



AASW

**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

*Submission to the Senate Education
& Employment Committee*

*Current levels of access and attainment for students
with disability in the school system, and the impact on
students and families associated with inadequate
levels of support*

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 9000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians. The social work profession is committed to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life, and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society. Social workers have worked extensively in the disability field for many decades. We have supported, counselled and provided therapeutic interventions with children, young people and their families across all settings, government and non-government, including schools.

We are pleased to have the opportunity of submitting to this Inquiry, and have selectively addressed the issues raised as follows:

a. Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support

Through our role with children with disability and their families in the school system or early intervention support services, social workers directly observe the impact of inadequate levels of support in the school environment on the child, the classroom, and the family. The impacts that are frequently seen include a range of responses from the child which have short-term and long-term effects, both for the child personally and their family. Inadequate support may result in student behaviour changes and maladaptive behaviours not being addressed at school, such as:

- disruptive behaviour in class due to boredom, stress, sensory restrictions;
- withdrawal from activities;
- lack of engagement with curriculum;
- lack of participation with peers;
- increase in part-time attendance, school suspensions and exclusions;
- decrease in attendance (student refusal); and
- the student is more likely to be subjected to bullying

The long term consequence of this inadequate support is that the student is not supported to reach his or her potential.

Typically the child's negative experience at school will spill over into the home environment, adding to family stress. At the same time, the family is stretched to commit additional time and effort to advocate for their child's support needs in the school environment.

Conversely, when adequate support is available at school:

- students are more likely to remain engaged in the schooling system for longer;
- students are supported to achieve to their capacity, thus increasing their sense of self-efficacy, a precursor to living a more fulfilling and independent life;
- assessment of needs occurs more regularly, therefore support can be appropriately tailored to individual needs;
- students and their families are happier and less stressed when students' needs are being met

b. The social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment

There are marked, profound benefits across the life span in all domains when students with disabilities have a positive personal and learning experience in school, and further education, training and employment.

Social workers involved in this field observe that when students with disabilities are seen as valued/valuable members of society, there are far-reaching, predictable consequences. These include:

- students with disabilities grow up with a sense of self-worth and optimism at school and in the community, linked to better social experiences and mental health outcomes;
- the school community benefits from a cohesive student body;
- the message to society is that all people are valuable, impacting positively on social capital, inclusion and acceptance of diversity;
- education/learning becomes a positive experience and students are more likely to seek lifelong learning opportunities, impacting on their access to employment and reducing welfare dependency;
- positive relationships in the school and broader community result in social capital and informal support structures being established and maintained, leading to less reliance on funded disability supports;
- appropriate levels of support in school lead to the development of better system-wide pathways to streamline referrals and structures. As a result, fewer students fall through the gaps in post-school transition.

c. No comment

d. The future impact on students with disability as a result of the Government's decision to index funding for schools at the consumer price index after 2017

If schools are unable to maintain their support services to children with a disability as a result of decreased funding, the positive outcomes listed above will not be achieved and there will be negative consequences for the children, their families, the school environment and the wider community.

e., f., g. No comment

h. What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools

There are a number of key strategies that, in the experience of our members, will reliably lead to better outcomes for students with disability in schools. Social workers play a strategic role in liaison, support, advocacy and therapeutic intervention with children and families in these circumstances.

These include:

1. improved assessment to determine
 - preferred learning style;
 - sensory needs;
 - positive behaviour strategies, when necessary;
 - communication needs
2. Improved family liaison
 - to ensure families struggling with school refusal are better supported;
 - to provide consistency with communication, behavioural and learning strategies across settings;
 - to link families with each other
3. Flexibility to work with individual needs, such as:
 - allowing uniform modification
 - allowing late start
 - accommodating family's individual needs
4. Reducing the incidence of school exclusion and suspension, unless this is actually a learning experience for the student. This could be done by:
 - adequate assessment – to fully understand the behaviours of concern, and the meaning of these behaviours, and developing a plan to recognise triggers and warning signs and respond with known mitigation strategies;
 - a problem solving approach – required to work with family/allied health professionals and staff to establish a positive behaviour plan and understand the student's motivators and rewards;
 - additional funding – which may be required to ensure that adequate support is available for the student displaying behaviours of concern; for example, one-to-one staff time, sensory room stimulus, or a calming activity.

5. Ensure that all staff are equipped to provide a positive and welcoming environment for students with disabilities and their families, including parents who have intellectual disability and/or mental illness.

i. No Comment

j. Any other related matters

State education departments and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) are working to support school children of all ages with a disability, sometimes providing the same type of support/therapy services to a child simultaneously. To maximise the effectiveness of the supports and services provided, the departments and the NDIA need to establish complementary policies and practices and ensure that their services are positively aligned.

Reports from AASW members working both with the Department and the NDIA indicate that a serious lack of communication exists between staff in the two services, and parents are confused when trying to liaise with both.

To effectively support the development of children with a disability and to ensure resources are used efficiently and not duplicated, senior managers, social workers and other staff in the Department and the NDIA need to work collaboratively to ensure:

- policies and practices are aligned and complement each other;
- new communication strategies are developed to facilitate effective three-way communication between parents, the Department and the Agency.

Submitted for and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers Ltd



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