

Re: Royal Far West School BER eligibility

I am writing to request that Royal Far West School's BER application be reconsidered. I understand that we have been deemed not suitable for inclusion in the program as we do not have a permanent student enrolment. I believe that we should be considered as a special case for the following compelling reasons:

- (i) To categorise us as a "non-school" with a "transient population" is a gross underestimation of the facility. In fact, we have an extended and regular relationship with the majority of our students, providing ongoing support to them, their families and their schools. At any one time we have approximately 45 students on site, with an annual enrolment of approximately 1500.
- (ii) We provide ongoing specialist expertise in a wide range of disability areas, particularly in the area of mental health, enabling our students to more fully access the school curriculum, to re-engage with schooling and to move productively to post-school education and training. Our student population is characterised by behaviour disorders, emotional disturbances, massive learning difficulties and communication disorders.
- (iii) At least 20% of our student cohort is Aboriginal. Our expertise in the area of Aboriginal education has been recognised by the state Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, who nominated us to be part of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Indigenous Project (AGQTIP). We sit on the Northern Sydney Region Aboriginal Education Planning Group and have strong links with the state-wide network of Aboriginal Education Officers, providing a unique service facilitating access of Aboriginal students to our related health services and educational supports. We have provided professional development programs to teachers in the Northern Sydney Region on school development days and through regional professional development programs.
- (iv) We are an absolutely unique icon in Australia. There is simply no comparable service, so it is not possible to fit us into a "one size fits all" set of criteria. We have very strong support from local, state and federal politicians who will be able to attest to the fact that we are far from a language or hospital school or environment centre which provides short-term, one-off or part-time services.
- (v) We work with some of the most needy and isolated students in NSW. Our students come to us with a range of disabilities and medical conditions, with a heavy emphasis on mental health issues, learning difficulties and communication disorders. We work in an ongoing way with children aged from three and a half to eighteen years, and make a huge impact on our students' ability to access appropriate services, to achieve the best possible learning outcomes and to move on to be productive members of society. We provide early intervention services, working intensively and on a regular basis with our families, teaching strategies to develop early speech and language skills, which of course, feed into early literacy development. We provide ongoing reading support using video conferencing and telephone support, as well as regular meetings on return visits by families. We run a strong School to Work program, linking with Transition Coordinators, Disability Coordinators in the TAFE system, home schools and families to link our students into appropriate and supported post-school options. We are currently providing outreach Multilit intensive reading support using wireless laptops, video conferencing and professional development support for country teachers.
- (vi) Families only come to our facility if they are unable to access local medical and paramedical services. Our students and families come to us with a typical profile of poverty, domestic upheaval and isolation. For many, we are the only ongoing educational facility they know and trust. Our relationship with our students and their families is one of continuous, ongoing support as a result of repeated visits to the Health Scheme over many years, regular telephone and email contact with students, families and schools and, increasingly, video conferencing links for ongoing instruction and support.
- (vii) Our application is asking for a basic facilities upgrade to children's toilets, carpeting of a preschool/kindergarten classroom and the construction of a large COLA with playground equipment. The toilets in question are in their original 1958 condition, the carpet bears the marks of years of young children with continence issues and we have absolutely no playground shade or equipment. I fail to see how an BER grant to provide toilets at, for example, Lightning Ridge, impacts on our dire need for better facilities for our children to use while they are in Sydney having medical treatment.
- (viii) I understand that we have been deemed ineligible for BER funding as we don't have permanent students. It is impossible to see why other schools such as Arndell SSP and Palm Avenue SSPs have been deemed eligible, while we have been refused access to the program. We are staffed and funded by NSW DET on a nominal enrolment of 45 students and surely this should be the same for the BER program. It is possible that Arndell and Palm Ave have been accepted into the program as they use the electronic enrolment system (ERN) and thus would have been harvested through NSW DET computerised data collection. As we have so many students (about 1500) from over 400 schools, NSW DET have put us "on hold" for conversion to ERN. This would explain why we have been omitted from the BER listing.
- (ix) I understand that some facilities such as hospital schools and IECs do not have buildings to maintain and therefore can see why they should not be included in the BER program. However Royal Far West is housed in an ageing 1950's NSW DET building that needs constant maintenance and upgrading, a situation that is exacerbated by our position near salt water.

Thank you for your consideration and assistance.

Kind regards

Jenny Rayner
Principal
RFWS
27/7/2009