

Inquiry
Vocational Education in Schools
House of Representatives
Education and Training Committee

In NSW, Schools for Special Purposes (SSP's), have been developing vocational programs for their students for over 30 years. These programs for students with disabilities have been successful in assisting the students to gain employment in a wide range of vocational areas from sheltered workshops through to apprenticeships ultimately translating into qualified chefs, butchers, cabinet makers, cleaners, greenkeepers, vehicle detailers etc. The success of these programs has provided the guidelines for the growth of Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses in secondary schools in NSW.

The student population in SSP's has changed over the past 10 years with the push towards integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools. This has meant that the SSP's are enrolling students who are far more difficult to manage and programs need to be more precisely structured to cater for the complex needs of the students. It has also meant that mainstream secondary schools have had to provide more appropriate/motivational programs for the increasing number of students with learning difficulties and behavioural disorders as well as intellectual disabilities. Hence the move towards Transition planning (Individual Transition Plans), vocational courses that give the students dual accreditation and work placements that provide the students with first hand experiences in chosen vocational fields.

For a person to be employable they need to have developed a work ethic, social/interpersonal skills, work skills and knowledge and in some vocational environments accreditation at a standard required for the position. The vocational programs developed by SSP's have been very good at the overall preparation of their students for entry into the world of work. This has often been supported by the comments of staff from supported employment agencies when working with persons with disabilities from mainstream high schools and those from SSP's. They find the students from SSP's far better prepared for all the requirements of a work environment than those from mainstream settings. As the student population of SSP's that catered for students with a mild intellectual disability has changed to students with a mental health disorder as their primary disability as well as a mild intellectual disability the schools have a more difficult job in preparing the students to cope with the social and interpersonal aspects of employment as well as developing a work ethic and work skills. The SSP's that in the past catered for students with moderate intellectual disabilities were successful in gaining supported employment in sheltered workshops and to a lesser extent into part-time or open employment. Today their students have severe and profound intellectual disabilities as well as severe challenging behaviours and any form of vocational outcome for their students is generally unachievable with the options being the attendance at day programs funded by ATLAS grants.

As the principal of Niland School (SSP) and chairperson of the NSW SSP Principals Network (NSW Primary Principals Association) the perspective of this submission will be on vocational education for students with intellectual disabilities and mental health disorders. This does not preclude the information that will be presented from being relevant for all students it just gives the background for the source of the information.

The range, structure, resourcing and structure of vocational education in schools, including teacher training and the impact of vocational programs on other programs.

SSP's provide a full range of vocational programs for their students beginning with in-school programs – work training centres, mobile work crews (grounds maintenance and landscaping, building and construction) enterprise activities, recycling activities, agricultural/horticultural activities as well as Work Education and dual accredited (Board of Studies & TAFE) courses. They also establish enclave sites where groups of students work together supervised by a school staff member in a work environment away from the school. There are also job coaches to provide students with assistance during work placements and then independent work placements.

Vocational programs are begun with younger aged (< 14 years) students with work studies integrated across curriculum and practical components of work practices allocated to everyday school routines – collecting the mail, distributing equipment, developing and maintaining school gardens. Work Training Centres are set up in classrooms, Industrial Arts rooms, Home Economic rooms. Whatever is most suitable for the activities being undertaken. The enterprise activities can be contract work sourced by the school or through parents or community groups, the production of saleable items (recycling timber for furniture, toys, etc), the recycling of paper or aluminium, growing and selling of vegetables and the preparation of food items – cookies, special lunches, morning and afternoon teas. Mobile crews require the school to have a vehicle to transport the students and a trailer to carry the equipment. The school can contract to maintain lawns and gardens for community members, businesses, other schools and government agencies. Other jobs contracted by the mobile crew have been the pulling down of paling fences, constructing colourbond fences, chicken coops, house frames, installing windows, laying concrete slabs and cement rendering walls. Students have to be 14 years of age or older and be trained in the use of mowers, edgers, blowers and hand tools before they are allowed to join a crew and work off-site.

Enclave sites have been established in factories, nursing homes, retail outlets, motels, registered clubs, Australia Post distribution centres, sheltered workshops and nurseries. The school would have up to 5 students at a site supervised by a teacher who controls the quality and quantity of work as well as maintain an appropriate level of work site behaviour. Job coaches provide assistance to students involved in transition from enclave sites to independent work placements with decreasing periods of supervision until the student is considered capable of maintaining their work standard without the supervision of staff from the school.

Vocational Education programs are generally resourced from within the school for work based activities with assistance in the planning stages from Support Teachers (Transition) and some financial support for job coaches from school district Vocational Education Coordinators. Teachers of VET courses need to be accredited to teach their particular course so that the students will be able to gain both Board of Studies and TAFE accreditation for the competencies achieved while undertaking the courses. Teachers implementing school developed vocational programs need to be competent in the use of any tools or machinery to be used in the program and to be aware of OH&S issues when training and supervising the students in the use of the implements. Teachers and Teachers Aides (Special) [T.A. (S)] also need to be able to model good work ethics and attitudes so that they provide a good example of what they are expecting from the students,

Vocational programs can be integrated across most curriculum areas and for students undertaking Life Skills School Certificate and Higher School Certificate courses the hours involved in work/vocational programs can be attributed across the courses. The application of academic skills into practical components of vocational education programs provides motivation for the students to use and thus develop skills that they had usually failed at when attempted in classroom theoretical activities. SSP's are not as restricted to timetables as secondary schools and special units in high schools and are therefore more able to give a greater priority to developing and implementing programs that meet the vocational needs of the students.

The difference between school-based and other vocation programs and the resulting qualifications, and the patterns of industry acceptance of school-based-programs.

School based programs are developed to meet the needs and interests of the students. They are implemented by staff, who are aware of the abilities, disabilities and characteristics of the students. For the majority of students who gain vocational outcomes from their work placements, the employers have been influenced in their decision to employ the students by their ability to work to a certain standard and their work ethic, not by any qualification that the student does or doesn't have.

Vocational education in new and emerging industries.

The growth in service and hospitality industries along with retail and building and construction are probably the vocational areas best suited for students from SSP's.

Accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education for indigenous students.

In SSP's indigenous students are able to access all vocational programs being offered but their participation in school based programs and work placements is often influenced by the work ethic and attitude towards work in the home environment. Indigenous students need to be involved in stimulating, practical vocational programs within the school at an early stage of their secondary schooling. They need to experience success, self-satisfaction and reward for effort so that they have developed a positive attitude to work before beginning on a work placement program. Niland School's Work Training Centre allows all students to participate in a range of vocational activities for varying periods of time before they become fully involved in the program. This allows them to experience success, receive an outcome for their efforts and learn the processes and structures of the program and become aware that there is an expectation that they will move into the program and eventually pass through each stage until they have earned the right to a work placement. Students who have gained employment from their programs at Niland School often return to school on their days off and they are held up to the present students as success stories that can be achieved by all students.

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