Australian Government Department of Education
More Support for Students with Disabilities 2012-2014

Evaluation Case Study

Building leadership capacity through collegial networks

MSSD Output 7: Leadership to strengthen teachers’ capability

ACT Education and Training Directorate
Building leadership capacity through collegial networks

Abstract

The MSSD initiative provided an opportunity to introduce a new model for specialist support roles by appointing designated school-based Disability Education Coordinators (DECOs) to support school leadership development directly targeted at improving opportunities for students with disability in each school. The new model is built around the DECOs and ‘Network Student Engagement Teams’ (NSET), in four geographic regions across the ACT, each with 20 – 25 schools and its own specialists. The networking approach has been central to the strategy of changing understanding about the nature of support for teachers and increasing capability across the schools.

Key elements and actions

The ACT Education and Training Directorate (ETD) established five priorities for disability education in ACT public schools in its Strategic Plan 2010-2013. The approach to Output 7 coincided with a major innovation in the provision of support for school leaders. Where previously ETD had a case-study approach with approximately one ETD support person per 90 students, the MSSD initiative provided an opportunity to introduce a new model for specialist support roles by appointing designated school-based Disability Education Coordinators (DECOs) to support school leadership development directly targeted at improving opportunities for students with disability in each school.

Reframing specialist roles

The introduction of the DECO initiative was accompanied by a restructure of the former ‘Disability Education Team Leaders’ (DETL) positions and a reorientation of their roles. Their work previously involved four teams, each with an executive officer responsible for developing disability plans and capability development in specific areas. The new model is built around the DECOs and ‘Network Student Engagement Teams’ (NSET), in four geographic regions across the ACT, each with 20 – 25 schools and its own specialists.

Selected schools identified a member of the school leadership team—usually Deputy Principals, or, in some cases, an aspiring school leader—to be the designated DECO responsible for the process of building capacity and capability. Schools with a different structure, for example preschool to year 10 schools, were able to nominate two DECOs: an experienced mentor teacher and a new educator.

Appointment of a project officer

ETD funded the appointment of a project officer to provide training and support for DECOs. In addition to leading and managing the overall implementation of the DECO project, the role included:

• designing and organising professional learning activities
facilitating networks
• raising the general level of confidence in people’s ability to work with students with disabilities
• developing a community of learners.

To assist in this work ETD also employed an officer to provide support to DECOs and their schools in the use of innovative technologies and resolving technical issues as the project evolved into a broader set of activities.

Activities of the DECOs

The roles and responsibilities of the DECOs include supporting the implementation of Disability Standards for Education 2005, which effectively underpins all their work. Each school developed the specifics of the DECO role according to individual school requirements. With the support of their school leadership team, DECOs planned a range of strategies to develop staff capacity based on specific school and network priorities. The major focus was generally on building the capacity and expertise of school principals and leadership team members through professional learning conducted by the DECOs. In addition, DECO roles within their schools typically include:

• informing their school of developments
• collecting, analysing and reporting on school profile data
• identifying strengths in approaches to teaching students with disability
• establishing links with communities and service providers
• putting students with disability on the agenda of the school senior executive meetings
• networking with families
• coaching and mentor staff in making adjustments and differentiating the curriculum.

In 2014 the DECOs facilitated discussion at the school level to ensure staff and families have a clear understanding of obligations under the Disability Standards following the completion of the online learning module.

A targeted professional learning programme for DECOs

All DECO sessions were designed with opportunities to build on their understandings of their responsibilities under the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and its implications for their individual school contexts.

An induction programme was designed in collaboration with the DECOs to assist them to embed strategies into schools. DECOs developed plans to build on their school’s strengths and successes to establish a whole school community approach to implementing the Disability Standards for Education 2005. The main elements of the induction programme included:

• train the trainer on Essential Skills in Disability for delivery to school staff
• a module on Disability Standards for Education 2005.
• needs assessment processes to help schools develop plans for the use of the DECO funding.

DECOs meet monthly in each of the four networks and use that opportunity to identify areas for further professional learning.
Building learning communities

The development of learning communities based around the four networks emerged from the first DECO induction sessions where they presented leading practice from their school and, with NSET feedback, identified areas to develop, enhance or modify in their schools. The project officer, along with the four network based Disability Education consultant school leaders worked to facilitate these communities of practice across the four ACT networks.

Supporting school connections

To further build collaboration every school was offered additional funds to provide teaching staff with the opportunity to visit other schools for observation to gain first hand experience of innovative practice. They were also offered funds to work with other schools on designing and delivering professional learning sessions to meet specific network needs. In order to support these connections and continuation of sharing good pedagogy in disability education, online forums were initiated to support skill development for DECOs through video capture and engagement with teaching practices using multimedia devices. More than 110 schools staff attended a conference organised by ETD in 2013 which provided an opportunity for DECOs and schools to share learning and discuss issues in common. This was one of many seminars and workshops organised over the life of the initiative.

Innovative grants fund

ETD emphasised local and collaborative approaches to DECO led change with project grants from MSSD funds to support school and network action plans for students with disability. More than 80 schools engaged in these projects around school-based action research projects. These included a significant shift to flexible learning environments using technologies as tools with the support of a school leader in inclusive technology (funded through the DECO project). Innovative grants projects focused on five areas: literacy; inclusive technology school capacity building; Individual Learning Plans and transitions; and a range of other projects specific to identified school or network needs.

Disability Education Professional Learning Page

The development of the online professional learning portal was a central element in the design and delivery of the DECO project. The Disability Education Professional Learning page is available to all staff in ACT public schools. Its features include showcasing the work of the individual DECO projects in media sites and PowerPoint presentations, storing resources, and sharing findings and successes from the DECO projects with staff across the directorate. The resources include templates for communication and support services, which are regularly updated to enable DECOs to identify and fill gaps in their schools’ management and support for students with disabilities. ETD employed a media teacher to visually capture and share teaching moments and teacher reflections about their practice in disability education and innovation.

Using digital capture for project reporting

A key feature of the reporting process for DECO projects was to use digital formats to capture the work of the project as a form of evaluation for the innovative grants funding, and as a tool for sharing their learning across the system. A virtual library of their contributions was made
available on the Disability Education Professional Learning site to enable teachers to share programs, projects and approaches in progress across the system.

**Lessons learned**

**Key observations**

Meeting the needs of students with disability required a flexible approach across the ETD schools involving a number of layers ranging from integrated programmes to more unit-focused activities. The focus now is on what the NSET can do for schools to build capacity to sustainable levels rather than focusing on caseload management of individual students.

**Supporting school level intervention**

The experience prior to the formation of NSET was reportedly that of patchy performance across the schools from highly integrated efforts to a lack of structure and strategy altogether. The inclusion support team worked across the four networks but it was clear that the schools lacked the skills base to sustain their approaches to intervention and support. Responsibility generally rested with one person to support classroom teachers.

While the NSET team still draws on expertise to provide consultant advice for individual students the caseload model has been superseded. The focus is now on what NSETs can do for schools rather than on individual students. This has become especially effective in addressing the needs of teachers and students in major transition phases, particularly the transition from high school to college. The approach also supports diverse approaches based on what works best in different school contexts and recognises variation in the capabilities of individual teachers.

Partly as a consequence of the fragmented activities, there had also been inconsistencies in approaches to supporting students with disability across schools. The DECO initiative established a strong platform across the ETD schools for consistency in understanding the diverse needs of students with disability and in the responses of schools. The change in approach increased the confidence of staff in providing for students with disabilities: a differentiated approach is now seen as core business. The issues concerning students with disability in schools, and the strategies needed, were increasingly given more prominence in staff meetings and professional learning activities over the life of the MSSD initiative.

**The impact of networks**

The collegial networking approach has been central to the strategy of changing understanding about the nature of support for teachers and increasing capability across the schools. NSET teams aimed to support all schools in the long term with planning and capacity building support embedded in the work of the schools. This strategy enhanced the interconnectedness of the DECOs within their network: their meetings investigated network specific issues, strengths and solutions.

From the early stages of the MSSD initiative ETD Disability Education staff were able to recognise a shift in the thinking of the designated DECOs about support to students with disabilities in their schools. DECOs were increasingly identifying themselves as the go to “expert” in disability education in their school. They reported early gains with pride and
shared new practices with fellow DECOs and Disability Education staff. In feedback provided to ETD, DECOs noted particularly how they valued the opportunity to have time to discuss and work with colleagues on developing processes in their schools, which allowed them to work smarter rather than harder. From the outset they began to ‘own’ the DECO program.

**Benefits of distributed leadership**

The DECO initiative has had a significant impact on the way the former Disability Education Team Leaders work: they are now concentrating their efforts on schools in a highly collaborative way with what is effectively a distributed leadership approach. The development of a broader base of expertise and the devolution of leadership to the local level is likely to be the critical element for the quality of educational provision for students with disability in the long term. The end result is that each school network has a team to work with rather than a series of single support experts. As one DECO, a deputy principal, observed:

> Previously, responsibility rested with one person to support classroom teachers. This was generally a somewhat piecemeal approach with a lot of people involved and only one resource person, the Learning Support Assistant. The DECO is now responsible for coordinating and informing the school of development. The lines of communication are a lot clearer.

**Impact of providing online resources**

The ETD conferences provided clear examples of the DECO initiative enabling staff across the schools and colleges to not only use the online resources to improve the education of students with disability, but also to evolve towards a culture of sharing ideas and expertise from their experiences. The use of the online resources to promote and share ideas also resulted in increased inter-network activity. Teachers and DECOs visited schools to observe new practices and discuss ways of improving their understanding of the needs of people with disabilities.

**Adding new dimensions with collaborative projects**

The innovative project grants appears to have been the glue that held the efforts of the ETD and the schools together as it emphasised the importance of these activities as a joint enterprise in every school’s interests. There was no sense that the schools were in competition for the funds. Many projects were in fact joint proposals with schools forging closer relationships across sites and among staff. For example:

- One project involved seven schools — in which college, high school and primary schools were represented — working together on the development of an online Individual Learning Plan that could be used by all in the group. In another area, work began on the development of an online student pathway product and since then both products have now been linked.

- The development of Flexible Learning Spaces was of interest to many DECOs and their schools. Three high schools not only planned for the physical space but also the curriculum content to be offered, while another group of high schools combined together, with support from Disability Education staff, to undertake research on furniture, equipment and IT provision. They also engaged a literacy expert to coach in the area of literacy.
• The nine college DECOs now meet regularly to problem solve the unique complexities of senior secondary schools and significant systemic barriers have been eliminated through the sharing of work and methodology.

A catalyst for new strategies and changing outlooks

The DECO programme has proved a catalyst for a number of related strategies to come together in a coherent framework and with a fresh outlook. The process of developing school profiles at the commencement of the MSSD initiative generated an audit across the system that in turn prompted cross-fertilisation of experiences and ideas through, for example, DECOs visiting other schools and working together on innovative approaches in the use of assistive technologies and flexible learning spaces.

Perhaps the most significant and timely of these was the programme of innovative project grants from MSSD funds to support school and network action plans for students with disability. Opportunities for further development emerged from the new framework. There has been a notable emphasis on school-initiated activities and away from traditional professional development. The projects are described by ETD as “genuine ground-up initiatives.”

The broader impact of the DECO project can also be seen in new approaches of schools to student transitions, particularly from primary to high school, and high school to college. Individual Learning Plan (ILP) documents now require schools to nominate a school officer as the person responsible for the transition of specific students.

The conversations between the ETD team leaders (NSET) and the DECOs shifted over the initial timeframe of the initiative from seeking specialist direction to an active partnership. DECOs now know where local expertise resides, as one leader observed referring to the previous arrangements: “We used to say we were building capacity but we created dependency.” The NSET leaders now provide mentoring, and the calls from DECOs are now more likely to be seeking clarification rather than close guidance.

Sustainability

A high level of enthusiasm amongst the DECOs and teachers was sustained for the initial three years of the project. A foundation for sustainability of the networks beyond the life of the MSSD programme has been established with the network and communities of practice well on the way to becoming permanent fixtures of the ETD approach to students with disability. The end result is that each school network has a team to work with rather than a series of single support experts. The development of a broader base of expertise and the devolution of leadership to the local level is likely to be the critical element in the long term.

Potential for adoption in other contexts

The model developed by ETD has potential for adoption in other contexts, particularly in smaller jurisdictions or divisions of larger jurisdictions.
Notes

The case study involved interviews with ETD Senior Manager Disability Education and DECO Project Officer, round table discussions with Network Student Engagement Teams including presentations on project activity, initial site visits and briefing interviews with DECOs at two schools in 2012, and participation in the DECO Networking Conference in October 2013 and the DECO Final Feedback session in October 2014.