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The Future Shape of the Special Schools Network in Greater Christchurch

16 June 2014

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The PPTA is the union representing around 18,000 teachers in state secondary, area, manual training and intermediate schools, as well as tutors in community education institutions and principals in secondary and area schools. PPTA represents the professional and industrial interests of its members, including those working in alternative education centres and activity centres. More than 92% of eligible teachers choose to belong to the union.
- 1.2. In early 2011, PPTA established an Earthquake Recovery Taskforce (ERT) to oversee our members' response to the ongoing earthquakes in Canterbury and subsequent education renewal process. The ERT has a strong relationship with the Ministry of Education and many education stakeholders in greater Christchurch.

2. Background

2.1 Special and Residential Schools

PPTA affirms that it is essential for the support of the SE network that we maintain special and residential schools.

PPTA opposes the suggestion that these become resource centres and/or bases for itinerant staff. This arrangement would increase the potential for increased bureaucratisation and inefficiencies and does not address the concerns of schools and families in isolated areas – many of whom are currently well-served by residential and special schools. In particular, we reject the superficial appeal of vouchers (like the Enabling Good Lives project) which, rather than empowering parents as is sometimes naively imagined, provides a strong motivation for parents to remove their children from education in order to access other services.

Professional Learning

PPTA sees the need for the Inclusive Practices work underway at the Ministry of Education to be brought to teachers' attention and to be supported by PLD provision in schools. While some progress has been made here the project seems to have stalled before any noticeable delivery has begun to have an impact in classrooms.

Initial teacher education (ITE) courses and in-service professional learning and development (PLD) for practising teachers need to include compulsory SE theory and practicum components. It is difficult to see how this could be achieved within current one year Grad Dip Sec programmes, which raises the question about the extent to which it is reasonable or realistic to expect teachers with little or no training in this specialist field to run inclusive programmes in mainstream schools.

PPTA supports pre- and in-service PLD for teacher aides and learning support assistants that are resourced, standardised and available across the country.

Information

The only comprehensive SENCO handbook currently available is privately produced and costs \$90. There is demand for common practice and good practice to be articulated in ways that are readily (and nationally) accessible. This means that GSE has a responsibility to provide written frameworks and guidelines – such as this book provides.* PPTA recommends that a set of SENCO frameworks and guidelines – including requirements and best practice examples – be published, publicised and distributed to all schools and ITE providers and updated regularly: <http://www.learningnetwork.ac.nz/shared/products/productBook.aspx?id=book545>. Again the Inclusive Practices work has the ability to influence more positively by providing more information to schools, but has yet to have a discernable impact.

Resourcing

While PPTA understands that this review does not include budget increases within its terms of reference it should be noted that the current level of ORS funding, for example, does not allow schools to cover current PLD and related environmental adaptation requirements to ensure full and ongoing inclusion and safe instruction for all students.

To help mainstream schools succeed, appropriate environments, class sizes, space and equipment are needed, so that all classrooms and areas of a school are equipped to support inclusion and integration for all students and, where appropriate, to support students with very high and/or multiple needs in a homeroom environment.

This includes equipment and resources that would not normally be found in secondary schools (except where there are students with specific learning/communication/mobility needs. Schools are not currently funded to this level.

Inclusion

The multi-teacher model of secondary education makes inclusion challenging and complex. This needs to be recognised in managing and maintaining funding, staffing and support for SE in the secondary context.

For secondary schools trying to offer inclusion the costs are increasingly outweighing their ability to do so effectively. Schools find it increasingly difficult to make ends meet – let alone maintain quality service provision and learning programmes, offer safe and inclusive learning environments and ensure that staff are given reasonable working conditions. In a system that has always relied to some extent on balancing 'unders and overs', the 'overs' now heavily outweigh the 'unders'. This adds up to significant stress for schools and teachers with fund holding responsibilities. It is critical that schools are supported to manage this responsibility. Ideally, this support would take the form of adequate funding, time allowances that enable SE unit managers and SENCOs to oversee staffing, liaise with parents, specialist and other agencies, and manage the related administrative load.

2.2 How Could Schools Work Together to Succeed?

A key message from PPTA is that local solutions work well when schools are supported by strong, coherent, national frameworks. Inclusion and collaboration take significantly more time than the current resourcing (staffing and funding) allows. Account needs to be taken of the complexity of SE work, particularly in the context of secondary schools and their communities.

SENCOs and other SE staff in secondary schools value opportunities to network, problem-solve and to share good practice. However, the organisational time for this does not sit within schools' current staffing resources. GSE could fulfil this role by providing networking at the regional level for SE teachers, SE units and schools.

There is also a lot of variation in practice between different regions and different clusters of schools, particularly with regard to service delivery by GSE, some of which is both unnecessary and undesirable.

Within secondary schools there is a clear need to ensure there is one designated middle, and one senior, manager (other than the principal) with a thorough understanding and overview of SE provision, funding and need. This happens currently in some schools, but not others. Once each school is confident in its overview of SE and key people are known, schools will be better able to liaise and work across in co-ordinated, coherent ways.

Schools need support to ensure that all students are offered suitable pathways and transitions from school. This holds true for SE and mainstream students. However, SE students generally have complex needs making this process more demanding. It is also sensible to have brokering/support services available to all schools in an area, rather than having this type of work replicated by every school or provider. Again, examples of this type of practice already exist, but are not necessarily available across the country.

Non-ORS-verified students with moderate to high needs do not receive support. This remains an area of significant pressure on schools.

PPTA members would like to see GSE regional offices being more pro-active in their leadership of SE and in creating opportunities for cross-school, cross-sector and inter-agency communication and collaboration. This may mean that additional resourcing is required in regional offices.

The co-operation and collaboration which underscores the Investing in Educational Success (IES) initiative should have a positive effect on schools working together and where possible special needs units should be part of a cluster of schools.

2.3 What arrangements for Funding, Decision-Making, Verification, and Fund Holding Should We Have in Christchurch?

PPTA recommends that the SE budget could be increased by redistributing existing funding streams:

- 1) Take the funding for private schools and redeploy it into SE to support more inclusive practice.
- 2) Move the money from contestable funding pools into the SEG grant (see SEG recommendations below).
- 3) Evaluate current bureaucracies in SE with a view to redistributing funding to secondary schools.
- 4) Tag funding and staffing for special needs students so it is ring-fenced for its intended purpose.

While PPTA supports special and residential schools as part of SE provision, we note that mainstream secondary schools offering more inclusive models of education are not funded to support their level of need. We applaud the funding of special and residential schools and suggest that MOE investigate equivalent funding models for SE in mainstream and inclusive secondary environments.

Students with moderate needs have been disenfranchised by recent funding decisions. More attention needs to be paid to ensuring that all students' needs are met and that non-ORS students are not disadvantaged.

It is critical that fund holding schools are supported and adequately funded. The real value of SE funding per student continues to drop as costs continue to increase. The compliance requirements that form part of the specialist service provider standards place schools under further stress.

SEG and TFEA funding should be more transparent and systems put in place to ensure that secondary schools use these funds (and associated MUs, MMAs) appropriately. PPTA would prefer to see LSF moved into the SEG pool.

SEG funding needs to be targeted more closely to each school's actual needs.

With regards to the RTLB 11-13 funding, PPTA also recommends more transparency and accountability on schools to show that it is being used as intended. With these in mind we reiterate the suggestion that schools ensure there is middle and senior staff with specific responsibility for and oversight of SE and that time allowances for this are adequate for the expectations of the roles.

PPTA questions the effectiveness of the SLS system for non-ORS students. Their needs justify better funding and more coherent support. We understand that there will always be some children whose needs do not meet the ORS criteria, and who do need extra support. The current method of SLS delivery does not work efficiently in secondary schools.

Verification

PPTA contends that the bar for ORS verification is currently set too high. There is a clear, paper-driven process in place, and secondary schools would prefer to have contact with regional advisers to assess and support during the verification process.

The high and complex needs funding process is unfair, inaccessible and needlessly complex.

The curriculum adaptation criterion is seldom if ever accepted in secondary ORS applications – yet this is at the heart of what schools are doing. Teaching and learning should still be at the heart of the work of secondary schools, yet funding to support this for SE students – particularly where inclusion is a serious goal for the learner – is routinely denied.

On an educational basis, any learner aged 13+ years still functioning at curriculum level one should qualify for ORS funding. Currently few of them do.

Many students are currently slipping through the cracks – this includes students whose complex needs include mental health issues. There is almost nothing to support students and schools in this area – and what exists does so with prohibitive and concerning waiting times.

PPTA acknowledges that the one-off increase in SE funding through ORS extension was a welcome contribution to raising the standard of support for SE students. However, schools report a certain discomfort in the manner by which this fund was distributed. Questions remain as to whether the process benefited those with most need. Again, transparency was lacking. There are also concerns that the proportion tagged for specialists in the ORS extension is too high.

The provision of sign language interpreters is another area in need of increased funding and staffing. First, schools are not funded to employ interpreters. Second, their conditions of work do not easily fit secondary school timetables. Thirdly, even should funding be available interpreters are a scarce resource and not always available when needed. Without this resource it is impossible for mainstream secondary schools to offer even the most basic learning programmes to deaf students.

Finally, some criteria in the verification process do not allow for differences in age/stage to be considered (for example, sexuality and mental health issues can become significant once students enter puberty, but are not considered).

2.4 How Can Individually Targeted Services and Supports Be Made More Efficient?

This is clearly an issue for the Christchurch region and while there is an argument for rationalising the resource it must be done on a scale that is acceptable to students and parents.

It is PPTA policy that students should be mainstreamed where possible, but that specialist units continue to exist to support the students who need this sort of specialised care.

2.5 How Can the Quality of Services be Improved?

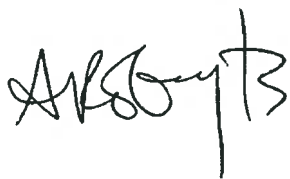
Secondary schools take the challenge of providing inclusive education and of making community connections very seriously. However, the complexity and time involved in progressing these mean that they pose significant costs to schools, both in staffing hours and financial costs. Inclusion and forming and maintaining community links are

expensive, labour intensive, time-consuming, require specialist support and pose significant extra infrastructure requirements.

School-based transition centres for 19-21 year olds could be built on in other schools and centres provided there is appropriate funding and support. Current provisions mean that sites of good practice, for example those in place at Hillmorton High School, may not offer realistic models for smaller areas or for schools with relatively few verified students. Support from the centre would make a positive difference in enabling the spread of innovations and programmes that are already effective.

The NZ Curriculum (NZC) is a rich document that has the potential to frame excellent teaching and learning practice in SE. However, the current funding does not support this. PPTA reiterates the desirability of better funding for the current system – including clearer requirements on schools in their use of tagged funding (including SEG, TFEA) – and diverting money from contestable funding pools into a more effectively targeted SEG. Money currently spent on private schools would offer a far greater return should it be redirected into public secondary school-based SE.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on this important topic.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ARoberts', written in a cursive style.

Angela Roberts
PRESIDENT

Queries and questions about this stakeholder submission should be directed to Michael Stevenson, mstevenson@ppta.org.nz, ph 021 669 900.