



National Disability Services

NDS Submission

SCHOOLS WORKFORCE

Response to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report





February 2012

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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.

For a long time, the choices and opportunities of many people with disability have been curtailed—by attitudes, discrimination, physical barriers and inadequate support. But this is changing. Disability policy is undergoing major reform with the aim to:

- strengthen the focus on the rights of people with disability across all domains of life;
- expand choice and control by the users of disability services;
- increase participation by people with disability in employment and community life;
- expand the provision of disability services, with life-long entitlement to support services for people with severe or profound disability; and
- establish national consistency in the rules governing the disability services system and equity of access to services.

The National Disability Strategy¹, with its focus on six policy areas—inclusive and accessible communities; rights protection, justice and legislation; economic security; personal and community support; learning and skills; and health and wellbeing—provides the framework for the policy reform agenda. Endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments, one very important purpose of the Strategy is to “drive improved performance of mainstream services in delivering outcomes for people with disability”.²

Across the country, education systems are currently failing many children with disability. NDS believes that the draft report gives insufficient attention to the extent of the educational disadvantage experienced by these students. In our earlier submission to the inquiry we provided argument and evidence to demonstrate that students with disability are failing to meet their potential. This concern is widespread and well documented in reports such as: *Disability updates: children with disabilities*³; *Shut out: The experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia*⁴; *Community attitudes to people with disability: Scoping project*⁵; and *Consultations with families of children with disabilities on access to services and support*⁶.

With respect to education, the National Disability Strategy 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

1 Commonwealth of Australia 2011, *National Disability Strategy*, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra.

2 Ibid. p. 9.

3 AIHW 2006, *Bulletin 42: Disability updates: children with disabilities*, AIHW, Canberra.

4 National People with Disabilities and Carer Council 2009, *Shut Out: The experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia*, FaHCSIA, Canberra.

5 Thompson, D et al 2011, *Community attitudes to people with disability: scoping project*, Occasional Paper No. 39, FaHCSIA, Canberra, pp. 45–46.

6 NSW Ombudsman 2011, *Consultations with families of children with disabilities on access to services and support*, Sydney.

disadvantaged in education and in the workforce, but mainstream education programs need to be designed for people of all abilities.⁷

The draft report on the Schools Workforce has largely ignored its responsibility to identify ways to develop and support the schools workforce overturn this disadvantage to ensure “people with disability achieve their full potential through their participation in an inclusive high quality education system that is responsive to their needs”.⁸ The final report must address these shortcomings. It needs to acknowledge the school workforce’s important role in improving outcomes for students with disability and be more explicit about how this might be achieved.

NDS makes the following recommendations to strengthen the final report.

Recommendations

- 1. Make explicit reference to Australia’s obligations to improve the educational outcomes for children with disability as a result of being a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of the Child**

NDS is concerned about the lack of attention given to how the schools workforce can be assisted to improve educational and social outcomes for students with disability. Improving these outcomes is an important human rights issue which has positive effects on a wide range of other life domains such as health, employment and community engagement. Being explicit about Australia’s obligations will help focus attention on the importance of improving the education of all students with disability.

- 2. Strengthen the emphasis on disability within the chapter on reducing educational disadvantage**

The section of the report that addresses the extent of educational disadvantage in Australia⁹ does not include children with disability in the discussion on disparities in educational outcomes. This omission is of great concern.

Australia, like much of the western world will struggle over coming decades to find the workforce it needs to generate the economic growth necessary to maintain our quality of life. Ken Henry, when Secretary of the Australian Treasury, outlined three supply-side factors to address this problem (the ‘Three Ps’)—population; participation; and productivity. Improving the educational outcomes of children with disability will increase their participation in work and their productivity. It is an investment Australia must make.

7 COAG 2011, *2010–2020 National Disability Strategy*, FaHCSIA, Canberra, p.53.

8 *Ibid.* p. 53.

9 Productivity Commission 2011, *Schools Workforce*, Draft research Report, Canberra, p.161.

3. Require all pre-service teacher training to include specific training on disability

Despite the increasing prevalence of children with disability in mainstream schools, they are being let down by current education arrangements. 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.

A 2002 Senate Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities¹⁰ 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 also 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.¹¹

Submissions to the consultation undertaken for the National Disability Strategy identified lack of training as a reason why some teachers struggle to adequately meet the needs of children with disability in the classroom. This is supported by Hsien et al¹² who reviewed the literature and concluded that teachers' attitudes on the inclusion of children with disability were influenced by how competent they felt, and that this competency was influenced by their training.

Also worth noting is a recent report on community attitudes to people with disability, which stated:

Including children [with disability] in regular classrooms means that the training needs to be included in general education courses, and not just confined to teachers who choose subjects on teaching children with disability.

...

10 '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.

11 COAG 2011, op. cit. p.54

12 Hsien, M & Bortoli, A 2009, *Teacher qualifications and attitudes toward inclusion*, Australian Journal of Special Education, vol. 33. No. 1, pp. 26–41.

According to the NSW Legislative Council, NSW was the only state to mandate a unit of study on special education as part of its pre-service teacher education courses...However, even here there were concerns that teachers were not being adequately prepared for educating students with disability. As a consequence, the Committee members recommended that the NSW Institute of Teachers review pre-service courses, including the mandatory unit in special education, so as to incorporate teaching strategies and practical skills for the learning needs of these students, with a view to embedding special education throughout pre-service training.¹³

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.

4. Acknowledge the importance of providing training and professional development for teachers (including pre-service teachers) on how to maximise the input from other disciplines such as therapists and psychologists

A critical component of good educational outcomes for students with disability is access to appropriate disability specialists (including those skilled in assistive technology and producing learning materials in alternative formats). These resources are limited, however. Teachers need skills and knowledge on how to maximise the input from these specialists and extend their value; training is required.

Teaching staff should also be able to draw on specialist teaching support and advice; the development of specialised teacher support services should be considered and ongoing professional development should also be widely available and supported.

5. Include a separate recommendation on the need for urgent research and evaluation of initiatives to improve educational outcomes for students with disability

While NDS acknowledges that the draft finding 9.1 mentions disability, there is a need to acknowledge the extent of the disadvantage experienced by these students. For this reason, disability should be highlighted in a stand-alone recommendation on the need for much greater research and evaluation of initiatives for improving the outcomes for these students.

¹³ Thompson, D et al op. cit., pp. 45–46.

6. Include a focus on the importance of diversity within the schools workforce

NDS is surprised by the limited attention given to the importance of diversity within the schools workforce. The draft report contains information on gender ratios and a brief comment that “the cultural background of the workforce has also changed” and “in 2008, one per cent of teaching staff in government schools were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians”. There is no mention of the value of increasing the proportion of people with disability in the schools workforce.

NDS believes it is critically important to include a focus on the importance of diversity of the schools workforce in the final report. This should include specific mention of the need to increase the employment of teachers and allied staff with a disability. As well as addressing the barriers many people with disability have in seeking employment, the presence of teachers with disability will help change community attitudes both now and into the future.



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