



National Disability Services – ACT Input to Special Education Review

NDS ACT held a member's forum for interested stakeholders to discuss the Review of Special Education and provide input to the process. Representatives from organisations which have a focus on education attended, as did members from organisations providing services to children, to young people and to school leavers seeking employment or further training upon leaving school.

NDS ACT believes that the special education experience of a child must include a practical focus on equipping that child with the life skills needed to enable them to truly participate in the community. The whole special education model in Canberra's schools must focus around the child and their own needs throughout their school career and beyond. Above all, a holistic model is essential – one which is considered early on in the child's high school career and which builds a practical transition from school to adulthood.

All stakeholders need to actively engage in the educative process – as well as the child his/herself, parents and teachers, effective inclusion of peers, friends, pastoral carers and counsellors is essential. Teachers and counsellors are often the first point of contact for parents and, as such, influence the inclination and/or capacity of parents to seek additional support and services. The use of pastoral carers to provide a consistent framework for case management is a model worthy of further investigation.

Tools and protocols already exist which theoretically address the issues raised here, including the "Students with a Disability: Meeting their Education Needs" policy (ref: SWD200810), issued in 2008. However, it is clear that moving theory to practice remains a challenge and it is here where NDS ACT believes further effort is urgently required if better outcomes are to be achieved in the area of special education. An interagency team with the authority to drive practical outcomes may be an appropriate means of establishing action priorities and progressing reform without additional call on the Budget.

NDS ACT would like to see a focus on the practical implementation of the "Students with a Disability: Meeting their Education Needs" policy in such a way as to:

- Assess meeting stated policy expectations with the same level of importance as other measures against which a school's performance is judged, including key curriculum inclusions such as literacy measures.
- Make compulsory the adequate performance management and professional development tools required to enable teachers to deliver against the policy.
- Provide an assurance of ongoing monitoring and review.

NDS ACT is concerned about the level of expertise in the teaching staff of mainstream Canberra schools. Teachers need to be equipped with the skills needed to work effectively with children in special education. This, in turn, will encourage other students in mainstream schools to better understand the behaviours of special education students. One area of concern is the capacity for teachers to effectively manage students with Asperger's Syndrome in such a way as to communicate effectively and encourage engagement in class activities. Another is the level of understanding around the differences between mental health, intellectual disabilities and the needs of children with multiple disability.

Where special education is brought into the main stream school context, this training and development becomes even more critical. However, there is a risk that such a commitment is avoided due to competing priorities or, worse, to avoid what are perceived as prohibitive insurance exposures. A clear theme in NDS ACT consultations on this issue is the importance of buy-in by school principals for any such scheme to work. As several NDS members said, "If the principal doesn't want it to happen, it won't!"

NDS welcomes the Review of Special Education and would like to offer its ongoing support to the reference group. NDS would be happy to provide further assistance and input to this important project.

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