Dear parents and carers,

I am writing to you regarding the results of a recent independent investigation into practices at Bendigo Special Developmental School (SDS). The investigation was conducted following concerns being expressed about the treatment of students at Bendigo SDS. The Department of Education and Training respects the rights of parents to raise issues and complaints, and treats all such concerns seriously. The investigation was undertaken by investigators Justitia between October 2015 and January 2016.

I am able to inform you that the investigation made no findings, either against Bendigo SDS principal Julie Hommelhoff or against any other staff member, which would have indicated that there are systemic practices and/or organisational or cultural issues that create a risk of harm to students.

In respect of the most significant of the allegations, I can advise that the allegations that there are inappropriate structures at the school were not substantiated, and the allegations that staff used “pressure points” to restrain students on occasions in 2009 and 2014 were also not substantiated. The investigation did find that last October, due to an error, a child was locked outside, within the “clothesline yard” for approximately five minutes. However, it was found that the clothesline yard was an appropriate place for that particular child to go if the child had the ability to move freely between the clothesline yard and the kitchen area.

The investigation also found that communication between Bendigo SDS teachers and parents (for example, in respect of the information included in communication diaries) could be improved.

Based on the findings of the report, the Department is satisfied there are no systemic practices or cultural issues at Bendigo SDS that create a risk of harm to students. Nevertheless, the Department’s Secretary, Gill Callister, has asked Department staff and the Principal Practice Leader (Education), whose role is to support all specialist schools and strengthen inclusion practices across the school system, to visit and work with the school to continue to improve its professional practices.

As part of the Government’s broader inclusion agenda, the Department and Principal Practice Leader will assist the school to identify initiatives and improvements that could be made to professional learning and training at the school. The Department will also assist the school to consider and act on Justitia’s communication findings.

I understand the past six to twelve months have been an unsettling time for the entire school community. I am confident that following this investigation, and under the leadership of Ms Hommelhoff, the Bendigo SDS school community will now be able to move forward together, focusing on a shared intention to offer students an opportunity to learn, develop and grow at a school dedicated to their needs. I ask you to support Ms Hommelhoff as she continues to lead Bendigo SDS into the future.

The cooperation and patience of Ms Hommelhoff and her staff during this process have been important. Should you wish to, I encourage you to contact Ms Hommelhoff to arrange a time to raise any questions or concerns you have regarding the investigation and its findings.

Yours sincerely,

Bruce Armstrong
Acting Deputy Secretary, Regional Services Group.

22/03/2016