

NSW Department of Education

Disability Strategy

A living document

Improving outcomes for children and young people, and their families
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Children achieve the best educational outcomes when they receive inspired teaching, are embraced by their schools and fellow students, and have the support of engaged families and friends.

We are committed to building a more inclusive education system, one where all students feel welcomed and are learning to their fullest capability.

The Department of Education is committed to providing children and young people with disability, their families and the broader community with an education system that meets their needs.

Teachers across New South Wales, in mainstream schools and specialist settings, are working with students with disability to achieve remarkable outcomes. However, rising demand, as well as an increasing shortage of staff with specialist training mean our system is facing unprecedented pressures.

Our research tells us that service provision differs from school to school across the state and that family experiences are inconsistent. Our efforts to address these issues received further focus during the Parliamentary Inquiry, Students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales schools, which found that there was room for improvement across a range of areas.

We accepted the findings and are acting on the recommendations of the Inquiry. Since this report, we have been working closely with our partners across the disability and education sectors to build our shared commitment to improve the education outcomes of children and young people with disability. We are committed to building a more inclusive education system, one where all students feel welcomed and are learning to their fullest capability. This strategy is evidence of that commitment. Together with educators, disability experts and families, we have put together a plan for an education system that does better by children and young people with disability, and enhances support for those providing that education – our teachers and school staff.

Over the following pages, we share our vision, consider what success looks like, detail the case for change and set out our plan of action.

Our Vision

Building a better system

We aspire to build an education system in which children with disability thrive academically, develop good physical, mental and emotional health, and gain the skills to live a fulfilling, independent life post-school.

Our vision is to be Australia's best education system and one of the finest in the world for all children and young people.

We are committed to continuously improving the education experiences and outcomes of all students in NSW. We envisage an education system where all schools and classrooms have the support they need to educate and include the range of children and young people in their local community.

People with disability have the same human rights as everyone else, including the right to participate in and contribute to social and economic life. Education has a fundamental role to play in supporting these rights.

Specifically, we want to ensure that all children and young people attending NSW schools are known, valued and cared for and that they:

- Are welcomed and included in their local school community
- Enjoy a wide range of experiences
- Learn to their fullest capability, achieving demonstrable learning, wellbeing and independence outcomes, in a safe, supportive and healthy environment
- Receive an excellent education, with expertise available to support access to the full curriculum in a way that is relevant to them
- Build friendships, interact with other students, and feel a sense of belonging

What we mean by inclusive education

Inclusive education means that 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.

What success looks like

In consultation with educators, disability experts and families, carers and many others, we have sought to identify what success looks like. A more inclusive education system is one where:

- Students with disability are learning to their fullest capability.
- Parents and carers are treated like partners in their child's education.
- Teachers possess the necessary skills to effectively educate children with disability, and feel confident doing so.
- School leaders wholeheartedly support and enable inclusive education practices.
- Specialists work alongside teachers, providing support and guidance.

Children and young people with disability are the main focus of our strategy, yet they are not the only ones who stand to benefit from our proposals.

In moving to a more inclusive system with support that better reflects the changing needs of children we will improve the experience of teachers, families and other students.

Students will

- Feel welcomed into their local school community
- Experience more responsiveness to changes in their needs
- Have more involvement in decisions about their education
- Experience smoother transitions between schools and settings
- Receive a clearer demonstration of learning outcomes from teachers

Families will

- Be treated as partners and recognised as experts of their child
- Receive earlier identification and support for their children
- Find it easier to connect with other families with similar needs
- Have better and easier experiences with our system (including complaints)
- Be provided with more consistent information from schools, NDIS providers and health services

Schools will

- Have more resources, and those resources will be more flexible
- Find it easier to find and use evidence-based professional learning and tools
- Be able to access specialist teachers and other experts
- Experience more celebration and sharing of what schools are doing well
- Be supported by facilities that are progressively designed and built to cater better to all students needs

The case for change

We want to ensure that every child and young person in our school system is realising their full potential.

This means that we need to address a range of factors that are affecting the education outcomes of children and young people with disability.

From rising demand to increasingly complex student needs, these factors have contributed to a wide variation in experiences.

In short, there has been a gap between the promise of inclusive education and the 'lived reality' that some children and their families experience in NSW schools.

During the 2016 Parliamentary Inquiry, some families spoke of low expectations, social exclusion and inadequate education outcomes.

Conversely, other families reported amazing experiences and noted that their children were flourishing, academically and socially, in mainstream and specialist settings alike. We want to replicate these positive experiences in all our schools.

To deliver optimal outcomes for children and young people with disability we must address a number of challenges now facing our system.

During the course of extensive consultation with teachers, other education experts, families, carers, and other stakeholders, a number of challenges standing between us and a more inclusive education system were identified.

Demand is growing

Demand for disability support is growing at four times the rate of enrolment growth.

Compared to 1%¹ overall annual enrolment growth in NSW public schools, we're seeing 4%² growth in students receiving targeted individual support.³

Students accessing specialist support⁷

Between 2013 and 2017

- Places in schools for specific purposes – up 2%
- Places in support classes in mainstream schools – up 4%
- Students in mainstream classes accessing only integration funding support – up 5%

We need the skills of our workforce to keep pace

The evidence is clear. Quality teaching is the single most important determinant of a good education.

Currently, only 9%⁴ of NSW teachers are approved to teach special education, and the number of new special education graduates each year is going down, not up. With 61%⁵ of supporting teachers now over the age of 50 (compared to 43%⁶ of all teachers), the need to invest more in developing a strong pipeline of teachers with relevant skills is undeniable.

9% or 6,000⁸ teachers are approved to teach special education. They:

- Support mainstream classroom teachers and other school staff
- Teach specialised support classes

Age of itinerant teachers, learning and support teachers and assistant principals, and transition teachers⁹

- 21-30 years 2%

- 31-40 years 13%
- 41-50 years 23%
- 51-60 years 35%
- 61-70 years 25%
- 71-80 years 1%

61% are over the age of 50.

A changed landscape

The last few years have seen a profound shift in public awareness when it comes to disability. Legislative measures, such as the NSW Disability Inclusion Act (2014) and the service changes in the National Disability Insurance Scheme, have helped foster increased understanding and expectations, leading to people with disability being more widely recognised for their contributions to society.

At the same time, the prevalence of disability in our schools has been changing. From 2013-17, enrolments of students with autism increased by ~14.5%¹⁰ per year while enrolments of students with mental health needs grew by 5.4%¹¹ per year.

Over the same period, enrolments of children with intellectual disability decreased by 1.5%¹², yet students with intellectual disability still accounted for 40%¹³ of total enrolment of students with disability in 2017.

Students supported by funded programs distributed by disability type 2017¹⁶

- Behaviour 2%
- Sensory 2%
- Physical 6%
- Autism 33%
- Mental health 17%
- Intellectual 40%

Average annual growth by disability type based on 2013-2017 funded programs¹⁷

- Physical -0.3%
- Sensory -1.7%
- Behaviour -5.2%
- Intellectual -1.5%
- Mental health 5.4%
- Autism 14.5%

A question of confidence, not will

Despite significant uptake of existing specialised professional development opportunities, many NSW teachers report a lack of confidence in teaching children and young people with disability.

In a 2015 Australian Education Union survey, 61%¹⁴ of NSW respondents said that their training and professional development did not give them the skills and expertise to teach the full range of children and young people. In 2016¹⁵, The NSW Auditor-General reported that teachers felt they lacked expertise and wanted greater support to help manage student behaviour, and to better support students with autism and mental health needs. It is a signal that we need to further expand our range of high-quality professional development opportunities – particularly with respect to those students.

We're short on evidence

One of the biggest challenges we face in reforming the education system to enable children and young people with disability to achieve consistently good outcomes is building an adequate evidence base.

Currently, there is little consensus on how to measure learning outcomes for students with disability.

As a result, there is very little research that robustly compares the results of children with similar needs across settings and practice. This makes it difficult to confidently identify and scale the approaches that work best for children and young people.

From 2013-17, enrolments of students with autism increased by 14.5% per year.

Our Plan

The opportunities

The department, in consultation with teachers, families, carers, other education experts and stakeholders, identified four areas crucial to reform. If we make the most of these opportunities, we will be well on our way to improving outcomes and experiences for students with disability in NSW.

- 1. Strengthen support:** Investing in teachers and other support staff.
- 2. Increase resources & flexibility:** Enabling schools to operate with more flexibility.
- 3. Improve the family experience:** Making experiences better and easier.
- 4. Track outcomes:** Building an evidence base to measure progress.

1. Strengthen support

We need to invest in teachers and other support staff.

That means more teachers and dedicated support staff with expertise in supporting students with disability. It means better ongoing training of the teachers we already have - both those trained specifically to support children with disability, and those who are not. We will achieve this through improved induction, improved professional development, and by providing opportunities for collaboration, mentoring and coaching. Taken together, these measures will vastly improve the capacity of mainstream schools to meet the needs of children and young people with disability.

We will redesign learning spaces so that they meet the needs of the full range of students, by strengthening the early involvement of disability education specialists in our designs, builds and refurbishment work.

Work is already underway to strengthen support for students and teachers.

This work includes quality assurance of all disability-related professional development programs. We are supporting schools with the roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). We are also improving the process for identifying and responding to students with additional needs, and looking at ways to strengthen access to specialist allied health and therapy services.

We will:

- 1.1 Build on suite of core, advanced and specialist professional learning.
- 1.2 Provide funding support for qualified candidates to pursue additional specialist studies.
- 1.3 Train school and departmental leaders in evidence-based approaches to support students with disability.
- 1.4 Develop and launch a new approach to induction on supporting students with disability for all new teachers.
- 1.5 Establish a permanent team of expert designers, planners, researchers and leaders, to work on the creation of inclusive learning spaces.

Immediate focus areas

1.1 Build on suite of core, advanced and specialist professional learning.

The majority of students with disability are currently supported in our mainstream schools. As the incidence and nature of disability changes, we want to ensure staff in mainstream and specialist settings have the skills and confidence necessary to educate the broad range of children and young people in NSW.

All staff will have access to core training which will help them develop a better understanding of disability, and equip them to educate and support their students. Where they need it, staff will have access to more advanced training to respond to specific circumstances and meet the needs of particular students. Teachers with expertise in supporting children with disability will have access to targeted training on topics such as managing highly complex behaviour, and skills in coaching and co-teaching to enable them to better support their colleagues.

Initially, we will conduct a coaching and co-teaching training pilot in 15 schools, for teachers with expertise in supporting children with disability to coach teachers in mainstream schools. This will be rolled out more widely from 2020.

1.2 Provide funding support for qualified candidates to pursue additional specialist studies.

We need a steady supply of high-quality teachers and support staff with expertise in supporting students with disability to ensure that we can meet the needs of the growing number of students in our system.

This includes increasing the number of staff in mainstream settings with expertise. It also includes addressing immediate staffing pressures in specialist classrooms and schools.

To attract more people to study special education, there will be additional funding, support and benefits available through our scholarship and sponsorship programs, such as flexible work arrangements (for current teachers), completion bonuses and networking opportunities. NESA and universities will be essential partners to ensure we are building teacher capability through all undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

We will increase the number of people studying special education by 50% by 2022.

1.3 Train school and departmental leaders in evidence-based approaches to support students with disability.

We want to be sure all our leaders ultimately are equipped with the tools and techniques they need to build and maintain inclusive learning environments and school communities.

Currently, there is a mix of confidence, skills and knowledge in delivering the best education to students with disability. School leaders who have benefitted from evidence-based training to support students with complex behaviours consistently report that it has helped them improve learning outcomes and create calmer, more positive learning environments for all students.

Through dedicated face-to-face training tailored to the NSW school context, we are going to ensure all our leaders receive the opportunity to work with experts to equip them with evidence-based, practical approaches to meet the needs of their diverse students and communities. This training will be designed and led by academics, practitioners and high-performing school leaders with expertise in supporting students with disability.

Initial training will include evidence-based approaches to support students with complex behaviour, such as trauma-informed practice and positive behaviours for learning. It will be developed and piloted in 2019 with over 1,000 staff, and delivered to all leaders from 2020.

2. Increase resources & flexibility

One-size-fits-all models don't work.

In order to deliver the best outcomes for children and young people with disability, our schools need to operate with more flexibility.

That's why we're proposing more resources as well as a resourcing model that allows individual student needs to be met, whatever their learning environment.

We'll share success stories within the system, improve connections between schools and families of children with similar needs, and allocate resources more flexibly to better support them at key transition points.

We will:

- 2.1 Launch an innovation fund for schools to trial and evaluate new resourcing models to give schools greater resourcing and flexibility to tailor education to students' needs.
- 2.2 Identify and showcase approaches that are getting great results for students.
- 2.3 Build online tools that make it easy for families, carers and teachers of students with similar needs across NSW to connect.

Immediate focus areas

2.1 Launch an innovation fund for schools to trial and evaluate new resourcing models to give schools greater resourcing and flexibility to tailor education to students' needs.

Our funding mechanisms aren't always flexible for individual students who may need to move through different types of support in their schooling. We will review the way we resource schools to enable them to respond to students' needs quickly, and to effectively support the best outcomes for each child and young person.

For example, schools have asked for additional flexibility to:

- share staff skills and expertise between specialist and mainstream schools. There may be a specialist teacher who has expertise in managing challenging behaviour who could work with a mainstream high school, while a maths teacher from that mainstream high school could work on programming and teaching approaches with the specialist school.
- employ specialist support staff to work between a preschool and a primary school to assist in planning for and providing support to students during points of transition.

Our innovation fund will support schools to pilot and evaluate new approaches. We will provide support and resourcing to help schools plan, implement and evaluate a number of different approaches. Successful approaches will be showcased so that other schools can adopt and adapt them, and will inform future resourcing decisions.

3. Improve the family experience

The families of children with disability are often faced with incredible pressures.

We are committed to ensuring that the experience of those families is supportive, transparent and straightforward.

We are currently working to ensure our systems help us act on concerns or complaints more quickly.

Over time, families and schools will receive more consistent support at the times that children are moving into school, between schools and graduating. We will improve the coordination between Education, Health, NDIS, external providers and advocacy groups for families. And we will work to improve the understanding of disability across the Department and communities.

We will:

- 3.1 Create a one-stop online resource with information for families and carers.
- 3.2 Provide new resources for local use to educate school and local communities about disability.
- 3.3 Streamline and improve the processes by which families, children and young people access support at schools.

3.4 Improve our response rates to concerns and complaints.

Immediate focus areas

3.1 Create a one-stop online resource with information for families and carers.

We want families to have better and easier experiences when they engage with our system and access advice.

We understand that some parents feel isolated when they are experiencing our education system. Information can be difficult to find, and some parents are unsure of where to start or where to seek advice. Often the local school will have the answers, but not every parent feels comfortable or confident approaching a school. Improving the information and advice available online for parents will enable them to understand what they can expect, and find the support they need. Examples include information on enrolling their child in school and accessing additional support for their child.

We will start by creating a single place online where parents can find information. The information will be in plain English, accessible and co-designed with parents. We will also establish a tool to connect families, carers and teachers of students with similar needs, so they can share their experiences and expertise.

3.2 Provide new resources for local use to educate school and local communities about disability.

We are committed to promoting a better understanding of disability across schools and the broader community. Attitudes and behaviours of staff and parents are key to ensuring all students feel welcomed and are learning to their fullest capability.

We will provide resources to our schools to help increase awareness about disability across their school community. We will recognise champions, highlight examples of good practice and promote inspiring stories that demonstrate good outcomes across different settings. We will also gather and act on regular feedback from families and schools.

We will start by working with partners that are highly-regarded in the sector to create the resource material and pilot it in up to 20 schools, before rolling it out across our system.

4. Track outcomes

We're serious about success, which is why we're committed to building an evidence base against which we will evaluate our progress.

We will improve measures and track outcomes around all students' learning growth, wellbeing (physical, emotional and mental) and independence at regular intervals.

We will invest in research to understand shifts in disability types and identify what practices support the best outcomes.

And we will use the School Excellence Framework to further improve school effectiveness.

These measures will provide the department, teachers and families with a good understanding of how students are progressing, and allow us to make any changes as necessary.

We will:

- 4.1 Initiate a ground-breaking approach, developed in NSW schools, to track and report the learning progress of students with complex needs.
- 4.2 Invest in new research to identify the practices that support the best learning outcomes.
- 4.3 Invest in research to better understand the prevalence of autism and mental health in our schools.

Our outcomes framework

- **Learning growth:** Students demonstrate progress in learning against the curriculum. Families and children report high expectations for achievement of meaningful learning goals.
- **Wellbeing:** Children and young people have demonstrable physical, emotional and mental health outcomes.
- **Independence:** Young people have the skills and capacity to live a post-school life as independently as possible and to thrive in their community.

Immediate focus areas

4.1 Initiate a ground-breaking approach, developed in NSW schools, to track and report the learning progress of all students with disability.

We will build a better understanding of how all students are progressing in relation to their learning, wellbeing and independence, so we can build an evidence base for what works. We will share this information with parents, so we have a joint understanding of their child's progress. At a system level, we will use the data we collect to establish baseline measures, set targets for system improvement, and continually connect our policy to practice.

There is a lack of consensus internationally on how to consistently measure outcomes for students with disability. As in many other jurisdictions, current tools in use within the department don't cater for the full range of children and young people. We are committed to developing consistent outcomes tools and measures, are appropriate and accessible for all students that will let us gauge the most effective approaches to education.

Our immediate priorities are to:

- develop an approach to track and report the learning progress, wellbeing and independence of students with disability
- ensure that our tools to measure wellbeing and independence can be accessed by a broader range of students
- support specialist and mainstream schools to adopt the tools, and to analyse the results.

Join us as we improve education for all

The department would like to acknowledge every teacher, principal, parent, carer, student, education or disability expert, and every other stakeholder who has contributed to the formulation of our strategy.

The strategy is the product of many months of collaboration, debate and revision, and could not have been produced without the enthusiastic contributions of many people.

We are keen to keep building on the successes we're having today in the hope of realising a more inclusive system tomorrow. To that end, we will continue conversations with stakeholders as we implement the strategy.

For more information

If you have any questions about this strategy, or to request a text-only version with the footnotes attached, please email: disability.strategy@det.nsw.edu.au.

References

- 1 Source: NSW Department of Education Full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolments in NSW government schools (1970-2017). Notes: Average annual growth rate of number of students enrolled between 2013 and 2017.
- 2 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Average annual growth rate of number of students receiving targeted individual support between 2013 and 2017.
- 3 Targeted individual support is funding or other types of support provided to students who have particular learning needs, such as students with disability who require moderate to high levels of adjustments in their learning.
- 4 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Percentage of the number of teachers approved to teach special education as at May 2018 over total number of teachers as at 30 June 2018.
- 5 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: 61% of the total number of itinerant teachers, learning and support teachers and assistant principals, and transition teachers as at May 2018.
- 6 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: 43% of total number of all teachers as at May 2018.
- 7 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Number of students accessing specialist support between 2013 and 2017 and average annual growth rate of number of students accessing each type of specialist support.
- 8 NSW Department of Education. Notes: Percentage of the number of teachers approved to teach special education as at May 2018 over the total number of teachers as at 30 June 2018.
- 9 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Percentages as at May 2018.
- 10 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Average annual growth rate of number of students enrolled with autism as their primary disability between 2013 - 2017.
- 11 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Average annual growth rate of number of students enrolled with mental health needs as their primary disability between 2013 - 2017.
- 12 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Average annual growth rate of number of students enrolled with intellectual disability as their primary disability between 2013 - 2017.
- 13 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Percentage of students enrolled with intellectual disability as the primary disability over the total number of students receiving targeted individual support in 2017.
- 14 Source: Australian Education Union, State of our Schools Survey 2015.
- 15 Source: New South Wales Auditor-General's Report 2016, Performance Audit, Supporting students with disability in NSW public schools.
- 16 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Percentage of students enrolled with the respective primary disability over total numbers of students supported by funded programs in 2017.
- 17 Source: NSW Department of Education. Notes: Average annual growth rate of students enrolled with the respective primary disability between 2013-2017. Behaviour needs are captured in the program data, however, students do not require a disability diagnosis or confirmation to access specialist education services.