



newsletter

NSW Teachers Federation

September 2010

Members of the Federation's Distance Education Restricted Committee met with Mike Tom and David McLeod from the Equity Programs and Distance Education Directorate of the Department of Education and Training (DET) on August 12 at Teachers Federation House. This meeting was organised to discuss the preliminary recommendations from the Distance Education Review.

The committee welcomed the opportunity to have a meeting with the DET and had a very frank and open conversation.

The DET outlined the timeline associated with the release of four recommendations resulting from the review and the strategies that have been developed to assist these recommendations being implemented in schools. The committee was also advised that there will be a review support document released by the DET before September 24.

The DET gave an undertaking to visit Distance Education Centres (DECs) to talk with teachers, parents and support staff about the review recommendations and implementation strategies.

Federation welcomes the Rural and Distance Education Unit's commitment to working closely with Regional Directors, School Education Directors (SEDs) and supporting staff managing and assisting students studying single subjects and full courses via DE.

DET needs to understand that Distance Education is a specialist pedagogy and while this is an option for students with significant needs, it requires appropriate support to be effective.

During the discussion a few DE specific problems were identified and discussed. One problem was the significant growth in students with high support needs presenting with a variety of mental health diagnoses and behaviour problems. Secondly, the organisation of DET is problematic for DE delivery as a number of DECs operate across school regions. This is particularly problematic for disengaged students where they are enrolled in one region but are residents of another region. The committee is aware of students from Hunter and North West Regions enrolled in a DEC on the North Coast Region. Thirdly, the lack of support services to DECs such as school counsellors and pastoral care programs.

Committee members

Members of Federation's Distance Education Restricted Committee include Darren Mearrick (Camden Haven High School), Helen Hennessy (Karabar High School), Gianna Pagni (Open High School), John Pemberton (Sydney Distance Education School), Margaret McDonald (Dubbo Distance Education Centre) and Andrew Pavlou (North East Public School of Distance Education).

The remainder of the morning's discussion focussed specifically on the general recommendations from the review. What follows are the understandings of members of the committee present at this meeting.

General Outcomes of Recommendation 1:

Tighter processes on attendance and guidelines for enrolment, the reinforcing of Distance Education as an equity provision and investigation of indexation of fees for external clients.

Discussion focused on the need to review access criteria to maintain an equity focus provision rather than expanded choice in schools.

Access to DE for single course subjects by other DET schools would be reinforced for reasons of equity to deliver provision to schools having the greatest need.

There was considerable discussion around the need to increase fees for users from non government schools. The review recommends the investigation of Consumer Price Increase (CPI) indexation for students enrolling from non government schools. This recommendation is disappointing as it does not reflect the cost to the system or the individual schools that deliver to external students and it remains a vexed area.

That said, the committee is aware that it is government legislation which requires the DET to provide support to a range of organisations including non government schools. Clearly this area of legislation needs to be reviewed.

There was also further discussion about the problems associated with the enrolment of students with high

support needs. This discussion focused on the lack of guaranteed support that must be made available for this type of student, as a matter of policy. Currently this decision is made at a regional level and is different from region to region. In many cases any support or money to assist with student engagement disappears once the student leaves the mainstream school and does not go with the student to the DEC. In reality this equates to enrolling students with significant support needs without that support.

As part of the discussion of this recommendation the committee was made aware of the Education Amendment (School Attendance) Act 2009 No 79. This commenced on January 1, 2010. This amendment can be found at <http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/sessionalview/sessional/act/2009-79.pdf>

“Section 23: Offences if parent fails to send child to school

“2. It is a defence to a prosecution under this section if at the relevant time:

- (a) The child was enrolled at, and attended, a school in another State, Territory or country in accordance with the law of that State, Territory or country; or
- (b) The child was enrolled at a government or registered non government school and participating in Distance Education provided by the school (unless the Director-General or school had previously directed that the child ceases Distance Education because of the failure of the child to perform the required school work).”

What does this mean? DE students must actively participate in school or they face the same penalties/consequences as students enrolled in mainstream schools who do not attend school.

The Rural and Distance Education Unit advised that it will work with Distance Education schools to trial a range of programs such as virtual faculties, Adobe connect and learning repositories to support student engagement and attendance.

Finally, the discussion looked at the enrolment of students with medical conditions or a history of violence. The committee advised the DET that Federation would continue to remind members working in DECs that they must comply with all DET policy and procedures as per any mainstream enrolment that is, undertaking risk assessments and the development of risk management plans.

General Outcomes of Recommendation 2:

A focusing on a blended learning pedagogy which meets the learning context of the different learner groups in Distance Education coupled with professional learning to meet the needs of the teachers.

This recommendation concentrated on the need to support teachers in a practical way (such as releasing teachers to develop resources) and for teachers to be professionally supported to develop the required skills. These strategies should address teacher workload issues, which are considerable and appear to be ever increasing.

The Rural and Distance Education Unit indicated that under current arrangements, funding is directed to schools and that schools are responsible for this process of change within their own contexts/budgets/staffing requirements.

It was also made very clear by the DET that whatever changes are put in place, there is no extra funding to allocate, as additional funds are not available. The committee made inquiries as to the funds saved as a result of dismantling the Centre for Learning Innovation (CLI, previously Learning Material Production Centre - LMPC) and whether this money would be provided to schools for the development of DE materials. In response the DET appeared to have no ability to re-channel these resources to individual schools.

The Rural and Distance Education Unit described a trial it is setting up, where teachers produce materials and place them on a resource repository for other DE teachers to use. The repository would establish workflows that allow control of material to be contextualised to suit the local school.

The committee reminded the DET that producing quality materials takes considerable time; most teachers are not professional course writers nor can they access the additional release time required under current working conditions to produce a variety of high quality, edited, copyright approved materials that LMPC once produced.

General Outcomes of Recommendation 3:

Resources and technologies to support teachers to develop and use blended learning programs for distance learning.

The committee cited the issues around teacher work overload, lack of time to prepare, lack of consistency in the quality of resources produced and the need for immediacy of materials in DE.

Concerns were also raised about the need for specialised and highly individualised learning materials for the increasing number of students with behavioural problems, or those developmentally disabled, or with mental health issues or disengaged older students.

The DET responded that the development of a Learning Resource Repository, about to be trialled is a partial solution to the known problems of resource sharing amongst DE settings. The repository was described as a web-based site that would eventually be accessible to all DE staff. The site will contain a work site where teachers can upload and download resources, produce resources, clone and modify resources produced by others (with a facility to link the cloned documents to the original author for sake of professional recognition).

Two high schools and two primary schools have been chosen to participate in this trial (Open High School and Sydney DEC, NEPSODE and Sydney Primary). Amongst the criteria behind this project is the plan to eliminate time wastage in replication of materials in order to support teachers in the provision of their learning programs, particularly in the case where teachers are teaching small cohorts.

The committee remains very concerned about the following:

- teacher work overload;
- quality of materials produced by inexperienced writers and lack of quality assurance;
- lack of inter-school collegiality in the face of the My School website;
- the statement that no additional resourcing will be supplied for materials production; and
- high cost of school photocopy, printing and telephone services.

That said, the Rural and Distance Education Unit is exploring the options available to meet the printing needs of the 2011 cohort. Additionally, DET procurement was investigating ways to streamline printing, mailing and telephone services and to find efficiencies across schools within the scale of economy of all Distance Education schools.

Finally, the committee raised the question of support to the schools involved in any of the trials and was advised that the Directorate would look to providing relief so that the trials were supported.

General Outcomes of Recommendation 4:

By developing more effective organisational structures, facilities and support processes, Distance Education schools will be better placed to improve learning outcomes for their students through enhanced teaching practice specific to Distance Education.

As part of the discussion for this recommendation, the DET outlined some of the issues raised with them by parents. This focused primarily on the difference between autonomous and integrated DEC.

One matter is that parents felt students in integrated DE schools were left waiting a long time to receive feedback for assessment tasks and returning student work needed to be faster. The committee reminded the DET that schools have systems in place to manage complaints and parents were always advised to contact their school

if they have any concern with their child's teachers or the support the school was providing. The DET also raised the point that some parents thought DE money was being drawn away from DE and used in the mainstream school.

The DET raised the possibility of integrated DECs doing a situational analysis with a focus on how they currently operate, asking such questions as "what do we do?", "what do we want to achieve?" and "what are the blockages?" to answer how this particular setting may come to terms with managing the move to an autonomous DEC.

Again, there is no additional resourcing available to move to this mode of operation.

An undertaking was given by DET that integrated DE schools would be supported to evaluate mechanisms that led to more autonomous internal structures to support DE pedagogy and students at a local level. The DET suggested one option was that a DEC may consider timetabling only DE to a number of teachers in a block, semester or a year. Again these matters were school based decisions.

Federation raised concerns that teachers should not be placed in a position where they could become deskilled from either face-to-face or DE teaching. If DECs elected to set up a structure such as outlined above, the Federation would expect and support members to continue to be able to access a range of teaching experiences and not be deskilled.