutrition program, and the inclusion of all students and a number of parents and community elders in the learning program.

As a result of confusion surrounding who has a say in what, the school needs to develop a practical understanding of the differences between Governance and Operations. Confusion also surrounded what the vision and mission of the school was. No one seemed to be able to articulate either of these and a number of folk said they would this investigated.

Gawa Christian School would benefit from encouraging a greater engagement with some of the families that are not present at the Gawa community. This is not an easy task but needs to be looked at in some way as better engagement with the homeland centres and Galiwinku could produce better outcomes and engagement for some of the students.
Finally, the school is in need of a framework upon which to hang and add its own documents of learning. It is recommended that the school investigate the Remote Schools Curriculum and Assessment Materials (RSCAM) with a view achieving this outcome.

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Enrolments have continued to fluctuate during each term depending on shifting communities, funeral commitments and the capacity to house everyone in the houses that are in Gawa.

On average, students are present for approximately 65% of the time. These figures don’t take into account that many students are present for over 95% of the time whilst others can still be enrolled but do not attend school for extended periods. The attendance is weaker in the secondary years.

Over 2008 and 2009, no students attained the National Benchmarks, although attempts at the NAPLAN testing have improved together with the support provided by the school.

A strong nutrition program is provided by the school and students which includes the supply of morning tea and lunch each day for students. An art program and an active vegetable program support student learning outcomes. Students are encouraged to participate in fishing hunting and traditional cultural days run by elders. Other activities such as sailing, music lessons and school camps are available.

There is strong community support for the school and the school is supported as part of the Northern Territory Christian Schools network of schools and this provides another valuable level of support. Within this network, the school liaises with Marrara Christian College, where some students move into Darwin to attend. The older Secondary students also access VETis and other senior secondary programs through Marrara as appropriate.

Section 4: Evaluation of performance: Commendations and Recommendations (2-3 pages)

Commendations:
The staff and wider community are to be congratulated on the welcoming nature of the school and wider Gawa community. Visitors to the community are made to feel welcome, and community members coming near the school are made to feel comfortable. It is significant that the school is not fenced off from the community and it quickly becomes clear that Gawa Christian School is indeed a place where 2 cultures come together as one. The community mosaic which was designed and created by the elders of the three homelands stands in the middle of the community, adjacent to the school. The three panels represent Gawa, Naningburra and Banthula and the school provides a place where these 3 meet.

There is much evidence for cultural diversity across the school and community environment. Gawa elders teach at the school and include culture and language in appropriate and authentic ways. The very fact that Balanda (Non-Indigenous) and Yolngu (Indigenous) live, learn and play with one another and within the same community is testimony to the uniquely successful meeting of 2 cultures in this remote location.
The passion for Christian Schooling, which will be focussed on in the Key Area of Faith Identity in another year, should not be passed over. Clearly the residents of Gawa want a Christian School and join the regular midweek fellowships and weekend gatherings which is an informal, yet meaningful church. It is held in the school facility and ownership seems to equally belong to Balanda and Yolngu. This biblical integration was apparent throughout the school and seemed to contribute to the ‘warm’ and ‘happy’ nature of the children.

Following this, Balanda and Yolngu students feel safe learning, living and socialising together. Within this culture of well being, student engagement in many and varied opportunities is high. There is a personableness amongst staff towards the students and although there is a comprehensive behaviour management policy, there isn’t great need for this to be utilised as the students are largely engaged and interested in their learning.

The school is to be commended for establishing a mothers and babies program within the school, which welcomes pre-school age children and parents and allows them to participate and transition into early schooling in a natural manner. Another noteworthy opportunity is provided for access and engagement in learning when the school is taken into another offsite community once a week so that families can see their children learning and any school age children not at school for various reasons can be followed up and exposed to a good model of teaching and learning.

Further access to learning is provided through a robust daily nutrition program which includes fruit and vegetables. Opportunities are also enhanced through the new Phonic Ear Program which both improves the quality and volume of the teacher’s voice as it better reaches the high proportion of students who have hearing issues.

Community members are integral to the learning process at Gawa and a good number of folk work within the school and move very comfortably through it. Elders can be seen to be involved in the teaching of culture and language.

Finally, the school staff is committed to their mission at Gawa Christian School and sees each child as an individual. Different staff members can be seen to be attending to different students no matter whose class they belong to. In addition, staff engage with families after school and on weekends which not only builds up relationships which are pivotal in the formal learning process but they also break down barriers to learning and provide opportunities for the school and wider community to have fun.

**Recommendations:**

Employ a community liaison officer (Indigenous) who is involved in dialogue/discussions with families each day. They can report back to families as they drop off students after school – and ensure that dialogue is open between school and families.

Investigate with a view to developing a practical understanding of the differences between Governance and Operational matters amongst school stakeholders. This will allow for better understandings of the roles and responsibilities of community stakeholders, parents, the Principal and the NTCSA, and give stakeholders an insight into when and how they might be able to participate in these areas of the school.
Confirmation and marketing of a well articulated vision and mission statement that is clear to all stakeholders is a straightforward, yet priority recommendation. This process will confirm the school, NTCSA and the community’s agenda.

Encourage parents not currently engaging with the school to begin doing so. Many parents are living outside the Gawa community and need to be presented with opportunities to engage in the school process in some manner. The holding of school events in the homelands and Galiwinku is recommended. Meet with parents periodically – as opposed to only when a child is 'off track'! Consult Daymangu more, particularly as this is his request.

Investigate the Remote Schools Curriculum and Assessment Materials (RSCAM) which is designed for Transition for Year 10 for remote schools.

Documentation plans are needed for teaching and assessment practices

Plan units of work and lessons with Gotha and Basma at the start of each term

Targeted training in the areas of ESL and Indigenous issues could be useful and could be done on a small scale in staff meetings.

With Professional Learning, Gawa is now at a stage where it could most benefit from consolidating what it already has in its grasp, including curriculum and organisational planning.

There has been a huge amount of Professional development and care needs to be taken when considering further PD needs so not to overburden the staff.

Organise sessions as part of the school week – for older students to mentor/teach younger students.

Encourage everyone to accept that Indigenous and Balanda cultures are different and we both have valid ways of dealing with situations.

It is recommended that a strategic plan be confirmed for the next 2-3 years.

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Section 5: Submission and Endorsement

Principal: **Lara Hvala**

Chief Executive Officer: **Geoff Bateman**

School Self Assessment Working Party: **Peter McNamara & Lara Hvala**

Date: **September, 2010**
School Self Assessment Report

Self Assessment Team: Peter McNamara, Lara Hvala

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Through a self assessment process which included interviews, written answers, discussions, observations, reflection and activities within and surrounding the school the community, a picture of how the community and culture was obtained within the Key Area of Teaching and Learning. This area should be inclusive of the culture and language that is the domain of the local community and which has much to offer the teaching and learning programs.

Gawa’s strengths include a warm welcoming learning environment which serves the Christian community by providing a Christ- centred education. The passion of the staff and the happiness of the students are quickly evident. The safe and engaging learning environment challenges students to make inroads into the areas of deficit in their learning journey. Many rich and innovative learning activities have been observed and Gawa can be commended upon the effort that staff put into the teaching program to make it accessible to all students and to make it interesting to all stakeholders.

Many aspects of this community enhance the opportunities for learning and these include the rich learning environments, student engagement, the catering of individual differences and the tracking of student progress. Partnering with families is an important part of developing outcomes in any teaching and learning program.

Gawa Christian School would benefit documenting many of its activities and policies. While many rich learning activities are occurring there needs to be a systematic framework upon which these can be documented and reported.

Finally, the school is in need of a framework upon which to hang and add its own documents of learning. It is recommended that the school investigate the Remote Schools Curriculum and Assessment Materials (RSCAM) with a view achieving this outcome.
Section 2: Methodology (½ page)

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A number of discussions regarding this key focus area were had with the Principal and liaison at the beginning during and at the end of the process, with particular reference to the self assessment area were participated in.

Key stakeholders such as teachers, teacher aides, traditional elders, parents were interviewed. With respect to the Yolngu, some of the interviews were very informal and took the way of discussions, using the requirements which were simplified and delivered orally, as they are not written for those who found English challenging in either written or oral form.

In some cases an interpreter was used. Classroom visits were informal, although different classes were observed on different occasions.

Attendance and participation at various community activities assisted this process: a community church service and discussion, a community barbeque on the beach, a 2 day formal cross cultural session and a weekend social event at one of the outstations were included in the data gathering activities. A number of staff were also met at a formal 2 day conference in Darwin which was the annual NTCSA conference.

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Over 2008 and 2009, no students attained the National Benchmarks, although attempts at the NAPLAN testing have improved together with the support provided by the school.

The Accelerated Literacy (AL) program is used throughout the school and student tracking has enabled the school to see good student progress through these levels.

The school program begins earlier in the build up and works through public holidays so as to not lose students back to communities. Release time for teachers is accumulated up until Friday when the staff meet together for planning.

A strong nutrition program is provided by the school and students which includes the supply of morning tea and lunch each day for students. An art program and an active vegetable program support student learning outcomes. Students are encouraged to participate in fishing hunting and traditional cultural days run by elders. Other activities such as sailing, music lessons and school camps are available.

Hearing testing has resulted in the recent purchase of Phonic Ear into the classrooms and the library which amplifies and improves clarity of sound for greater sound production.

There is strong community support for the school and the school is supported as part of the Northern Territory Christian Schools network of schools and this provides another valuable level of support. Within this network, the school liaises with Marrara Christian College, where some students move into Darwin to attend. The older Secondary students also access VETis and other senior secondary programs through Marrara as appropriate.
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Gawa elders teach at the school and include culture and language in appropriate and authentic ways. The very fact that Balanda (Non- Indigenous) and Yolngu (Indigenous) live, learn and play with one another and within the same community is testimony to the uniquely successful meeting of 2 cultures in this remote location.

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whose class they belong to. In addition, staff engage with families after school and on weekends which not only builds up relationships which are pivotal in the formal learning process but they also break down barriers to learning and provide opportunities for the school and wider community to have fun.

The AL program incorporates a major focus on explicit teaching and is working very successfully, allowing for systematic testing and tracking of students. Student portfolios and rich learning tasks support these endeavours.

Scaffolding is effectively employed in the school to assist students as required.

**Recommendations:**
- Document successful Teaching and Learning activities
- Collect and Collate newsletters and make use of them in the teaching and learning process
- Document appropriate policies and collate
- Document an ongoing curriculum framework
- Explore opportunities to improve NAPLAN results
- Build an awareness of student progression and attendance strategies
- Track student trends as they leave the Gawa School
- Investigate opportunities to employ a part time liaison officer

**Section 5: Submission and Endorsement**

Principal: **Lara Hvala**

Chief Executive Officer: **Geoff Bateman**

School Self Assessment Working Party: **Peter McNamara & Lara Hvala**

Date: **September, 2010**