Evaluation Case Study

Leadership development in special schools

Output 7: Supporting school principals and school leadership teams to strengthen teachers’ capability

Victorian Department of Education and Training
Leadership development in special schools

Abstract
The Victorian Department of Education and Training supported leadership development (Output 7) for special schools through two projects: a leadership programme tailored specifically to meet the needs of specialist school principals; and a professional learning programme for specialist school leaders and staff on preventing and responding to extreme and challenging behaviours. This case study is focused on the Specialist Schools Leadership Program, a course designed in partnership with the Principals’ Association of Specialist Schools (PASS) and the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership to build the knowledge and skills of principals as educational leaders. Distinctive elements of the course included: strengthening the existing community of practice; embedding change in school operations; and support from a workplace mentor for ongoing professional learning and the implementation of change projects.

Key elements and actions
The Victorian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) allocated almost half the MSSD funds to supporting school principals and/or school leadership teams. A significant component of this involved professional development opportunities for specialist school principals. DET recognised that the skills and knowledge of specialist teachers are increasingly being called upon to support mainstream schools teachers, and that the specialist school principals could play a broader role in terms of their contribution as centres of excellence in all aspects of specialist education.

DET, in partnership with the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, supported the development of the Specialist Schools Leadership Program designed to build the skills of specialist principals and leadership teams, including their ability to support colleagues in local neighbourhood schools. The strategy also included longer-term goals such as strengthening the community of practice, and embedding change in school operations.

Responding to identified needs
The Principals’ Association of Special Schools (PASS) covers more than 80 special schools in Victoria. These schools cater for students with special needs including intellectual disability, physical disability, health impairment, hearing impairment, visual impairment, autism spectrum disorder, emotional disorder and language disorder. PASS identified the need for a course to address the professional learning needs of its members including strategies to meet gaps in knowledge and skills, particularly with respect to some teachers in the special schools who may have limited training in relation to special education.

The Bastow course was based in part on responses from a survey of the PASS members and a steering committee of five principals and assistant principals. Using this information it focused on equipping principals with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop emotional intelligence and resilience, work effectively with stakeholders, and design and evaluate curriculum and assessment practices that meet the needs of specialist school students. The course also aimed to support schools to effectively integrate the learning with the change processes for each school. Two participants from each school were required to attend the course: a principal plus one member of their leadership team.
Course structure

The five-month course followed a continuous cycle of theory, application, feedback and review. Participants completed up to 80 hours of professional learning involving the following activities:

- five and a half workshop days including panel discussions with practitioners and experts
- preparation of a personal development plan to guide professional growth
- a school-based project to apply new knowledge and skills in practice
- ongoing support from peer partners
- a visit to a fellow leader’s school to observe their impact as a leader and to provide feedback.

The content of the course was primarily focused on:

- how leaders develop the emotional intelligence and resilience of themselves and others
- how leaders engage, motivate and build the capacity of teaching, therapy and education support staff both as individuals and as a team
- how to collaboratively design, implement, monitor and evaluate curriculum and assessment that meets the needs of specialist school students
- the potential impact of parent involvement in their children’s learning in school and at home, and how to implement strategies to foster optimal parent involvement
- how leaders collaborate effectively with external providers and stakeholders
- the legislative and regulatory frameworks that govern specialist schools in Victoria and the necessary actions that leaders take to meet compliance requirements.

Participants engaged in a range of complementary activities designed to apply the learning from the course in their schools, to build a community of practice as the basis for shared growth of knowledge and expertise. Participants were encouraged to access information and stay connected with each other through Bastow’s online learning management system, Bastow 307.

The course also had very clear requirements of participants to ensure individual and school commitment, for example, they were expected to identify a workplace mentor who could provide the organisational and professional support for their ongoing professional learning, and application of learning in the school.

Lessons learned

Key observations

The two case study Specialist Schools provide examples of the immediate and mid-term outcomes of the Bastow course on school leaders. Both schools provide educational services to regional centres and surrounding districts in Victoria. The first, School A, caters for around 150 students aged five to eighteen, with intellectual and/or multiple disabilities. The majority
are enrolled full-time, with a small percentage of the students participating in a transition programme at a mainstream local primary or secondary school. The second example, School B, is a dual mode specialist school for students with intellectual disabilities, and shares responsibility for the provision of services in its region with four other centres. It has around 100 enrolments, approximately half of whom are identified with Autism and high support needs.

In both cases the schools incorporated the Bastow course in a suite of actions leading to improved outcomes for students and improved capacity of teachers and leadership. In School A, leadership training was also taking place in regional programmes along with ongoing teacher training both of which were enhanced by close working partnerships with other schools and agencies. In addition to these activities, School B was engaged in a region wide process of curriculum adaptation for special schools.

Matching professional learning to school needs

This case study highlights the strengths of the model of professional learning adopted for the programme. The approach took into account the prior learning of participants and their specific needs, for example, the course focused on evidence based strategies for schools, coping with change, working with parents on grief and loss, challenges in the principal role and time and stress management.

The school leaders valued the programme as an approach to professional learning matched to their needs and the challenges they faced in their school and regional environments. The principals were particularly enthusiastic about the tailored approach reflected in the course design and delivery: “The Bastow course is significantly better than generic leadership courses. Typically those courses have only limited relevance or bearing on what principals and teachers are trying to do in special schools.” The school leaders also appreciated the way the course provided the broader policy and theoretical context to assist their thinking about their approaches at the local level and their alignment with jurisdiction and national priorities.

Practical applications

The project component of the course was considered one it most valuable aspects. Participants saw major changes in the schools occurring almost immediately as a direct result of the projects being done for the course assessment. The requirement that two participants should attend from each school had the potential value added component of embedding and sustaining changes based around the projects in each school. The course also facilitated participant interaction with other schools that involved three site visits, which provided strategies and materials the school leaders could take back for use immediately in their school.

A focus on collective growth of expertise

The strengthening of the network of the principals through the course was a significant mid-term outcome of the initiative. The course prompted a collective growth process for the whole cohort of principals and senior leaders, and gave the principals opportunities to meet with one another as practitioners who specialise in this area, and to engage in in-depth conversations. The participants valued the opportunity to talk to others and to examine and assess a range of strategies for possible adoption or adaptation in their own schools. These exchanges formed the basis of both formal and informal networks that grew from these connections and complemented the existing PASS network, which meets each month. For
regional teachers the network element proved invaluable in connecting them with colleagues from metropolitan schools and broadening their opportunities to observe good practice.

**Building capacity on collaborative staff practices**

The Bastow course built on the support most valued by the leadership groups in the case study schools: that provided by colleagues in their own and other special schools. Staff in both schools spoke highly of PASS activities at a state-wide level and the contribution of their colleagues in the other special schools in their region. The principals of special schools in the region meet regularly each year for highly valued professional meetings. Teachers working together at their point of need, supported by mentors and other teachers has led to empowerment of the teachers in the school. The teachers feel confident and have deeper understandings of the programmes they are implementing at a school-wide and classroom level with students.

The collaboration with teachers in mainstream schools in the area was also seen as very beneficial for both parties. Students with disabilities transition between mainstream and specialist settings over the duration of their schooling. Specialist school collaboration with mainstream schools helps with this transition, and also develops teacher skills within the mainstream schools.

**Sustainability**

The focus of capacity building across the established network of the PASS organisation has strengthened connections and the focus on a collective approach to professional learning that should sustain the changes in approach. The end result of the projects and networks is not that the course was completed but that the projects have made a difference to the professionalism of the leaders and teachers. Interventions of this kind typically require a cycle of professional learning programmes to address the needs of new cohorts of school leaders to maintain the momentum and respond to the changing context.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

The overall strategy of engaging and supporting existing professional networks has strong potential for adoption in other contexts. The main elements could be readily adapted to suit the needs of participants and the environments in which they work.

**Notes**

The case study commenced with interviews of PASS executive and principals enrolled in the Specialist Schools Leadership Program. The first site visits to the regional schools were conducted in May 2013 and included interviews with the principals and key teachers enrolled in the Bastow course, examination of documents, and observations of students and teachers in classrooms and playground areas. Data available publicly on DET and school websites was also used. Follow-up site visits to the schools were conducted in 2014.