



National Disability Services

## NDS Submission

# Education and Training Workforce: Schools





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**Contact:** Dr Ken Baker  
Chief Executive

### **About National Disability Services**

National Disability Services is the peak industry body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote and advance services for people with disability. Its Australia-wide membership includes around 700 non-government organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. Its members collectively provide the full range of disability services—from accommodation support, respite and therapy to community access and employment. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.

## Introduction

Since its election in 2007 the Federal Labor Government has committed to delivering ‘an education revolution’—from high quality and accessible early childhood education to quality schooling; from training and retraining the workforce to world class higher education and research. Education reform is a priority of the Australian Government.

In 2008, Australian Education Ministers released the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*<sup>1</sup>, a document that sets the direction for Australian schooling over a 10 year period. It enunciates two important goals:

1. Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and
2. All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

While advances in education are certainly being made, many children with disability are not well served by current education systems: they do not have access to the opportunities and support they require to reach their potential.

The terms of reference for the Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into ‘The Education and Training Workforce: Schools’ are extensive. In this submission NDS, the peak industry body for non-government disability services, limits its comments to “whether the knowledge and skills base of the workforce, and its deployment within and across schools and regions, are appropriate to meet the community’s needs”.

## Improvement is needed

### Governments are seeking improved education outcomes

Australian governments have committed to education reform. The preamble to the Melbourne Declaration states:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia’s capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation. Education equips young people to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of this era with confidence.

Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring social cohesion...

The Melbourne Declaration acknowledges major changes in the world that are placing new demands on Australian education.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008, *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, Canberra.

In a speech to CEDA earlier this year, Prime Minister Gillard expanded on one of the challenges of this era when she spoke of the forthcoming labour market shortages caused by an ageing population and the resources boom. In outlining the workforce participation agenda of the Government, education and training were identified as a key part of the solution:

For young people, our goal is nothing less than the best education system in the world.

Great schools led by great principals and staffed by great teachers.

Universities creating opportunities for all—with uncapped publicly funded places to meet the aspirations of students and at the same time, supply the professional skills that industry needs.

A world class market-driven TAFE and vocational training system—designed to deliver the expertise and skills to unleash a new wave of innovation in Australian industry.

We also need to drive participation for young people who fall through the cracks because the better their skills, the more likely they are to succeed in life.

Unfortunately, children with disability are falling through the cracks in the education system; the goals of the Melbourne Declaration are not being translated to high quality outcomes for them. As a result, fewer than should will continue into post-school education and training and employment.

### **Educational systems are failing many children with disability**

AIHW reports that in 2008 150,641 children with disability were attending government and non-government schools (5.1 per cent of government school students and 2.8 per cent of non-government school students)<sup>3</sup>. AIHW's earlier work indicated that 63 per cent of school-aged children with disability reported they experienced some difficulty at school—most commonly, fitting in socially and because of communication and learning difficulties<sup>4</sup>.

Over recent decades, there has been a trend towards greater proportions of students with severe or profound limitations attending mainstream schools rather than special schools<sup>5</sup>, but debate continues over whether mainstream schools have the capability to provide the best learning environment for all children with disability. While many parents believe that an inclusive education environment is the only suitable option for their child with disability, there remain a significant number who believe a specialist

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> AIHW 2009, *Australia's Welfare 2009*, AIHW, Canberra, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> AIHW 2006, *Bulletin 42: Disability updates: children with disabilities*, AIHW, Canberra.

<sup>5</sup> AIHW 2008, *Disability in Australia: trends in prevalence, education, employment and community living*, AIHW, Canberra, p. 19.

environment will deliver better educational, social and/or emotional outcomes. These parents often fear their child's education needs will not be adequately met within a mainstream school or are fearful their child may be subjected to bullying, harassment or isolation. To broaden what they offer, some mainstream schools have created specialist programs for children with disability (or with a particular type of disability) within the general timetable.

Specialist schools themselves vary, from those that are generic (but primarily attended by children with intellectual disability and/or multiple disability) to disability-specific schools (for example for children with sensory loss or with autism). Disability-specific special schools ensure their environment caters appropriately for the particular needs of the children who attend (for example, they may have explicit social skills training within the curriculum, may structure the learning environment in particular ways, or may teach particular skills such as Braille or Auslan).

A 2009 report, *Shut out: The experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia*, describes the social isolation experienced by many people with disability. It refers to the education experience of too many people with disabilities as 'the wasted years' and reports that almost 30 per cent of submissions made to its consultation indicated that "far from ensuring young people with disabilities have every opportunity to realise their potential, the education system acts as a barrier to greater achievement and independence in their lives"<sup>6</sup>.

In this report, one parent notes:

My daughter's two physical ed teachers ignore her totally, [and] as a consequence, I have withdrawn her from these classes. She was sad and bored with being taken around the block or playing ball with an aide. The teachers were not made accountable for this in any way.

One aide refuses to turn my daughter's communication device on saying they do not have the time.<sup>7</sup>

The report provides numerous other examples of the failures of schools to appropriately support students with disability, and this is despite the large numbers of children with disability in our society.

A family from Western Australia recently advised NDS of their difficulties in getting adequate support for their young son to attend mainstream primary school:

... what followed was a stressful conversation, starting with [a senior education department employee] suggesting that [our son] could attend a special school if we weren't happy with the allocation and that "many people are confused about what inclusion is" ... She also suggested that his aide time is possibly restricted as he "there are other places for

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<sup>6</sup> National People with Disabilities and Carer Council 2009, *Shut Out: The experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia*, FaHCSIA, Canberra, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.49.

children like [our son]... equipped to deal with his needs, like [a special school]'... At this point I was getting an overwhelming indication from the [senior education department employee] that the Education Department staff do not support inclusion and indirectly impose strategies to discourage mainstream schooling options for children with disabilities. When I picked [my son] up from school that day, I was in tears.

The National Disability Strategy, endorsed earlier this year by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) notes:

At present there remains a significant gap between students with disability and those without, notably in the attainment of year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and particularly in university studies. Targeted support is needed to assist people who are disadvantaged in education and in the workforce, but mainstream education programs need to be designed for people of all abilities.<sup>8</sup>

The goal must be to ensure, as far as possible, that all mainstream schools are properly equipped to educate children with disability, while at the same time ensuring that parents have the choice to send their child with disability to a special school.

## **Australia has obligations to improve**

As a signatory to the UNCRPD<sup>9</sup> Australia is committed to improving the educational experiences of people with disability:

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:
  - a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
  - b).The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
  - c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.
2. In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that:
  - a) Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not

<sup>8</sup> COAG 2011, *2010–2020 National Disability Strategy*, FaHCSIA, Canberra, p.53.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;

b) Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;

c) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;

d) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;

e) Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:

a) Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;

b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;

c) Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.

4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

5. States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.

Australia is required to report every four years to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on progress in meeting its obligations.

The National Disability Strategy, recently endorsed by COAG, will help Australia meet its obligations under the UNCRDP. It responds to the poorer educational outcomes and experiences of people with disability by including 'Learning and skills' as one of the six policy action areas. It notes:

At present there remains a significant gap between students with disability and those without, notably in the attainment of year 12 or equivalent, vocational education and training qualifications, and particularly in university studies. Targeted support is needed to assist people who are disadvantaged in education and in the workforce, but mainstream education programs need to be designed for people of all abilities.<sup>10</sup>

Within this area of policy action the Strategy identifies four immediate priorities:

1. Strengthen the capability of all education providers to deliver inclusive high quality educational programs for people with all abilities from early childhood through adulthood.
2. Focus on reducing the disparity in educational outcomes for people with a disability and others.
3. Ensure that government reforms and initiatives for early childhood, education, training and skill development are responsive to the needs of people with disability.
4. Improve pathways for students with disability from school to further education, employment and lifelong learning.<sup>11</sup>

The implementation plan for the National Disability Strategy will be developed during 2011; progress will be monitored by COAG.

## **Are the knowledge and skills base of the workforce, and its deployment within and across schools and regions, appropriate to meet the community's needs?**

Despite the increasing prevalence of children with disability in mainstream schools—in 2003, around 295,000 students with disability (aged 5-20 years) attended ordinary schools, up more than 90 per cent from 1981, and nearly 35,000 attended special schools—they are being let down by current education systems on a range of levels.

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<sup>10</sup> COAG 2011, *2010–2020 National Disability Strategy*, FaHCSIA, Canberra, p.53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* pp 54 & 55.

The funding available to support them is inadequate; access to appropriate assistive technology is poor; learning materials in appropriate formats and therapists are lacking; discriminatory attitudes exist; and teachers often haven't been taught the skills to support their teaching of children with disability. Action is required at all of these levels to assist children with disability reach their potential and become active and engaged citizens and, in the future, productive members of the workforce.

In particular, achieving good outcomes for children with disability requires skilled educators who are appropriately prepared, funded and supported by specialists as needed. Research<sup>12</sup> shows that educators find inclusion demanding, but the strategies and adaptations that work for children with disability tend to be effective for all students. Critically, practitioners need special support in order for inclusion to be effective. They need access to information and support from professionals in special needs education as well as the experience of other teachers.<sup>13</sup> A Senate Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities<sup>14</sup> recommended that all university teacher training courses include a mandatory unit on the education of atypical students (including students with disability). This should occur.

Improved teacher training will help change the expectations teachers have of children with disability. The National Disability Strategy notes:

An inclusive and accessible educational culture based on the principle of universality will assist students of all abilities. Teacher training and development is critical to ensure that teachers can meet the diverse educational needs of all students. Many people with disability cite low expectations from those around them as a major reason for not reaching their full potential. It is vital that education providers have the same expectations of students with disability as of others, and collaborate with and support families in their aspirations for family members with disability.<sup>15</sup>

Australia must have a goal of equipping every teacher to be skilled and confident enough to work with children of all abilities. Teacher training programs should be structured with this goal in mind, and advice and support should readily be available to assist teachers in the classroom. A more integrated approach to giving all trainee teachers skills in disability—such as that used at Syracuse University—should be implemented in all teacher education institutions.

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<sup>12</sup> See *Disability or Diversity? Encouraging True Inclusion*, Tony Shaddock, University of Canberra, Early Childhood Australia website at [http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/every\\_child\\_magazine/every\\_child\\_index/disability\\_or\\_diversity\\_encouraging\\_true\\_inclusion.html](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/every_child_magazine/every_child_index/disability_or_diversity_encouraging_true_inclusion.html)

<sup>13</sup> Autism Aspect Australia's 'stepping stone transition' models, such as the satellite class program, facilitate inclusion and enable child and school capacity to be built to a point where supported inclusion in mainstream settings can work.

<sup>14</sup> 'Report of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee on the Inquiry into education of students with disabilities', December 2002, pp. 8, 80.

<sup>15</sup> COAG 2011, op. cit. p.54

An important contributor to good outcomes is ensuring children with disability have access to the technology they require. Teachers need to have sufficient information about what is available—to encourage them to seek it out—and be confident in using it. The following example highlights the potential:

A deaf student in a Western Sydney high school was at the bottom of the class as she struggled daily trying to keep up with what was happening in the classroom. Her world drastically changed when she was finally able to directly access what the teacher was saying through real-time captions on her laptop. Where previously she had intensely focused on the lips of the teacher, she could now look around at what was happening in the classroom and then refer back to her laptop to read information she had missed through the captions on the screen. She went from the bottom of her class to coming first in her yearly exam after only 10 weeks of using Ai-Live technology.

Ai-Live is a whole-of-life solution, providing direct, same-language access to mainstream classroom content, which enables the deaf student to build a large vocabulary while increasing their understanding of grammar and punctuation. It also allows the deaf and hearing-impaired students to communicate directly and immediately with their teachers and peers, something that has not been possible until now. This is one of the most incredible impacts the technology has for deaf children.

Teachers working in schools should be able to draw on specialist teaching support and advice which includes information about assistive technology and producing learning materials in alternative formats; the development of specialised teacher support services should be considered and ongoing professional development should also be widely available and supported.

## Conclusion

All Australian governments must do better in the education of children with disability. The regular reporting required by the UNCRPD and the National Disability Strategy will focus the attention of governments on the experiences of children within the education system; progress will be expected.

The Inquiry into the Schools Education and Training Workforce can assist by making recommendations to deliver urgently required improvements in the skills of teachers to educate children with disability and to provide them with much-needed advice and support services.



National Disability Services

Locked Bag 3002  
Deakin West ACT 2600  
Ph 02 6283 3200 Fax 02 6281 3488  
[nds@nds.org.au](mailto:nds@nds.org.au) [www.nds.org.au](http://www.nds.org.au)