



AASE NSW Submission Review of the National School Reform Agreement

The Australian Association of Special Education, NSW chapter (AASE, NSW) is a broadly based organisation that advocates for the provision of quality educational services for people with special educational needs. AASE, NSW is actively involved in advocacy for, and delivery of, quality education to students with disabilities and special education needs. As such, this submission has a focus on the **National School Reform Agenda** from the perspective of students with special education needs and their teachers.

Information request 1: Drivers of student outcomes

- What does the evidence suggest are the key drivers of student outcomes across the three key NSRA domains — academic achievement, engagement, and skill acquisition?

Teacher quality has long been identified as a key driver of student outcomes with many aspects of teacher practice contributing to student success. Most importantly, instructional practices derived from empirical research known as evidence-based practices (EBP), have strong associations with both academic and behavioural outcomes. These include the use of specific engagement practices, the delivery of positive feedback and attention to the curriculum (Scott & Gage, 2020). Evidence-based practices specific to students with autism have been identified by Steinbrenner et al. (2020).

Drawing on the McLesky et al. (2017) summary of high-leverage practices in special education, Dally et al., (2019) identified the following competencies needed by special educators:

- Individualised instruction using effective and evidence-based strategies and adjustments
- Data-based decision-making
- Explicit instruction
- Use of assistive technology
- Working with families
- Transition practices
- Positive behaviour supports
- Functional assessment of problem behaviour
- Progress monitoring.

All teachers need to be equipped to implement evidence-based teaching strategies for students with disabilities and all teachers in support and special education positions should hold a special education qualification that equips them with essential skills and knowledge.

AASE NSW, along with other bodies, has noted with concern the lack of qualified special/inclusive educators in Australia. The 2016 NSW Auditor-General's Report on Supporting Students with Disability in NSW Public Schools identified as a concern the fact that NSW Department of Education does not require learning and support teachers to have

special education qualifications. The 2017 NSW Parliamentary Inquiry (2017) into the Education of students with a disability or special needs included a specific recommendation (36) that the NSW Department of Education work towards having all Learning and Support Teachers with appropriate special education qualifications to support the range of disabilities and special need presenting in schools. The 2016 Victorian Review of the Programs for Students with Disabilities found “there is a lack of specialist expertise and support for schools to deliver inclusive education. This can make it difficult for schools to implement strategies to maximise the learning of students with disabilities” (p.79). This report also noted the need for teachers with expertise in Autism Spectrum Disorders to provide specialist support to teachers and students.

AASE NSW is committed to the provision of appropriate educational services to students with special education needs and the realisation of inclusive practices in schools. These goals will not be achieved without appropriate pre-service, in-service and post-graduate education for teachers delivered by people who themselves have demonstrated expertise and competence in special education.

Preparing Specialist Teachers

AASE NSW strongly advocates that learning support teachers/consultants, transition specialists, and teachers in special education units and schools, have a qualification in special education or inclusive education that incorporates the following components:

- Curriculum-based assessment, functional behavioural assessment and monitoring of student learning
- Effective programming, including the development of appropriate individual plans and the reporting of progress against these plans
- Effective explicit teaching strategies in basic literacy and numeracy skills; cognitive skills, pro-social behaviour skills, self-help skills and communication skills
- Teaching, mentoring and modelling effective practices for other teachers and teacher aides
- Effective collaboration with families and inclusion of families as partners in the development of IEPs, and
- Skills in identifying evidence-based practice.

Supporting All Classroom Teachers

AASE NSW 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 regular class teachers have access to support from an appropriately qualified special educator
- Effective on-going professional learning for in-service teachers with a focus on evidence-based practices (individualised with a coaching and feedback component)
- Support for schools to make adjustments other than providing a teacher aide or teacher aide hours, such as more support from special educators, peer support and tutoring systems, better deployment of specifically trained teacher aides, volunteers, buying in appropriate programs and materials and training teachers or teacher aides 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.

Teacher Aides

At present teacher aides are seen, and even promoted (see for example NCCD case studies) as a solution to the problem teachers may experience when they have a student with a disability in their class. There is little consideration given to how teacher aides may be used most effectively.

AASE NSW believes that:

- the teacher aide is one valuable avenue of support for some students with special education needs. Especially when they deliver evidence-based programs to individuals or small groups
- Responsibility for all students must remain with the class teacher
- Aides should be assigned to support a classroom, that is the teacher and all students including the student with special education needs
- Roles and responsibilities of teachers and aides should be clear and unambiguous, with the aide working under the direction of a teacher
- Further consideration needs to be given to the recruitment and professional preparation of teacher aides to determine best practices
- There should be a clear career path for teacher aides
- Regular and special educators should receive professional development to enable them to plan for, work with and supervise a teacher aide as effectively as possible
- Mentoring opportunities should be formalised as an essential component of professional development for teachers and teacher aides.

Information request 1: Drivers of student outcomes

- Are there barriers that disproportionately impact outcomes for specific cohorts of students?

In addition to inadequate teacher training and insufficient supply of qualified specialist teachers and support staff, AASE NSW considers the lack of mechanisms that capture progress and learning outcomes for many students with disability to be a barrier for this cohort of students. The learning of students with significant intellectual disability is not captured by NAPLAN with this cohort being exempt from assessment and the assessments themselves not including items relevant to this population of students. Other students with special education needs are often not encouraged to participate.

Information request 2: Assessing the appropriateness of the National Policy Initiatives

It is evident that the initiatives do not apply to all students. Students requiring extensive curriculum and teaching adjustments are not included in data collection that captures their learning progress or learning outcomes.

Supporting students, student learning and student achievement: Learning progressions have been developed and the online resources, with associated professional learning, will be progressively rolled out from 2022 (p 9 Call for Submissions)

- The learning progressions and the online formative assessment tool with accompanying resources currently under development are helpful for students who are accessing a 'mainstream' curriculum but are not inclusive of students with complex special education needs.
- AASE NSW recognises the formative assessment tool with accompanying resources as an exciting a productive support to teachers and would like to see the content

extended to be more inclusive of the full range of students with special education needs. AASE NSW would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of resources for students with special education needs.

Enhancing the national evidence base: The Australian Education Research Organisation has been established, their first research agenda was released in 2021 (p 9 Call for Submissions)

To date little information is available on the AERO website with specific reference to special education and inclusive practices that have a strong evidence base. Case studies and/or links to examples of practice specific to students with disabilities are needed.

AASE NSW recognises the reality that for many educational practices, the results of randomised control trials or other quality research studies, and studies in natural settings are not available and that decisions must be made drawing on the results of a more limited research base. Thus, there will be degrees of support that allow practices to be recommended with varying levels of confidence.

AASE NSW therefore recommends:

- That state and federal education authorities take responsibility for promoting evidence-based special education practices and advising against disproven approaches. Currently, education authorities do not consistently provide this advice, and in fact promote and tolerate unproven and disproven practices in special education.
- That state and federal education authorities, in consultation with special education researchers and knowledgeable professionals, develop a set of criteria or adapt existing standards relevant to Australian schools, for judging the standard of evidence available about special education practices.
- AASE NSW would welcome the opportunity to work with AERO to set a special education research agenda.

Information request 3: Assessing the effectiveness of the National Policy Initiatives

- Are the NPIs (likely to be) equally effective for all student cohorts, including equity cohorts, or are more tailored measures required?

More tailored measures are needed if the **National Policy Initiatives** are to be inclusive of students with substantial/extensive support needs as defined within the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) initiative. AASE NSW would welcome the opportunity to provide advice with respect to measuring outcomes for this cohort of students and the training their teachers require.

Information request 4: Measurement Framework and performance indicators

- Does the performance reporting framework in the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) embody the 'right' mix of objectives, outcomes, targets and sub-outcomes for inclusion in a future agreement?

As depicted in the example theory of change **Figure 4 – Approach to defining and assessing appropriateness and effectiveness**, (p 17 Call for Submissions) teacher quality is fundamental to student outcomes. The current professional standards for teachers are generic, and therefore do not clearly state the skills and understandings required of today's special educators through different career stages. As a result, a potential gap exists between how universities are preparing pre-service teachers for the profession generally (the

graduate standards), and the needs of schools (special educators with extensive knowledge and a range of effective strategies). AASE, NSW calls for the **National Policy Initiative** to work with **AITSL** to:

- Specify practices to be included in Initial Teacher Education programs
- Develop specific standards to be met by qualified special educators

With increasing numbers of students with disability attending their local school it is time to review the content of 'inclusion' units of study in **Initial Teacher Training** programs and of **Post- Graduate Special Education/and or Inclusion** programs to ensure that pre-service and specialist teachers are receiving adequate training in special education teaching practices that will lead to positive student outcomes. Future NPI agreements should include improvement in teacher quality as it applies to students with special education needs.

AASE NSW recognises that the recommendations above will involve considerable financial investment but argues that enhanced life outcomes for students with disability sufficiently justifies any cost.

References

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