A Lead High School

MSSD Output 8: Assessing learning levels and adapting curriculum

South Australia Department for Education and Child Development (DECD)
A Lead High School

Abstract

To support school leaders and staff to strengthen teachers’ abilities in assessment and curriculum adaptations, the South Australia government sector has established a number of lighthouse schools. These schools are expected to work with other schools to share knowledge and enhance capabilities across multiple sites. Known as ‘lead and buddy schools’, the model is premised on the lead schools having pre-existing strengths in leadership, differentiated curriculum delivery and strong learning programmes which are being augmented by professional learning and resources provided by the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (DECD). This case study provides a detailed overview of developments that have occurred in one of the lead schools in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. Critical elements of the case study include the organisational arrangements established by the school for learner support, the use of assistive technologies and the approaches that the lead school adopted for staff professional learning and engaging families, particularly those of children with disability enrolled at the school.

Key elements and actions

The case study high school is a large secondary provider located in the Northern Eastern suburbs of Adelaide. It shares facilities with two other secondary schools on the same site and the schools collaborate in a number of ways including over timetable structures, the delivery of some classes and via cross campus faculty meetings that are held once per term.

The high school’s involvement in the MSSD initiative reflects the school’s own direction and development process. The school has established a range of strategies to effectively cater for the learning needs of all students enrolled at the school. These strategies are outlined below.

Learner support

Organisational structures and systems operate at two levels to support student learning:

- **Student placement in the Disability Unit.** The placement is determined via a regional process and, once placed, students are supported through a range of curricula guided by the Australian Curriculum, South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework and the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) and life skills learning opportunities. Students in the unit mix with mainstream students via integrated home groups and also have access to Home Economics kitchens, Science labs, technical workshops, Art studios and sports facilities. Students enrolled in the Disability Unit are also included in all whole school events such as swimming carnivals, sports days, achievement assemblies and graduation celebrations.

- **Students placed on a Negotiated Education Plan (NEP).** This occurs in response to identification of a disability or learning difficulty. For these students the NEP, developed in collaboration with parents, allied health professionals and often the students themselves, identifies learning goals, teaching strategies and adjustments to curriculum in order to optimise learning.

All relevant staff are informed of the student, their needs and suggested strategies for differentiation via a student letter that class teachers are required to sign and date to
acknowledge that they have been made aware of the student and their learning needs. The school provides a template document for this purpose.

The school also adopts a range of strategies to support student learning, including establishing learning and assessment plans for students in all classes including:

- **Use of metacognition strategies.** These are based on Habits of Mind and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

- **The provision of a Learning Centre.** This is the initial base for delivery of English at years 8, 9 and 10. Similarly Mathematics classes for students in Years 8 and 9 also have the provision of a support officer. The Learning Centre also acts as a resource for staff to guide curriculum modification across all curriculum areas.

- **Specific training and guidance.** Staff are supported to differentiate curriculum and strategies catering for the social and learning needs of all students, including those with disability as well as students who may be academically gifted.

Consultations with staff provided clear evidence of active differentiation in approaches to meet student needs across organisational arrangements, curriculum delivery and assessment processes. For example, one teacher outlined an approach that had been developed for an individual student who often experienced high levels of anxiety when lining up with other students prior to entering the classroom. Permission was given for the student to wait in an area adjacent to the classroom, within eyesight of the teacher but not amongst the other students.

Evidence was also provided of differentiated tasks for other students where the learning task for most of a Home Economics class was set out in a detailed text under a series of sub-headings. However, for other students, the same learning task was set out in a simpler format with a table that provided a summary of the more complex text.

Similarly, assessment strategies showed variations in work requirements according to students’ capacity to complete written reports or make oral presentations. All students had to demonstrate their understanding of a particular topic but the means to demonstrate this learning varied in terms of breadth, depth and medium of presentation.

**Use of assistive technologies**

In order to identify the most effective and appropriate technology to support student learning, the school has established an Innovations Learning Team (selected from across learning areas via an expression of interest process). Its task is to investigate and develop identified emerging ICT technologies and applicable devices, for direct use in the teaching and learning programme at the school.

The team has responsibility to support other staff on curriculum delivery and pedagogy to become comfortable in the use of these emerging ICT applications across all learning areas through three areas of action:

- **Investigating and trialling the use of iPads and tablets.** This involves promoting exemplars of good classroom practice, making applications and software available that fully utilise the device, and demonstrating the ease of using the device in a learning setting.

- **Providing ongoing professional learning.** All staff are assisted to embed successful practice and recommendations are made for ongoing training.
• **Planning organisational arrangements.** This includes administration and resources with recommendations to the ICT leadership group as to preferred software, devices, and systems.

To achieve these outcomes, team members initially made their own use of the iPads or Tablets, then shared their expertise with the other staff.

While the school makes extensive use of information and communication technologies as tools to aid and support learning, staff representatives did not consider assistive technologies as a panacea to meeting learning needs. Instead, a consistent message was to focus on understanding students’ needs and then applying technologies to meet these needs by knowing the child, knowing the disability, and targeting technologies based on identified gaps, needs and capabilities.

**Engaging families**

The high school has established a series of family forums to support the parents of students with disability. The forums operate in a low key, informal manner to enable family members to meet, talk, share and support each other and develop links.

A senior member of staff coordinates the family forums and assists with their facilitation. Other staff, including the principal, assistant principal and student welfare coordinator and people external to the school with relevant knowledge and skills, also attend from time to time but not in the capacity as ‘experts’ to inform parents of what they should do. Rather, all staff and visitors who attend are encouraged to contribute to the conversation but not dominate proceedings.

The focus of the first forum centred on establishing protocols for the forums, brainstorming future topics and planning the dates and duration of future forums. Following, forum topics have included:

- As a parent of a child with a disability, what are your five major concerns for them and their future?
- What strategies do you use to develop independence in your child?
- iPad apps for organisation, literacy and numeracy, delivered with assistance from the Departmental Special Education Resource Unit (SERU).
- How do I support my child’s emerging sexuality? (Delivered with the assistance of a representative from Sexual Health: information and networking South Australia).

Parents consulted during the course of the case study were unanimous in their positive response to the forums. They were seen as a rich source of information and ideas and a way for parents to feel valued and connected with the school. Others also appreciated the opportunity of talking to other parents “..... for the first time I felt that I was not alone. Other parents were saying the same things as I felt.”

From the school’s perspective, the family forums provide a tangible means for establishing a strong relationship with parents and have proven to be a valuable source of information and insights into the lives of students beyond school. As a consequence, while confidences are maintained and privacy protocols are observed, the minutes of forums are maintained as a record of discussion, and relevant information arising from the forums is shared with staff and parents not able to attend via email.
Professional learning

The school has a strong professional learning culture that operates at a number of levels. Firstly, it ensures that it accesses and interacts with specialist practitioners with expertise in fields relevant to the school’s strategic direction. As a result, school leaders and other key personnel are involved in a series of professional learning activities delivered by Professor Barry Carpenter as part of the South Australia government sectors Lead and Buddy Schools initiative.

Similarly, staff attended the Hawker Brownlow conference in Melbourne in May 2013 for the purpose of enhancing knowledge and skills and to enhance the quality of the school’s teaching and learning pedagogy in differentiation, Backwards by Design curriculum planning and digital learning.

School-generated professional development topics have included:

- Differentiated curriculum
- MultiLit training – 9 SSO, 1 Lead teacher
- Autism On-Line Learning
- Dyslexia and Reading problems on-Line learning
- Planning and Programming for Dyslexia, ADHD and Aspergers
- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Conference
- Assistive Technology Conference- Gold Coast.

The school provides in-house professional learning to ensure that all staff are fully conversant with approaches to differentiate curriculum delivery and to ensure that the social and learning needs of students are met. A critical element is the school’s Watching Students Learn (WaSL) strategy summarised as:

.... an opportunity for all staff (as leaders of learning) to promote discussion about student learning, which will facilitate collaboration between staff about quality teaching and learning and what that looks like to staff, to students and in the school’s learning spaces. [WaSL] will assist in developing a culture of sharing and using feedback to guide practice towards continuous improvement.

Important features of the WaSL strategy include:

- **Emphasis on students and their learning.** Rather than being a critique of teaching staff members undertake the visit to a colleague’s class and are encouraged to wander around the class and speak with students about their learning.

- **All teachers participate in the process.** This includes their roles as both observer and being observed with the expectation of a minimum of two of each during the school year – one WaSL outside of each teacher’s learning area and the other within their own faculty

- **Post observation discussion.** It is expected that the two staff members find 15-20 minutes after the session to discuss the learning that has been observed (preferably within three days of the classroom visit)

- **Recording observations.** To assist staff in the WaSL process, the school has produced a template for staff to fill in – both as an aid to discussion and also to serve as a record of what has been observed and learned
• **A repository of data and learning.** To ensure that all staff have access to the outputs of professional learning activity, the Senior Leader, Learner Support maintains a comprehensive repository of data and learning on a share drive on the school’s network which is accessible by all staff.

**Outputs and outcomes**

**School tone**

It was clear throughout the site visit that the school is one in which learning is expected of all. There is a clear priority to ensure that student learning needs are met and that they are actively engaged in learning. This expectation for staff is also reflected in the school’s strong emphasis on professional learning.

The output of these expectations and the activity that arises from them is a business-like tone to the school where behavioural issues seem to be minimal and, where they arise, are acted on in a respectful manner to enable the focus on learning to resume as the norm.

**Team ethos**

Underpinning this focus on student learning and overall positive tone is a strong team ethos across the teaching and non-teaching staff. Undoubtedly, the school’s focus on professional learning contributes to this ethos and, within this, the WaSL process is an excellent example of the way in which common understandings of student learning may be engendered across and within faculties.

The same sense of teamwork exists across all levels of experience with the teaching staff. Recent graduates and their highly experienced colleagues showed a high level of collegiately with collaboration and mutual support.

**Strong leadership and coordination**

There is a depth of leadership in the school underpinning both the tone of the school and the team ethos. Key personnel play a critical coordination role in ensuring that the school’s high standards and strong teamwork are maintained. These roles include:

- maintaining repositories of information, strategies and resources
- ensuring efficient communication within the school and between the school and other key stakeholders, such as parents and the other schools that share the site
- being proactive in the development and implementation of effective teaching and learning strategies inclusive of assistive technologies and differentiating curriculum
- a strong focus on professional learning for all staff that is both targeted and followed up to ensure that the learning becomes ingrained in the teaching practice.

**Lessons learned**

**Key observations**

Key observations from the site visit relate to:

- **Enlivening differentiation.** While in some settings there is often rhetoric but no substance to the concept of differentiating curriculum for students with disability, it is
very much part of the day-to-day planning and practice for staff at the High School. Differentiating organisational arrangements and curriculum delivery according to students’ learning needs is the norm.

- **Shared practice being the driver of school based professional learning.** With staff actively engaged in observations of student learning in the classes delivered by peers, a strong culture exists in openly sharing practice and learning from each other. The WaSL process adopted by the school provides a powerful mechanism for identifying and disseminating effective pedagogy for all students but most particularly those with disability.

- **Engaging parents of students with disability.** Through the development of a Family Charter at a general level, and more specifically, through the operation of family forums, the school has provided an avenue for parents to interact with each other and become informed of important issues regarding the learning and development of their children. The forums have become a highly valued source of information for parents of children with disability, a confidence boost, and a highly appreciated means of connection to the school and to other parents who are in a similar position to themselves.

**Sustainability**

While the development of tone and culture of schools is something that evolves over time, the approach adopted by the High School is arguably quite sustainable beyond what the MSSD initiative has facilitated. As noted in the introductory remarks, the school was already well underway in the development and implementation of the systems and strategies that have been established to support the learning needs of students with disability.

The MSSD initiative has clearly accelerated these developments but is not on its own in underpinning them. It is therefore expected that the approach adopted by the school will continue well beyond the life of MSSD.

**Potential for adoption or adaptation in other contexts**

There are aspects to the case study high school that are unique to its setting, such as the shared facilities with two other schools. However, its approach to supporting students with disabilities should not be seen as site specific. The approaches adopted in areas such as learner support, curriculum differentiation, use of assistive technologies, and professional learning could easily be adopted or adapted in other contexts.
**Background**

**MSSD Output**

Output 8: Supporting school staff to assess the current learning level of students with disabilities, adapt teaching curriculum to suit their current level of ability and report on student progress against adapted curriculum.

However, the *Lead and Buddy Schools* model has direct links with other MSSD outputs that are the focus of DECD’s response to MSSD, most particularly:

Output 5: Providing training for practicing teachers to build their skills in special education where one of the online learning programmes has a specific focus on Autism and the other on Dyslexia and reading difficulties; and

Output 7: Supporting principals and/or school leadership teams to strengthen teachers’ abilities to assist students with disabilities.

Additionally, the underlying principles of Output 6: providing training for all school staff to improve understanding of their obligations under the Disability Standards for Education (2005), are embedded within DECD’s approach to implementing Output 8 through the *Lead and Buddy Schools* model.

**Case study methodology**

The case study methodology had its origins with one of the MSSD information seminars that were implemented in South Australia in April 2013. Based on the presentation made by the school’s Senior Leader, Learner Support, it was clear that the organisational arrangements established by the school, combined with effective pedagogy at all levels was having a positive impact on the learning outcomes for all students, particularly those with disability.

As a result, a site visit was arranged with the approval of the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development, and this case study report provides a detailed overview of the outputs and findings arising from the site visit completed in November 2013.

**School Background**

The high school has 1400 students, the majority of whom are enrolled in mainstream classes. DECD also established a Disability Unit at the school catering for 50+ students across three middle school classes and one senior class. These students are integrated into mainstream home groups but have their subject learning delivered by specialist teachers in small class settings with additional School Service Officer support. Placement is via regional application and a guidance report recommendation.

Within the mainstream setting there are also students with intellectual disabilities, autism, Negotiated Education Plans and below benchmark academic attainment.