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

Evaluation Case Study

Far North Queensland
Autism Centre of Expertise

MSSD Output 3: Developing support centres

Department of Education and Training Queensland

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Far North Queensland Autism Centre of Expertise

Abstract

The Centre of Expertise is one element of an interrelated approach adopted by the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETEQ) to build capacity to meet the needs of students with disability in state schools. Since 2005, Far North Queensland region of DETEQ has given priority to building staff capabilities and school capacities to respond to the challenges of the rising incidence of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). This case study reports on how a strategic partnership between parents of students with ASDs, specialists from Griffith University and key regional staff has led to the formation of the Far North Queensland Autism Centre of Expertise (ACE). Four key steps in this journey are described: the early advocacy by parent members of the Cairns Autism Spectrum Group (CASG) provided impetus for changed practices regarding students with ASDs in this region; regional leadership established a formal priority for an autism forum; a partnership was formed with the University for pilot projects in three schools; and an extensive school and community consultation process conducted by regionally-organised groups.

Key elements and actions

Three initiatives involving regional personnel, school staff, GUACE specialists and CASG parents, led to the formation of the Far North Queensland ACE: an Autism Forum demonstrating regional commitment to this priority in December 2011; a Seminar, Workshop and projects in three Pilot Schools over 2012 to research issues for implementation; and a targeted consultation processes via two regional groups in late 2012.

The Autism Forum identified regional priorities for improving learning of students with ASDs:

- development of more consistent special education program and services founded on evidence-based practices
- improved professional development and training for all school staff
- community consultation that acknowledged that almost all students with disabilities are and will continue to be enrolled in mainstream schools across the Far North Queensland region.

The regional partnership with Griffith University Autism Centre of Excellence staff developed momentum over 2012 via adoption of a systems-based, capacity building approach to supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in schools operating on three levels:

- individual student
- whole-school
- region-wide.

The model is a leadership-driven, collaborative and multi-disciplinary approach directed towards four goals:

- increased school capacity to provide programs for all learners;
- better outcomes for students with Autism
- competent confident staff
- increased parent trust and engagement.
In February 2012 an Autism Spectrum Education Seminar was conducted by GUACE specialists and regional staff with school teams that each included the Principal, the Head of Special Education Services (HOSES) and a parent of a student with an ASD. Three schools were approached and agreed to participate in a pilot project working with Griffith University: a primary, a secondary, and a state college.

At a School Planning Workshop in March 2012, the aims of the pilot project were expressed as:

- increased positive engagement of students with ASD in academic and social life of school, especially as measured by significant positive change on criterion-based measures (e.g., NAPLAN, Goal Attainment Scaling, Emotion Regulation and Social Skills Questionnaire) and on rates of school attendance
- improved teacher sense of confidence and capacity in working with students with ASDs
- fidelity of implementation of practices by all stakeholders - school leaders, teachers, students and parents.

Four elements were identified in the pilot school implementation planning process:

- self assessment – baseline data collection (survey, School Profile checklist)
- creation of a school ASD Leadership Team
- review of existing school systems and formulation of School Action Plan
- monitoring, review and evaluation procedures.

GUACE specialists supported staff from the pilot schools with key assessment tools, developed and provided initial professional development on Positive Communities of Practice and Developing Student Processes, collected and analysed data, and reported on progress. This pilot evolved into a Second Project for GUACE specialists - the conduct of more specific workshops and the development of regional resources, as well training and mentoring of staff selected to initiate the FNQ ACE.

Details of the regional service delivery model centred on the FNQ ACE evolved from consultation and meetings conducted by two groups established by the region last year:

- **A Strategic Planning Group.** Including the Regional Director, Manager and Principal Education Officer - Student Services, three parents from CASG, GUACE Professor, Primary and Secondary Principals, HOSES - met once a month throughout 2012 to set the regional strategic direction in regards to students with ASDs.

- **A Specialist Working Party.** With regional office representatives, Speech Language Pathologist-In-Charge, Occupational Therapist In-Charge as well as a Principal, HOSES, a local paediatrician and three parents from CASG - formed in the middle of 2012, met regularly and consulted closely with professional groups via its members.

**Outputs and outcomes**

**Pilot School Project – outcomes**

According to Far North Queensland Regional Office, work in the three pilot schools demonstrated:

- improved teacher capacity to effectively use assistive technology during the teaching and learning cycle
- more precision when modifying curriculum, pedagogy and classroom environment to better meet the needs of ASD learners
- routine involvement of external agencies in the case management process
• systematic and intentional processes to deal with the issues / challenges associated with ASD learners.

Primary School - Pilot Project and outcomes

The primary school services a low-SES and multi-cultural suburban area. In 2012 it had 930 students enrolled, 38 per cent of whom were Indigenous with significant proportions of both Pacific Islander (mainly Cook and South Sea) and English as a Second Language students (especially Hmong Asian and North-East African). The baseline description provided for the 2012 pilot project identified key strengths and weaknesses for the school, which are summarised in the table below.

**Key Strengths and Weaknesses for the Pilot Primary School in 2012**

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<tr>
<th>Key Strengths for School</th>
<th>Key Weaknesses for School</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clearly articulated values and vision for the education of all students</td>
<td>Limited use of data to make connections between curriculum standards and Individual Education Plans (IEPs)</td>
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<td>A predominantly a collegial school culture within an ageing work force - including Curriculum into the Classroom units, Explicit Teaching and the use of data to inform teaching</td>
<td>No knowledge of functional assessment of behaviour to develop student plans for skill building, especially the social skills of students with ASDs</td>
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<td>Well established social and behaviour supports - through School Wide Positive Behaviour Support and Discover programs.</td>
<td>Staff had incomplete knowledge of the tools and effective strategies to differentiate planning, instruction and assessment to meet the needs of students.</td>
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Many of the most challenging issues related to the school’s Special Education Program, which grew over 2011-13 from 28 to 60 students with disabilities. According to school leaders, the school’s Special Education Program had challenges stemming from its 2011 practices:

• greater focus on care than education
• segregated education for many students - integration for socialization, not learning
• disparity in resource allocation
• significant student dependence on Teacher Aides
• lack of clarity about staff roles
• ineffective case management processes
• a belief that evidence-based teaching practices and curriculum were not relevant to special education.

Involvement in the pilot school change process at the primary school over the past 12 months has reportedly resulted in school-measured successes for many students with ASDs in:

• program access (improved attendance, re-engagement in learning on a daily basis, movement from alternate to mainstream programs)
• behaviour (significant decreases in number and severity of incidents)
• academic outcomes (90 per cent improved in reading levels, 85 per cent improved in KLA achievements by at least one year level).

School staff reportedly also experienced some significant developments in professional and inclusive practices worth sustaining, including:

• improved school wide systems via a systematic cultural change process
• a clearly articulated set of common school expectations for students with ASDs
• shared professional language to enable continuous dialogue and communication
• supportive and collaborative leadership providing space for innovation
• co-teaching, responsibility and accountability shared by all staff
• input into research on differentiation in planning of instruction and assessment.

Service delivery continuum for the Far North Queensland Autism Centre of Expertise

The focus of the FNQ ACE as a centre of expertise is to build the capacity of school staff to maximise learning opportunities for students verified with ASDs and currently enrolled in state schools in the region. As illustrated in the figure below, the Far North Queensland ACE engages with schools at three levels of service delivery: intensive management of complex cases; targeted support; and whole school planning on a region-wide basis.

Service Delivery Continuum for the Far North Queensland ACE

**Individual Students: Intensive Management of Complex Cases**

Collaborate with schools to develop complex case management and intensive programming for individual students with ASDs.

**School Staff: Targeted Support for Evidence-Based Practices**

Work with schools to implement their School Autism Plan using evidence-based best practice; build staff capacity on differentiation and make adjustments to curriculum and pedagogy at classroom level.

**Region-Wide: Ensuring Whole-School Autism Plans and Processes**

Work with schools to apply Disability Standards for Education (2005); implement Developing Positive Communities of Practice workshop; support implementation of regional Student Snap Shots; provide online training in Understanding Autism; inform and share quality resources, strategies, research and professional development; develop digital resources to support remote area staff; develop evaluation survey instruments.

As a regional service centre the aim is to work collaboratively with school teams to put systems and processes in place for the development, submission and implementation of Whole-School Autism Plans. Most current activities of the four staff members are focused on this priority, along with understanding the needs of students with ASDs and meeting with their families. Far North Queensland ACE has developed a referral system with clear expectations, procedures and
documentation forms to manage outreach consultations with schools. It also specifies how centre-based services are used to support the building of staff capabilities and how schools are to consult with families of students with ASDs. Records of contacts with the Far North Queensland ACE are recorded on a database and cross-referenced to the developing file kept for each school.

Once these documented foundations are in place, the priority for staff can shift to the provision of targeted support for school staff focused on differentiation and adjustments in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. If the need arises, staff can develop and implement intensive programming for complex case management of individual students with ASDs. Since it is proposed to house the Far North Queensland ACE within the new Cairns Special School when it is established over the coming years, this level of service delivery should then be more feasible and appropriate than it is at present.

**Lessons learned**

**Key observations**

There are seven reasons why the FNQ ACE has been able to be successfully conceptualised, planned, initiated and implemented over 2011-13:

- persistent advocacy from a group of resilient parents of children with ASDs who consulted both widely and strategically to build a strong case for changes in service provisions and who have continued to have significant input into plans and procedures used at regional and school levels
- the expertise of key staff from a University harnessed by parents as knowledgeable brokers and contracted by the region as providers of specialist professional services
- strong leadership in regional priority-setting and in school-based commitment
- pilot school research and development used to highlight implementation issues
- strategic and specialist consultation on a reformed model of service provision
- systematic development by Centre staff of a referral system for schools which has clear expectations, procedures and documentation
- strategic and timely harnessing of MSSD funds by DETEQ to develop an expert support centre in the designated high-need area of FNQ to support students with ASDs and their families via capacity-building in schools.

**Sustainability**

Far North Queensland ACE is a new centre providing specialised services and referral functions; it needs to ‘settle in’ as part of the new way of doing inclusive state education in the region over the next 12-18 months. Sustainability is likely because of the developmental care taken over the past few years. Sustainability of the Far North Queensland ACE appears less certain over the medium- to long-term, because the factors involved are more complex and less predictable and longer-term planning therefore becomes more difficult.

A challenge is the ageing educational workforce, the imminent ‘baby boomer retirement effect’ and the turnover of key staff at regional and school levels, especially in leadership positions among both administrators and teachers. The model of change underpinning the formation and operation of the Far North Queensland ACE is leadership-driven and capacity-building in emphasis. Maintaining energy, commitment and intensity to sustain a high expectations school culture, whole-school planning and evidence-based practices may prove difficult in such a shifting staff environment. It may also make it more difficult to sustain the established university, system, and schools relationships and partnerships based on effective use of expertise, research and best practices.
More sophisticated and systematic succession planning, coaching and modelling may be required in anticipation of the likely impacts of such staff turn over effects. Building and sustaining teacher capabilities are likely to remain as significant priorities requiring ongoing attention and renewal, particularly as other challenges emerge over time. Such staff change processes are also likely to have flow-on impacts on both school partnerships and teacher relationships with parents of students with ASDs. It may be difficult to sustain consistency and coherence in approaches across schools, forcing many parents to seek more secure schooling responses in a limited range of settings, as many had to do in past years.

In common with schools, significant staff turn over at the Far North Queensland ACE (especially in its leadership) is also potentially a factor affecting its sustainability over the longer-term. There are many challenges that can be anticipated to impact more directly and sooner on the service delivery priorities and processes of the Far North Queensland ACE. The number of students with verified ASDs is expected to continue to rise, as will those requiring more targeted or more intense programming responses. Increased demand for costly specialist services may place the service delivery model and Centre staff under increased stress.

The region is aware that funding from State and Commonwealth sources are not guaranteed for the longer-term and has planned for Far North Queensland ACE to operate beyond the National Partnership as a component of the Cairns Special School. This may lead to pressure to link with other key disability policy initiatives, resulting in a potential loss of its specialised ASD focus. In any case, evolution of the functions and operations of the Far North Queensland ACE appears inevitable.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

The concept of developing support centres to serve as centres of expertise in the educational needs of students with specific disabilities is not new in Australia. There is a history of establishment of such centres and of them evolving and folding over time, especially as cost pressures mount and as maintaining relevance as valued service providers becomes more difficult to sustain.

Pre-conditions would need to be met for the Far North Queensland ACE model to be adopted or adapted elsewhere, identified in the *Key observations* section. They relate to the particular nature of the four-way partnerships between parents of students with disabilities, key school leaders, university specialists and regional educational authority leaders that were established and nurtured, and which were systematically built into the design features of the model of the Far North Queensland ACE.

This Centre is currently ‘owned’ as a service provider by each of the stakeholders – parents, schools, university and DETEQ regional office. Each has significant interest in providing improved educational outcomes for students with ASDs and to date there have been few alternative sources of advice, support and development available locally.

In metropolitan and larger regional centres there appears to be less pressure to establish an on-ground centre of staff expertise. Professional specialists are more readily available to both families and schools as sources of advice called on as needs arise. Educational authorities that wish to enhance service provisions related to students with ASDs appear to be relying more on web-based virtual centres to fill any gaps, since they appear to be less costly, more accessible by clients, more readily updatable, and less demanding of ongoing system commitment. On the other hand, they are also more anonymous and usually less personally engaging.

It is not likely that other education authorities or systems will seek to adopt the Far North Queensland ACE model. It is more likely that that they will seek to learn from or adapt some of its key elements – for example, the Far North Queensland emphasis on developing Whole-School Autism Plans and building of staff capacities via communities of practice for enhanced inclusion.
Background

MSSD Output

Output 3: Developing support centres which serve as a centre of expertise in the educational needs of students with disabilities and provide expert support to a group of schools that may not have this expertise.

Case study methodology

This case study focuses on the Far North Queensland Autism Centre of Excellence (ACE) as it has been conceptualised, planned, initiated and implemented up until June 2013 to provide expert support services to schools, students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) and their parents. The approach to the case study included:

- introductions obtained from inter-systemic consultative seminar presentations conducted in Cairns on 19 April 2013
- meetings and interviews conducted in Cairns on 3-4 June 2013 with:
  - DETEQ Regional Director for Far North Queensland
  - Regional MSSD Coordinator for Far North Queensland
  - Head of Special Education Services (HOSES) and three Far North Queensland ACE staff at the Flexible Learning Centre
  - Principal and the HOSES at the Primary State School, one of the pilot schools
  - Coordinator and other parents from Cairns Autism Spectrum Group.
- collection of relevant documentation related to the development, formation and current operation of the Far North Queensland ACE
- an interview with the Convenor of the Autism Studies Program at Griffith University.

Description of activity

Building staff capabilities and system capacities to deal with the challenges of rising incidence of ASDs addresses an acute need identified by DETEQ, in common with many other education authorities throughout Australia and elsewhere. Far North Queensland has experienced the fastest regional growth in the number of students diagnosed with verified ASDs over recent years: from under 400 prior to 2010 to over 660 in 2013, with around 75 per cent currently enrolled in Cairns local area schools. The MSSD Initiative, especially with its specified output focused on developing expert support centres in designated high-need areas, was timely for parents of students with ASDs and aligned closely with the identified priorities of the Far North Queensland region.

From 2011, parents from the Cairns Autism Spectrum Group (CASG) played key advocacy roles in identifying the need for the formation of the Far North Queensland ACE. Formed over 20 years ago, CASG currently has over 150 family members who provide information via coffee meetings, written feedback, a Facebook page, email conversations, and focus group Q & A sessions. According to a letter sent to the Far North Queensland Regional Director on 24/10/2011: “...issues related to educational difficulties are constantly at the top of the list and are the greatest single cause of stress, anxiety and frustration for our members and their children”. CASG parents also met with many school staff, representatives from Queensland Teachers Union and the local state Member of Parliament. These meetings established that many educators in Far North Queensland were also frustrated and desired improvements in this area, and that key schools and existing centres were either stretched or over-loaded in their capacity to provide appropriate services.
Around the same time that parents received confirmation of their impending meeting with the Far North Queensland Regional Director for DETEQ, the CASG Coordinator became aware of the formation of the Griffith University Autism Centre of Excellence (GUACE). She formally requested GUACE staff assistance in identifying current issues as well as key strategies, interventions and programs considered to be best practice in the field. Key CASG parent issues identified with GUACE staff included:

- high degrees of parent/child frustration regarding limited achievements of students with ASDs in educational settings
- limited communication between school and families and lack of options/choices for educational assistance
- limited current staff knowledge, expertise, flexibility and understanding
- inconsistencies among schools and professionals, with limited information about related services and providers
- bullying and harassment issues by both staff and children in schools, but perception that students needed to ‘just control their behaviour and fit in’
- devaluing of the knowledge of parents of their child, including fear for their future
- willingness of parents to help but currently overwhelmed with responsibilities
- a need for specific educational programs to develop communication and social skills in those students with ASDs.

The CASG Coordinator also organised a meeting between the GUACE Convenor and special education staff at an ‘ASD friendly’ school which identified best practices in communication, planning, pedagogy, professional development, transition support, and in leadership in developing a welcoming school culture with inclusive programs.

Based on this information and analysis CASG formally submitted a set of nine written recommendations for changed practices to DETEQ and discussed these with the FNQ Regional Director. The Regional Director conducted his own investigation of Special Education Programs as part of his visits to a range of schools in the region and found substantial agreement with the analysis as provided by CASG with GUACE assistance. In 2008 the proposal for a Cairns Special School had been first articulated and since then the need for Far North Queensland region-wide reform to enhance provision of services to meet the needs of ASD children had become critical. The Regional Director also concluded that improved school leadership was required to drive professional learning towards substantial improvements in planning and differentiated pedagogy for more inclusive learning for students with ASDs.