



Submission to the Senate Select Committee:

School Funding

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Novita Children's Services (Novita) congratulates the Australian Government for investigating the development and implementation of national school funding arrangements and associated school reform.

The opportunity to provide commentary to assist the Select Committee fulfil its Terms of Reference is appreciated.

This submission focusses on a selection of the Terms of Reference:

- a. (iv) the consequential equity of educational opportunity between states and territories, schools and students;
 - b. How funding arrangements will meet the needs of all schools and individual students, including Indigenous students, students with a disability, small schools remote schools, students with limited English, and students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds;
 - c. The Government's proposed changes to the Australian Education Act 2013, related legislative instruments and their consequences;
 - d. The economic impacts of school education policy; and
 - e. The Government's consideration of expert findings, research, public consultation and reports in the development and implementation of school policy, including the selection of experts to provide advice on education policy.
- (a) Novita agrees with the Coalition's commentary (www.liberal.org.au/our-policies) that eight school systems exist in Australia rather than one national system, and that the reality of this for students with a disability is significant variability between states in the school sector's approaches, funding arrangements and practical mechanisms for supporting them to realise their full educational potential. A significant area of variation is the differing interpretation of 'excellence in education'. In one state eg Victoria, this embraces strategies employed by the education sector to not only facilitate a student with special needs to access the curriculum, but to also provide individually-tailored direct early intervention approaches to individual children with special needs. In other states eg South Australia, the extent of real school sector support has historically included the provision of classroom access modifications, without the provision of intervention therapies and teacher capacity building strategies to enable optimal functional skill acquisition for students with a disability across the full spectrum of their educational domains.

While individual school empowerment in leadership and management is supported, the application within each school across Australia of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of People with a Disability such that each child is supported to achieve their best potential across all life domains, must be assured. In practical terms, any national/state funding approach must be

financially supportive of the dualities of access to curricula/ educational programmes, and intervention and therapies to extend a child's skill level to the best possible.

While the National Disability Insurance Scheme has been lauded as providing improved support for children with a disability, of note is the reality of its implementation to date which is effecting real constraint on the ability to achieve a holistic, child-focussed, cross-sectorial approach to maximising a child with a disability's developmental outcomes. Education funding priorities must drive an integrated approach to teaching and learning strategies coupled with the provision of allied health therapies; assistive technology prescription/assessment and training that embrace the total life domains of the child.

- (b) The Australian Education Act 2013 committed the nation to giving every child access to excellent education. The Act's expression of commitment to excellent education for every child irrespective of socio-economic level of advantage/disadvantage, and level of ability/disability is applauded. According to the Act and associated regulations, schools supporting children with profiles of additional need will attract extra funding above the benchmark funding for every child. Recognition of the spectrum of costs associated with supporting the best educational, ability and life outcomes for children in these special need categories is commended. The principle of the use of Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) including loadings where appropriate for schools assisting children with additional needs is supported. However, it is apparent that the generic formulaic approach (186% x SRS for students with a disability attending a main stream school; 223% x SRS for students with a disability attending special schools) as contained within the Australian Education Act 2013 Appendix: Loadings for Students with Disabilities, grossly under-represents the individual variations in support needs of students with disabilities; and grossly under-represents the total costs required to enable a student with a disability to engage with the entire team of professionals required to enable them to realise their full developmental and educational potential. This 'team around the student' concept extends beyond teacher and student. The team must be inclusive of the input of:

- the child
- their family/carer
- their teachers, and
- experts in relation to determining:
 - o the extent of a child's challenges as they impact on the ability to access school and the curriculum, the potential of the child to achieve their maximal potential in the areas of physical, cognitive, sensory, social/ emotional skills and educational outcomes; and
 - o the provision of supports and intervention strategies needed to optimise support for each child to reaching their best possible skills in all educational and life domains.

Novita recommends that in order to determine appropriate funding loading formulae for the categories of children with special need, that in addition to consulting with the education sector, the government would benefit from the extensive experience and collective knowledge of leading children's disability

service providers such as Novita (South Australia); Cerebral Palsy Alliance (New South Wales) and peak bodies such as Ability First Australia; Children with a Disability Australia; and National Disability Services (NDS) to inform the accuracy of these processes.

Novita recommends for consideration, the concept of a loadings mechanism with *a number of tiers* which reflects the extent of additional needs of each student. Novita emphasises the weight of evidence in education, child development and child health literature in relation to the benefits of early intervention in achieving best developmental and educational outcomes. Thus, periods of 'short-term additional loadings' to support early intervention at the right time, right intensity and in the right place; provided by professionals relevant to the child's physical, cognitive, sensory, social/emotional challenges or in relation to associated challenges of singular or multiple disadvantage, is recommended. The ability for a child's designated level of loading must be able to be readily adjusted in a timely manner according to changing child and family circumstances, in the new funding model. While funding is allocated to the school, individual student specificity of relevant loadings must be identified and attributed to the relevant child's supports.

Furthermore, Novita recommends that a tiered loading system must be inclusive of the full spectrum of children with special needs ranging from gifted children, to those with "mild" challenges, to those with the most complex disabilities/support needs. The Australian Education and Development Index (AEDI) Report 2009 highlights:

"Prevalence of Australian children ...at school entry is considerably higher than has been previously reported in the literature and far outweighs the four percent of children that currently qualify for special education services at a school...findings reveal that less severe developmental problems are not being diagnosed prior to school entry. This is problematic given that these conditions are often more amenable to early intervention" (AEDI, 2009). Thus loadings to enable school's to purchase early intervention therapies for children with mild challenges, is thereby an important preventive measure enabling reduction in the need for the scale of future loadings for that child later in their school years.

- (c) The Government's proposed changes to the Australian Education Act 2013 reference "improved quality of teaching and related support services" (www.liberal.org.au: Coalition Policy for Schools: Students First" must safeguard:

1. Quality teaching

Novita recommends that the definition of 'quality teaching' addresses the following:

- (i) Quality teaching for a child who has special needs including disabilities requires that:
 - Teacher and ancillary staff are trained in:
 - the needs of students with a variety of disabilities and/or other special needs, and
 - teaching and learning strategies relevant to the diverse needs of this vulnerable group.

- Each teacher has sufficient time and resources to ensure that each student with special needs is:
 - included;
 - in an environment where lessons are adapted as required; and
 - supported to meet his or her educational goals.
 - Each teacher has access to specialist information from disability/cultural experts regarding the individual student's needs eg cognitive, communication, visual, auditory, behaviour, mobility, and classroom task performance; and
 - Each teacher has access to practical advice from disability experts.
- (ii) The building of an ever-improving teacher workforce requires collaboration with the tertiary education sector to ensure that the principles and ethos of quality inclusive teaching practices are embedded in the skill development phases of student teachers.

2. Quality learning

Novita recommends that the definition of 'quality learning' addresses the following:

Quality learning for a child who has special needs requires that:

- All the quality teaching goals referenced above are met;
- The student can physically access the entire school environment;
- The child's ability to engage is optimised by application of assistive technologies, by appropriate positioning within the classroom, curriculum modification, and use of human supports;
- The student's social and emotional needs are understood and met; and
- The student's abilities are promoted to the greatest level via intervention strategies relevant to the child's individual plan; learning challenges; academic, developmental and vocational aspirations. This includes the teamed effort of school teachers partnering with families, parents and carers, as well as health professionals and other experts to realise the best possible abilities in all life domains for and with the child.

3. Empowered school leadership

Novita recommends that the definition of 'empowered school leadership' embraces the following:

- Empowered and quality school leadership must embrace the needs of every student, including those with a disability, and other special needs. School leadership needs to value the contribution that these children make to the school community, and their future contributions to society. Attitudinal development towards an ethos of positive inclusion needs to be a feature of 'empowered school leadership'. The engendering of a culture of inclusivity that see opportunities created by supporting a child/children with additional needs in their education pursuits, rather than barriers; and the promoting of creative approaches to problem solving, need to be driven by the leaders of each school as well as the sector as a whole;
- School leaders need to advocate for the needs of all students and promote the expectation amongst all school staff that all students are able to achieve and improve their abilities and educational attainments irrespective of their

circumstances, special needs or disabilities. This encapsulates the full spectrum of children, from gifted to those with 'mild' or 'less complex' learning challenges/developmental disabilities, to those with the most complex or 'severe' physical / intellectual / behavioural / social impairments; and

- School leaders need to embrace the responsibility for immediacy of action to emerging or changing student needs in order to maximise outcomes of early intervention strategies.

4. Better information about school performance

Novita recommends that the definition of better information about school performance be expanded to include the following:

- Inclusion of information relevant to students who need extra support, in publications and on the My School website;
- Documentation of number and type of partnerships with specialist services, such as disability service providers, that can support the educational outcomes of students who need extra support; and
- Inclusion of positive stories of success.

5. Meeting student need

Novita recommends that the definition of 'meeting student need' addresses the following:

- For students who need an array of extra supports, it is essential that each individual's needs are clearly and fully identified;
- 'Meeting the need' must extend beyond providing physical access to the school for a child with a mobility issue, but encompasses supporting each child to achieve their best potential;
- A student's needs are only met when they are meaningfully engaged and included in the day to day life of the school and when they have the realistic opportunity of achieving their personal educational goals;
- For some students it will require a partnership approach that goes beyond the classroom, the school or the education sector, but must be inclusive of a collaborative approach with professionals from other sectors including Health, Disability, Housing and Transport;
- Specialist knowledge of the individual student's disability, social or emotional situation may be required to accurately define the student's needs, and then to implement strategies to meet those needs;
- The loadings in addition to the benchmark Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) must be readily able to be amended according to evolving individual student needs, and prior to and during key transition phases during their journey through school. The phase of preparation for leaving school, including vocational training for adolescent children with additional needs is highlighted as a key area in which a school's allocated funding for a child with additional needs must have an additional loading; and
- Loadings for children with additional needs, living in regional, rural and remote areas should be inclusive of the dual components of additional funding in recognition of the:
 - location of school in the regional/rural/remote area, and
 - additional costs to the school of securing specialist assistance for children with disabilities and/or other special needs, by virtue of their

location, and paucity of disability experts in regional, rural and remote areas.

- (d) The economic impacts of school education policy are far-reaching, extending beyond the student and their educational attainment and their school's support of them in this pursuit, but also impacts current and future generational employment and societal outcomes. National Disability Services Australia estimates that if 20% of Australian carers of people with a disability return to work, then the economic impact would add \$32 billion per annum to Australia's economy. In 2012, Novita with the Centre for Work + Life (University of South Australia), and South Australian Disability Services, conducted a research study entitled "Juggling Work and Care". This study's findings included:
- One in five parents/carers of children with disabilities who were not in paid employment had originally intended to return to work after the birth of their child; and
 - More than a quarter of parents and carers who were in part-time employment said they would like to work more hours, if supported to do so.

Unavailability of suitable child care was a key factor in reduced workforce participation for this cohort. "Care" in this context includes the period of time each day when a student is at school, coupled with before, after and vacation care options. These research findings have been accepted for publication with the Journal of Community and Work. The implication of improved support for students with a disability in school, education and care environments for children with disabilities in relation to workforce participation and associated contribution to the economy is clear.

Multiple avenues of research and literature evidence in the fields of education, child health and development, reiterate the economic benefits of investing early in intervention strategies to maximise child potential to reap long term substantial economic benefits through maximal societal contribution by adults of future generations. The practical implications at a reform implementation level must actively support schools to financially purchase for their student's early intervention therapies in a timely manner in order to effect best outcomes.

- (e) The Government's consideration of expert findings, research, public consultation and reports in the development and implementation of school policy, including the selection of experts to provide advice on education policy is critical in order to ensure the development and implementation of school funding reform occurs in a nationally and locally relevant manner that levers the best available evidence to support students to reap the outcomes from an excellent education system.

Research currently being instigated via a national collaboration being led by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research that links data from the AEDI, Child Disability data, Infant and Child Development data, concurrent with NAPLAN results, will provide an important information platform from which the School Funding's reforms process will need to draw from to evolve appropriately in the future. The input of peak bodies such as Ability First Australia; Children with a Disability Australia; and NDS should be sought also as experts in a field which

traverses the multiple sectors which impact on the realisation of a child with special needs' potential.

The practical relevance of proposed changes to the Act, regulations and reforms requires must be readily informed by detailed "on-the ground" knowledge and insights of education providers and critically the service providers that interface with the education sector. Service providers who engage across sectors including Education, Health, Disability, Social Services such as Novita and Cerebral Palsy Alliance are nominated examples.

Novita appreciates the opportunity to provide comment regarding the development and implementation of school funding reforms. Planned implementation in synergy with other significant reforms such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme, will maximise opportunities to support every child to achieve their best potential.

ABOUT NOVITA CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Novita Children's Services (Novita), previously known as the Crippled Children's Association, is one of South Australia's largest non-government, non-profit organisations, providing child development, rehabilitation and disability services to children and young people living with special needs, including those with disabilities, and their families. Novita currently provides allied health therapy, equipment and family support services to more than 2,000 children – and through broader work with families and communities, has a direct impact on more than 10,000 South Australians.

Providing innovative services that foster ability and inspire every child to achieve their best is Novita's highest priority. The pre-school and school years are a crucial time for life skill acquisition, career aspiration formation, social and educational development, and community participation. Effective support for children and young people with special needs is critical to their future contributions to society. Celebrating its 75th year in 2014, Novita continues its passionate pursuit of enabling children and young people with special needs to discover their potential, equipping them with skills that ensure they can confidently pursue their life goals.