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

Evaluation Case Study

Lead and Buddy Schools

MSSD Output 8: Assessing learning levels and adapting curriculum

South Australia Department for Education and Child Development (DECD)
Lead and Buddy schools

Abstract
The South Australia government established a number of ‘lighthouse’ schools prior to the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) initiative to strengthen teachers’ abilities in assessment and curriculum adaptations. These schools are expected to work with other schools to share knowledge and enhance capabilities. Known within South Australia as ‘lead and buddy schools’, the model is premised on the lead schools having pre-existing strengths in leadership, differentiated curriculum delivery and strong learning programmes augmented by professional learning and resources provided by the Department of Education and Childhood Development (DECD). This case study looks at two lead primary schools in a small network, sharing roles and resources to support staff in buddy schools to assess learning levels of students with disabilities, adapt the curriculum accordingly and report on student progress.

Key elements and actions
The South Australia government established 28 ‘lighthouse’ schools prior to the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) initiative to strengthen teachers’ abilities in assessment and curriculum adaptations. Schools were selected by DECD to be lead schools, either as stand-alone sites or in paired or cluster arrangements such as the two case study primary schools which were part of a small network located in Adelaide. The two lead schools have taken a shared resource approach to professional learning and school improvement. While serving slightly different communities, the schools share a common philosophy regarding student engagement and learning and a strong capacity for sharing and collaboration.

DECD support
The Department of Education and Childhood Development (DECD) provided grants for the lead schools to cover costs related to their own planning and activity within the school as well as the costs associated with providing support to buddy schools. Each lead school is required to undertake a series of actions as precursors to working with their buddy schools, including:

- establishing a project with a set of goals, associated professional learning and performance measures
- developing a Family Charter in consultation with the broader school community
- participating in a showcase day to share knowledge and learning
- providing progress reports to DECD according to a predetermined schedule
- ensuring staff contribute to DECD baseline data gathering to monitor the impact of the initiative over time via an online survey on staff perceptions of their knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting students with disabilities.

DECD also provided professional learning activities including participation in the professional learning programme delivered by an international expert and additional professional learning activity delivered by DECD personnel and online modules. Direct support was available in the form of guidance in the use of assistive technologies as tools to aid differentiation in teaching and learning programmes as well as access to DECD project coordinators and consultants. In addition, DECD established an online repository of resources, templates and presentations all designed for sharing.
information across schools involved in the MSSD Initiative as well as teachers in other schools to support students with disabilities and learning difficulties.

**Neuroscience as the basis of a whole school approach to differentiation**

A distinctive feature of both lead schools is the use of neuroscience to guide cognitive development, learning and interpersonal relationships across all aspects of school activity:

> Neuroscience is about understanding the way the brain works. Students and teachers at the school explore ways that neuroscience can help them to be the best possible learners. A Neuroscience Coordinator, shared with the buddy school, is working with individual teachers and their classes on the core areas of research that apply to teaching and learning.

Differentiation aims to remove barriers to learning for students requiring additional support. It aims to foster emotional literacy and improving learning outcomes by assisting students to be the best learner they can be. The strategies established by both schools include:

- planned implementation of the South Australian Teaching for Effective Learning framework
- professional learning, peer observations, team teaching and mentoring via the support of a literacy coach
- evidenced-based planning supported by whole school moderation of learning.

**Appointment of a differentiation teacher**

A differentiation teacher was appointed in each of the schools to lead the professional learning of four staff members while supporting improvements in differentiation across both sites more generally. The role involves working in a coaching, mentoring and team teaching mode with two teachers from each site. The role seeks to skill the four participating teachers in strategies that are at the heart of differentiation — the how and why of differentiation — across the learning environment, learning tasks, routines and assessments. The differentiation teacher also has a more general role consulting with staff in small groups on planning, working with families and delivering workshops on specific aspects of differentiation to all school staff.

Working with the differentiation teacher as a guide and mentor, teachers are provided with weekly in-class support, and planning and reflection release time. They have the opportunity to:

- develop deep pedagogical and content knowledge through regular planning and reflection sessions and group discussions
- participate in professional learning communities and networks across the two Lead School sites
- design, plan and organise for learning and teaching
- work in a team teaching situation
- develop effective data collection and analysis strategies.

**Development of a Family Charter**

Family Charters were established at both schools and are strongly supported as a vehicle to foster positive interaction and collaboration between families and each school. However, the appointment of a School Support Officer responsible for enacting the family charters of both schools did not eventuate. Instead, the schools have worked closely with their respective governing councils (which
have parent members) to ensure that all relevant activity is implemented within principles and
guidelines evident in each charter.

An internet café has been established at one site on Friday mornings each week to encourage
families to interact informally with the school. Effectively operating as a ‘drop-in’ centre for a ‘coffee
and a chat’, the café has been greatly appreciated by parents. It provides access to the internet for
personal business and communication purposes as well as the opportunity for interaction with other
parents and staff.

Training for School Support Officers

School Support Officers (SSOs) from the area cluster of schools participated in a training programme
to enhance their knowledge and skills to support students improve their reading comprehension
skills. The programme involved a series of presentations and activities to give SSOs insights into the
pedagogy associated with teaching reading. In addition to training provided by DECD for SSOs, the
schools have also invested in activity to enhance the skills of their non-teaching workforce. As a
result, staff report a closer working relationship with SSOs in planning for learning and innovative
strategies within class programmes:

_In years gone by I might have used an aide to work one-to-one with one or two of my weaker
students. Now during guided reading sessions, I work with the weakest students and the SSO
supervises the other groups who are more independent. She knows in advance exactly what
is expected with each group which frees me up to work intensely with those with the greatest
need._

Lessons learned

Key observations

The lead and buddy school initiative is characterised by clear coordination and guidance from DECD,
and an equally clear sense ownership of activity at the school level. The DECD arranged _Showcase
Day_ which occurred in Term 1, 2013, illustrated the point where the schools involved in the initiative
presented their experience to date. While there were areas of commonality across all the
presentations (all schools had developed a Family Charter) the sense of ownership of the structures
and process and the willingness to share the story of the learning and development to date was both
universal and uplifting for all participants. There was a consistent message of growth and
empowerment.

The background work undertaken by DECD to establish an integrated package of resources, guidance
and support has clearly paid dividends. The sense of lead schools being in control of their own
destiny with confidence in their own skills and capacity to support others clearly provided the
groundwork for them to assume a leadership role with buddy schools as the initiative unfolded.

Setting realistic timeframes

The lead/buddy model was implemented with the expectation that the learning and development
that has occurred in the lead sites would be transferred through close collaboration with one or
more buddy schools that have formal relationships with respective lead schools. While this may have
eventuated in other settings, in reality the group of teachers who were participants in the first tier of
professional learning in the case study schools are only now beginning to express confidence in
sharing their knowledge and skills with their immediate colleagues.
The concept of lighthouse schools is a long established model of supporting change and professional development in Australian schools. Whilst not arguing against the merits of the lead/buddy school model, in the two case study schools the timeframe for embedding the knowledge and skills acquired through professional learning has proven to be somewhat over ambitious. A more realistic approach might be around an 18 months – 2 year timeframe to build capacity within the lead schools before embarking on capacity building in buddy schools.

**Maximising the impact of the differentiation teacher role**

As it has transpired, the differentiation teacher in one school has worked with two groups of staff over 18 months to build their skills, knowledge and confidence in meeting the learning needs of students with disability. Feedback from all relevant stakeholders – principals, differentiation teacher and participating staff – suggests that the professional learning for the first tier of staff was particularly successful. Key ingredients to this success included:

- commitment by staff via an expression of interest process that requires staff to ‘sign up’ to the expectations of the programme
- participation in a shared learning experience at the outset of the programme which also contributes significantly to group cohesion
- the skills of the differentiation teacher in adjusting guidance and support according to the needs of the individual staff member
- allocation of time for individuals to enable shared planning and reflection with the differentiation teacher as well as whole group sessions a couple of times each term.

While each of the above has contributed to the success of the programme, the manner in which the differentiation teacher has embodied the concept of differentiation in her approach to working with staff remains the hallmark attribute of the programme.

**Maintaining staff interest and general readiness**

The return visit to the schools revealed that there has been limited success with the lead/buddy concept in terms of the skills transfer to the designated buddy school. While staff from the buddy school initially participated in professional learning activity offered by the lead schools, the principal of the buddy school ultimately withdrew from the programme citing a lack of staff interest and general readiness within the school to undertake a significant process of learning and reform.

Notwithstanding the lack of progress the two schools remain as beacons to other schools due to the high quality practices across a number of areas, including differentiation. As a result, the schools field regular inquiries for advice, guidance and support from a broader network of schools, both within and beyond the lead/buddy school initiative. However, the project has clearly had ongoing success in developing staff skills in differentiated curriculum delivery in each of the schools. There is clear evidence of day-to-day curriculum differentiation in practice. Teachers saw differentiation as less about individual planning and more related to eliminating barriers to learning, thereby ensuring that all students are able to access and engage with learning tasks:

> Too often in the past, we have operated with a deficit model where ‘individualised’ has equated to ‘marginalised.’ What we are doing here is looking at the learning needs of students and removing barriers as they arise on an individual basis – it is a completely different way of conceptualising learning support.
**Sustainability**

DECD has required all lead schools to establish sustainability plans to ensure continuity of outcomes beyond the life of the MSSD initiative. This was a condition of the resources being allocated for an additional 12 months. The model has built on the capacity of buddy schools to a level where the support from the lead school is no longer required. Indeed, there is a strong expectation that a new set of lead schools will emerge from the current group of buddy schools, thereby perpetuating capacity building across a broader range of schools.

Under ideal circumstances the lead and buddy strategy would have served its purpose and approach to bring successive groups of lead schools up to speed in all that is required of them as they make the transition from their buddy status. Given the propensity for ‘early adopters’ and highly motivated schools to be well-advanced in relation to participation in the lead and buddy school initiative, the need to respond to this challenge is likely to become more important over time, rather than less.

Whilst more difficult in terms of managing accountabilities, the option exists to establish a more open-ended approach to identifying buddy schools. As the experience in this case study would suggest, while the formal relationship that was established failed to come to fruition, other schools with expressed needs for guidance and support have been making contact with the lead schools on an ‘as needs’ basis.

Despite the challenges outlined above, a high level of teamwork and mutually supportive collaboration has developed across the two lead school sites. Given the risk of single site strategies falling short of growth and development expectations due to self-referencing limitations, the experience of the case study schools presents a strong case for seeding collaborative capacity building activity across a couple of sites or even small clusters of schools. There are strong indications that the efforts of the two schools will be sustained over time. In the short term, the school principals are highly conscious of both the value of the differentiation teacher and the fact that the MSSD resources to fund the position via the allocation by DECD will not be available beyond the end of the 2014 school year. As a result, the principals are reviewing staffing structures and school budgets in order to ensure that the position remains ongoing while the benefits of the position remains.

Concurrently, and taking a slightly longer term view, the differentiation teacher is highly conscious of not fostering dependency with the staff of either school: “..... if I can make myself redundant by building a depth of capability across both schools, then I will have been successful.”

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

Given that the lighthouse approach to supporting reforms is not new to schools or school systems, there is strong potential for adoption or adaptation of the model in other contexts. Under a range of contexts and different titles, the model is operating in other jurisdictions as part of the MSSD Initiative.

Historically, the strength of the model has been subject to the quality of the lighthouse, particularly the extent to which they have been held accountable for the support and services provided to other settings. A weakness is the potential for ongoing dependency of schools on the lighthouse.

These strengths and weaknesses are addressed in the approach adopted by DECD. Reporting requirements and staff surveys provide DECD with ongoing insights into activity, outputs and outcomes. There is also a clear expectation that buddy schools will reach a point where they can lead and take on buddies of their own.
Notes

An initial site visit to one of the two schools was made in early September, 2012 and included collecting background information and refining the approach to completing the case study. The majority of students with disabilities and special learning needs are in mainstream classes, with additional support from two district special classes, one of which has an early childhood focus, the other for students from Year 3 to Year 7. A return site visit was completed in April 2014. During the follow-up visit, consultations were completed with the principals of the two schools, a teacher with the designated role of ‘differentiation mentor’ as well as teaching staff and parents, combined with classroom observations.