



School-based Perspectives on Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education Project

Executive Summary

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Report prepared for the NSW Department of Education

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This stakeholder consultation report was written by Ricky Campbell-Allen, Lynne Khong & Dr. Peter Goss. Professor Roger Slee provided expert advice and valuable contributions.

This document presents the Executive Summary of the report – *School-based Perspectives on Inclusive Education*.

The report was prepared for use by the NSW Department of Education (the Department). It was prepared in order to assist the Department with identifying specific opportunities to strengthen inclusion and inclusive practices in NSW public schools. Readers should refer to the full report for the more detailed analysis that informs the themes presented in the executive summary.

We would like to thank all the participants — principals, other school leaders, teachers, school counsellors, student learning and support officers (SLSOs) and others — who gave their time, shared their lived experiences and provided the input that made this report possible.

EdCapital is an education consultancy helping system leaders, networks and schools to lead change through strategic facilitation, strategy, leadership development and research.

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Overview

All students should be able to access and fully participate in NSW public schools. Inclusive education for students with disability or additional needs is a major focus for the NSW Department of Education. Parents and the broad community expect no less. It is also the law.

For this report, we spoke about inclusive education with principals, teachers, SLSOs and others from 8 schools across NSW, including a diverse mix of mainstream schools and schools for specific purposes (SSPs). More than 600 educators also completed our broad survey on this topic.

These stakeholders highlighted an inherent tension: providing dedicated support for students with disability can create new barriers that make education *less* inclusive in practice. At a cross-school level and in the survey, we heard of gatekeeping, where mainstream schools ‘encourage’ parents of students with disability or additional needs to find an SSP or a school with a support class even when reasonable accommodations could be made for them. Within mainstream schools, we heard how support classes could be invaluable — but can also shift responsibility for students to a small group of educators rather than being ‘everyone’s business’.

Educators can learn much from their colleagues about how to make education more inclusive, not least how to minimise new barriers that can arise from dedicated and necessary support. This report captures some of these lessons, both as challenges and as enablers that support inclusivity. Although there were many similar themes across mainstream schools and SSPs, context matters.

Educators in mainstream schools spoke of growing numbers of students with disability combined with increasing complexity, especially in mental health. Some described being overwhelmed. Other challenges included cultural resistance to inclusion; finding time to plan curriculum adjustments; and variable capacity of mainstream class teachers to make those adjustments. The key enablers that helped mainstream schools address these challenges were: action-oriented leadership that follows through; a culture of ‘our kids’; support classes and specialist staff; creative re-organisation of school resources to support diagnosed and undiagnosed need; developing teacher expertise to provide access to the curriculum; and high quality relationships with SLSOs.

Educators in SSPs have always supported students with highly complex needs, and they were typically much more confident about their ability to do so than mainstream school educators. That is not to minimise the daily challenge of working in an SSP, where basic life skills can be as important as progress in academic outcomes. We spoke to several schools who are finding innovative ways to do both, even when they felt like there was not the same level of expectations on academic outcomes compared to mainstream settings. For SSPs, the key enablers were: expert, hands-on leadership; consistent school wide expectations, systems and routines; SLSOs and teachers partnering to support student wellbeing and learning; strategic use of funding to build pedagogical expertise; and strong relationships with parents, carers and allied health workers.

One common theme across all schools was praise for the outstanding efforts and contributions of Student Learning and Support Officers (SLSOs). SLSOs were always valued by teachers and school leaders but some schools went further and they were treated and spoken of as ‘partners’.

The NSW system has made real progress in delivering inclusive education. But schools face a dual challenge: growing numbers of students with disability or additional need means they are being asked to do more, and increasing expectations mean that are being asked to do it better. From what we heard, principals, teachers and others have the will. Only as a system can NSW find the way.

Introduction

This stakeholder engagement report is one component of a larger project being delivered by the Disability Strategy team as part of the *Disability Strategy: Inclusive Education Project*. The project aims to assist with identifying specific opportunities to strengthen inclusion and inclusive practices in NSW public schools.

EdCapital was engaged to run a small scale, rapid stakeholder engagement with school leaders, teachers and school learning and support officers (SLSOs) in late September 2020. The consultation was designed to provide a snapshot of how educators across a range of schools are grappling with the reality of embedding inclusive education in NSW public schools, through focus groups and a survey. Another organisation worked with the student and family cohorts.

Approach and methodology

Our stakeholder consultation approach can be described as a ‘T-shaped’ methodology — a broad online survey (n=635 responses) and eighteen virtual focus groups (n=62 individuals) which enabled us to unpack perspectives on inclusive education in more detail. Insights were triangulated across three complementary stakeholder groups who are in the frontline of inclusive practice – school leaders, teachers and SLSOs. Due to COVID-19 all our engagement was online.

Eight schools participated in the focus groups: two primary schools, two secondary schools, one central school and three schools for specific purposes (SSPs). Most but not all mainstream schools had support classes. Focus group schools came from a mix of metropolitan, regional and remote locations. In the broader online survey, most respondents (83%) said they were from a mainstream school and the remainder (17%) from SSPs. Survey respondents had a diverse range of roles.

Data analysis involved qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thematic analysis of the focus group input was used to create school level summaries that integrated the perspectives of principals, teachers and SLSOs from each school. The cross-school summaries were then analysed to generate insights and identify consistent themes. Where possible, themes identified in the focus groups were cross-checked with analysis of the broad survey. The full report provided to the Department provides a much more detailed description of our methodology and findings.

The context in which NSW public schools operate

The disability reform landscape

Disability reform is a global effort to promote the equal and active participation of all people with disability. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability was introduced in 2006; Australia ratified it in 2008. Nationally, the Disability Discrimination Act (Cth) dates from 1992, the Disability Standards for Education (Cth) from 2005, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme from 2013. Despite these efforts, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability — appointed in 2019 — shows that Australia still has far to go.

In 2019, the NSW Department of Education released a new Disability Strategy. It outlines the vision for building a better education system for students with disability in NSW public schools:

All students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices.

Clear expectations are vital but are only half of the picture. The Department's 2019 Disability Strategy notes that the proportion of students who have disability or additional needs is growing four times faster than overall enrolment growth. In effect, schools have a *dual challenge*: they are being asked to do more, and to do it better.

School context matters

Schools organise their learning support in different ways as they seek to provide individualised support. In the mainstream schools we spoke to, learning support was provided in a mainstream classroom, through withdrawal from class, through small group or 1:1 tuition, or in a specialist support class. Mainstream schools use SLSOs, school counsellors and allied health professionals as part of this learning support. SSPs have much smaller class sizes and learning and support staff in all classes. SSPs frequently use 1:1 support and often have a high concentration of allied health providers. These contexts greatly influence how educators perceived inclusive education.

In our focus groups with **mainstream schools**, we consistently heard about increasing numbers of students with disability or additional needs. The survey agreed: 85% of mainstream school principals reported higher proportions of students with disability than two years ago. Educators in mainstream schools also spoke of growing complexity around mental health, trauma and behavioural challenges, plus many more students with *undiagnosed disability*. Mainstream school educators also noted increasing — at times overwhelming — expectations. Although the NSW framework for students with disability has been largely stable since 2011, high profile reviews and the Royal Commission have raised public expectations around disability. Mandatory DoE training requirements and the 2019 strategy may also be raising expectations across the system.

The context for educators in **SSPs** is framed by the needs of their students. SSP leaders and teachers described these needs as highly complex and multi-dimensional, encompassing a variety of behavioural/social skills, intellectual abilities as well as medical support needs. SSP educators talked of providing emotional support to families as well as students. For some students in SSPs, progress in basic life skills was seen as just as important as progress in literacy or numeracy.

The summary results of the broad survey provide useful insight into educators' overall responses to these contexts. The good news is that most respondents from both mainstream schools (83%) and SSPs (93%) felt confident to communicate their responsibility to help students with disability learn. They were also confident that they included students with disability and/or their families in decisions that affect them (79% in mainstream schools; 88% in SSPs).

Beyond those two questions, the responses about educational practice diverge sharply between mainstream schools and SSPs. Educators in SSPs are much more confident in their ability to deliver inclusive education than educators in mainstream schools. At least two-thirds of respondents from SSPs agreed with each of the ten statements about practice in their schools.

SSPs' high staff-to-student ratios and (often) specialised training probably helps, but it is not the whole story. The SSPs we spoke to have developed highly systematic routines and processes, and SSP survey responses were generally consistent regardless of role within SSPs.

Meanwhile, less than one-third of respondents from mainstream schools agreed that teachers have the skills and confidence to effectively differentiate their teaching for students with disability, or that the school has a structured process to support new staff. Survey responses from mainstream schools also varied greatly depending on role. Concerningly, Learning and Support Teachers in mainstream schools — whose day job is supporting students with disability — were the least confident about their school's ability to deliver inclusive education.

The next section unpacks the challenges that educators raised in our consultation.

What schools are challenged by

Participants in the consultation described a range of challenges in their efforts to enact greater inclusivity in their schools. Several themes were reinforced consistently across multiple cohorts (School Leaders, teachers and SLSOs), while some were more specific to one group. The themes differ somewhat for mainstream school settings versus SSPs, and they are discussed separately.

Challenges for educators in mainstream schools

Challenges for all cohorts. For some mainstream school leaders there is an inherent tension in the desire for more specialist support for students with disability or additional needs, and the goal of making inclusion 'everyone's business'. Educators spoke highly of the value that specialist support staff brought to the school, but also of the risk that having those specialists on board could make it harder to build the collective responsibility of all staff, for all students. Even in schools whose leaders were very committed to inclusive practice, staff mentioned the challenge of overcoming pockets of cultural resistance that led to restricted opportunities for authentic inclusion for students with disability or additional needs.

Educators in mainstream settings were clear that, while some programs and practices could be designed to universally suit the needs of all students, adjustments were often needed in order for the curriculum to be made accessible to students with disability or additional needs. Focus group participants describe variability in the capacity and confidence of mainstream class teachers to make these adjustments. This was reinforced by the survey. Of the 530 respondents from mainstream schools, nearly 40% disagreed that teachers in their school have the skills and confidence to effectively differentiate their teaching for students with disability or additional needs. Only 30% agreed that teachers have the skills and confidence they need.

Educators also described the difficulty of finding adequate time and focus for planning and adjusting the curriculum for students with disability or additional needs, and in managing complex behaviours while maintaining the engagement of all students in their learning.

Challenges for SLSOs in mainstream settings. SLSOs were widely acknowledged to be a valued support in mainstream schools, both in mainstream classrooms and in support classes. While SLSOs in some mainstream schools reported being included and treated as equals with teachers, not all SLSOs were equally empowered. Some SLSOs said they felt less effective than they wanted to be in supporting their students because relevant information was not shared with them, or they were not included in discussions such as Individual Learning Plan (ILP) meetings.

Most of the mainstream school SLSOs we spoke to reported having few professional learning opportunities. Some described not having access to *any* training opportunities, while others described being included mainly in mandatory whole school training events, such as first aid. SLSOs felt strongly that they could be far more effective in supporting their students if they had the skills and knowledge in specific topics that were relevant to the students that they supported.

Challenges for educators in SSPs

Challenges for all cohorts. A significant theme arising out of focus group discussions with SSPs was the challenge of adapting curriculum, assessment and progress metrics to the needs of students with more severe or complex disabilities. A number of SSP principals and teachers mentioned the challenge of not having a life skills curriculum for primary school students in SSP settings,¹ along with the need for broader recognition of the importance of independence and other learning and wellbeing goals, particularly for students with more severe impairments.

Some SSP leaders felt that, as a small proportion of NSW public schools, SSPs could be marginalised. One school leader thought this was due to a lack of understanding or exposure by department staff to the realities and complexities of a high-needs setting. Others expressed frustration that the system seemed to have lower expectations of academic outcomes from SSPs and felt that the Department was less interested in student performance data from SSPs.

Several educators described the challenge of supporting students to make successful transitions between mainstream and SSP settings. SSP staff described explicit forms of gatekeeping behaviour, where students with disability or additional need are discouraged from enrolling in (or returning to) mainstream schools, even though reasonable accommodations could be made for them. This was also raised by some educators in mainstream focus groups and in the broad survey. In the survey data, 66% of SSP principals from SSPs (and 39% of mainstream school principals) agreed with the statement, “In the last few years, we have had several enquiries from families of students with disability or additional needs who tell us that they have been discouraged from applying to another school”. While it is not possible to understand from this statement how often families were discouraged from enrolling, or the precise reasons why, it is clear from the examples raised in discussion that there are still instances of gatekeeping in NSW.

Even for those students who do move between settings, educators called out the challenge of supporting successful and sustained transition of students from SSPs back into mainstream settings. SSP staff spoke of the frequency with which students who try to transition to a mainstream school end up back in an SSP — particularly those with behavioural challenges.

Specific challenges for SLSOs in SSPs. SLSOs in SSP settings generally perceived themselves to be more included and empowered than their mainstream colleagues. However, SSP school leaders pointed out that the role of an SLSO in an SSP setting was often focused heavily on supporting the health care needs, behaviour and medication requirements of their students. Some educators felt that a low level of recognition and reward made the job unattractive. Like their counterparts in mainstream schools, SSP SLSOs pointed out the lack of professional learning opportunities for SLSOs.

¹ Some focus group participants spoke about the need for a primary school curriculum for some students in SSPs or support units that was *mainly or entirely focused* on life skills. Others spoke about the need for a primary school curriculum for SSPs that *includes* life skills components. Resolving this complex issue is beyond the scope of our research.

Throughout the consultation, schools described how they try to address these challenges in order to support more inclusive education. The next section explores these school level enablers.

What helps schools to deliver inclusive practices

Enablers are school wide factors that participants thought most helped support students with disability or additional needs to learn and thrive at their school. The school wide enablers are interconnected and operate in concert to support inclusivity across a school. We observed these being applied to a greater or lesser extent in the schools that participated in the focus groups. While contextual differences such as school size, location and school type influenced how they were applied, these enablers suggest potential take-outs that other schools might consider trying.²

Inclusivity enablers in mainstream schools

The six mainstream school level enablers surfaced through this consultation are:

School Enabler 1: *A strong action-oriented school leadership team that champions an unambiguous narrative of inclusion, sets high expectations of teachers and students, and follows through.*

In our focus groups, all schools had a leadership team who articulated a strong moral purpose and a narrative of inclusion. Schools that were stronger in this area consistently communicated high expectations of all their teachers and had worked to overcome teacher resistance in some parts of their school. They also prioritised connections with parents/carers and in some cases had created roles to specifically connect with parents/carers of students with disability.

As one school leader put it:

“I think we’ve actually — very, very slowly and in tiny incremental steps — been able to educate the parents... that’s the hardest part ... it’s that stigma...so I think we’ve been able to break that down and have been able to show the community that when your child does receive the extra support, they have an opportunity to be successful”. (School Leader)

Potential take-outs for other schools: Consider increasing the visibility of students with disability by celebrating their success; make explicit the behaviours and practices that are expected of all teachers to enact greater inclusion.

School Enabler 2: *An inclusive teacher culture of ‘our kids’ where most teachers take responsibility to enable participation and inclusion of students with disability and are making adjustments to their teaching.*

All schools aspired to have a school wide celebratory inclusive culture. In the more advanced schools, inclusive practice went beyond participation by students with disability in sport and playtime into an inclusive teacher culture and practice in the classroom.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider running a school inclusivity check (assembly, sport, library, playground, excursions etc.

² The full report provides additional potential take-outs for other schools.

School Enabler 3: *Support classes and access to specialist learning and support staff in mainstream classrooms.*

This enabler was considered the most essential by participants — participants didn't believe students with disability would have equitable access to quality teaching without specialist learning and support staff. SLSOs were highly valued, and the more advanced schools were making greater use of SLSOs by bringing them 'into the loop' with ILPs.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider how to get the most out of SLSOs, for example by including their perspective in the development of a student's ILP.

School Enabler 4: *A strategic and creative approach to (re-)organising school structures and staffing resources to enable more flexible support options for students with funded disability and undiagnosed and/or unfunded needs.*

Schools prioritised and managed their resources in innovative ways to support students with undiagnosed and/or unfunded needs, create flexible support options for students with disability, and get the most out of specialist staff.

For example, one high school created parallel classes in English and Maths in Stage 4 (entry to high school) for students who just missed out on support classes or who had very low literacy. They then prioritised their learning support staff to these classes. This approach required changes to the timetable and staffing model but provided greater flexibility at low cost.

Another school deliberately placed its support hub next to the staffroom so that teachers and SLSOs could drop in during their breaks, increasing staff and student interaction.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider locating any room used to support students with disability (e.g. a support hub) close to the staffroom so that it is not isolated.

School Enabler 5: *Development of teacher expertise to differentiate teaching and provide access to the curriculum through tools, communication systems, programming and professional learning.*

All of the schools wanted to build the capacity and confidence of mainstream teachers to differentiate their teaching and provide access to the curriculum. A key mechanism was the use of student profile builders or equivalents to assess students' learning needs and help teachers plan, implement and monitor adjustments. These were used for students with diagnosed and undiagnosed need.

Potential take-out for other schools: Create co-teaching, mentoring and coaching opportunities that focus on inclusive pedagogy.

School Enabler 6: *High quality teacher-SLSO-student relationships.*

High quality relationships were a dominant theme in the focus groups. A central aspect of this was ensuring continuity of key support relationships to provide safety and stability and ensure that students have a 'go-to person' when they have an issue. Continuity of relationship between teachers and students with disability was harder to provide in a mainstream high school setting.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider reviewing timetables and staffing decisions with specific students in mind to check for continuity of key teacher and peer relationships.

Inclusivity enablers in SSPs

School Enabler 1 (SSP): *Expert ‘hands-on’ leadership team that advocates for every student by setting high expectations with a focus on wellbeing and learning outcomes.*

In all schools, participants referred to a collegial culture that was anchored in the rights of students with disability to a high-quality education. In the words of one school leader:

“...we always ask ourselves, ‘what about...?’, and then we put a student’s name there. So every single activity that we do in the school from an excursion, graduations, award ceremonies, everything, we always ask ourselves, ‘What about Emma? What about Brady? ...They’re all students. How do we get them there? How will we support them? Who will go? What about the toileting? Do they run away?’ We’re constantly trying to make sure that everything we do caters for every student in some way”. (School Leader)

Potential take-out for other schools: Mainstream and SSP schools could consider forming learning partnerships schools for two-way professional learning opportunities.

School Enabler 2 (SSP): *Consistent school wide expectations for students, communication systems and routines to support student communication, wellbeing and learning.*

Consistent communication, expectations of students and routines were at the top of the teacher and SLSO enablers. Participants described a student undertaking the same routine every day. In an SSP setting, supporting a student’s ability to communicate was often the primary focus of an SLSO and teachers work and was supported by school wide communication systems and individualised information on each student.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider agreed and explicit common language for dealing with (challenging) student behaviour and clarity around individual student routines.

School Enabler 3 (SSP): *SLSOs and teachers working in partnership to support each student’s wellbeing and learning.*

Life skills and self-care were considered foundational skills for students in an SSP setting. There was an acknowledgement and respect for the role SLSOs had in assisting with personal hygiene, feeding and behaviour management. Some SLSOs reported that 80% of their time was spent on these tasks. SLSOs were often central in supporting student engagement in any academic activity as several students required 1:1 support for reading and writing. Several teachers and SLSOs described how brief but regular check-ins made these partnerships work, clarifying expectations for the SLSO and providing the teacher with the SLSO’s insights on how students were coping.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider establishing check-in and debrief times and protocols for SLSO and teachers.

School Enabler 4 (SSP): *Using funding to strategically (re-)organise school structures and staffing resources to have an explicit focus on developing teacher expertise and pedagogy.*

Two of the three SSPs in our focus groups had recently prioritised an explicit focus on developing teacher expertise and pedagogy in a specific learning area. One school described using funding to appoint an instructional leader, with experience in a mainstream setting, and additional SLSOs to

focus on reading. Another school described the use of executive leadership time to provide direct 'hands-on' modelling/coaching to support teachers in classrooms.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider how to prioritise teacher and SLSO expertise development in specific learning areas (e.g. writing) with modelling/coaching and mentoring.

School Enabler 5 (SSP): *Strong relationship and communication with parents and carers; and collaborative processes involving specialists, families and school staff to support student learning and wellbeing.*

There was a strong sense that a student was better supported if parents and carers were treated as partners in the education of their child and 'everyone was on the same page'. Several participants described the emotional support they provided to parents and carers, particularly in the early years of schooling. One school described a collaborative approach to developing individual learning and behaviour plans, where goals were jointly negotiated and set. This was also aided by daily or almost daily 'hand-over' information on how a student was coping.

Potential take-out for other schools: Consider induction training for new staff on the importance of engaging with parents, and strategies for how to do it effectively.

What schools wanted help with

All parts of the NSW education system are responsible for growing inclusive practices in NSW public schools. Three dominant themes emerged when we asked focus group and survey participants 'What can the NSW Department of Education do to help your school to be more inclusive of students with disability or additional needs?'.

Theme 1: *System support to build the capacity of all teachers and school leaders to better enact inclusion in their schools/ classrooms, including:*

- Enable more job embedded, longitudinal professional learning that allows teachers to adapt inclusive practices to their classroom contexts (e.g. through mentoring and co-teaching, classroom visits, observation and feedback).
- Share field-tested tools and resources for planning and enacting adjustments (e.g. *pro forma* ILPs, student profile building and adjustment planning tools).
- Develop disability targeted curriculum resources (e.g. life skills in the primary curriculum).
- Provide access for SLSOs to professional learning relevant to their role and the students they support (e.g. youth mental health).

Theme 2: *Funding for specialist support, and release time for teachers and leaders to plan learning adjustments, including:*

- Provide inclusive education specialists who work across schools to build the capacity of all staff to develop and implement inclusive practice in their specific contexts over time (e.g. an inclusion or disability specialist instructional leader shared across schools).
- More access to school counsellors (e.g. additional counsellor days on site, particularly in country areas).
- Additional SLSO support to support mainstream classrooms with a high proportion of students with disability but which currently do not have support.
- Enable executive teacher and staff release time to plan for adjustments and enable

coordination between school and family.

Theme 3: *More flexibility in disability criteria and reducing the administrative burden of the Access Request process, including:*

- Reviewing the approach to the use of disability criteria to capture student need based on functional assessment rather than just a diagnosis (e.g. broadening the criteria for individual funded support to include trauma).
- Reducing the administrative burden and complexity of the Access Request process.

Potential areas for further exploration

Schools are at very different points in their inclusion improvement journeys and they want differentiated system support that meets them where they are at. In this process we have unearthed some powerful examples of what schools have done when given more resources or support — from the SSP who transformed the schools' reading outcomes to the mainstream high school that restructured their timetable and staffing to support an early intervention program. We have also seen examples where improvements were made by using existing resources differently — for example, by bringing SLSOs into discussions about ILPs. Sometimes a different use of resources is enough; but not always.

We believe the department has an opportunity to continue to listen and learn from stakeholders; partner with the profession; help schools, leaders, teachers and SLSOs connect better; and elevate and spread field-tested approaches. Below are the authors' suggestions for further exploration to support a systemic approach to strengthening inclusion. These build on and respond to analysis of the key themes in the report.

- Staying in touch with school-level progress through an ongoing pulse check;
- Profession-led leadership capability-building focused on 'how' to lead and champion inclusive change;
- Supporting learning connections between SSPs and mainstream schools to help build mainstream teachers' capabilities;
- Embedding inclusive education in the broader work of school improvement through planning, reflection and data tools for schools;
- Positively tackling 'gatekeeping' at an individual principal and network level through middle tier supports;
- Fostering higher academic expectations, better understanding and support of SSPs throughout the system.

There has been real progress in NSW towards an inclusive education system. The challenge lies ahead in meeting that aspiration for every student in NSW public schools. Schools cannot do this work alone. In our view the greatest risk is continuing to raise the expectations but not making the changes or investments necessary to deliver on those expectations. The greatest opportunity is to build the collective professionalism of teachers, principals, SLSOs, and others. Individual educators may have the will; but only as a system can NSW find the way.