

CHAPTER 1

Background to the inquiry

Reference

1.1 On 17 June 2015, the Senate referred the following matter to the Education and Employment References Committee for inquiry and report:

- (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;
- (b) the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment;
- (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;
- (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;
- (e) the progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act;
- (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;
- (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;
- (h) what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools;
- (i) the early education of children with disability; and
- (j) any other related matters.

1.2 On 10 September 2015 the Senate granted the committee an extension of time to report from 3 November 2015 to 3 December 2015.

1.3 On 10 November 2015, the committee received from the Senate a further extension to table its final report by 15 January 2016.

Context of the inquiry

1.4 Australia, as a nation, has allowed educational outcomes for students with disability to be poor as a consequence of failing to consider what outcomes we want for children with disability. Without defined goals or outcomes for students with disability, there has been long-term policy confusion around expectations of the school system in general and individual students in particular. What is needed, therefore, is greater consideration given to what would be the optimal educational outcomes for students with disability, and then an effort made by governments at both commonwealth and state/territory level to put into place the policies, practices and funding that would lead to these outcomes.

1.5 While it has long been a topic of intense concern for the families involved, Australia's funding of additional support for students with disability in the school system, along with broader questions about the education of students with disability, has in recent years attracted greater public attention as the shortcomings of existing systems have become more apparent.

1.6 The Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling, released in December 2011, highlighted that disability is one of the major determinants of educational outcomes in Australian schools (along with socioeconomic background, English language proficiency, indigeneity, and school size and location), and recommended an additional loading for all students with disability, based on nationally consistent data and being sector-blind in its approach.¹

1.7 The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD), a process recommended by the Gonski Review, in 2015 had its first full nationwide collection, with a view to informing school funding for 2016.

1.8 The previous Labor government also established the More Support for Students with Disability (MSSD) program as a temporary measure until the full roll-out of NCCD-based funding based on the Gonski Review's model. Designed to raise awareness and understanding within the education sector of the rights and needs of students with disability in schools, the MSSD was independently evaluated by PhillipsKPA, who found that the initiative:

As a modest, short-term investment the MSSD initiative achieved its major objective to build the skills of teachers and increase school capacity to better meet the educational needs of students with disability. There was general agreement across the jurisdictions that the MSSD initiative was a significant catalyst for change. The initiative provided opportunities for

1 *Review of Funding for Schooling*, pp xvi-xvii, <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf> (accessed 21 December 2015).

authorities to get planned activities underway, or more broadly distributed, and to develop or refine innovative approaches.²

1.9 Broader context for this inquiry also comes from the launch in July 2013 of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), itself a consequence of a Productivity Commission review which found that the existing systems for funding and supporting people with disability, along with their carers, were inadequate. While the NDIS is not specifically concerned with education and school funding, it is a central component of the increased attention given to Australia's policy settings in relation to people with disability.

1.10 Given the above policy initiatives and broad context, the Senate saw that it was an appropriate time to hold an inquiry into the access and attainment levels for students with disability in the school system, along with the progress and impact of the various initiatives and models recently introduced in the area.

Barriers to education

1.11 Throughout the course of this inquiry, the committee received overwhelming evidence regarding the many barriers faced by students with disability and their families. Access to education is a basic human right, but for many students with disability in Australia, it is a right which they are prevented from accessing.

1.12 Barriers take multiple forms, including difficulties enrolling, failure of schools to provide the reasonable adjustments required by students, exclusion from school activities, a shortage of services in rural and remote areas of Australia and low expectations of students with disability from school staff and others, leading to a failure to take seriously the educational needs of students.

1.13 In particular, the committee found that, while educational outcomes for students with disability are not strong for any students, the experiences of students in the school system varies widely: the family's financial means, geographical location and indigeneity all affected what level of education students with disability could access.

1.14 The practice known as 'gatekeeping', whereby families of students with disability are informally and unofficially discouraged from enrolling their child at their school of choice is another major barrier. For many families, merely enrolling their child in a school was the first of many battles they have to fight in order to ensure their child receives anything like an adequate education.

2 PhillipsPKA, *Evaluation of the More Support for Students with Disabilities Initiative, 2012-2014: Final Report (June 2015)*, Department of Education and Training, p. 9, https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/phillipskpa_mssd_screen_reader-final_report_20_july.pdf (accessed 21 December 2015).

1.15 This tied in with another major theme that became apparent during the inquiry: a key determinant in the quality of education students with disability receive at school was the culture of the individual school, starting with the principal and manifest in classroom teachers. For many students, the difference between positive and negative educational experiences could be traced directly to the extent to which individual principals and teachers understood the importance of providing real educational experiences for all the students in the school or class, including those with disability.

The consequences of failing students

1.16 The committee heard from numerous submitters and witnesses that barriers placed in front of students with disability have severe and compounding consequences – for the student themselves, their family and the whole Australian society and economy. Neglecting the education of students with disability at school will have long-lasting effects.

1.17 For the students themselves, inadequate education access at school will result in their diminished capacity for the rest of their lives. Under-education leads to unemployment, lower levels of health, social isolation and a lifetime of disadvantage.

1.18 For their families, the consequences include significant financial costs – both through the school years and beyond, if the students are never able to achieve employment – and an overwhelming emotional burden. Parents told the committee of their exhaustion and the emotional strain on families and relationships of having to fight on an ongoing basis to achieve for their child the level of education that most families take for granted.

1.19 Both individual families and the broader Australian workforce suffer too, when schools fail these students, effectively forcing one parent to give up the paid workforce to care for, and try to educate at home, their child.

1.20 The wider Australian society also pays the price of failing to adequately educate students with disability, not only from the loss of that student from being able to contribute as a worker later in life, but often from a reduced involvement from the families of these students. Beyond that, adults with disability whose education did not prepare them for workforce participation will also contribute to government income support spending.

1.21 The consequences, therefore, of Australia's low levels of educational access and attainment for students with disability are serious and multifaceted. Failures in this area produce long-lasting and severe problems for the students, their families and the entire Australian society.

The conduct of this inquiry

1.22 Details of the inquiry were made available on the committee's website. The committee also contacted a number of organisations inviting submissions to the inquiry.

1.23 The committee called for submissions by 21 August 2015. Submissions were received from 294 individuals and organisations, as detailed in Appendix 1.

1.24 The committee held the following public hearings:

- in Sydney, on 18 September 2015;
- in Brisbane, on 25 September 2015; and
- in Melbourne on 29 September and 20 November 2015.

The witness lists for the hearings is available in Appendix 2.

Acknowledgement

1.25 The committee thanks those individuals and organisations who contributed to the inquiry by preparing written submissions and giving evidence at the hearings.

Note on references

1.26 References in this report to the *Hansard* are to the official *Hansard*.

