NSW Secondary Principals Council
Response to the 2008 Distance Education Review
Friday 20 Feb 2009

This paper was constructed after a meeting, held on 20th February, 2009, of all six secondary principals leading distance education services in NSW. In the afternoon the Principals welcomed the opportunity to ask questions provided by Kate English Manager Rural and Distance Education and Mike Tom Leader Rural and Distance Education. The schools and principals include:

- Southern Cross Community School has an integrated 7-12 distance education centre located in Ballina – Principal John Baker
- Camden Haven High School has an integrated 7-12 distance education centre located in Port Macquarie - Principal Margaret Hutchinson (Rlg)
- Karabar High School has an integrated 7-12 distance education centre located in Queanbeyan - Principal Paul Kells
- Sydney Distance Education High School is an autonomous distance education school located at Woolloomooloo - Principal Mark Piddington
- The OPEN High School is located at Randwick and provides languages curriculum to single course students - Principal Stephen Murray
- Dubbo School of Distance Education is an autonomous P – 12 distance education school located in Dubbo - Principal Christine Mason

Each principal is currently leading the development of a Distance Education Review submission within their own school community.

The styles of distance education services that have been developed at the six sites have common elements as well as notable differences that have evolved to best meet the diverse needs of the student populations and local contexts. The six principals identified areas of common agreement regarding the proposed modes of distance education that have been detailed in the discussion paper. A brief description of each mode is listed below with qualifying statements that were generated at the meeting. It is proposed that this paper be considered and adopted by the SPC state assembly as its current position paper regarding the future provision of distance education.

Areas of agreement relating to the six modes proposed in the discussion paper

1. Home distance learning (Preschool and Stages One to Six) is an important mode which caters for at home students who cannot attend a face to face classroom on a daily basis. These students will benefit from additional technological support that enhances student ability to work in peer groups and with teachers.

2. Tutorial distance learning (Stages Three to Five) provides for the behaviourally and emotionally disturbed as well as students who may suffer from mental illness conditions including high anxiety and school phobia. The model proposed may work well in city areas where tutorial places can be established for groups of students in close geographical proximity; however the numbers and geographical dispersion of students in rural areas combined with the inaccessibility of technologies including the internet will continue to pose challenges for some time yet. All principals agreed that the time limit of six months for enrolment is unrealistic as many of these students need a longer period of time to develop the social skills that will enable them to return to their home school. In isolated rural schools it is almost impossible for some students to return to their home school because of community pressures. These students need access to a curriculum that allows them to develop social skills by physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually interacting with others. A blended learning provision, behaviour modification programs and the chance to build trusting relationships in a new environment with teachers and peers all contribute to student wellbeing and take time.

3. Rural linked distance learning (Stages Five to Six) is an important program that has allowed rural isolated schools to share curriculum delivery since 1990. The structures, relationships and expertise that have been developed over 19 years should not be devalued or underestimated in their importance to establishing and maintaining learning communities in rural areas. The advent of connected classrooms, online learning environments such as Moodle, collaborative softwares such as Bridgit, appropriate bandwidth and laptops for student and teachers should allow the access programs and learning communities to become even more effective.

4. Single course distance learning (Stages Five to Six) is a highly successful program that provides increased equity by allowing students to access a broader curriculum than would otherwise be possible in smaller, rural schools. The single course and access programs complement each other in providing flexible options for students. The OPEN High School and Language Departments in Distance Education Schools play a critical role in providing language curriculum development and delivery as many schools simply cannot access language teachers. A significant focus and resources must be placed on the provision of learning in Asian languages.

5. Mobile distance learning (Stages One to Four) is essential for travelling families such as 'Show People' or itinerant rural workers. The restriction to one year is not recommended for all students e.g. students whose parents are regularly travelling for work purposes or are based in isolated overseas countries that do not have a quality school system. Distance Education schools have developed 'family' units of work to provide curriculum and the advent of online learning and the laptop program, if accompanied with access to the internet, will greatly support this mode.

6. On-line distance learning (Stages Five to Six) is currently being developed in a number of distance education and access schools.

Further discussion at the meeting focussed on the following five areas.

1. **Integrated to Autonomous**
   The challenge of developing autonomous distance education schools around the state to replace the integrated distance education schools at Karabar, Southern Cross and Camden Haven is complex and will need considerable planning and resources. At each of these schools the relocation of somewhere between 50 and 70 staff would be required. When teachers have developed community links and lifestyles in these towns the level of distress associated with identifying who stays and who leaves would be excessive and highly detrimental to students, teachers and parents. Strategies to transition from an integrated school to any level of autonomous service are needed and it is essential that the communities are involved in the identification, development and implementation of this transition.
   See Recommendations 1 and 2

2. **Accuracy of data presented in the findings and used to compose the discussion paper**
   The data presented in the findings was questioned by the principals of the integrated schools who stated that the HSC results of Single Course students is not included in their schools' EMSAD data. At the meeting the Equity Programs and Distance Education Directorate expressed support for principals in gathering additional student outcomes data pertaining to their schools.
   Recommendation 3

3. **Welfare of principals, teachers and SASS**
   See Recommendation 4 and 5

4. **Online Learning**
   Online learning is recommended as a component of a blended learning provision for all students that also includes regular quality contact between students, their peers and teachers. The separation of teaching and the creation of resources have not worked in the past and do not support the research which indicates that achievement of student learning outcomes is highly supported by the quality of the student teacher relationship. The mode as presented in the discussion paper is NOT supported by the principals as it infers that students will access all their learning online with minimum or no physical interaction with teachers and other students
   See Recommendations 6 and 7

5. **Vocationally Talented Students**
   The enrolment of vocationally talented students is possibly presenting a commercial opportunity for individuals and companies to inappropriately take advantage of public education resources.
   See Recommendation 8

6. International Students
There exists anecdotal evidence that international students would be willing to enrol in learning via distance. If appropriate costing was investigated DET could make a viable profit.
See Recommendation 9

7. The future of the review and timelines
Principals understand and acknowledge that the findings and discussion paper have been composed and presented in good faith, allowing the distance education and access communities the opportunity to contribute to the data both before and after the composition of the discussion paper. This will allow communities the opportunity to propose strategies and models that would cater for equity and the future learning of the students of NSW. Principals have also been advised to provide as much detail as possible in proposed models as this will better inform the review process and the future.

Principals were assured that responses from the submissions would be collated and that further information would be provided during term 2 about these responses and timeframes for actions. Principals were also assured that there is no 2010 start date proposed for any changes at this stage.
See Recommendations 10 and 11

Recommendations

1. The Rural and Distance Education Directorate and DET acknowledge and support the proposals from the current integrated school and use these to inform future school operations. Each response should be viewed within the context of the school community from which it comes and be assessed in terms of the supporting evidence provided for any proposals made.

   Autonomous, or semi-autonomous campuses, should be established either on or within close proximity to the current sites of Karabar, Southern Cross and Camden Haven. This would facilitate the relocation of large numbers of staff and significantly reduce anxiety and disruption to learning and public education.

2. The NSW Secondary Principals' Council (SPC), staffing and NSWTF support the permanent part-time placement of teachers of smaller cohorts in both the face to face and the autonomous sites. This would enable valued specialist teachers and courses to be maintained in school communities.

3. The Distance Education and Access School Principals provide additional contextual data with their DE Review submissions.

4. The SPC negotiates support from DET including staffing, ITD and property directorates to ensure the welfare of the principals and staff who would be required to manage the transition required to implement proposed changes. DET support, and co-management of the process is necessary to ensure that a fair and equitable process is determined in relation to each integrated school site and to alleviate on-going management issued that may be faced by the principals of these schools.

5. The SPC, the NSWTF and the PSA negotiate additional welfare support for all staff including principals affected by the changes.

6. The SPC and Distance Education Principals does support the development of virtual learning environments and resources but does not support the current mode of online learning as presented in the discussion paper as it is not portrayed as part of a blended learning model with due attention to students and teacher relationships or quality teaching.

7. DET supports all distance education schools with staffing and resources to develop high quality online learning resources as an integral component of teaching and learning. For example DET provides learning communities with a single server to facilitate the sharing and development of high quality learning materials across schools and to promote the establishment and growth of professional learning networks.

8. The SPC supports the DET review of the enrolment of Vocationally Talented Students as suggested in the discussion paper.

9. The SPC recommends that DET seriously considers and plans for the business potential of enrolling international students in distance education for profit.

10. The SPC negotiates timeframes with DET, the NSWTF and PSA to ensure the provision to school principals and communities of:
    a. full and transparent information centred around the following questions:
        i. what happens next after the submissions have been tabled?
        ii. will there be a set of options developed? and
        iii. how will Principals, DET and regions been involved?;
    b. an adequate transition period; and
    c. appropriate resources.

11. When constructing models for the future principals and communities should:
    a. Consider who the distance education learner is and could international students and corporate people be regarded as students?
    b. Support decision making in local contexts; for example decisions relating to the relocation of teachers, executive restructures, new buildings, location information etc.
    c. Recognise that the proposal is around autonomous operations supporting student learning.
    d. Consider the functions that persons would have in model(s) that support student learning.

12. DET, Equity Programs and Distance Education Directorate support the recommendation made in the Distance Education Review regarding the provision of support for teacher professional learning in distance education pedagogy and technological infrastructure necessary to ensure that any changes to current operating processes in distance education schools are successful and improve the learning outcomes of students.