

Dear Colleagues,

More than 1,800 people working as support teachers learning assistance have been told by their union that the department is planning to abolish their jobs and reduce support for students with disabilities in mainstream schools.

That isn't true. Let me explain what we are doing.

Last year's mini budget provided an extra \$9 million a year to establish the Learning Support Coordinator Program. We're evaluating that program this year to see whether to expand it in 2010.

If we go ahead no teacher would lose their job. Children would get more direct support in mainstream schools not less and they wouldn't have to get formal assessments to get help.

Every public school would have a specialist teacher to support children with additional learning needs and their classroom teachers.

What is the School Learning Support Coordinator initiative?

From the start of the 2009 school year, 168 School Learning Support Coordinator positions were established in 265 schools across 40 communities of schools. The funds came from the mini budget and provide the equivalent of 80 additional full time specialist teacher positions.

School Learning Support Coordinators, through their school's learning support team, provide direct assistance to regular classroom teachers as they respond to students with complex additional learning needs from diverse cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds.

These include those students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, difficulties in learning including Dyslexia, behaviour disorders, language and communication disorders, and confirmed disabilities.

As part of the initiative, School Learning Support Coordinators are also being provided with over 110 hours of specialist training to support them in their role. We've had very positive feedback from those teachers involved in the training.

This includes training in Autism Spectrum Disorders, managing behaviour, motor coordination difficulties, speech, language and communication needs, and curriculum access for students with complex additional learning needs.

Creating these positions has provided an exciting opportunity to implement a new way of supporting students and their teachers.

The initiative is based on collaborative efforts within communities of schools to plan the use of these additional positions, and other resources available to the school, to meet their local needs.

The initiative received overwhelming support from principals from the outset. A comprehensive induction program was provided for the School Learning Support Coordinators and other key school and regional personnel during term 1.

Many regions have now established coordinated support and mentoring arrangements for their School Learning Support Coordinators and principals.

All School Learning Support Coordinators have started their online training and are now completing their course on Autism Spectrum Disorder, together with additional school based and regional staff.

Feedback received from over 400 participants in the online courses to date, including trials held in 2008, has been overwhelmingly positive about the quality and accessibility of the materials and the impact on teacher practice.

Information about the initiative, including the schools included in 2009 is available on the Department's website:

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/studentssupport/programs/disabilitypgrms/slscinfo.pdf>
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What are we considering and why?

Principals, teachers and parents are telling me about the need to change the way in which students with additional learning needs and their teachers are supported in schools.

For a large group of students with special needs, support should be available where and when it is needed without the need for students to be formally assessed.

As a result, we are considering expanding the School Learning Support Coordinator initiative, to build on its strengths, together with the strengths of the Learning Assistance Program, and form a new model of support for students with additional learning needs and their classroom teachers.

If we proceed this way we would establish a specialist teacher in every school across the state.

This could be achieved by reforming a number of existing and diverse special education provisions and implementing a single specialist provision to provide more immediate specialist support for students, teachers and schools.

There are many good reasons to consider a new approach.

We know that the learning needs of our students are becoming increasingly diverse. There is a real need for:

- * more immediate support for our regular classroom teachers,
- * increased expertise of our specialist teachers,

- * reduced administration in order to access support, and
- * co-ordinated effort to make the best possible use of our resources.

The model under consideration would draw together existing funding allocated to the Learning Assistance Program, related itinerant programs in behaviour and integration, and a portion of the Integration, Funding Support Program supporting students with mental health and autism with lower level support needs, to create a single specialist provision, to be known as the School Learning Support Program.

Positions and funding would be allocated to all schools across the state using an equitable allocation process combining incidence and student learning need.

The model would allow flexibility for schools to identify the specialist expertise they need to support students and teachers directly and in a timely manner - and this would be determined by each school's priorities.

Consultation and feedback

We have been engaged in extensive consultation with key education, union, parent and community groups, including principal representative groups.

This consultation will continue as we evaluate the results of the Learning Support Coordinator Program and continue to develop our thinking.

I'll provide further details as the consultations progress and share with you the results of the evaluation later in 2009.

If - and it is if - we decided to make any changes, groups of teachers would be allocated to a group of schools. I can guarantee that no teacher would lose their job.

With my best regards,

Michael Coutts-Trotter
DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TAFE NSW
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