Evaluation Case Study

Using student data to guide change

MSSD Output 7: Leadership to strengthen teachers’ capability
MSSD Output 8: Assessing learning levels and adapting curriculum

New South Wales
Department of Education and Communities (DEC)

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Abstract
This case study examines a regional NSW high school’s response to improving the learning of students. The school has 180 students with a range of abilities. The focus of the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) activities is on adaptations to the curriculum, and teaching and learning approaches for students with special needs. The impetus for change was the school’s involvement in the trial of the national data collection for students with disabilities, combined with the implementation of the New South Wales statewide initiative Every Student Every School that has been championed in the region. The key observations relate to the role of leadership in change, the use of the data by class teachers, the development of staff collaboration and the sustainability of change.

Key elements and actions
The case study school is a government high school of 180 students located in the Southern Highlands area of New South Wales. The Adjustment Audit trial held in 2012 at the school revealed that approximately 100 of the 180 students enrolled at the school required some form of adjustment in order to enable them to fully engage in learning programmes. While the number of students requiring adjustment has since been revised to a lower number as staff became more familiar with the audit tool, the results of the audit nevertheless galvanised the school into action to ensure that the needs of their students were being met – in essence, the learning needs of students suddenly became everybody’s business.

The initial Adjustment Audit result was a shock to staff as it showed that more than half the students in Years 7-11 were identified as needing adjustments to their learning programme. The need to respond to this situation seemed overwhelming to teachers, but it was also apparent that the required action had the potential to build on initiatives already underway at the school, particularly the Positive Behaviour for Learning programme introduced in 2012. This programme provides positive feedback to students in regard to their learning, attitude and behaviour and is seen by the school as a key factor in changing student expectations and school culture. The work in training staff, building their commitment and implementing this programme was seen by the school as an important precursor to the changes that have occurred in 2013.

The school has also made use of the New South Wales Literacy Continuum in 2013. This statewide resource was used in an action research approach that involved all teachers in professional discussion regarding students’ literacy abilities based on evidence from NAPLAN data, work samples, assessment tasks and the Adjustment Audit. Using this data, teachers have mapped each student onto the Literacy Continuum and worked collaboratively with other teachers to moderate the results. Samples of work were collected for each dimension and cluster of the Literacy Continuum to form a standards package for future reference. Work is commencing on a similar approach for the Numeracy Continuum.

With this groundwork in place, two additional key drivers of change emerged during the 2013 school year:

- the leadership role adopted by the school’s Learning and Support team
- the openness of staff to collaboration and implementing adjustments at the classroom level.
**Learning and Support Team**

Learning and Support Teams are a key feature of the *Every Student Every School* initiative established by the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC). Key elements of the role of the Learning and Support Team include:

- a whole school approach to planning and support
- coordination, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the educational programme
- ensuring that the needs of students are being met
- identification of individuals and groups of students needing support and implementation of such support
- a multidisciplinary team involving key leaders, teachers and support staff
- building teacher capacity to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

**The team**

The school established a Learning and Support Team using DEC guidelines. The team assumed a leadership role in supporting staff to undertake a closer examination of the results of the audit and unpacking the information on a student-by-student and class-by-class basis.

The team is supported by the Learning and Support Teacher and the Deputy Principal who are both members of the team, along with the Student Counsellor, and Head Teachers of English, and Science/Special Education.

The role of senior management on the team is critical. It allows decisions to be made without delays caused by having to consult higher levels of management between meetings and empowers the team to analyse, evaluate and take action in support of the overall directions of the school.

**A streamlined referral process**

A defining feature of the approach is the process for referral by class teachers of students with specific learning issues. This involves the class teacher completing a Learning Support Team Referral Form that identifies the areas of concern in academic, social, behavioural or attendance areas. The referrals can also be made by parents, year advisors, the school counsellor or self-referral by the student.

A key part of the referral is for teachers to identify what strategies they have already put in place with the student prior to the referral, what support the student has already received and what support is requested. This creates a strong sense of ownership by the class teacher of the student’s learning programme, rather than it being deferred to the Learning and Support Team.

The team meets fortnightly and keeps track of follow-up action from the previous meeting’s referrals. This ensures that students and class teacher needs can be addressed in a short timeframe. Detailed records are kept of each referral, and feedback to teachers is a critical part of the team’s actions.

The process for the Learning and Support Team meetings is well-structured and typically covers agenda items of new referrals, follow-up from previous referrals, monitoring progress of students, professional learning for the team and staff, the implementation of the Literacy Continuum and Numeracy Continuum, monitoring of Individual Education Plans (IEP) Personal Learning Plans (PLP) and Transition Plans and links to primary schools. This streamlined process is considered highly effective in addressing students’ needs and assisting staff to make necessary adjustments to sustain engagement in learning.
Staff collaboration and professional development

The implementation of the Every Student Every School initiative across the school is built on the previous work by staff in implementing the Positive Behaviour for Learning programme. This whole-school approach was a key factor in the success of the Positive Behaviour for Learning initiative and this has had flow-on effects for the implementation of the Every Student Every School initiative.

Professional development sessions were scheduled every third week during Terms 1 and 2, 2013, with each faculty identifying how they were implementing adjustments in their teaching and learning. The 1.5 hour sessions were held after classes and involved presentations of information, sharing of data, work samples and assessment tasks, reflection on classroom teaching and learning strategies and planning future actions. The sessions relied on internal expertise of staff. There was a strong view from the school that external opportunities for professional learning had diminished in recent years. As a consequence of the MSSD initiative, the building of teacher capacity within the school, using collaboration within and across faculties, sharing of knowledge and approaches and sharing of learning across the school, are now key features of the school’s approach.

The Adjustment Audit and Literacy Continuum were key resources that provided a context for sharing of information amongst staff. As these were both focused on individual student learning, they provided a platform for further professional dialogue about specific teaching strategies to improve learning.

Through these professional development sessions staff began to see that for some students only small changes were needed in regard to how information was presented, or how new content was introduced. Staff also saw that, for students with more serious difficulties with learning, they were not alone, but were part of a team of teachers who were working with the students to meet their needs. The referral process empowered staff to identify needs of students, seek help in a coordinated way and receive feedback regarding strategies and approaches to use in their classes.

The policy direction and guidance from the DEC via the Every Student Every School initiative, the Learning and Support Teachers and Learning and Support Teams, has provided a framework for staff to work together as a team to identify and support students in need. Additionally, an extensive professional development programme has been implemented to embed the Literacy Continuum in the work of class teachers. Every teacher has now mapped a class on the Literacy Continuum using evidence based approaches across Key Learning Areas. This teacher-led process has enhanced the professional culture in the school which strongly supports and celebrates teachers’ learning and knowledge.

Lessons learned

Key observations

Role of leadership in setting the agenda for change

One of the key findings of this case study concerns clarity of direction within the school. The principal has an in-depth knowledge of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the school and put clear planning in place to address the identified issues. Throughout the school there is a strong focus on raising expectations of both students and staff and raising standards of achievement. Every staff understands the direction of the school and the programmes in place to achieve its goals and objectives.

Such unity in direction may be easier to achieve in a small rural high school, but such schools also often have long-term staff who may be resistant to change. This issue was apparent at the case
study school, but it has been skilfully negotiated in this school by building key teams, empowering these teams to implement change, supporting the work of the teams with time and resources, and building the expectation that all staff have a role in meeting the special needs of students.

**Whole school commitment and buy-in to the change**

The empowering of staff is a key feature in the implementation of any initiative. The *Every Student Every School* initiative implementation process brings the impetus for change down to the needs of individual students in the school. Each teacher has a role in assessing this need, can see the assessments of other teachers of the students and can contribute to the development of adjustments for these students. This contextualises the *Every Student Every School* initiative from a statewide policy to its day-to-day implications for the teacher in their class with individual students.

The buy-in of staff at the school has been achieved through clear direction and expectations of the principal and executive teachers, the skilful work of the Learning and Support Team and building a critical mass of teachers committed to changing their approach to accommodate the needs of students. Once this buy-in had occurred, the collaboration of staff has led to further refinement of the teaching and learning approaches in the school to address the needs of students.

**Impact at the class and individual student level**

The impact of the *Every Student Every School* initiative flows through to the classroom level. While some attributed the dual effects of the *Every Student Every School* and *Positive Behaviour for Learning* initiatives to be the key factors changing the school’s approach to responding specifically to students with disability, the Learning and Support Team, executive staff, principal and teachers saw the benefits applying to all students in the school.

The school has ensured that all staff are included in training programmes, share modifications made to class programmes and believe their contribution is valued. This has built the involvement of all staff as the programme has been fully implemented across the school. The building of a critical mass of teachers who are committed to the approach was a key tipping point in this process.

**Sustainability**

The focus of the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) activities in this case study is on adaptations to the curriculum, and teaching and learning approaches for students with special needs. This case study provides an example of potentially sustainable change including the practices listed below:

- **Use data to drive the need for change and to evaluate success.** The school has used data from the Adjustment Audit, school generated data and NAPLAN and other results to critically examine their current educational provision to students, identify gaps and implement new approaches to address the gaps.

- **Provide a structure and impetus for change.** The statewide *Every Student Every School* initiative has been a catalyst for change, both in terms of setting a policy agenda for implementation at the local level but also in offering approaches that are suitable for the school to adopt. The school has made the statewide policy their own. The school has taken from the initiative those things that are relevant to the school and their staff and their situation as an isolated school.

- **Value the knowledge of teachers and support staff.** The school has recognised the strengths of its staff expertise as well as areas for further development. By recognising the strengths, the school has been able to utilise this knowledge with the rest of the staff,
carefully target the areas of need and make good use of internal resources as well as outside expertise.

- **Build professional learning in a supportive school culture.** The supportive culture has developed over a period of time through a number of initiatives (*Positive Behaviour for Learning, Literacy Continuum, Every Student Every School*). These programmes build on one another, and recognises the prior learning of staff.

- **Actively involve school leaders in the change process.** The leadership of the school is actively involved in the implementation of change, from identifying needs, programmes and approaches, working alongside the teachers, and evaluating the successes and areas requiring further development. The leaders recognise the efforts and work of staff in their professional learning; and celebrate this success.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

**Whole school approach to change**

The importance of a whole school approach cannot be underestimated. This includes clear leadership from the principal and executive teachers, putting MSSD initiatives (such as *Every Student Every School*) into the school context, and ensuring the involvement and subsequent empowerment of all staff to make changes in their classrooms.

The concept of school readiness for change is also important. The work of the school in implementing the Positive Behaviour for Learning programme and other projects, such as *Literacy Continuum*, at the school have set up a culture of professional learning that laid fertile ground for the MSSD initiative.

**Role and composition of the Learning and Support Team**

The composition of the Learning and Support Team with a mix of senior management, teacher leaders, class teachers and support staff ensures that this team can take action and communicate broadly with staff across the school. The team model and processes for referral is highly suited to other schools and school systems. The support materials from the Department of Education and Communities provides clear guidelines for the team and a strong rationale for the approach that has been adopted at the case study school which would be equally relevant in other settings.

**Building the buy-in of staff through collaboration**

The implementation of any new programme or initiative at a school level does not occur in a vacuum. The professional culture of a school develops over a period of time, building teacher and leadership capacity through the learning that occurs as staff collaborate on successive initiatives. Each new programme builds on the success of others.

At the case study school, the success of programmes and initiatives such as *Positive Behaviour for Learning, Literacy Continuum* and *Every Student Every School* has been a result of the supportive professional culture of the school, which has been further developed by these programmes. This is the essence of sustainability: a self-improving professional culture within the school which is able to take from new initiatives what is required for the staff at that point in time.

The catalyst for change in this school were the findings of the audit analysis. They led to change in teacher practice due directly to the supportive professional culture already existing in the school. The receptiveness of staff to new projects, and the existing professional culture in the school, must be considered when planning the implementation of MSSD professional learning programmes in schools.
Background

MSSD Outputs

Output 7: Supporting school principals and/or school leadership teams to strengthen teachers’ ability to assist students with disabilities.

Output 8: Supporting school staff to assess the current learning level of students with disabilities, adapt the teaching curriculum to suit their current level of ability and report on student progress against adapted curriculum.

Although the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC) has not established any specific activity related to MSSD Output 10, the approach adopted by the case study school also encourages collaboration by supporting teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities through collaborative teaching practices such as team teaching.

Case study methodology

The site visit included interviews with the principal and key teachers, focus groups with support staff, examination of documents and electronic data and observations of students and teachers in classrooms. The school also provided extensive documentation relevant to the case study in addition to data available publicly on the school’s website.

School background

Recent downturns in local industry have affected enrolments at the school. The school’s ICSEA index of disadvantage is 976 (Australian average 1,000), with only 9 per cent of students within the top quartile of income. The majority of enrolments come from within the town, with small numbers bused from surrounding rural areas. The school has one multi-category class for more disabled and high needs students. Some students in this class also attend mainstream classes.

The school has 23.5 teaching staff and 6.4 administrative and support staff. This includes Learning Support staff of Learning and Support teacher (0.7EFT), School Learning Support Officers (3.0EFT) and a Counsellor (0.2EFT). The school is a member of a regional Learning Community: a cluster of schools that broaden their respective senior curriculum through sharing of specialist teaching resources via videoconferencing.

This case study has been selected for further follow up and will be updated in 2014.

1 My School website 2013