

INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Organisation: NSW SSP Principals' Network

Date received: 8/08/2011



NSW Legislative Council

Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families

Response from the NSW SSP Principals' Network

Background

The NSW Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP) Principals' Network, the peak professional organisation for principals of Special Schools in NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Legislative Council into the "Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families". This Network represents 113 Special School settings throughout the state of NSW. These Special Schools cater for students with intellectual and multiple disabilities including Autism, hearing and vision impairment, behaviour disorders, emotional disturbance as well as Hospital Schools and Educational Training Units (ETU) within Juvenile Justice settings.

Terms of Reference

That the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on programs and services for children with additional and/or complex needs and their families during transitions between stages of education, and in particular:

1. the adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families;
2. best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions;
3. any other related matters.

In the case of most Australian children and their families, life stage transitions are looked forward to and celebrated. This is frequently not so for children with additional needs, especially when these needs include a very significant intellectual disability, behaviour disorder or other complex needs. For many families with a child(ren) with a disability, it is a time of stress and uncertainty as families seek impartial information that effectively correlates future placement options with the needs of their child at each transition point throughout their education.

Preschool to school

Adequacy and accessibility of support

Pre-school to school can be a daunting task for families who are coming to terms with recent diagnosis of their child with a disability. Matching educational options to their child's needs can be overwhelming. Early Intervention programs continue to provide much of the support necessary. In the Department of Education & Communities (DEC), regional support includes Students Services Team including disability programs consultant and itinerant support teacher transition. Generally the adequacy and accessibility of support can be good where families are linked school services in a timely way by Early Intervention providers.

Factors that impinge on the adequacy and accessibility include:

- *Poor case management where students are not accessing Early Intervention (ie families moving interstate or family choice)*
- *Where coordination of transition from prior to school falls to parents with their varying levels of skills, ability and understanding.*
- *Parent agenda: denial a strong defence mechanism*
- *Incorrect/late diagnosis in order to access support*
- *No reliable assessment tool for young students with significant intellectual disability*
- *Dependency on a diagnosis for substantial support*
- *Parent confusion re available options*
- *Late placement by regional placement panel e.g term 4 of year prior to commencement of school*
- *Poor transition planning / no plan*
- *Unwelcoming school i.e. school agenda*
- *Lack of prior to school services such as preschool, early intervention.*
- *No Early Intervention*
- *Parents wanting students to start immediately*
- *Red tape*
- *Insufficient paperwork with little information to support the student.*
- *Inadequate resources including no release time for staff to support students to transition.*
- *No school access to funding to release staff to enable prior to school visit for new students.*

Best Practice Approaches: School to post school placement

- Strong and effective Case Management approach from day one of the students and family being identified for support.
- Case manager (or small case management teams of 2 – 3 individuals) with the authority to
 - oversee and support all aspects of the students' pathway to school;
 - employ essential resources from a variety of sources (including other agencies) and ensure that services provided will be continuous, in the long term, and represent best available practice;
 - involve all relevant agencies to utilise an across sector case management approach to addressing the needs of individual children and their families;

- support the student and families to ensure access and continuity of other support services such as therapy and health care.
- Sound interagency support, and Early Intervention communication with schools.
- Early identification of students and families requiring support and sound access to Early Intervention is vital prior to starting school.
- Removal of Agency boundaries and similar limitations which may need to include innovative employment or contractual arrangements.
- Highly effective interagency communication strategies to ensure effective understanding of resourcing needs.
- Early intervention providers, including educators, therapists, social support personnel and medical personnel, need to be very familiar with and knowledgeable about school environments and programs.
- School personnel need to be equally familiar with environments, services and programs which operate at the pre-school stage.
- A common language of disability prior to school and within DEC. Currently many students enrol in an SSP with assessments stating "global developmental delay". This impacts negatively on school resourcing and does not support families to fully understand the level of their child's disability.
- Timely assessment. As Support Classes and Special Schools placement eligibility are based on student label to meet specific criteria rather than need. Recommendation: change DEC labelling model to a need base. Timely assessment to establish need can often be difficult for parents to obtain.
- Parent access to adequate and impartial information on available on all school options.
- Adequate regional DEC support personnel to assist families to be aware of all options appropriate for their child. Families need access to impartial information of all available school options (eg general publication, website) in order to make the best possible informed choice.
- Family visits to local SSP schools and Support classes to ensure parents make an informed choice.
- Regional DEC calendar is linked to optimise transition planning.
- Timely placement in by Regional Placement Panels to enable schools to support transition to school – preferably third term of the year prior to school entry or earlier.
- Reduce/remove the "administrative hoops" families that are require to 'jump', to access school. (See below for one example)
- Early communication between families and school. Currently DEC enrolment process includes a Learning Support Team (LST) meeting at the family's local school. Parents provide information and support documentation to the local school in relation to the student's educational, communication, therapy, medical, behavioural and personal care needs. When a student is placed in an SSP, the enrolment policy mandates another LST meeting where families are required to repeat all the above information. There is an assumption that all information is passed to the incoming school however this is often not the case nor in the detail required. For some families who are still coming to terms with the degree of their young child's disability, this can be a distressing time.
- Allocated time for school staff to visit pre-schools and/or Early Intervention setting to talk with previous setting staff about ongoing needs of student.
- Slow transition into the new school setting with families supported by early parent/ teacher meeting to discuss outcomes and priorities.
- Ongoing support in schools from the commencement of the school year and into the first semester.
- Smaller class sizes for students in SSPs and Support Classes in their first year of schooling. Improved resourcing for the first year of school including class sizes in Early Stage One (up to 6 years) be no

greater than six students to ensure the best possible start for all students and their families. Smaller class sizes in the early years of education have been recognised as essential to give all students the best start to quality education and have been implemented in mainstream K-2. No flow-on effect was seen in SSPs or Support Classes. School Counselling Services recognise the difficulties in gaining an accurate assessment of a young child, especially under 6 years of age and correctly err on the side of not labelling a child as "severely disabled". However this becomes a resourcing issue and young students can be placed in classes of 9 or 10 instead of 6 where students need to be given the best start to school and support transition.

- SSPs resourced to support the transition of young students and their families including:
 - Time for the school to visit the child in their current EI setting and speak with staff;
 - Time to meet with the family to discuss all aspect of the students' learning needs, risk management through Learning Support Team meetings (LST);
 - Time for class teachers to be a part of the initial LST enrolment process.
- LST and Review meetings – while in mainstream are able to be funded through Funding Support, no equivalent assistance is available to staff in SSPs and are borne by the administrative goodwill of SSPs and their staff and their internal budget of the school. This can directly impact on the time devoted for these meeting.
- Preschool to school: Slow transition into school/ morning session then afternoon session over 2 or 3 days. Full days to follow perhaps 2 or 3 in the first week then full weeks. Early meeting with parents and teacher/ SLISO to outline outcomes, program and timetable.

Year 6 to 7 or whenever students transition from an SSP to a mainstream Support Class or regular class

Student placements in Support Classes are reviewed annually. DEC see placements as fluid and encourages parents to review the best possible placement in the least restrictive environment in at any particular year, not only from Years 6-7. As a result, many students do move from one setting to another throughout their school life. For mainstream students identified with additional needs moving from 6-7, DEC transition support funding is available. However, no similar funding is available for students moving from SSPs to a lesser restrictive environment and rely on the goodwill of the SSP staff and its internal budget to develop and implement transition programs.

Adequacy and accessibility of support

The adequacy and accessibility of support to SSPs to assist students and their family is borne of the "good will" of SSPs. Administratively to develop and case manage individual Transition Plans, schools use the LST and Review processes to support families and general local knowledge to provide families with information on future options. To implement these transition plans, SSPs are not resourced in any way and are required to use their internal 'global budget' to support students moving across settings. Without sufficient resources, schools maybe unable to financially cope with the number of students who may be identified as ready to move to lesser restrictive environments.

Factors that impinge on the adequacy and accessibility include:

- Poor case management
- No access to funding (SSPs only) to support student transition
- Late placement by regional placement panel e.g term 4
- Inadequate resources including release time for staff to support students to transition.

Best Practice Approaches: Year 6 to 7 or whenever students transition from an SSP to a mainstream Support Class or regular class

- Quality Case Management is the core of all transition where SSPs are supported to conduct quality LST and Review meetings.
- Annual formal review process in Year 5 provides the opportunity for families to gather information and to make decisions for the following year.
- Family support to explore all available options re high school options or other lesser restrictive options through. SSP staff escorting parents to visit other local placements option. Families are often required to make contact with the new school which can be daunting.
- Timely placement by Regional Placement panels.
- Transition plans developed jointly and in collaboration with families and students and service providers. Joint responsibility, primary and secondary, is required for successful transition.
- Quality handover of information is passed onto incoming schools through:
 - Student and family transition visits to the new environment supported by SSP class teacher/executive to pass on information, effective teaching and management practices, curriculum accommodations, health care procedures etc directly to the incoming teacher.
 - Incoming teacher time to visit the student in their current environment to observe best educational accommodations practice and medical or behavioural supports and
 - Ongoing SLSO support for the student while visiting the incoming school. Existing classes are often 'full' and an addition a new student can change the dynamics of an already settled class.
- Initial ongoing support from SSP to support staff, student and families in first term of year 7 or their new lesser restrictive placement.
- Year 6 to 7: Professional learning support for new teachers relate to accommodations required for educational success.
- Executive support to oversee transition and monitor tracking of student progress and effectiveness of the transition plan
- Regional systems to facilitate transition processes including
 - availability of additional support where indicated
 - personnel to support the family and, where indicated, the school.
- Primary and secondary school personnel and the other related service providers (particularly therapy services) need to operate across the different sectors to ensure continuity of services and programs. This is particularly important for therapy services, communication skills development and utilisation, social skills development and behaviour management approaches.
- Identifying and targeting primary aged students with significant behavioural needs when exiting Primary schools and providing intensive transition planning.

School to post school placement

Adequacy and accessibility of support

Factors that impinge on the adequacy and accessibility include:

- *Poor case management and handover of information*
- *Late placement by regional placement panel eg term 4*
- *Inadequate resources including no release time for Executive and other staff when SSPs with secondary enrolments are staffed on a Primary School model.*
- *Parent confusion re available options*
- *Lack of availability of support in the new environment*
- *Late advice for students accessing ADHC funded community participation programs*
- *Lack of familiarity with processes and procedures operating in post-school service provider environment.*
- *Lack of familiarity with processes and procedures operating in school environment by post-school service providers.*

Best Practice Approaches: School to post school placement

For families, moving on from school to an unfamiliar environment is challenging

- Quality and effective individually based Case Management, resourced through SSP Executive release equivalent to Head Teachers in High Schools (4 hrs/week). Currently SSPs are staffed on a Primary School model, impacting on the quality of transition delivery.
- Provision of quality senior curriculum specialists to prepare students and trial a variety of options while in the school setting while ever SSPs are resourced as Primary Schools. (High Schools equivalent is 1.4 staffing).
- Early awareness raising for families as part of individual student transition planning processes.
- Timely and collaboratively developed transition plans with parents at school to address student needs and determine how best to support.
- Family access to timely, quality information related to Post School Options eg work or community participation program, Service provider or supported employment agency, employment agencies, TAFE, mental health services, mentoring services, youth connections programs.
- Early family support in choosing appropriate post school setting or service.
- Adequate provision of options for families living outside regional towns and centres
- Relevant agencies develop highly effective interagency communication strategies to ensure effective policy and resourcing but utilise a case management approach to addressing the needs of individual children and their families.
- Teaching staff to accompany parents to service expo's. Time/funding needed to free staff of class responsibilities
- Sound communication around student expectations. School to post school placement: Transition Support Teacher to organise assessment of students as well as information sessions for parents on services available.
- Students very substantially engage with post-school agencies and their services and programs, long before they leave school, supported with funding available for staffing.

- Positive communication between post-school providers and families/schools. This includes post-school therapy, medical and social services providers, as well as continuing education, vocational and community participation services.
- Timely assessment in early Year 12 that consider
 - Transport and mobility
 - Access to appropriate social recreation services
 - Links to adult services: NSW Health, ADHC
- Timely and quality School/service provider handover information.
- Support from previous school in first month.
- Ongoing tracking system in place to follow success of students or provide additional information from the SSP if required after the student has left school.
- Consideration around challenges associated with School to post school placement for families living outside regional towns.
- Post-school service providers operate with and within schools.
- Schools to provide teacher support when transitioning to work sites.
- Open days provided by service providers/employment agencies to communicate options for students and families.
- Information sessions for families to include NSW Health, ADHC, Centrelink, RTA (Transport Subsidy Scheme) held.
- Support for student to visit various service providers preferably with parents.
- Adequate placements are available.
- Staff to accompany parents and / or provide transport to service expo's.
- Ongoing sharing of behaviour management approaches between SSP and service providers are in place prior to exiting school to avoid failure.
- Service providers should not operate in isolation from each other and nor should specific life-stage services operate in isolation from the services which focus on other life stages.
- Ensuring availability of services on offer is commensurate with needs, abilities and interest of students.
- Availability of additional support where indicated.
- Professional learning for secondary and support teachers in regional towns is available.
- Better partnerships between school, health and agencies working with at risk students with behaviour difficulties, ongoing mental health, drug and alcohol and relationship problems for young person and significant others in their lives, possible homelessness as well as students exiting Juvenile Justice, this targeted group of young people.
- Long term support for sustainable job placement, apprenticeship and/or TAFE courses for above targeted group.
- To develop bridging partnerships that will see a student through the inevitable successes and failures with work and/or TAFE. It is naive to believe that a student who has taken on an apprenticeship will go the distance when the general statistics suggest 75% of apprenticeships fail. Same with work opportunities – these students require follows up and ongoing supports.

Other

Supporting young people and their families in their transition from custody to the community.

While in custody, young people have access to a range of educational opportunities and intensive support. However, when they are released from custody both access and support is ad hoc at best. Many students who enrol at an ETU report that poor or no recent school attendance other than at another ETU. Each ETU tries to make the most of each student's enrolment period and many students demonstrate very positive engagement and achievement. However, there are few opportunities for ETU's to maintain contact and support post-enrolment. In fact in many cases, young people are released from custody and do not appear to reengage with education until their subsequent incarceration.

This scenario is particularly the case with young people on remand for short periods. Upon their release, these young people may be supported by Juvenile Justice Officers in the community. However, there is no state wide systemic educational response which addresses their specific needs and links their educational achievements while in custody to appropriate opportunities in the community and supports their engagement. This issue is exacerbated by the extended school leaving age and its requirements in relation to school attendance and other training options. To facilitate successful transition and reduce the high rate of recidivism, strategies such as outreach transition programs with a specifically educational focus must be considered.

In Conclusion

As outlined above, successful transition requires continuity of planning, monitoring and service provision. This is particularly important in regard to communication skills, social skills (including behaviour management), and therapy and medical support. Children and their families need to know what to expect as they progress through life stages and they must expect, realistically, that each transition will lead to enhancement of quality of life through increased empowerment. All service providers must understand the expectations and needs of each student and their families and be committed to, and capable of, meeting the services agreed to. Each service provider must appreciate the program from which the child has emerged and fully understand the needs and expectations of the next life-stage environment the child will progress to.

A powerful case management approach will be required to achieve this high but essential standard. The case manager or small case management team must have the authority to draw upon essential resources from a variety of sources, cross agency boundaries and develop innovative and flexible approaches to addressing critical needs. Case managers must be guided by quality management principles which focus only on outcomes meaningful in regard to the child concerned and which ensure that only measures which lead to beneficial outcomes are implemented. Case managers must be committed to implementation of best practice (evidence-based practice) as an essential complement to the aspirations of children and their carers in the development and maintenance of long-term transition planning for children.

Jill Dean

President, NSW SSP Principals' Network