Evaluation Case Study

Developing a regional Special Education Network Centre

MSSD Output 3: Developing support centres

Catholic Education Office of Western Australia
Developing a regional Special Education Network Centre

Abstract

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia has adopted a long-term plan for the development of support centres of expertise for schools, staff and community to address the needs of students with disability and shape their future opportunities. The More Support for Students with Disability (MSSD) initiative has supported the initial stage of the planned statewide development in the Kimberley Districts with the development of a Special Education Network Centre (SENC). The Centre is providing training for teachers and assistants, programmes tailored to the needs of individual students, and a range of life-skills and self-care activities. The Centre also offers opportunities for parents to meet with a wide range of allied health and specialist educators. The appointment of a skilled special education needs leader has been a key element in the successful establishment of the Centre.

Key elements and actions

The Special Education Network Centre (SENC) provides specialised teaching and services to students from kindergarten to Year 12 in the Catholic system, and has potential to serve other students across education sectors. The Centre offers opportunities for parents to meet with a wide range of specialists such as College Psychologist, College Counsellor, Disability Services, Allied Health Services for Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy, Independent Living Centre WA, and Autism Australia (Positive Partnerships). Teachers and assistants are trained in strategies for students with disabilities through the Centre to provide programmes to meet the needs of each student. Opportunities provided for life skills and self-care activities and for students to access maximum participation in the mainstream classroom.

Appointment of a special education leader

A key element in the establishment of the Centre was the appointment of a skilled special education needs leader as SENC coordinator in early 2012. The role requires sufficient skills, knowledge and expertise to coordinate the Centre as well as support strategies with staff in building capacity to address local needs. A portion of SENC Coordinator time was redirected into a Learning Support Coordinator role. In addition, the appointment of a full time special education learning support role specialist in 2013 has enabled the SENC Coordinator to focus coordination and development of Centre support across the Kimberley Region.

The SENC Coordinator is also responsible for coordination of disability identification, support application and related individual education plans, in collaboration with teachers, school psychologist, allied services and parents. Support is provided to meet a range of student behavioural, social and emotional needs. Professional learning and training are also part of the Coordinator’s brief and are essential in developing a sustainable level of expertise to enable greater control and management by teachers.

Project management

The SENC Coordinator and School Principal manage the project in conjunction with administration and staff across both primary and secondary sites. In its early phase of
development, the initial focus was on maximising Coordinator support, developing knowledge, understanding and confidence addressing disability needs in the classroom.

A Primary Leadership Team was formed to increase attention on students at educational risk supplemented by a Student Services Team more specifically focused on students with special needs and disability. This mirrors the Secondary Student Services Team and together they provide a complete and inclusive strategy with a sense of ownership while building greater capacity to address student needs.

**Strengthened connections with support services**

Additional staff support from the primary and secondary sites released time for the Coordinator to broaden SENC scope and services. This included strengthened connections to allied professional services with some services operating within the Centre, such as psychology and speech therapy. From the Principal’s perspective, this meant that:

> ... we expect the Centre will enable teachers to better meet the learning needs of students who receive disabilities funding through coordinated support from the SENC Coordinator and specialists by working with them both in and out of the classroom. In addition many other non-funded students with learning difficulties will also have the flow on benefit from the support.

Since the implementation phase, extensive planning and time has targeted support structures and operations. The major outputs include greater structure for the overall coordination of staff, the appointment of future Special Education Teachers, and ready access to allied professional service. Teachers have been assisted with more focused early identification and funding support applications for students with disabilities, especially targeting early intervention and support assessment of pre-primary students.

**Professional learning**

Professional development activities provided by the Centre include skilling teachers to better understand student disability, identify their needs and plan accordingly, in partnership with parents, for cyclical individual learning improvement programmes. The Centre provides development and resourcing for a range of learning activities, supports student focused withdrawal, classroom integration, and a congenial environment for classroom, parent and community activities.

Programmes and qualifications from ASDAN, a UK charitable social enterprise with awarding body status, have been introduced to offer students flexible ways to accredit skills for learning, skills for employment and skills for life for high needs students with disability.

**Extended collaborative relationships**

Closer relations have been established with all involved including case study management by the SENC Coordinator working with stakeholders such as the Catholic Education Office WA Special Need Consultants, as well as cross-sectoral collaboration with local schools and services through the Kimberley Success Zone which has been established to support all Kimberley schools improve outcomes for their Indigenous students. In addition, a range of general meetings and education networking opportunities have been fostered complemented by relevant professional learning opportunities offered across all sectors, such as:
• Nola Gray professional learning (Visiting Teacher Disabilities Service) generally for teacher assistants and education assistants on a range of issues and needs of students with disability
• *Team Teach* for staff working with students who can be aggressive, sharing strategies for restraint and movement
• liaising with the Day Care Centre to gain information on potential future enrolments and action early access to Allied Services
• other relevant bodies and support organisations through professional learning opportunities, forums, conferences and grant applications.

**Lessons learned**

**Key observations**

From the outset, staff felt that SENC was having a positive impact across the school. The appointment of an experienced and skilled coordinator was universally acknowledged as a critical factor in the development of support for students with disabilities and evolution of the Network Centre:

> ...there have been improvements across the board in the management of routines, day to day needs and learning focus...due to the SENC Coordinator and the development of appropriate strategies and individual learning programmes targeted at needs levels.

The most obvious benefit has been teacher professional learning and coordination in the management of student needs and adaptive teaching–learning relationships and programmes. Staff reported a greater level of awareness about students and their disabilities and their subsequently improved confidence and capacity to provide, review and amend appropriate learning programmes.

Individual Education Plans have increased in number as more students are identified and are implemented across the whole school while collaboration between students, teacher, coordinator and parents has provided greater focus and understanding for all stakeholders.

Staff are also positive about the level and impact of associated professional learning and support generated by the Centre, particularly on the primary campus. Extra training and learning provided for teacher assistants, complemented by appointments of additional teacher assistants has provided additional support, and is reported that the prospects of programme sustainability have increased:

> ...the Centre is now a welcomed part of the school which supports both students and staff. Where earlier there was a perception the Centre should be taking in more or all students to relieve classrooms, there is now a broader understanding about support eligibility related to disability and how this may be provided within a classroom and Centre context. So too is there better understanding about responsibilities and capacity for individually tailored education and action plans.

As the Centre has grown and the wider community become more aware of successes, enrolments are also growing. Subsequent eligibility for increased funding and support staff has enabled a larger team and wider coordinated support. The SENC reputation has also influenced some families to move to the area so their children may access Centre services.
**Sustainability**

Staff are optimistic about the initiative’s sustainability and it appears that the foundations for a sustainable programme are well-established. School community partnerships and the support of the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia will be critical in the future and the school is already actively seeking expansion in this area. CEO has indicated significant interest and values the concept of the evolving SENC, particularly with the growing numbers of students with disability in the region and the significant resources already invested.

To ensure sustainability, school leadership, staff and the SENC Coordinator identified an ongoing need for strategic considerations about the Centre operations including:

- how the Centre can better serve two distinct sites given the impact of the initiatives in the primary area as students move into secondary education
- the services and support that can be offered to other schools
- catering for possible future student Centre placements from outer schools
- providing transition accommodation for family members during these times, as well as follow up outreach support when they return to their communities.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

The network model developing at the school has clear potential for application in other regions within Western Australia, and particularly in regional and remote locations where access to special education support is limited. The main elements needed for successful adoption include an experienced and skilled Coordinator to provide:

- clarity on procedures about eligibility and guidelines to access support and placement
- professional learning and direction to build staff capacity and confidence to cater for students with disability in their classrooms
- focused and appropriate Individual Education Plans and Curriculum Action Plans
- leadership for a supportive student services team.

It is also essential to have a designated base providing:

- ready access to teacher support and shared knowledge
- ready access to resources
- a place for professional learning
- direct access to SENC staff with privacy for teacher and parent consultations.

Sustainability also requires enlisting positive responses from the community particularly by engaging parents, networking with allied services and basing some services in the Centre.

**Notes**

The case study methodology included meetings with the principal and administrators; Leadership Team; SENC Coordinator; Learning Support Coordinator Secondary; Learning Needs Teacher (SENC); classroom teachers; teacher assistants; and parents. The first site visit was undertaken in November 2012. This was followed up by a final visit in March 2014.