Evaluation Case Study

An integrated Diocese wide strategy

Multiple MSSD Outputs

Catholic Education Office of New South Wales
An integrated Diocese wide strategy

Abstract
The Catholic Education Office within the Wagga Wagga Diocese has implemented four programmes, as part of the Catholic Education Commission NSW response to the MSSD initiative, in 2012-13. These projects are having a significant impact on schools and in particular students with special learning needs. They address the needs of all primary and secondary schools in the Diocese.

Key elements and actions
This case study examines some of the key decision-making processes in developing projects and evaluating their impact. Decision making processes within the Diocese involved consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including; principals, schools, parents, community support agencies, support staff in schools and the Diocese office and students. The expertise within the Diocese office enabled all views to be listened to and synthesized into a series of projects to meet the needs of schools and students. The experience of the special education staff in the Diocese office was critical in this regard. Their knowledge of the schools in the Diocese, their needs and the issues relating to service provision, effective teaching and learning approaches and the range of student needs in the schools was essential in developing programmes that addressed the local needs.

The process identified key priority areas to be addressed:

- training for all members of the school community to better understand student needs
- provision of effective interventions for students with special needs
- monitoring of progress
- application of learning technologies
- strategies to allow for transfer of therapeutic approaches to classrooms.

The development of partnerships with the tertiary sector was an important strategy for the Diocese. The Diocese engaged Professor Tony Shaddock (University of Canberra; Special Education) to provide participating schools with guidance and support in planning and implementing their projects. Professor Shaddock has experience in collaborating with schools, and has strong research credentials and long standing expertise in inclusive practices in schools. The strong focus of this partnership was developing an action research model to empower schools, their teachers and support staff to improve knowledge and skills through practical projects within each school.

Partnerships with support agencies in the community were also a critical part of the approach in the Wagga Wagga Diocese. The involvement of general practitioners, mental health professionals and speech pathologists in the development and implementation stages of the projects was seen as important in developing sound decision-making and research-based approaches.

Projects meeting needs of schools
The projects had to meet the needs of all schools in the Diocese. In the primary schools there were strongly identified needs in language disorders in the early years of schooling. The schools had identified that many students were coming to school with low levels of oral language which was delaying the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Schools wanted to develop more inclusive
teaching approaches for this more diverse range of students. They also wanted the provision of intervention programmes for these students with disabilities and special learning needs.

The needs of secondary schools included the provision of effective intervention programmes for students with language disorders, particularly in Years 7 and 8. The building of teacher capacity in the area of inclusive approaches to teaching and learning was a clearly identified need along with the use of assistive technologies.

**Outputs and outcomes**

**The MORE project**

The MORE project was the largest of the four projects involving 15 schools. The name was a shortened version of the MSSD Initiative. The MORE project involves five high schools and twelve primary schools in the Diocese. The focus is on school-based action research on developing effective teaching and learning approaches to meet the needs of all students including those with disability. Each school was involved in an initial two-day professional development programme where the school teams were exposed to research on inclusive schooling, background on the MSSD initiative, sustainability through building the capacity of staff and the action research approach to be used.

The diocesan staff and the principals interviewed considered the programme an important introduction for their team, an opportunity to reflect on their school’s needs and to spend time planning their school based project. Principals were active participants and this had a positive effect on the implementation of the projects at the school level. In some schools, movement of staff, including principals, was a factor limiting progress. However, the use of teams from each school helped negate the impacts of staff changes.

Following the two-day programme, each school was visited at least twice by Professor Shaddock and diocesan staff to further refine their projects. The principals found these visits important in reviewing their progress and planning future action. This monitoring of progress also allowed the diocesan team to reflect on their own approach, the support needed and the future directions of the projects.

The school-based projects were designed to develop school settings where school ethos, policies and practices were inclusive of all students. They also strengthened each teacher’s abilities to teach and manage the increasing range of abilities in their classes, particularly those with disabilities. Each school project reflected the needs of the school at that point in time. Projects included oral language abilities, assessment techniques, English as a Second Language teaching, using digital technologies, student engagement, differentiated mathematics teaching, early intervention, using student feedback and effective literacy programs.

The results of the projects were presented to other schools at a MORE Showcase Day in November 2013. This was a very successful day with each school presenting their reports in a variety of formats. The CSO also completed a comprehensive documentation of the processes used to develop the MSSD projects during 2012-13. These are detailed in the booklet — ‘MORE: More Support for Students with Disabilities 2013 Project Reports’. Each school report is included in the booklet. Some schools also presented at a state-wide showcase that followed soon after in Sydney.

**Secondary Communication and Language Delay (SCALD) project**

The Secondary Communication and Language Delay (SCALD) project involved four of the five secondary colleges in the Diocese. The schools worked in partnership with speech pathologists in Griffith, Albury and Sydney to develop programmes to support students in Years 7 and 8. The focus
of the project was on building the capacity of teachers to meet the needs of students. Initially, teachers used screening tools to identify areas of need in their classes. Teachers, leadership teams and speech pathologists worked together to provide professional development to staff across all Key Learning Areas (KLAs) in the areas of demonstration lessons, in-class support for students, adjustments needed in lessons, monitoring progress, feedback and resources.

Staff then implemented changes at classroom level, drawing on the specific strategies gained from the sessions with the speech pathologists and other teachers.

**Early Years Language Disorders project**

In this project the focus was on developing teacher capacity to improve oral language through implementing key strategies recommend by speech pathologists and other teachers. The school-based work was informed by the administration of the Teacher Assessment of Communication (TAC-P) in K-2 classes. The information gained about each child and the collective needs of each class were then used as a basis for planning of class programmes to improve oral language.

The impact of the programme was important in building awareness of oral language needs in the first three years of schooling by diocesan staff and by principals interviewed. However, it appears that staff changes over the 18 months diminished the impact in some schools.

**Software project ‘Read and Write Gold’ for iPads**

This project was implemented in secondary schools in 2012, with some larger primary schools commencing implementation in late 2013. This software programme enables students to have pages or words scanned into a computer and read aloud to them. Students with disabilities have easier access to course materials and also their own written material read back to them for review.

The project was delivered using a train the trainer model, with teams from each school including IT Coordinator, Special Education Coordinator, three teachers across the Key Learning Areas (KLAs) and just one student in the first instance. This team then went back to their school to train others in the use of the project.

Thirty iPads have also been purchased for use in the schools. The embedding of technology in the class programmes is seen by the Diocese as an important outcome of this project.

**Lessons learned**

**Key observations**

**Opt-in model**

One of the key comments from the diocesan staff was in regard to the opt-in model adopted by the Diocese. This ensured that schools had to make a conscious decision to take part in the MSSD initiative. This was seen by diocesan staff as ensuring commitment from schools, and in particular principals, to the success of the projects in their schools.

Most schools in the Diocese opted-in. However, some had difficulty committing due to leadership changes in the school, reported as a factor in some schools not fully completing projects. Again, movement of principals, vice-principals or key teachers in the projects led to diminished outcomes in some schools.

The opt-in model raises questions about the schools that do not participate, and are unable to access new learning, information and services. To counter this, diocesan staff provided a wide range
of professional learning to ensure students in these schools did not miss out on new approaches to support their learning.

**Collaboration between schools**

Wagga Wagga Diocese allowed for collaboration and learning between schools. The action research nature for the MORE projects was a key structural factor in allowing such collaboration to occur over the period of the project.

The release of teachers part-time to support schools was an important factor in their success. This enabled teacher practitioners to support other teachers in their learning. The additional experience gained by the released teachers was then taken back to their own schools to further enhance their own school.

**Documentation of learning**

The document produced to showcase the work of school on the MORE project is an impressive resource that can be used by schools within and outside the Diocese and is available from the Wagga Wagga Diocese. It sets out each school’s approach, strategies, processes used and outcomes for their MORE project. It also provided each school with an opportunity to reflect on their learning and the outcomes for students in their school.

The Wagga Wagga Diocese staff played a key role in bringing this information from schools together in a cohesive, professional format as a record of the MSSD initiative in the diocesan schools and a guide for future work.

**Use of external experts**

The decision to use external experts — academics, researchers, speech therapists — is a key factor in the success of the MSSD initiative in the Diocese. These external providers brought a strong research background to the work in an area where access to professional advice is key to ensuring that these schools are not further disadvantaged from lack of professional learning opportunities for staff. This built on the already strong existing professional knowledge base within the Diocese in the area of special education. The external experts were chosen on the basis of the personal professional knowledge of Diocesan staff, the resources of the Catholic Education Commission NSW and professional networks.

The feedback from schools, Diocesan staff and principals was that the work of Professor Shaddock was highly valued and the schools appreciated the visits and follow-up professional contact that supported their projects.

**Sustainability**

**Building teacher and school capacity**

The projects were well planned to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’ that staff in many rural schools believe impacts on their access to professional learning and overall effectiveness. The in-school support was structured to enhance the ability of schools to make their own decisions to meet their specific needs. The sustainability of the work under the MSSD initiative will depend on the provision of professional learning at school level in 2014 and beyond.

**Staff turnover**

The level of staff changes each year is a key factor in determining sustainability in Diocesan schools. Changing leadership positions in larger schools had a significant negative impact in some schools,
although others sustained the project’s positive effects despite several leadership changes in 2012-13. This suggests the need to build continuing management into project design.

In smaller schools the movement of teachers also had an impact. This was particularly evident in the K-2 area of primary schools where several younger teachers had been trained as part of the MSSD projects and then subsequently transferred to other schools.

This highlights the need for ongoing training in the area of students with special needs. The task of training teachers and support staff is never complete as there is always new staff to train and support in their professional learning.

Potential for adoption in other settings

Well-planned projects and targeted coordination

The Wagga Wagga Diocese undertook detailed planning by both diocesan staff and schools. The Special Education team at the Diocese were experienced in the field and had a detailed knowledge of their schools. The MSSD initiative allowed dedicated staff to be appointed to support schools, including releasing teachers with expertise to support other schools.

The detailed planning process, documented in the ‘MORE Project Reports 2013’ (Catholic School Office Wagga Wagga, Nov 2013), involved:

- self-nomination of needs by schools
- prioritisation of project areas
- specific projects to meet identified needs
- school-based action research projects (MORE Projects) to allow flexible approaches within schools
- follow-up support from expert staff and practitioners to support schools and monitor progress
- presentation of project reports via showcase days and written booklet.

The work of the diocesan team in this planning process is an excellent model for other systems to use when planning other projects to support students with disabilities.

Collaborative approach

The collaborative work between schools has great potential in other settings and in all sectors. Collaboration has great benefit for those students with disabilities and learning difficulties in rural and regional schools, where access to professional learning is often more limited than in metropolitan areas. The action research model used in the MORE project is a way of using the expertise of teachers across school sites to enhance the professional learning in all participating schools.

Focused and documented activities

The prioritisation of key areas for schools was an important lesson from the Diocese approach in this Diocese. The range of needs and possibilities can be overwhelming for schools, but in this case the synthesis of school’s needs into four projects enabled schools to opt-in to the projects that best suited their needs. This meant that the work of schools and the diocesan support staff could be focussed on key areas to get maximum outputs from the small resources available to them.
The production of the ‘MORE Project Reports 2013’ has provided an excellent record of both the approach used in the MSSD projects in the Wagga Wagga Diocese and the professional activity in schools over the course of the project. This can be used by other systems and schools in their own planning to identify key tasks for their own work and as a benchmark for what can be achieved.

**Background**

**(MSSD) Outputs**

The case study relates to the following MSSD Outputs:

- Output 1: Providing assistive technology (e.g. computer software, low vision aids, communication tools) to support the teaching and participation of students with disabilities.
- Output 2: Providing training for teachers to strengthen their skills in the use of assistive technology in the classroom.
- Output 4: Schools coordinating with health/allied health or other professionals to strengthen schools’ support for students with disabilities.
- Output 7: Supporting school principals and/or school leadership teams to strengthen teachers’ ability to assist students with disabilities.
- Output 8: Supporting school staff to assess the current learning level of students with disabilities, adapt the teaching curriculum to suit their current level of ability and report on student progress against adapted curriculum.
- Output 9: Supporting teachers to develop or modify lesson plans to suit the needs of students with disabilities.

**Case study methodology**

A site visit to the Diocese was completed in December 2013. Interviews were conducted with senior staff including the Director of Schools, Education Officer, Head of Team Learning and Teaching/Inclusion and the CEO of Special Education for Catholic Education Commission in NSW. In addition, phone interviews were conducted with three principals from secondary and primary schools in the Wagga Wagga Diocese.

A review was then conducted of planning documentation, school project applications and reports, assessment data and other relevant documents. A significant document was the ‘MORE - More Support for Students with Disabilities 2013 Project Reports’ (Catholic School Office Wagga Wagga Nov 2013) booklet that details not only the project activity, but the processes and rationale behind the project development.