

23. SOUTH LEARNING CENTRE



General Manager responsible:	General Manager Community Services, DDI 941-8534
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PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update for Councillors following the recent Ministry of Education decision not to continue to provide funding to the Christchurch City Council for the operation of programmes to 23 schools in south Christchurch through the South Learning Centre, and to suggest future funding options for the operation of the South Learning Centre to enable the continued delivery of programmes to these schools.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. The South Learning Centre was established as a joint partnership between the Christchurch City Council and Ministry of Education in September 2003, after the closure of Sydenham School. Appendix 2 outlines the activities and operation of the learning centre.
3. The Council was building a new library in the south of Christchurch at the time and an agreement was reached to combine the Learning Centre in this facility. At the time, the Ministry of Education provided an initial sum of \$850,000 to cover expenses relating to its use by local schools. This one-off grant was to last three years. The Council has carefully managed this funding to last almost four years.
4. In December 2006, the Council applied to the Minister of Education for an ongoing financial commitment for the next five years of \$205,000 or \$20 per student per annum. This application was endorsed by the 23 south Christchurch schools which use the facility. There were more than 11,000 visits by students to the Centre in 2006.
5. In late May, the Ministry declined the application. The Council has since twice requested the Ministry to urgently review this decision. To date, no response has been received.
6. The Council and the schools involved have extensively canvassed the Ministry and local MPs.
7. Late last week, the school principals requested the Council to consider continuing the services to the schools for the remainder of the academic year, to December 2007.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

8. The Libraries and Information Unit currently has \$205,000 budgeted annually to be received from the Ministry of Education for its contribution towards the South Learning Centre. In the event the Ministry further declines funding, there will be a budgeted shortfall of \$205,000.
9. One option, if ongoing funding is not forthcoming from the Ministry, is for the Council to fund this service to schools as part of the 2007/08 Annual Plan. This option is not supported by Council staff as central government has the primary responsibility for funding the delivery of educational services to schools.
10. Another option is the Council chooses not to fund the service to schools from the Learning Centre past 1 July 2007.
11. The preferred option is for the Council to fund the service until the end of the academic year, thereby honouring the current commitment to schools in terms of programmes already planned and timetabled. The cost of providing a basic teaching service and covering the associated overhead costs would be about \$70,000. This amount is unbudgeted.
12. As part of the preferred option, Council staff would work with local principals during terms 3 and 4 to explore alternative options for sustainability. This could result in a mixed funding model being used with schools contributing in the form of staffing, contract applications for one-off grants related to specialist projects, sponsorship and user pays for some services. The staffing for the new model will need to be determined based on available funding and services required.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Council:

- (a) Agree to support option B (to fund the service to the end of the school year), if ongoing funding for the service is not forthcoming from the Ministry of Education from 1 July 2007.
- (b) Notify the Ministry of Education and the schools concerned that the Council will not fund the service beyond the end of the 2007 school year.
- (c) Note that the Council considers that the provision of learning programmes for schools at the South Learning Centre is the responsibility of central government and should be funded accordingly.

BACKGROUND

13. The South Learning Centre opened in September 2003, following the closure of Sydenham Primary School. There was a strong desire among local schools, the Ministry of Education, the Christchurch City Council and the local community to provide new learning opportunities for both students and the community.
14. At the time, Christchurch City was in the process of building a new library in the south of the city and an agreement was reached to combine the learning centre with the Council's library and service centre. The Council built and equipped the centre as part of the \$6 million library/service centre development.
15. Private sponsorship of \$160,000 was received by way of sponsored equipment/one-off price reductions from HP NZ, Microsoft New Zealand and Technology Leasing and Computers. TelstraClear has a continuing commitment to meet bandwidth charges at the centre.
16. In what was considered a partnership, the Ministry of Education provided an initial sum of \$850,000 to cover Learning Centre expenses related to its use by local schools. This funding was intended to last three years but has been carefully managed by the Council and will last until the end of June 2007. (NB: When this funding was granted, the Ministry said it was a "one time grant and that the Ministry is not obliged to provide further funding".)
17. In December 2006, the Council applied to the Ministry for an ongoing financial commitment from the government for the next five years of \$205,000 annually or \$20 per student per annum. Work on this application began in May 2006 in consultation with the 23 schools and with advice from the Ministry of Education's local office.
18. This application was considered a partnership proposal with central government, being endorsed by the 23 schools which use the facility receiving leading edge technology and innovative learning opportunities.
19. The application requested funding to cover teacher costs, a contribution to building maintenance/depreciation and funding to undertake a research project to measure the learning outcomes generated by this already successful model of educational innovation.
20. On 21 May 2007 the Minister of Education, Steve Maharey, notified the Mayor that the Ministry "was unable to find a ready source for ongoing funding of the Centre" and that "the Ministry does not have a role in providing resources for the Centre".
21. The Mayor replied on 1 June 2007 to Mr Maharey asking him to urgently review the decision. He stressed the importance of the partnership between local and central government to provide a facility "that delivers cutting edge life-long learning opportunities".
22. With only two weeks of funding remaining, the Mayor sent a further letter to the Minister on 14 June requesting an urgent response to his earlier letter. He noted that, as a model of educational innovation and excellence, the Centre had much to offer the Ministry as an incubator helping "to build an education system for the 21 century; a system where every child and student is stimulated to learn". He also urged the Ministry to provide emergency funding to enable the Centre to continue programme delivery to the 23 schools to the end of the school year. To date, no response has been received from the Minister.
23. In addition, the principals of the 23 schools affected by the Ministry's decision wrote to the Minister on 8 June strongly expressing their concern at the decision and requesting an urgent meeting to explore options to ensure ongoing programme delivery to the schools (copy of letter attached as Appendix 1). The principals have also written letters to the local Labour MPs as well as communicating with parents and encouraging them and their children to take action by writing to the Minister and contacting the local MPs and the media.

24. Pupils from eight schools have also sent their own letter to the Minister requesting ongoing funding for the Centre and inviting Mr Maharey to visit the Centre and "see the liveliness of the students and the learning that takes place".
25. Principals wrote to the Mayor on 15 June requesting that the Council "seriously consider" continuing the services to their schools for the remainder of the academic year, providing with the time for them to explore other funding options with Council staff while ensuring the students' needs can still be met for the remainder of 2007.

OPTIONS

26. If ongoing funding is not forthcoming from the Ministry the Council's options are:
 - (a) The Council opts to fund the South Learning Centre for the delivery of programmes to schools, as well as the community. This would require the Council to provide an additional annual contribution of \$205,000 for staffing from the 2007/08 and 2008/09 Annual Plans, to be formally reviewed as part of the LTCCP 2009/19.

This option is not supported by Council staff as central government has the primary responsibility for funding the delivery of educational services to schools.
 - (b)
 - (i) The Council could fund the service until the end of the school year, thereby honouring the current commitments to schools in terms of programmes already planned and timetabled. The cost of providing a basic teaching service and covering the associated overhead costs would be about \$70,000. This amount is unbudgeted.
 - (ii) During terms 3 and 4 the local principals would work with Council staff to explore alternative options for sustainability. This could result in a mixed funding model being used with schools contributing in the form of staffing, contract applications for one-off grants related to specialist projects, sponsorship and user pays for some services. The staffing for the new model will need to be determined based on available funding and services required.
 - (c) The Council chooses not to fund the service to schools from the Learning Centre past 1 July which results in one of the following options:
 - Schools hire the facility and equipment but provide their own teaching and technical support. All lessons are self managed.
 - Reduced services are provided based on user-pays. Schools would hire the facility and equipment, in addition to paying for specialist Learning Centre expertise/technical support.

POTENTIAL RISKS IF SERVICE CEASES

27. Loss of highly valued "whole of life" learning experiences and opportunities for students and their families in South Christchurch.
28. The negative perception within the community that the Council is no longer supporting life-long learning, one of the key community outcomes in the Long-Term Council Community Plan.
29. Impact on the ability of the Council to continue to develop cutting edge technology programmes for delivery through its other learning centres at Parklands and Upper Riccarton Libraries.
30. Impact on the ability of the Council to develop a comprehensive network of learning centres within Christchurch and Banks Peninsula.
31. Adverse effect on the strong relationships that have been built/established with 23 schools in South Christchurch.

32. Adverse effect on existing partnerships with sponsors, eg TelstraClear which has contributed more than \$100,000 during the last four years.
33. Loss of partnerships with researchers and ICT innovators at the cutting edge of technology developments, for example the virtual reality project with HITLab NZ and the LAMS project, an e-learning collaboration with Macquarie University.
34. The social equity impact for students at low-decile schools. Any loss of access to these learning opportunities will have the greatest impact on those children and their families who can least afford it.

PREFERRED OPTION

35. The preferred option is option B.