



AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION

OF

SPECIAL EDUCATION (AASE)

**SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO CURRENT LEVEL
OF ACCESS AND ATTAINMENT FOR
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM
AND
THE IMPACT ON STUDENT AND FAMILIES ASSOCIATED WITH
INADEQUATE LEVELS OF SUPPORT**

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE) is committed to advocating for the provision of quality education for children and young people with special education needs. It is a broad-based group with membership comprising teachers, therapists, academics and others. AASE National is represented on advisory bodies such as the ACARA Students With Disabilities Advisory Group. At a state level, AASE State Chapters are consulted by education departments, provide representation on a range of state committees and offer professional learning for teachers and others. AASE supports awards to exemplary teachers and leaders in the education of students with special needs. In advocating for evidence based practices in the education of students with disability AASE provides a biennial award to support research relevant to the education of students with special needs, and organises an annual conference focusing on the education of students with special needs. It also publishes two journals, the Australasian Journal of Special Education and Special Education Perspectives.

AASE is appreciative of the opportunity to make a submission to this enquiry and representatives are available to provide further information if required.

AASE may be contacted at office@aase.edu.au

AASE has addressed those areas of the enquiry that are most relevant to the access to quality of education for students with a disability and other special education needs. We believe that access and attainment would be improved by ensuring all students with a disability are taught by teachers with the required skills and knowledge.

In addition to our responses to the discussion points, we have provided as an appendix copies of AASE Position Papers that are relevant to this enquiry – those on Teacher Aides, Evidence-based Practice, Preservice Education and Quality Education.

Summary of AASE Submission

AASE recommends:

- Better preparation for ALL teachers so they know and can implement effective educational practices for students with special education needs
- A requirement that all teachers in support and special education positions hold a special education qualification (that includes skills in collaborating with and coaching adults)
- A requirement that all regular class teachers have access to support from an appropriately qualified special educator
- Effective on-going professional learning for in-service teachers (individualised with a coaching and feedback component)
- Support for schools to make adjustments other than providing a teaching assistant or teacher assistant hours such as more support from special educators, peer support and tutoring systems, better deployment of specifically trained teacher assistants, volunteers, buying in appropriate programs and materials and training teachers or teacher assistants in their use
- Guidance to schools about effective research-based practices and discouragement of the use of interventions known to be less effective or ineffective.

- Introduction of accountability for students who currently fall outside the accountability framework (e.g. NAPLAN assessments)
- Use of needs-based funding with the proviso that funds are not unlimited and must be used prudently

How is disability defined?

For the purposes of this submission, the interpretation of “students with disability” means those students identified under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA), including those for whom educational adjustments must be provided. AASE supports the work of the federal government in developing a model for the nationally consistent collection of data on school students with disability. This work may provide information to address the discrepancies in definitions and supports and adjustments currently provided by systems and sectors to students with disability.

a. 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

AASE would like to emphasise the importance of the use of research-based educational practices for all students as the basis for access to effective education for students with disability and special education needs. Effective approaches including tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) models based on practices shown by empirical research to be effective (such as explicit, teacher-directed instruction) support ALL students and provide a way of supporting students with disability that is based on their individual and specific need for intervention, not their diagnosis and may reduce the need for specialist supports. We would particularly note effective basic school-wide systems such as an RTI approach for literacy teaching and Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (PBIS) for social behaviour as research-based approaches that benefit all students.

It is hard to judge the adequacy of adjustments in terms of their ability to improve student access to education, since the specific nature of the supports provided in schools is not known nor is how schools decide what resources they need to make adjustments. Principals report that resourcing is inadequate but seem to want more teacher assistant (School Learning Support Officers, teacher aides, education support staff) time and it would appear that the most commonly used adjustment is teacher assistants. Although teaching assistants can be used effectively to support students, research in other countries has established that there are many situations where their use is problematic and not only does not improve student outcomes but may increase student dependence on adult help (Blatchford et al., 2009; Giangreco, 2010; 2014; Giangreco & Broer, 2007). A number of studies have suggested undesirable effects and an over-reliance on teaching assistants when teachers relinquish too much responsibility to the assistant (Giangreco, 2010, 2014; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). As Giangreco has pointed out, the use of teaching assistants often makes the least qualified person in a school responsible for students with the most complex learning needs.

AASE recommends that school communities be supported to investigate and introduce alternatives to the indiscriminate use of teacher assistants. If teaching assistants are the only adjustment considered by schools and families when collaborating and negotiating support needs, it is unlikely they will be used effectively. Alternatives that could be considered to increase access to effective education could include, for example,

- Provision of professional learning which includes coaching and feedback to improve the skills of ALL teachers in differentiating instruction and the curriculum to meet diverse learning needs
- The use of peer assisted learning and peer support (<https://kc.vanderbilt.edu/pals/>)
- Changes to school structures and timetables to allow more targeted use of teacher assistants with specific skills. Teacher assistants may be trained, for example, in a specific area such as early literacy instruction and then the school timetables literacy sessions around the availability of SKILLED support.
- Co-teaching of qualified special educators and regular teachers, although the research evidence for the effectiveness of co-teaching is limited. (<http://faculty.virginia.edu/coteachUVA/5formats.html>)
- Schools should be supported to make data driven evaluations, using objective measures of student outcomes, of the effectiveness of the adjustments they choose to employ.

It is agreed that effective teachers are crucial for access to effective education. In education generally, there is little research that links teacher qualifications to classroom practices and good student outcomes but there is an emerging evidence base that teachers with special education qualifications achieve better educational outcomes for students with disability (Feng & Sass, 2013). Common sense would suggest that if teachers are not aware of effective, research-based practices for students who have difficulty learning, they would be unable to make appropriate adjustments. Many teachers in special education settings are not qualified and many teachers in inclusive schools who provide additional support are likely to be unqualified as well. A recent survey in NSW found that 37% of teachers who were teaching students with autism in support classes had no special education qualifications (Ho, Stephenson, & Carter, 2015) and this is in accord with figures reported from Victoria by the Principals Association of Specialist Schools. The finding that at least a third of teachers in support positions are unqualified is extremely disturbing and we doubt that the community would accept a situation where a third of maths teachers had no qualifications in teaching maths.

AASE recommends that the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) develop professional standards for specialist teachers such as special educators and standards for the university courses that prepare them. This would be a first step in requiring that only appropriately qualified teachers fill special education and support roles in schools. The University of Newcastle is currently researching appropriate standards for special educators. At present, there is no financial incentive for teachers to complete additional education and as systems and sectors are happy to employ unqualified people there is no need for teachers to gain additional qualifications. AASE recognises that many teachers access system-based professional learning opportunities to support students with disability but notes that the majority of these do not lead to certification.

c. The 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;

AASE will not address this in detail, but would like to make the general comment that evaluation of initiatives such as More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD), which often involve very large sums of money, should have funds set aside for evaluation that is planned from the beginning. Evaluation should include an objective assessment of the impact on student outcomes against predetermined learning criteria. Student outcomes should be directly measured and evaluations should not depend only on teacher reports.

The effectiveness of funding programs such as MSSD should not be determined by the system level of activity in dispersing the funds.

d. The 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;

Again, AASE will not address this in detail, but notes that research in the US indicates that jurisdictions that spend the most on special education (where the major cost is staffing) do not necessarily get the best student outcomes. School districts in US that emphasised teacher quality and increased instructional time outperformed school districts that spent more money on staff (especially on teacher assistants) (Levinson, 2012).

The move to school-based decision making so that schools can respond to local needs places a greater onus on school communities to make prudent decisions about how funds will be spent. School communities are likely to need support in determining how resources should be best used to provide effective adjustments as we have noted in response to point a.

e. The progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act;

AASE is supportive of needs based funding if reliable ways to assess need can be developed. There may be roting of any system such as exaggeration of needs, diagnosis shopping etc. Needs-based funding is much preferable to diagnosis-based funding as the needs of students with the same diagnosis (e.g. Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder) can vary from no support needed to ongoing and pervasive support. The information collected through the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data project should inform assessment of need. There is one caution that should be added which is that some students with relatively low levels of need might obtain greater benefits from short-term substantial funding whereas students with complex needs are always likely to need considerable ongoing support. Some consideration needs to be given to the likely outcomes of the support provided, and allowance made for appropriate levels of support for students with less severe disabilities particularly in the early years of education.

f. The 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;

AASE supports the NCCD project and believes that it provides a good picture of the adjustments provided to students. It gives a better picture of what schools are doing, and doing for a very much wider range of students than has been previously recognised. NCCD has provided the opportunity for systems and schools to clarify their processes and become more systematic and consistent in terminology. Further work is required to establish if the adjustments implemented by schools are in fact the most effective and the most cost-effective available. In the US, comparative data on the spending and outcomes on a school-district basis have been helpful in assessing cost-effectiveness of supports as we have noted in response to point d. and similar work may be useful in Australia.

g. 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;

There is little or no empirical evidence for inclusion itself. Inclusion is a rights-based movement. If the community has determined that inclusion is desirable, the actual question should be “How can effective programs and instruction for students with disability requiring adjustment be delivered in inclusive settings?” And that question is not currently answered. There is a wide range of research-based practices that have been shown to be effective for students with disability and special education needs, particularly practices based on the principles of applied behaviour analysis and on explicit, teacher-directed instruction. These practices are not generally favourably regarded in modern mainstream education or in current teacher preparation courses outside special education. The problem is to educate teachers (both preservice and in-service) to add these strategies to their current skills and to determine when they would best be used to differentiate instruction.

AASE believes that successful outcomes for students with disability can be achieved in a variety of settings with a continuum of supports and that a range of educational placements from segregated schools and classes through to placements in mainstream classes with appropriate additional supports should continue. This is an area where informed parent choice on educational placement must be respected.

h. What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools?

As has already been noted, appropriately qualified special educators and support teachers are essential. Systems and sectors should be required to employ appropriately qualified teachers for students with disabilities and special education needs.

As well as requirements for well-trained specialist teachers, it is crucial that regular class teachers are able to make adjustments and differentiate teaching strategies and curriculum to meet diverse needs. At times this will only be possible with the support of a specialist educator but initial teacher education could certainly be improved. AASE believes that teacher education courses must have at least one stand-alone unit that addresses pedagogy for students with disability and special education needs, preferably linked to a quality practicum in an inclusive setting with an effective teacher supported by a qualified special educator. Course content must include the legal obligations of schools and teachers, information on assessment, programming, instruction, making adjustments and collaboration with specialist teachers and teacher assistants. In addition, all units in content areas should include the full range of teaching methodologies, including teacher-directed explicit instruction as well as student-centred approaches. This is particularly important for key areas such as early literacy and numeracy instruction and gives regular teachers the tools for effective differentiation.

Regular classroom teachers also need a sound preparation in practical, research-based classroom and behaviour management strategies. Students with disability may not receive the best education if teachers do not have requisite skills to both teach pro-social behaviour and discourage inappropriate behaviour.

On-going professional learning for in-service teachers covering research-based approaches, which includes in-class coaching and feedback, should to be provided as required. Single shot professional learning sessions and online programs without a coaching component are likely to be ineffective in changing teacher practice. Part of the role of qualified support

teachers in schools would be to co-teach and coach regular teachers and teacher assistants to increase their skills.

i. The early education of children with disability

It is important that the early education of children with disabilities and developmental delays in early intervention, childcare and preschool is underpinned by good evidenced based practice and early childhood educators, therapists and early childhood workers who are trained in inclusive practice and educational strategies that meet the diverse needs of learners.

University courses **preparing early childhood educators** should have at least one unit that addresses the needs of students with disabilities and developmental delays and staff should have access to ongoing relevant professional development.

There are currently very few specifically trained early childhood special educators and this should be addressed if the long term educational outcomes for these children are to be enhanced. It is universally acknowledged and research supports that evidence based practices in early intervention leads to excellent outcomes.

AASE acknowledges that the Federal Government's trial of the National Disability Insurance scheme (NDIS) with children in a number of sites in states and territories around Australia has led to the possibility of all children with disability and developmental delay receiving evidence based therapies and services from birth or diagnosis. The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) has been clear that all therapies and other practices funded by them must have an evidence base and this is to be commended. AASE would strongly recommend that the NDIS is rolled out to the full cohort once the trial finishes in 2016.

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Appendix 1

LINKS TO AASE POSITION PAPERS

<http://aase.edu.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/documents/Position-Paper-Evidence-Based-Practice.pdf>

<http://aase.edu.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/documents/Quality-Education-Position-Paper.pdf>

<http://aase.edu.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/documents/Teacher-Aide-Position-Paper.pdf>

<http://aase.edu.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/documents/AASE-Pre-Service.pdf>