Far North Queensland is a complex region as diverse as its communities and landscapes. Regional Director Deb Dunstone shares how she is championing successful transitions to school and using data to lead the region towards a more desirable future.

Laying the foundation

Supporting successful transitions to school has implications across all of the department’s portfolios from early childhood, state schooling to training. Getting this part of the education journey right will create the foundation for future learning and boost the capacity of the next generation to contribute to our society.

The benefits are obvious but the best approach for this work in our region was not. In Far North Queensland we have been on a journey to develop a whole of region approach that draws on the success of past and current projects; and is evidence-based, sustainable and can be embedded in the work of each division. And this journey is far from over.

It is clear early childhood education and care in Queensland has taken great leaps forward in terms of quality with the Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline, Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Framework. What is missing is the connection between our early childhood services and parent programs and the school gate.

Starting the transition conversation

Our first step in making this connection has been to effectively engage our school principals. We recognised that we needed to raise awareness amongst principals about what transition is and what it looks like in action in our different schools. Our Assistant Regional Directors (ARDs) are instrumental to this process. They work with school principals to ensure they recognise how improved transition to school practice aligns with the state schooling strategy and drives school performance.

Before starting these conversations we ensure we can provide principals with the information, support and space they need to invest in transition to school activity. We consider our principals’ significant responsibilities and identify how we can add value to their current work. We have found effective use of data is the key.

Indicators

ARDs coach each principal using NAPLAN and other performance measures as a strong basis for conversations and future planning. These professional conversations clearly highlight the work ahead for our region and the need for all officers and school staff to be on the same page. During these conversations with principals we reinforce that it is our investment in the early years that will improve outcomes for all moving forward. We also work to shift schools’ focus on transition from 0 to 5 year olds to the 0 to 8 space.

With a commitment from the school to creating a shared understanding of transition and orientation, the next step is to present a clear overview of the school community. Each school’s data placemat, developed by the Transition and Partnership team, represents school and community data including Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), NAPLAN, cultural groups and census data. In addition, using Google maps we can provide a bird’s eye view of the school highlighting the early childhood services and parent programs in its catchment area.

Many principals are surprised by the number of services that fall within their community. We then explain how our partnership and transition team can support the school to connect with all of these services to provide children with a better transition.

Case study

Data in action in Far North Queensland

Far North Queensland is a complex region as diverse as its communities and landscapes. Regional Director Deb Dunstone shares how she is championing successful transitions to school and using data to lead the region towards a more desirable future.
Decisions based on data

Once our ARDs have determined a school is ready to take further transition action considering its other priorities, we give the principal their data placemat.

Through professional conversations with the ARDs and the Transition and Partnership team, data is interrogated using focused questions that go deeper into the data to develop explicit knowledge of the school community. As inferences are made it is an opportunity to develop an understanding of trends, patterns, strengths, vulnerabilities and linkages between school and community data.

As the principal and early years champions triangulate these multiple sources of data, they enrich their understanding of implications for the school community’s transition and orientation planning. For example, the data might reveal where to hold a playgroup activity to enable families to participate based on the number and location of mothers that don’t have cars.

It could reveal to a school that while they are working with these services they have actually missed a service from which a lot of the students are coming. We have found that our principals love this information and find it very useful in strengthening their existing transition and community engagement activities and future planning.

“...while schools increasingly have access to large-scale data sets, it is the decisions based on that information that guides strategies to improve learning.”

Helen Wildy (School Data Profile Handbook 2015)

Based on this information we then work with schools to identify what transition activities we can co-invest in and the work we will do together. We are mapping and tracking that information to ensure everyone in our team can see the progress and action of each school. This will help us to identify what works and what doesn’t. Importantly it will enable my team to present compelling cases for future transition action and enable principals to make informed choices for their school.

It is important to note that each school is starting its transition journey in a different place. While we have a whole of region approach for starting the transition conversation, there is not a one size fits every school model for transition action. Our aim is to start supporting principals at exactly where they are at, at the right time, doing the right work to support successful transitions to school.

I am proud to share our story so far but recognise there is a lot more work ahead. As Regional Director it is my role to champion seamless connections between early childhood education and care and state schools and ensure our young people are positioned well for lifelong learning.

More information

For contact details for your region’s Transitions and Partnerships and Innovation Officers visit https://oneportal.deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/forschools/Pages/Transitiontoschoolsupportcontacts.aspx

For more information and resources on supporting successful transitions visit www.qld.gov.au/transitiontoschool