



# newsletter

NSW Teachers Federation

July 2009

## Though welcome, Federation is concerned about the review of distance education

While the Federation welcomes this review of distance education (*A vision for distance learning for the 21st century*) it is of concern that the union is hearing from its members the haste to which some Distance Education Centres are moving to carry out any restructuring before a number of questions are answered and certainty around teachers' conditions is assured.

Federation will pursue any cases where members' conditions are eroded as a consequence of the implementation of this review.

While the union welcomes consultation at the local level, Federation asserts the following:

- No changes will be implemented until Federation has had an opportunity to check that there has been no erosion of teachers' working conditions and that members at each site are fully cognisant of the impact of the proposed changes.
- All local arrangements that may occur as a result of the Distance Education Review must comply with all state-wide policies covering such areas as transfers, teacher qualifications, promotion/classroom teacher ratios and teacher/student ratios.
- Federation would caution the Department of Education and Training (DET) not to implement changes to integrated distance education centres hastily, so that natural attrition can alleviate any stress associated with staffing any new local proposals.

Distance education is first and foremost an equity program to ensure all students — no matter the physical location or well being — have access to a quality education.

### Special education concerns

Federation is strongly opposed to the proposed closure of the Distance Education Support Unit located at Sir Eric Woodward School. This school is a statewide re-

source that utilises specialist knowledge, experience and resources for our most vulnerable students, that if closed would be lost to the public education system. As this school is a K-12 setting for special education needs students, their families experience a continuity of service, knowledge and staffing.

### Distance education and technology concerns

- Federation asserts that a combination of old technology and new technology that are both effectively resourced is in the best interest of the learner.
- Technology can not be a substitute for a teacher learner relationship. It must be a means of supporting the relationship by bridging the distance.
- There is no evidence to suggest that the use of computers and digital learning methods alone are an improvement to student learning. Like all other teachers, distance education teachers need to have the professional freedom to model their own pedagogy.
- Federation asserts that DET's emphasis on the use of technology, that is sitting learners in front of the computer for extended periods of time, would have occupational health and safety implications and be educationally unsound.
- Assumption around teachers' access to computers, information technology support and available time to develop and consolidate new technology skills are flawed.
- Proliferation and high turnover of information technology programs that teachers are expected to master is problematic.

### Workload implication

Federation's preferred option is that DET maintain a unit that produces specific quality distance education course material K-12. However, if the expectation is that distance education teachers must develop their own quality course materials, Federation asserts that this cannot be done over and above a teacher's present allocation. If this is DET's expectation, then additional release time must be provided and or a reduction in the student teacher ratio be provided.

### Access Program schools

Federation opposes any cuts to the staffing allocation of Access Program schools. The current Access Program

schools have developed a structure that supports rural learning communities. Access Program schools have a strong culture of succession planning, supporting new teachers to the program, ensuring that the curriculum delivered meets the needs of all learners. This is proven by the consistent School Certificate and Higher School Certificate results. If DET's intention is to spread the resources more thinly, isolated rural school communities will be further disadvantaged.

## Model, modes and “categories of enrolment”

There is significant amount of confusion amongst teachers and schools around the terms “model”, “modes” and “categories of enrolment”. It is Federation's view that it is the category of enrolment not the mode of delivery that gives distance education access to student support and possible associated funding. It is interesting to note that while the emphasis of the review has been on placing the learner at the centre of the model, the modes emphasis is on the method of delivery not the learners' needs.

## Home distance learning

- The maintenance and resourcing of mini school and home visits ensure “positive social and learning relationships” which provide additional “real” opportunities for social and academic learning.
- The development of support materials for home supervisors is important; teachers are spending too much time on this work, without proper resourcing.

## Tutorial distance learning

Federation recognises the importance of continued quality learning programs for students who have specific learning support needs. Limiting this category to stage 3–5 is not advisable as students entering this mode in stages 1 and 2 are the most successful return-to-mainstream school candidates.

Adjustment to student-teacher ratios is needed to increase the capacity to better assist the Teaching and Learning Program and the Learning Support Teams as provided in mainstream settings.

## Single course distance learning and online distance learning

The level of support to develop all the technological aspects of this model is welcome, as is access and equity of curriculum provision to students.

Federation asserts that if private school students access these modes of delivery, enrolment fees must be commensurate to the cost incurred by the public education system.

## Mobile distant learning

The emphasis on individualised flexible learning and level of teacher contact and support is welcome in this mode. However, DET does not currently provide computers or information technology support for mobile learners. There is an assumption in this mode that the mobile distance learners will become an online learners for stages 5 and 6.

## Building and supporting the proposed model

Federation asserts that distance education schools and centres currently work across school education area offices, regions and the state. Distance education sees itself as part of the whole of the public education system, not just members of a particular group within that system. To implement the proposed model, distance education must have access to school counsellors and disability support funding.

The union also asserts that the Review must acknowledge the vital role supervisors in mainstream schools play in enhancing single subject distance education students' outcomes by provide adequate training and support for them. Concessional allowances must be given to teachers in mainstream schools supervising students studying through distance education. Federation is aware that that some Distance Education Centres and schools attempt to address this issue but the responsibility to manage this problem must lie with the Directorate.

## Keep the union abreast

It is important to remember that the protection of our student's learning conditions and teachers' working conditions relies upon ongoing input and support from our members at the local level. Keep your Federation Organiser informed of concerns and any new developments at your workplace, so Federation can keep abreast and develop action.