



Transition talk

Perspectives on diversity in the South East



Sharyn Donald, South East Regional Director sits down for a conversation about how the region respects diversity in their transition-to-school practices.

It has been over a year since the *Supporting successful transitions: School decision-making tool* has been published and schools across Queensland have continued using this framework of reflection and action for their transition to school strategies. Sharyn Donald discusses the South East region's approach to respecting diversity within practices supporting children's transition to school.

Please tell us a bit about your region, particularly in relation to diversity?

South East region comprises four local government areas, each with its own idiosyncratic socio-economic characteristics. Across the region these include:


- high population of families with a language background other than English
- large and rapidly growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- high refugee population
- large and rapidly growing Maori and Pasifika population
- areas of high transience
- significant proportion of families and students with disabilities and/or other diverse learning needs
- rural and semi-rural populations
- island communities
- pockets of high density living
- within each group we have:
 - blended and single parent families
 - young people living in kinship groups

- individuals and families who are homeless
- substantial numbers of young people in out of home care

Being among one of the most diverse regions in Queensland, can you tell us about the skills, knowledge and understandings you have found to be integral in responding to the cultural and contextual needs of children, families and the community?

We must work to gain insight into our local communities and the pressures that our families face. As well as crucial partnerships with parents, this involves engaging with local community representatives and groups, and working cooperatively with them in collaborative decision-making on matters pertaining to their children's education.

Although data underpins our practice, our teachers and principals never lose sight of the faces on that data, and the individual knowledge and experiences, expectations and understandings, which make up the young personality behind each face. Regardless of circumstance, every child is supported to meet his or her individual needs so that each child is provided with optimum opportunity to succeed.



‘The successful transition of students with complex needs from early childhood services to schools requires high levels of trust and communication between parents, schools and educators.’

Please tell us about how schools across the South East region have strengthened their practice in responding to children and families from diverse backgrounds, particularly in relation to transition to school?

Partnerships between our schools and their communities are being strengthened, as ensuring children and families within their neighbourhood are safe, healthy and engaged in quality learning experiences from very early childhood. We recognise this as a shared responsibility. Close to 70 per cent of schools are now participating in Early Years Neighbourhood Networks alongside local early childhood services and other community partners.

The successful transition of students with complex needs from early childhood services to schools requires high levels of trust and communication between parents, schools and educators. It also requires our early childhood services to understand the legislation and support available in schools so that they are able to communicate this to the families in their services.

We have an additional opportunity to disrupt intergenerational disadvantage by working with vulnerable families with children 0 to 3 years, to enhance the home learning environment for children before they enter kindergarten. The Transition and Partnerships and Innovation team has been established to support schools plan effective transition to school strategies and establish partnerships. They have also been supporting communities to tailor a replicable 0 to 5 years pathway for vulnerable families and children. This team is also working with Regional Education Services staff to develop a successful transition to school program specifically for students with disabilities.

How does the South East region promote and support equitable access to learning for all children?

We foster an environment of sharing best practice between schools. Schools are encouraged to work across clusters and the region, and this is facilitated through collaborative networking and professional development opportunities. Additional support is provided from regional specialists to build capability in school staff and to equip them with the tools to appropriately support children from diverse backgrounds.

Transitioning students to school who have complex needs can be a stressful time for families and our early childhood services are often relied upon to assist parents and children through this time.

All our schools are required to adhere to the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*. All schools therefore make reasonable adjustments to ensure students with disability are able to participate in education on the same basis as students without disability throughout their schooling.

We endorse whole-school strengths-based approaches to improving student learning, and provide a variety of supports and services to all students, including those with disability and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, so they can participate in school life, access the curriculum and achieve optimum learning outcomes.

Please share some insights on collaboration with your leadership team or others to embed inclusive practice in the region and in schools.

We have developed a culture of transparency and trust that underpins our mission to ‘ensure that all of our children, regardless of circumstance, will have the best possible start in life. Every school within our region will be on a sustained trajectory of improvement ensuring every student is succeeding. All our young people will have access to the highest quality training and further education leading to gainful employment.’ (*South East Queensland Region Operational Plan 2015 - 2016*)

Our schools and students are supported by:

- a regional Indigenous team that engages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and assists in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in schools and in the curriculum, as well as implementing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island languages program to teach Yugambeh and Jagera languages to students from Prep to Year 3
- the Regional Maori and Pasifika Education Advisory Group who research and provide targeted analysis of issues and needs for Maori and Pasifika students, and how these issues might be addressed
- an extensive program to cater for students with English as an additional language or dialect whose components include social emotional as well as linguistic support
- targeted resources for students with disabilities in all schools, together with regional support from education services staff, including designated coaches
- teams who specifically assist and/or case manage at risk students to remain engaged in education or to find meaningful and productive alternative pathways
- South East region partners with community groups and other government departments across all four local government areas to ensure we are providing individualised strategies that cater to the specific and varied needs of the communities across our region.

There is a strong Collective Impact initiative – Logan Together – in the South East region. How has this partnership enhanced transition to school practices in your region?

The initiative seeks to address the needs of the 0 to 8 year old cohort in Logan. We are piloting programs to explicitly measure risk and vulnerability as well as health and wellbeing outcomes for Logan children. Collaboration around transition-to-school practices occurs through the Quality Beginnings Quality Futures Reference Group incorporating the Logan Together Education Chapter. Membership includes regional office, school principals, early childhood providers, early childhood association, universities and TAFE.

The reference group is working to improve the rate of:

- children developmentally on track before they start school,
- children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and vulnerable children attending Kindergarten
- children successfully transitioned to Prep as per Australian Early Development Census data,

so that every child can be safe, healthy and engaged in quality learning experiences, and within ten years we will have closed the gap in rates of healthy development for children at age eight.

Our project officer, appointed to develop strategies to increase kindergarten attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Logan, has established strong partnerships and collaboration with early childhood service providers, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and the Children and Family Centre. This has already resulted in increased kindergarten enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Logan.

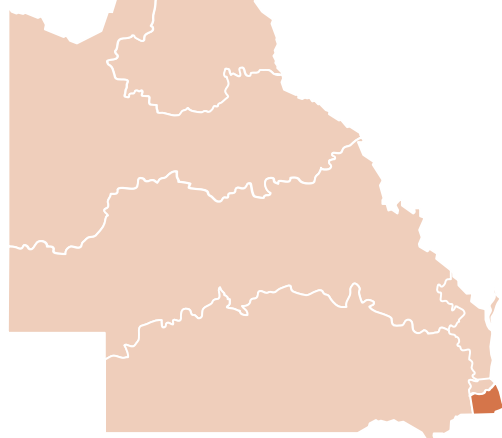
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Our 2016 focus continues to be:

- boosting attendance at quality kindergarten programs
- progressing the establishment of neighbourhood networks to improve transition to school and subsequent attendance
- improving the skills of early years teachers to better engage children in age-appropriate learning, and cultivating the skills of parents as first teachers
- learning from and building on our early successes.



Any final advice you would share with others in similar leadership roles?

Have a vision and a plan to attain it. Communicate the vision. Enlist others. Build a diverse and inclusive team around you who share your goals. Communicate those goals. Ensure everyone knows where they are going and how they will get there. Celebrate diversity. Embrace change. Seek and model continuous improvement.

For educational leaders, ensure the young person remains firmly at the centre of all you aspire to, and all that you do. For us in the South East region this means equal access to learning, regardless of geographic, socio-economic or linguistic background, and ensuring all our young people, regardless of circumstance can experience a trajectory of success.

More information

For contact details for your region’s Transition 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