



NDCO Joint Submission

Senate Inquiry - Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.

Education and Employment References Committee

The National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) Programme is funded through the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. There are presently 31 NDCO regions geographically located around Australia according to population density. Each region is situated within a host organisation. The programme began in January 2008 and is funded through 30 June, 2016. The goals of the NDCO Programme are to:

- Establish better links between schools, higher education and vocational education and training providers and providers of disability programs and assistance
- Improve transitions to help people with disability move from school or the community into post-school education and training and subsequent employment
- Increase participation by people with disability in higher education, vocational education and training and subsequent employment

The NDCO Programme works closely with a range of key stakeholders in all education sectors, including schools, adult community education, vocational education and training, as well as higher education. This places NDCOs in a unique position to gather a range of perspectives about the current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.

SUBMISSIONS:

Social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment:

If individuals with disability have the opportunity to build capacity and attain authentic educational outcomes, and subsequently participate as contributing social and economic citizens there are enormous benefits for both the individual and society. These include financial benefits, increased participation in society, a sense of personal achievement and contribution, savings to the welfare system, and increased opportunities to build understanding and capability to respond to diversity and build inclusive communities.

NDCOs report that many students with disability face discrimination, bullying and find the education environment very confronting. This is particularly evident by the number of young people in secondary school who have Autism who do not attend school because of their anxieties, or previous experiences. These students have limited opportunities to build capability and enjoy the social, economic and personal benefits of education and subsequent employment.

In principle support for inclusive practice exists, however students and families present with experiences where educators are often not equipped to respond in a flexible and innovative way to the educational needs of all their students.

Impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students:

The More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) program enabled all school sectors to build capability and focus on strengthening knowledge and expertise in responding to the needs of students with disability and inclusive education practices. This model of skills sharing and exploring projects created a strong focus that has declined since funding has ceased.

There are a range of observations from NDCOs indicating that there is varied impact of increased knowledge and understanding and improved practice within the compulsory education and training sector as a result of the MSSD funded program.

The development of the online modules on different disabilities has enabled teachers and support staff to improve their knowledge but as it is not compulsory there are some areas where these have not been fully utilised. In Tasmania where Disability Standards for Education training was mandated the awareness and capability levels are significantly increased.

The website <http://resource.dse.theeducationinstitute.edu.au/> developed to support families and communities to understand the Education Standards has not been well advertised and promoted within the sector. It is also important to recognise that simply knowing the standards and entitlements is not sufficient. Families and individuals may need additional and objective support to effectively navigate the system, apply the information and make informed choices.

More often than not, teachers in the compulsory education system are not aware of the resources and projects previously developed as part of the MSSD and it has largely been up to the Disability Practitioners and the NDCOs to make them aware of their obligations and opportunities.

It was noted however that there has been a change in the last five years where in some regions transition staff within the compulsory education system are looking at a broader range of inclusive options within the transition years for young people with disability.

Until all education environments are inclusive and capable of responding to individuals needs funding should be available. This funding was about building the workforce capability which must occur in tandem with individual supports.

Future impact on students with disability as a result of the Government's decision to index funding for schools at the consumer price index after 2017:

This decision will impact significantly as schools will individually be required to bear costs associated with facilitating programs that specifically meet the needs of students with disabilities. In conjunction with the cessation of More Support for Students with Disabilities funding and a refocus through the implementation of the NDIS, it is unlikely that schools will be able to make the systemic changes required to build inclusive school environments and practices. Limiting the funding with indexation to CPI (Consumer Price Index), fails to recognise the specialist skills and requirements needed to ensure children with disability are fully included in all education opportunities.

Progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act:

All identified need should be funded, however there is confusion about what constitutes a disability that attracts funding in the education sector and what individual supports are possible and available.

We recognise that while individual needs based funding is paramount, schools should also have access to funding to make systemic improvements regarding inclusive education environments and practices.

The NDIS will improve many lives, however many young people who may not meet eligibility criteria will still require comprehensive needs based funding models. Funding will be required to enable them to access support and assistance to develop their foundations skills. These core skills will enable them to progress through regular training, education and employment pathways.

Progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability and the findings, recommendations and outcomes from this process, and how this data will, or should, be used to develop a needs-based funding system for students with disability:

While the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability has been a welcomed strategy to identify national measures regarding disability, it has also assisted in creating a shared understanding about disability and needs.

The NDCOs gain insights on a regular basis that indicate some education providers are unaware of their responsibilities socially, and legally, along with individual funding being pooled so other students with disability who don't receive funding get supports.

While needs based funding is optimal to support students with disability there is concern that the funding is not always made directly available to the individual student but used to fund broader inclusion strategies within the school.

Additionally, Special Education Programs within schools often report that they are unaware of the funding that has been allocated to the students in their schools and whole of school projects are not financially inclusive of students with disability. This results in the program being required to pay additional funds for activities that should be readily available to all students i.e. swimming programs,

Career Development Activities etc.

How possible changes as a result of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability will be informed by evidence-based best practice of inclusion of students with disability:

While the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability will provide key information about the number and degrees of support being provided currently the data collection itself may be limited by current resourcing and professional development. The data may not also be a clear indicator of good, best or evidence based practice. It may simply reflect that a number of schools are endeavouring to do their best given the circumstances and resources available to them.

Learners can present with complex needs and staffs require a suitable level of expertise and experience to respond effectively and ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. The adjustments that are provided can sometimes depend on the knowledge of the person with disability or education provider about what is possible and available (i.e. new technologies).

Making the data more widely available will encourage transparency and accountability of practice.

What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools; the early education of children with disability:

- Increase teacher training in respect to working with students with disability, particularly those with learning disabilities.
- Establish curriculum and design guidelines about inclusive education principles and obligations and ensure that there is opportunity to trial, apply and share the knowledge. Learning, understanding and application of the principles is critical to building capacity across all education and training sectors.
- Promote the value of utilising a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting students with disability to achieve their greatest capabilities and personal goals. This means education and training providers developing networks and connections with internal and external service providers to fully maximise opportunities for achieving positive outcomes.
- Provide more information and guidance to parents and carers about their options, rights and responsibilities. Programs like Parents as Career Transition Supports (PACTS) are excellent opportunities for parents to understand the choices for themselves and their child as they progress through the education sectors.
- Recognise the need for identified and specialist support at all key transition points, in particular the post school transition where the access, types and levels of supports are significantly different from the compulsory school sector
- Recognition about the need to balance scaffolding methodologies, reasonable adjustment and authentic education outcomes to ensure we are setting students up for success.

- Recognise the difference in approaches between State/Territories and Commonwealth funded programs and the various eligibility criteria, and seek strategies to address inconsistencies.
- Seek to address the limited resources, services and support available to regional Australia to facilitate positive educational outcomes for students with disability.
- Acknowledge that amongst culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities that disability and education may be experienced very differently and there may be additional considerations required to address understanding of and access to relevant and responsive supports and services.

Ensure that students with disability have authentic and meaningful opportunities to complete work experience so that they have real opportunities to explore their own capabilities and make informed choices about potential career pathways.

- Ensure Career Development and Planning activities are inclusive in all schools
- Provide dedicated Transition Services
- Increase consciousness of the need to transition and transfer skills, strategies and technologies from the school environment to the post school environment.
- Focus on being aspirational, articulating expectations and setting standards so that all young people with disability come out of school with Foundation Skills that will enable them to pursue pathways effectively.
- Closer collaboration between the Senior Secondary and Post School Education and Training sectors to eliminate the differential in the access to, and application of reasonable adjustments, and establish shared understanding and practice to maximise opportunity for students to access further education.
- Develop practices and protocols that are more consistent about the types and access to special provisions and reasonable adjustments across the States and Territories, and throughout the education and training sectors to reduce the significant differential between supports and responsiveness available in each sector.
- Acknowledge that the education and training sector will need to be more responsive and collaborative in meeting the needs of individuals with disability as the NDIS begins to enable and empower individuals with disability and their families to advocate more effectively for themselves.

Case Studies:

We have identified a number of case studies (de-identified) that highlight some of the key issues experienced by students with disability at all stages and ages of education and training to emphasise some of the key points of our submission.

Liam who is blind, was completing his High School Certificate. At his school, they had provided JAWS on all computers; he had a scribe in all classes and had a participation buddy at all times outside of

the classroom. The school was incredibly accommodating and Liam thrived and achieved great results. He applied to attend University and accepted into his course of choice.

Liam arrived on the first day of University and was overwhelmed and uncertain about what was going to happen. Liam had assumed that the school would have disclosed his disability and arranged for support. As Liam was managing well at school, everyone assumed he would manage just as well at University. Formal transition planning could have avoided this issue.

Megan is a young woman with a mild physical disability causing considerable fatigue in the school environment. Megan requested to access reasonable adjustments for her school exams but faced opposition from teaching staff and peers because she was doing well academically even without adjustments. Megan knew that her capacity to achieve was greater and had to fight to access adjustments like extra time for her exams. This case demonstrates a lack of understanding of the rights of students with disability and a need to ensure all students are supported to reach their individual capacity.

VET in Schools Programs. Recently at a Disability Transition Information Session, a school teacher was asking about pathways for her Year 12 students who had disabilities. She indicated that her current class had all achieved a Certificate II in Business Services facilitated as a VET in Schools program. It was acknowledged that this provided a positive pathway to pursue a number of different Certificate II qualifications depending on the student's interests. The teacher then indicated that there was no way they would be able to achieve a Certificate III because they did not have the literacy skills. When asked about how each of the students had achieved a Certificate II she exclaimed that they had modified the whole program to ensure that they would get through.

Georgia is a young woman who has a physical disability and complex health conditions. Georgia has been in a special program at High School completing the final year of her High School Certificate over extended time. Georgia is on a ventilator 24 hours a day and requires a health nurse to be with her at all times. The health nurse also provides personal care such as feeding and changing Georgia's continence aids regularly, which requires a private full adult change facility and hoist. Georgia is non-verbal because of the placement of her ventilator and uses a communication board to point to symbols or spell words, she is competent on the computer. Georgia also requires an Education Support Officer to be with her to assist in participation in the learning environment. Georgia indicated that she would like to pursue studies when she has completed her High School certificate. A meeting was facilitated with her support personnel and current teaching staff to commence her transition planning in pursuit of her tertiary education goals. During this meeting the teacher flagged that she did not believe a University pathway was viable because Georgia because she had not developed the written English skills that would be required in Higher Education. When questioned why and how Georgia was successfully completing her High School Certificate they simply said they didn't think she would be going to University so they had adapted everything to meet her needs. There were no indicators that Georgia could not achieve the requisite skill level to go to University, only the belief of her educators that she would not. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Callum has an Intellectual Disability and is in Senior Secondary School in a Disability Unit where he is completing a High School Certificate, with learning outcomes modified to meet his needs. Callum's teacher is focussing on the development of strategies and skills development that will enable Callum to successfully transition to a post school option. Callum is supported to achieve basic work ready certificates such as First Aid, White Card, Drivers Learners Permit, and Work Experience each term for years 10-12. Additionally he is developing life skills of using his iPhone and iPad to regulate his day and provide access to speech to text apps that help enhance his literacy, language and numeracy skills. Callum has been having regular Career Counselling at School and was recently supported to attend an Education and Training Expo. Callum's teacher has been having a Transition Planning Meeting each term with all of key supporters. Callum attends each of these meetings, and has been identifying his post school options, as well as choosing subjects he will do in the last year of school to support this. Callum's teacher is helping him build a profile of skills, capabilities and strategies for effective participation. There is a plan for Callum to meet with the local VET Provider to explore transition and foundation skills courses with the aim of preparing to apply for a traineeship. At the commencement of the next year, Callum has a new teacher who has limited experience in working with students with disability and has had no hand over from the previous teacher. Callum's plans are not being implemented.

John attended a small rural school for much of his education. When he transitioned to a larger school to complete his year 11 and 12. At the beginning of the year he began to struggle, he started to suffer anxiety and found the fast pace environment far more difficult to manage. During the 2nd term break he was diagnosed as being on the Autism Spectrum. After school returned his mother made contact with the NDCO programme to ask what extra supports he son could receive to support his success in his studies. Contact was made with the school who urgently put in an application for extra time and a smaller exam room. The student's request for reasonable adjustments was declined because the submission was late. Further investigation revealed that the authorising body expects that education providers should submit applications for known cases by the published due date each year and no provisions could be made once exams had commenced. In this case, John's condition was not known before the due date, and exams had not commenced. John was also charged a late fee. This has denied John the opportunity to access reasonable adjustments and opportunity to reach his full potential, as well as being charged to make the request in contradiction to the Disability Discrimination Act.

Regional Australia. In a small regional town of less than 1500 people. It is located about 90 minutes from a regional centre. The community is experiencing a local unemployment rate of around 5% and of those working, almost one third are only working on a part-time basis. There is a public and a Catholic school from Prep to year 12 but no special education program. The town has had challenges in attracting professional services such as Doctors, Health and Disability practitioners to the town on a regular or permanent basis. For example they currently have a position vacant for someone to run their local kindergarten as they cannot attract a suitable qualified person to fill this role. The current short term solution is to hire a casual worker at higher wage rates until a more permanent option

can be found. This person will be leaving in the next week and a replacement is not known at this stage.

This limited engagement with professional services and supports particularly effects students with disability who may not have access to skills and experienced early intervention, educational support, transition pathway services such as disability employment services, mainstream employment services, transition to work programs, day services and respite care. The reality usually involves travelling the 3-4 hour round trip to the regional centre. This time away from school further impacts on the student and their educational outcomes. Whilst the local shire council is aware of the above as an on-going issue, and is continually working on lifting the profile of the town and attracting people to meet the skills needs, they are very much concerned that this trend will not change in the near future. In fact the community is concerned that the introduction of the NDIS may exacerbate the situation.

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