Evaluation Case Study

Tasmania transitions

MSSD Output 12: Support for student transitions

The Department of Education Tasmania (DoE)
Tasmania transitions

Abstract

This case study looks at two elements of the Transition Project of the Department of Education (DoE) Tasmania. First, the “Knowme” application (app), developed in collaboration with Tascare, is an online resource where parents or carers can provide consolidated and comprehensive information about their family member with disability to share with teachers and other professionals. The app has the potential to greatly improve the provision of appropriate care to cater for the transition needs of the student. Secondly, DoE has also supported the development of individual transition programmes for students with disability entering formal schooling in prep, transitioning from primary to secondary, to college (years 11 and 12), and post school options. This element of the Transition Project has been implemented through collaboration between the DoE Learning Services and individual schools. It also supports challenging transitions that often occur within school programmes for students with complex needs.

Key elements and actions

The Department of Education (DoE) in Tasmania have provided additional support for students with disability to transition effectively through key stages of school and post-education experiences through the Transition Project (Output 12).

This case study looks at two aspects of the DoE Transition Project:

1. The development of an online web-based resource – “Knowme” – which allows parents and families to consolidate in one location all the relevant information about their family member with a disability. The information can be updated and shared with carers, teachers, and other professionals involved.

2. Examples of individual school initiatives to support individual transition plans for students with high transition support needs.

Transition Project Officer and Learning Services

DoE appointed a Transition Project officer in 2012 to undertake the tasks in relation to this project. The project officer was involved in activities including:

- development of an online web-based resource, in partnership with Tascare Society for Children
- workshops for school staff to explore effective partnerships and processes between families, schools and agents focusing on better educational outcomes and transitions for students with disability
- forums for parents to share their experiences and insights.

DoE Learning Services took over the responsibility of the project with the retirement of the project officer in April 2013.
Information sharing app - Knowme

A significant problem for parents with a family member with disability is the ongoing problem of communicating important information about the child to a wide range of specialists, teachers, carers, and administrators. This is a frustratingly time consuming and often repetitive task of explaining the child’s particular range of disabilities, social and emotional issues, needs, changes, developments, and relationships. This is particularly critical in regards to transition of students with disability between stages of schooling and to post school options, and for some students with disability such as children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) there can be challenges with transitions all day and every day.

As part of the DoE Transition Project, the project officer worked with Tascare and their members on the development of an online web based application (app) for information sharing. Through a focus group comprised of parents with children of varying ages and disability, they identified a need for better, faster and more convenient ways to share information that would lead to a more holistic view of a child’s needs. Further focus groups and an online consultation process began to fine tune what families needed in sharing information with the people involved in the their children’s lives.

A local design and advertising agency were consulted and briefed to enable them to design the app, while the content layout and technical build was conducted by another local agency. Particular consideration was given to the security and design features of the app after feedback from parents, and issues were addressed in the review and testing phase.

A user agreement covering privacy legislation requirements and code of conduct for use has also been jointly developed. Operation of the Knowme resource will continue to be managed by Tascare with free access for all families and individuals who wish to use it.

In 2014 the Knowme app was launched and is now available on the internet at: http://knowme.net.au and is described on the ‘About Us’ webpage as:

People living with disabilities each have their own needs for care and support, and these needs change with time. This application allows parents, carers and people with disabilities themselves to record and share the information they would like new and existing carers and supporters to know. This is a perfect online introduction so you’re not repeating information over and over again, and it ensures all relevant people get the updates they need. Choose what is shared, allow access to other people who provide care or support, and even let them update pages in some circumstances.

- It’s fast, it’s personal, it’s easy and, most importantly, it’s private.
- Record important information about a person living with disability.
- Focus on their strengths.
- Personalise the pages.
- Even print out pages as a book.

The app has been constructed in such a way as to limit the burden of administration. Once a new user has registered for an account and Tascare has approved it manually, the account user — usually a parent — can create their child’s profile, upload pictures and files for sharing, and grant access to others as guests, such as specialists, doctors, carers, school and agency staff. Guest access can also be time limited and visible to the account holder.
Learning Services supporting individual transition programmes

Part of the DoE Transition Project was the allocation of funds to provide relief for teachers to participate in professional learning and time to support individual and small group transition plans for students with high transition support needs. Stakeholders such as class teachers, support services staff and families worked together to develop tailored transition plans for students with disability. In 2013 funding support was allocated across the DoE Learning Services and 72 schools to provide relief to teachers to develop transition plans for students entering school, moving from primary to secondary school or college, from school to post school education or employment options, as well as for transitions within school programmes.

Some case study examples of individual and group student transition programmes were provided by the Learning Services at the end of 2013, to illustrate the range of strategies that had been developed under the MSSD allocations to address students’ transition needs.

In their MSSD Progress Report 3, DoE noted that the case studies provided by the Learning Services on individual student transition programmes have:

...highlighted that successful transitions occur where clear processes are in place, school staff and family members work collaboratively, communication processes are well defined and opportunities for class teachers and support staff to develop new knowledge and skills are provided at appropriate times.

As one primary school principal stated in 2012 during one of our case study site visits, ‘Tasmania has a full inclusion policy so all children must be catered for.’ It is within this context that the transition programmes sit. The examples provided by DoE Learning Services range from:

- a ‘transition room’ set up at a school providing a space and support staff for students who have difficulty engaging or needing support to transition into their classrooms
- the process undertaken by Early Childhood Intervention Service (ECIS) to assist students with disability to transition to kindergarten
- one school’s high school to college transition process for students with special needs prior to year 11
- a programme to accommodate a child with a range of severe disabilities requiring care and appropriate schooling during periods of respite for the child’s guardian
- the transition process for a child attending a special education school to gradually attend a mainstream primary school full-time
- a boundary training programme to assist students transition from a fenced kindergarten playground to an unfenced school play area
- continuous transition planning for children with severe disabilities to ensure inclusion in a mainstream educational programme
- a programme for a student in Grade 6 to transition to a combination of attendance at high school and the regional support school
Lessons learned

Key observations

Partnership relationships and a collaborative approach

Collaborative approaches have been fundamental to the success of these programmes. A recurring theme in the sample of transition programmes listed above is the importance of developing positive relationships with the many people involved with the child including parents, school support staff, carers, special services and specialists. The development of partnerships, which acknowledge that everyone in the relationship comes with some expertise, is a fundamental part of successful planning, progress and success of transitions.

The process undertaken by ECIS to assist two students with disability to transition to kindergarten involved developing communication and relationships between the parents, students and principals in the first instance, followed by the school staff who were to be involved with the students in their kindergarten year to work alongside the ECIC and Autism Special Early Learning and Child Care (ASELCC) staff. Specialists were also consulted to ensure there was appropriate access and equipment in place at the schools, in readiness for the initial 1:1 sessions at the schools, similar to those the students were accustomed to at ECIS and ASELCC. More meetings with parents, school, ECIS, and ASELCC allowed further planning and monitoring of the transition process to occur.

Another example of the importance of positive partnership relationships can be seen in the programme to accommodate a year 6 child with a range of severe disabilities requiring respite care and appropriate schooling during these periods of respite at both the local high school and the regional support school. Learning Services staff reporting on this transition programme note it “was exciting to see the ‘wraparound approach’ that happened in regard to the student’s transition in the space of 3 weeks.” This refers to a wide range of activities in this short time frame that included:

- a visit to the high school by a school support consultant
- visits by the principal of the high school to the child’s primary school
- meetings between the primary school staff, Learning Services staff and the school who would be sharing the child’s schooling until there was a vacancy for him at the regional support school
- meetings with the child’s family and school staff
- meetings with the regional support school staff to set up access to a range of their special programmes
- assistance from the Epilepsy Association
- visits from the child’s primary school teacher aides to support his new teacher aides.

At the end of 2013 Learning Services staff noted that, “This gradual transition to the regional support school has really suited his needs, allowing him to become familiar with the setting, his classmates and programmes. It has also allowed staff to get to know him well, prior to him attending in 2014. I have been very impressed with the teamwork, professionalism and ‘can do’ attitude of all staff involved.”
Supporting staff to develop new knowledge and skills – a whole school approach

For a special needs child with ASD, the transition plan was based on dual enrolment at a special education school and a local primary school for the first three years of schooling, with a gradual increase in time at the primary school to full time by Grade 3. One of the key elements for the success of this plan was providing professional development to develop new knowledge and skills. In this case, all staff at the primary school attended autism specific professional development. This included administrative staff and grounds staff to ensure that there was a consistent approach when interacting with the child. Each year, further professional development was provided to staff who would be working directly with the child, before they commenced working with the child.

Clear coordinating processes

For the senior secondary college (years 11 & 12) that has set up a ‘high school to college transition process’ for students with special needs prior to year 11, there is a clear process to follow and appropriate programmes for students to engage in. While the students are still in year 10, the following processes are arranged:

- college staff visit the high schools to meet the students
- students attend college for 2 days as a year 10 group
- students are given the opportunity to attend college for one day a week in final term
- college staff set up meetings with students, families, teacher assistants, and other stakeholders to develop transitional IEPs for students.

When the students commence year 11 at the college they are enrolled in programmes such as Community and Me, Basic Communication, Basic Number, Personal Care, and Expression through the Arts. In year 12 students are enrolled in Prepare for Work, Prepare to Live Independently, Personal Care and Expression through the Arts, plus additional classes of choice.

Sustainability

Information sharing app - Knowme

The Knowme app developed in collaboration with key stakeholder and parent groups through Tascare and DoE allows parents and families to consolidate in one location all relevant information about their family member with a disability, which can be shared at all times, but is particularly valuable during times of change and transition. The Knowme app has been widely praised by parents and families, and beyond the modest set up costs it does not require ongoing financial support.

Transition plans

The transition plans for individual students and small groups of students with disability referred to in this case study required a relatively small amount of funding for the provision of teacher relief, and appear to provide value for money. Most were aimed at preparing students for their transition to a new education environment, with others related to ongoing and continuous transition needs for students with severe disabilities to participate in some mainstream education settings. Each of these transition plans depended on a wide range of people collaborating, planning and monitoring the progress of the approaches. Sustainability will come from the capacity building and experience that has equipped school leaders and staff for the future.
Potential for adoption in other contexts

**Information sharing app - Knowme**

*Tascare* and DoE showcased the Knowme app at the 2014 MSSD Information Sharing Seminar in Hobart. Seminar participants were impressed with the app and its potential to significantly streamline communication between parents and the people involved with the children with disability, and therefore to manage critical transition periods for these family members, right through to their transition to post-school education and employment:

*The feedback from parents involved in the development and trial process has been overwhelmingly positive which will assist with awareness-raising and roll-out during 2014. Planners from the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) working with the Tasmanian cohort of students with disability as school leavers are also interested in exploring use of the tool for this group.* (DoE Progress Report 3)

Although DoE did not continue Output 12 in 2014 it provided a programme to raise awareness.

**Transition plans**

With a collaborative approach, the process of developing and implementing transition plans for individual students and small groups of students with disability can be readily adapted. It requires a relatively small investment for potentially significant impact. With the proviso that there is sufficient support for staff release for professional development and collaboration this approach has potential for adoption in other settings.

**Notes**

The case study commenced with a visit to a primary school and the regional support school in October 2012 to talk to staff. Consultations were also held with DoE staff including the transition consultant at the time. This was followed up with further consultations with DoE, reference to case studies provided by the Learning Services staff on individual student transition programmes, presentations at the Tasmanian MSSD Information Sharing Seminars, and discussions with the Executive Officer from Tascare Society for Children in 2013 and 2014.