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

Evaluation Case Study

Kimberley Region Support Centre

MSSD Output 3: Developing support centres

Catholic Education Office of Western Australia
Kimberley Region Support 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. Students are also given as much access to mainstream classrooms as possible. 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 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 aim is to provide the highest quality of education to allow each student to develop to their full potential. This Special Education Network Centre has so far supported 20 students with disabilities and advised 42 school staff (teachers, assistants and Aboriginal Education Workers).

Teachers and assistants are trained in strategies for students with disabilities through the Centre. The Centre enables students to access programs that are functional and developed to address the needs of each student. Life skills and self-care programs are implemented respecting the dignity of the child. Opportunities are also provided for students to access maximum participation in the mainstream classroom.

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).

A key element to the establishment of a Special Education Network Centre was the appointment of a skilled special education needs leader, as its support centre coordinator early 2012. The role requires sufficient skills, knowledge and expertise to network and coordinate support strategies and programs with staff and schools in building capacity for addressing local disability needs. Given this need almost half the SENC Coordinator time has been redefined into a learning support coordinator’s role. Some 25 per cent of primary students alone are involved in support programs.

The project also includes a recently appointed Learning Support Coordinator to provide support for students with learning needs on the secondary campus (0.4 Full Time). Plans are in place to appoint a full time special education learning support role specialist for 2013. This will enable the SENC Coordinator to focus more on their coordination role and the development of Centre support across the Kimberley Region.
The Centre did not commence until the end of Semester One 2012. Originally a kindergarten, the Centre required refurbishment and resourcing. It was not until late September 2012 that it was officially opened. This was made possible through various school, community partnerships and grants. The MSSD Initiative provided almost half (over $190,000) of the initial project investment, which was targeted at essential coordinator and specialist salaries. Community partnerships also provided funded support: Woodside $20,000; Broome Air Services $20,000 and Disabilities Foundation $20,000. The remainder was funded by the College and significantly by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia.

The project is managed by the Secondary High School Deputy Principal with the SENC Coordinator and School Principal in conjunction with administration and staff across both primary and secondary sites. Given the early phase of development, the initial focus was on maximising coordinator support with the school staff and students, developing knowledge, understanding and confidence in addressing disability needs in the classroom.

The responsibility for coordinating other learning support teachers and teacher assistants is with the SENC Coordinator. So too is the process of disability identification, support application and related individual education plans, in collaboration with teachers and parents, developing their skills and confidence. Support is provided to meet a range of student needs, behavioural, social and emotional needs. Professional learning and training are also part of the coordinator’s brief and is essential in developing a sustainable level of expertise to enable greater control and management by teachers.

Connections to allied professional services have been strengthened in this initial period, with some services already operating within the centre, such as psychology and speech therapy.

**Outputs and outcomes**

The overarching focus for the Special Education Network Centre is Output 3: the development of a support centre which serves as a centre of expertise in the educational needs of students with disabilities and provides expert support to a group of other schools that may not have expertise. From the Principal’s perspective:

> ... 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.

In the early local implementation phase, extensive planning and time was targeted to support structures and operations. Outcomes include:

- structure for the overall coordination of staff, that is, the combined role of the appointed Centre leader (both SENC Coordinator and Special Education Coordinator), and Teacher Assistants
- appointment of future Special Education Teachers
- assisting teachers with more focused early identification and funding support applications for students with disabilities
- targeted early intervention and support assessment of Pre-Primary students
- skilling teachers to better understand student disability, identify needs and plan accordingly for cyclical individual learning improvement programs, in partnership with parents
development and resourcing for a range of learning activities
- student focused withdrawal classroom integration
- allied professional services access
- professional learning
- an environment for classroom, parent and community activities.

Extensive collaborative relationships have been established including case study management with support of the SENC Coordinator with stakeholders, including:
- Catholic Education Office WA Special Need Consultants
- 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
- other relevant bodies and support organisations through professional learning opportunities, forums, conferences and grant applications
- development of community partnerships supporting the SENC initiative.

Lessons learned

Key observations

The Special Education Network Centre was officially opened at the end of September 2012 and in its infancy feedback from staff indicated it already had 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 the evolution of a Network Centre.

The most obvious benefit has been teacher professional learning and coordination in the cyclical management of student needs and adaptive teaching – learning relationships and programs. Staff say there is a greater awareness about students and their disabilities and subsequently improved confidence and capacity to provide, review and amend appropriate learning programs. Individual Education Plans have increased in number as more students are identified and are implemented across the whole school. Collaboration between students, teacher, coordinator and parents has provided greater focus and understanding for all stakeholders. Extra training and learning has been provided for teacher assistants who in turn work with the students, teachers and parents under SENC Coordination. Not only does this provide additional support, but also program sustainability, which was complemented further in 2012 with the school appointment of an additional Teacher’s Assistant.

Success was notable given the initiative had been operating for a short time. As one staff member stated, “…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 programs targeted at needs levels…”

From September 2012 to March 2013, 20 students identified with disability have benefited from the initiative, along with their teachers and families. On a broader level, larger numbers of students with learning difficulties and related staff have also benefited from classroom integration support, either by the Centre Coordinator or the secondary Learning Support Coordinator and Teacher Assistants.
The degree of development is a credit to the school and staff, who generally have embraced the initiative. However, as interviews revealed there is still quite a way to go before the Centre will reach its full potential as a network resource for other schools. Some networks have already commenced through forums such as Kimberley Success Zone as well as meetings and discussions with other school personnel and sectors.

To enable its logical progression, once this initial phase is embedded within the school, it may be time for collaborative shared vision setting and strategic planning with stakeholders that may enhance the Centre’s growth and influence in the future. However, given the numbers of Kimberley students with disabilities yet without ready access to experienced support, a need for a Network Centre exists.

**Sustainability**

Staff are optimistic about the initiative’s sustainability and it appears that the foundations for a sustainable program are well-established. To this point school community partnerships and the support of the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia will be critical and the school is already actively seeking expansion in this area. The school is committed to the initiative.

**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 more generally in regional and remote locations where access to special education support is limited.
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 other schools that may not have this expertise.

Case study methodology
The case study included meetings with:

- Principal and administrators
- Special Education Network Centre Coordinator – appointed to coordinate support centre operations in the Kimberley
- Learning Support Coordinator Secondary – appointed to provide support for students with learning needs on the secondary campus
- Classroom teachers
- Teacher assistants.

The site visit was undertaken in December 2012.

Description of activity

The Kimberley is the northernmost region in Western Australia covering some 423,517 square kilometres and includes a diversity of communities and schools with varying needs. Catholic Education services some nine schools in the East Kimberley and four in the West. These remote schools experience challenging situations in terms of catering for needs of children with disabilities who require specialised teaching strategies and support. High support needs students have no specialised facilities to access education.

There are 218 Kimberley students recognised as being eligible for funding support in Catholic Education. Of these, 20 are at the College where SENC is based. Many other students are not diagnosed. As of the first Term 2011, 126 students also accessed ‘Schools Plus’ support in Department of Education government schools. Given the disparate nature of school and student distribution across the Region an alternative model to disabilities support is evolving; a central hub to provide support, expertise and professional development to regional schools as a Special Education Network Centre (SENC).

The SENC is based at a Kindergarten to Year 12 Catholic Co-Educational College, located in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia. It has a current enrolment of around 650 students across two campuses. The College affirms its own multicultural identity, maintaining an active commitment to reconciliation and the cultural story of every student and family. It promotes student leadership and encourages students to become independent and responsible individuals.

A Disability Support Coordinator role is part of the appointed SENC Coordinator position. The role is to work directly with students as well as supporting teachers, assistants and Aboriginal Education Workers. The students are from K-12 across both primary and secondary campuses. The coordinator is also proactive in engaging allied health support such as therapists and psychologists.

This case study is part of a longitudinal study and will be updated in 2014.