Evaluation Case Study

The Big Plan: Transition support for students

MSSD Output 12: Support for student transitions

Department of Education Western Australian
The Big Plan: Transition support for students

Abstract

Through its Distinctive Schools Service Centre model, the Department of Education Western Australia (DoE) recognised the senior campus of an education support centre as a distinctive school that could support other school communities with transitions beyond school for final-year students with disabilities. The case study looks at The Big Plan project, which helps students plan for their future in a way they find meaningful. The project increased students’ engagement, and increased on-campus support and participation in a greater range of activities in school hours.

Key elements and action

Distinctive schools are designated by the Department of Education Western Australia (DoE) as having particular expertise and experience to help other schools meet the learning needs of students with disabilities. The case study school provided additional support through its The Big Plan project for students with disabilities to transition between stages of schooling and from school into further education, training or employment.

The Big Plan helps students ‘identify their dream in life’ — their interests, hopes and aspirations — and build a team to help them achieve it. It asks, 'What would it take for this student to have a full and interesting life, surrounded by friends and family and where they could make a valued contribution to their community?'.

The distinctive school caters for students with disabilities. Its co-location on a senior campus provides a supportive and adult-oriented environment for students with disabilities, and helps them prepare for work and build their social skills and independence. Differentiated curriculum provision addresses their educational needs and they have individualised and negotiated programmes developed through individual transition planning meetings with parents, teachers and agency representatives.

Project start-up

The Big Plan pilot started in 2012 and involved 10 students with varying levels of disability selected by the school across the whole school campus: some from the mainstream classes and some from the support centre. It was the first time these students had collaborated in this way. A trained facilitator conducted fortnightly, two-hour group meetings over six weeks. These meetings brought students, their teachers, caregivers, friends and agencies together, to create a plan for students’ school-to-post-school transitions.

Each plan was supported by the individual student’s Disability Service Commission Learning Area Coordinator who contributed to the process and developed the necessary information and guidance for further support in unfolding each individual’s plan. At the same time students from both campuses worked together to reinforce their understanding that everyone needs to plan for their future and that they can help one another.

Resource support and professional learning

DoE provided resources and support for professional learning for project leadership staff, over five sessions, by an expert facilitator from Scotland, where The Big Plan originated.
Professional learning also equipped project coordinators to provide further training and support. DoE’s resources and support helped develop, maintain and support the network of partner schools, enabled staff from partner schools to join in training sessions by distinctive school project coordinators and provide relief for the training sessions. Over 14 partner schools and almost 50 staff completed the training.

An operational plan

After the training phase, those trained were surveyed to assess their needs and understandings about their students. The results provided a baseline for project operational planning and for developing targets. The operational plan included the following steps to achieve the targets:

- develop and deliver professional learning opportunities to support partner schools improve their transition planning knowledge and teaching practice
  - external facilitation of training for person-centred planning with The Big Plan
  - focus on the student as the centre of a process that enables them to plan for their future in a way they find meaningful.
- support networks and partner schools by sharing transition planning expertise and exemplary teaching and learning practice
  - training in a virtual classroom: a synchronous distance education tool (Centra), via webinars about online networking, delivered at the senior campus
  - Centra conference led by a distinctive school for partner schools
  - five fortnightly The Big Plan session delivery meetings online for mentoring, coaching, follow up and sharing resources.
  - feedback from each workshop to support teachers improve their transition planning knowledge and teaching practice, looking at what worked and what didn’t, and sharing strategies and resources.
- identify and share strategies and resources to support teachers to improve their transition planning knowledge and teaching practice
  - develop a training package Getting Started with The Big Plan workshop, and key resources
  - provide the Centra User Guide to all schools
  - electronic resource containing The Big Plan session outlines
  - session preparation (for example, catering and room layout)
  - promote DoE Pathways and Transition Planning website
  - produce a video to increase understanding of The Big Plan, and provide sample activities and advice about implementing it.
- build the capacity of partner schools to deliver person-centred planning to other partner schools
  - expanding the network
  - with the support of the external facilitator at the support centre, building capacity so they can become trainers (‘train the trainer’).
Student workshops

Implementing The Big Plan in schools involved five, two-hour student workshops. Each student brought their support team comprising the important people in their lives, including family, friends, siblings, education assistants and people from external agencies (such as Disability Services Commission). The team helped the student identify and explore their dream of how they could have a full and interesting life and contribute to their community. Each workshop dealt with one aspect of students’ dreams and helped them take the first step toward achieving them. Community service students attended the workshops to evaluate them.

Professional learning for partner school staff

In 2013, staff of the distinctive school provided professional learning and support for the partner schools with an emphasis on maintaining the integrity of The Big Plan and ensuring consistency in procedures and operations across schools. Staff from different schools trained and wrote session plans together.

Lessons learned

Key observations

Feedback from both schools about the initial impact of the project was overwhelmingly positive. Students developed individual transition plans and identified the support needed to achieve them. As the Support Centre Principal said:

> Some amazing highlights included students from the [Special Education Centre] overcoming their fear of failure and low self-esteem by engaging in a number of public speaking opportunities. Students who would normally shy away from getting up to speak grew in stature and not only stood up but commanded a position at the front of the class. The students from both campuses developed self-respect, self-control and amazing self-confidence through this exciting process.

As a direct result of The Big Plan, students with disabilities were present, visible and engaged with the mainstream school community. They actively participated in The Big Plan on the school’s main campus, where they would previously have attended classes at the special education centre. A key focus was the business and operations of a campus café for Certificate 1 senior campus hospitality students and support centre students. Certificate 2 community services students prepared and decorated the café, as part of their assessment.

Staff reported the response from students was very positive. They enjoyed their participation in the project, and demonstrated a greater sense of self-worth and belonging.

Improved teaching-learning relationships

There were several positive changes to teaching-learning relationships because of the project:

- **Raising aspirations.** It helped students explore and emphasise the importance of their dreams, and encouraged them to think about how they could achieve them. Through structured planning, students identified how they could realise their dreams, and the steps to doing so. From the pilot project, staff saw the positive approach as infectious: students and parents were more engaged and positive about students’ aspirations. This was especially so with the hospitality campus café project.
• **Developing a collaborative culture.** Participants were sharing ideas, discussing issues and successes and exchanging resources through meetings and Centra webinars. This was building interactions and trust to support ongoing networking. These schools had identified *The Big Plan* as a tool to address their needs. Enthusiasm was high and people were willing to contribute beyond their hours of duty.

• **A school-driven approach.** A strength of the project was that schools volunteered to be partners, and actively sought help and leadership. If involvement had been required or imposed, participants felt there would have been less enthusiasm and collaboration.

• **A whole school approach.** Having a unified whole campus approach to piloting *The Big Plan* and then making it available to other partner schools was a major factor in its success and made the programme stronger by increasing the critical mass of expertise, resources and support.

• **Maintaining programme integrity.** *The Big Plan* process requires there be no deviation from specified structures and procedures. The external facilitator—a founder of *The Big Plan*—emphasised the risk of diminished outcomes if there was deviation. Deviation did not occur in the pilot, and partner schools also needed to respect the project’s integrity. Professional learning, networking and access to resources were therefore particularly important.

**Impact on other schools**

Feedback from the education support centre about the professional learning and support was very positive. They encouraged schools to consider using *The Big Plan* to address the needs of their students. Schools learned that it was a proven and effective transition approach, and that it expanded students’ options and equipped them to achieve their ambitions rather than seeing transition as just a process of leaving school.

Staff were also very positive about the impact of *The Big Plan* on students. In particular, they saw the dream session as a breakthrough experience, giving students time and opportunities to dream and to share their thoughts about their future. There was real benefit in having a range of adults working together to support the students. Some considered they should do *The Big Plan* every year.

**Impact on mainstream activities**

The positive impact of *The Big Plan* extended to mainstream school activities and approaches. It raised awareness amongst mainstream staff about the work of the support centre staff and agencies. It also encouraged cross-curriculum and cross-school approaches to working collaboratively for the benefit of students.

The project also raised the awareness of mainstream students about the support centre students: who they are, and their aspirations. Mainstream students reported they felt more connected to the support centre students.

Both streams of the school committed to increasing cohesiveness and communication between the mainstream and support centre students. As the project integrates with the curriculum and involves the whole campus, inclusion of support centre students will increase.
The professional development led by the distinctive school increased awareness about the need to better address students' transition needs, in a student-centred way. This helped increase students' post-school choices and funding options by including local area coordinators in the team.

The project also raised awareness of the importance of transition planning involving students, their families and supporters. Increased family involvement was a major benefit of the project, and allowed families to contribute to students' individual plans and prospects with greater understanding.

**Challenges and opportunities**

Project coordinators recognised the need to ensure *The Big Plan* does not lose integrity as it moves further from its original source. Coaching support may be needed to continually upskill and support staff and so ensure quality.

Project coordinators also identified the need to follow up students' transitions, to keep track of their progress. Student progress is monitored at workshops and their development staged in incremental steps to work towards their dreams, but at this stage there is no follow-up beyond the workshop. Ideas and plans for student tracking are developing, focusing on connectedness with the student team. This should be easier in urban areas (where staff are relatively stable): in rural and remote regions, schools will need to have succession plans so there are staff, training and support. This will be an ongoing issue for networks.

The school network faced several challenges during implementation:

- It was hard to find a suitable time for workshops for staff, parents, students and their teams, including an assurance that students had enough daylight to catch public transport home.

- Some regional schools faced issues using their technology. An i-learning coordinator was available online to help partner schools address technical issues. There were also short webinars for training between Centra webinars.

- Workload was also an issue, as the project required time beyond normal duties. However, people involved believed in the project and gave their time to make it a success, which was testimony to their commitment.

**Sustainability**

*The Big Plan* has strong potential for sustainability. It operated within current staffing levels, with initial seed funding. As a grass-roots initiative driven by schools to address their needs, with support and leadership from the senior campus education support centre, it also tied in with the new *My Way* disability funding model for post-school transitions. After the initial seeding funding finishes, training, network building and *The Big Plan* implementation should continue, as schools build the costs into their budgets: because they want to do it and know it works.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

Other schools should be able to replicate *The Big Plan*. It is of more value if it is school-driven, and would be less successful as a system-driven initiative because its value may not be as clear. However, there is no reason why system support for local networks such as the distinctive school network could not help other schools adopt *The Big Plan*. Other schools
could also readily adapt elements (such as the highly successful café), but *The Big Plan* added much to the value of the café as a result of its integration with other programme elements.

Other schools can also readily replicate *The Big Plan* framework. It involves a team approach, locally and across the schools’ network, that increases interaction with partner schools. This in turn helps build networks that schools can tap into. Ultimately, schools will have the opportunity to build further networks, and support schools in them with their own projects.

**Notes**

The case study was based on meetings with the Principal and Project Coordinator at the distinctive school and the Principal at the support centre, a partner school. Initial visits were for two days in August 2013, with follow-up discussions with the Principal in June 2014 and partner school feedback.