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

Evaluation Case Study

Special schools as centres of expertise

MSSD Output 3: Developing support centres

New South Wales
Department of Education and Communities (DEC)

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Special schools as centres of expertise

Abstract

The New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC) allocated MSSD funds to help special schools be centres of excellence by developing local networks of regular schools with which they could share their knowledge, expertise and specialist resources. DEC helped by providing and supporting quality assurance mechanisms, peer mentoring, involvement by universities and other organisations, regional personnel expertise, and templates for document proposals and midyear reports. Several projects attest to the effectiveness of localised activity, including professional learning programmes for case managing students with anxiety disorder: using iPads to improve student engagement and learning; and professional learning workshops. Participating schools found the professional learning valuable, relevant to their needs and gave them practical insights into how to better meet the needs of students with disabilities in regular schools.

Key elements and actions

The New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC) has an integrated approach to providing better learning and support for the 90,000 students with disabilities, and/or learning difficulties in New South Wales public schools.

As a core component of Every Student Every School, DEC seeks to provide support and guidance to learning and support teams by drawing on the skills and knowledge of the state's 106 government special schools and positioning them as centres of expertise. The rationale for this approach is that special schools have deep knowledge and understanding of students with additional learning and support needs. The approach includes professional learning, support for teachers and support staff, and growing the capacity of schools by increasing the capabilities of each school’s learning and support team.

Priority areas

DEC allocated MSSD funds to special schools to develop networks across schools to share their knowledge, expertise and specialist resources. It required participating special schools to propose activities in one or more of these priority areas:

- assistive or augmentative technology and software for students to access the curriculum
- case management of students with high and complex support needs in health and/or behaviour (including mental health), and collaborative interagency practice to support students and their teachers
- support for, and adjustments to, the learning programmes of students with communication delay or disability that prevent them from accessing the regular curriculum
- support for the transition needs of students with disabilities
- building learning and support plans in partnership with parents and communities.
DEC regional officers supported the special schools to develop and implement the networks and projects. They were also involved in professional development activities, which included forming peer mentor groups. These supported the schools to develop the networks and find academic partners.

The opportunity to develop and share products and services across a network of schools has been enthusiastically embraced by special schools in New South Wales. A number of projects have been established including those developed through the networks outlined below.

**Case management for students with anxiety disorder**

Two professional learning programmes for a network of schools in western Sydney were conducted on how to case manage students with anxiety disorder. These students may not be fully engaged in learning, and their needs are often not met. A special school developed and implemented the programmes, and while the special school was responsible for the development and implementation of the project, it was strategic in drawing expertise from universities, and also in the manner in which it empowered learning and support teams in the use of case management interventions.

The first programme, for learning and support teams covered functional behaviour assessment. It offered team members (usually a school executive member, a learning and support teacher and one other team member) four days training in assessment and intervention strategies. Participants carried out action learning tasks between each training day, and had ongoing contact with other network members for at least three months.

The second programme, for 50 school counsellors, covered how to conduct anxiety management interventions for small groups of students. It used the DEC’s *Get Lost Mr Scary* and *Cool Kids* resources designed by Macquarie University.

**Liberating communication in special education – iPad for learning**

This project examined how schools can use iPads to improve student engagement and learning. It included:

- links to Positive Behaviours in Learning, an initiative in western Sydney
- development of rubrics to evaluate how effectively apps increase student engagement in communication, behaviour, learning and social interaction
- trialling and testing of apps, with the help of Spectronics, a large supplier of special needs software and assistive technologies.

**Scheduling iPad project (SIP)**

Some students find the transition from one activity to another as challenging, distracting and as intimidating as moving schools, or moving on from school. Working with a Macquarie University academic and a local primary school teacher, the project team identified the features of several relevant iPad apps, the scheduling needs of students, and the extent to which each app met students' needs. This included examining the quality of each graphic display, the motor skills required to use it (such as touch, swipe and pinch) and if users could import graphics and photographs from other sources, add sound and resize content.
The team identified ‘First Then Visual Schedule’ as the preferred app and trialled it with four students (at a special school and a regular school). They aimed to increase their independence by guiding them through a sequence of activities over a whole day, and in a teaching session.

The students found it easier to transition from one activity to another with the app, and their interactions with teachers subsequently related more to teaching and learning than to instruction and behaviour management.

**More learning, more teaching (eZones)**

Building on the two projects above, the eZones project developed learning spaces, each with its own curriculum focus, where students used iPads to enrich their learning. There were eZones for physical education (ball skills), mathematics (counting exercises) and literacy (responses to a text, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*). In each eZone, the iPad was used to guide activity and support learning, together with other materials such as balls, counters and texts.

For eZones to be effective, teachers need to organise resources in advance and adjust activities to each student’s learning level. As with the Scheduling iPad project, this approach reduced the emphasis in the teacher-student interaction on instructions and managing routines, and increased it to learning via explicit teaching and guidance.

**Professional assistance learning scheme (PALS)**

The PALS project consisted of workshops interspersed with classroom visits, independent activity, feedback and reflection. Participants were personnel from support units and classroom teachers from regular schools across a network. PALS is provided by executive staff and teachers of a special school, with an academic partner from a university and an information technology specialist from Spectronics.

PALS enables information sharing, practise, feedback and discussion about topics including the teaching and learning cycle, student assessment, working with parents, individual education plans, student communication systems and models of classroom practice.

**Professional learning opportunities**

The professional learning in projects concerning case management for students with anxiety disorder and PALS provide examples of localised activity. While DEC provided seed funding and owns some of the resources, special schools, together with other organisations, developed and managed the methodology and delivery. Participating schools found the professional learning valuable, relevant to their needs and gave them practical insights into how to better meet the needs of students with disabilities in regular schools. As a by-product of the local level professional learning, relationships have been enhanced at three levels:

- **Relationship between schools.** Whilst this has most obviously occurred between the special schools and the other schools in their networks, enriched professional relationships occurred across the regular schools as well. As a result, there is a strong sense of the network as an ongoing source of knowledge and expertise beyond what may be expected from centrally managed professional learning activity.

- **Relationships with universities.** In addition to the input received from universities via the statewide planning sessions managed by DEC, both special schools in this case study have established relationships with universities for the purpose of adding value...
to their projects. The long standing relationship between one of the schools and an individual academic has been enriched by the project development activity. The academic acts as both a critical friend to the school (by providing feedback and guidance) and by working closely with staff as a co-researcher in design and development of resources.

- **Relationships with third party organisations.** The special schools also built relationships with other organisations, including hospitals, Spectronics and Apple. These organisations provided services for no fee and the relationships are clearly mutually beneficial.

Through conference presentations and the publication of papers in educational journals, the special schools also improved their profiles and relationships more broadly.

**Recognition and professional growth**

As a result of these activities, special schools are more recognised as a potential source of expertise for regular schools. However, *potential* is used advisedly: the universally positive feedback from schools across all projects is largely due to high-quality leadership and the skills and willingness of staff to contribute to the professional learning of others.

It is also clear that the activities have stimulated professional growth in the special schools, with staff recognised and sharing their knowledge and skills outside their schools. Staff also report they have improved their knowledge and skills across many areas, including for example, data gathering and analysis, presentations, information and communication technologies and project methodologies (particularly collaboration on action research).

**Rubrics and other tools**

The projects have also developed useful tools and resources. For example, the rubric developed by one of the special schools to evaluate apps was published in an educational journal, to benefit other schools. Third parties have also developed resources, such as iPad apps, for use by network schools.

**Lessons learned**

**Key observations**

The projects show how special schools can draw on their expertise to develop resources and capabilities to provide expert support to regular schools that do not have such expertise. The model allows for the particular expertise of each school to be harnessed and broadly disseminated. DEC added value through its quality assurance mechanisms, including peer mentoring, involvement by universities in the development phases, support of regional personnel, and templates for project proposals and midyear reports.

**Sustainability**

The products and services provided by special schools were highly valued by network schools, and the positive response suggests that the professional interaction that has occurred may continue beyond the life of the MSSD initiative. While it can't be known if such networks would have emerged without the initiative, once established they have the potential to be self-sustaining beyond the life of the initiative.
Potential for adoption in other contexts

Other authorities could adopt the DEC’s approach to draw on the expertise of special school staff. However, if they planned to do so, they would need to consider the New South Wales context, where special school expertise is part of an integrated strategy. Special schools partly drive, and are partly driven by, the growing awareness of the obligations of schools under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and Disability Standards for Education 2005; and by the demand for knowledge, products and services arising from the strengthened focus on learning and support teams in regular schools, as a key component of the Every Student Every School initiative.

Notes

Two special schools in Western Sydney were included in the site visits. Consultations were held with relevant stakeholders including school principals, teachers, school counsellors, academics and regionally based personnel with coordination responsibilities. The site visits included tours and classroom observations at both schools. Principals of regular primary and secondary schools were also consulted to gain insights into the use and value of the products and services that the special schools developed.