



Association for Children with a Disability

Submission to the Department of Education
and Early Childhood Development

Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform

Association for Children with a Disability
Suite 2, 98 Morang Road, Hawthorn VIC 3122

Phone 03 9818 2000 or 1800 654 013 (rural callers)

Fax: 03 9818 2300 Email: mail@acd.org.au

Web: www.acd.org.au

An Overview – Focus Questions

Driving reform: a new approach to learning, wellbeing, health and development

1. What other opportunities might exist as a result of the creation of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development?

The creation of the new Department of Education and Early Childhood Development provides a range of opportunities to develop a system that genuinely welcomes and supports the learning, wellbeing, health and development of children with a disability from birth to adulthood.

It provides an opportunity to put in place a continuum of streamlined services that are responsive and offer real choice to families of children with a disability.

Other opportunities may include:

1.1 Specific targets and measures for children with a disability

We acknowledge the specific proposals for children with a disability and their families included in the Blueprint discussion papers and the intent of such terms as 'all children'. However, there must also be specific proposals, targets and measures for children with a disability so that their needs can be clearly identified and met.

1.2 Planning for a continuum of service from birth to adulthood

There should be better planning and co-ordination between DEECD, families and DHS to develop timely, dynamic plans to support children and families for known and likely events, such as early childhood intervention services, kindergarten, school, and aids and equipment. Detailed formal planning for children with a disability should occur at every stage of transition. This includes early years transitions, the transition from primary to secondary school, between year levels and the transition from school to adulthood and post-school options. The current maze of services across regions and municipalities offers varying levels of support and is difficult to navigate. Good planning and co-ordination will help reduce uncertainty for families, early years workers and school staff and assist with broader service planning.

1.3 Broader eligibility criteria for Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services

Funding for Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services packages should be expanded to support early childhood learning and development outcomes for a broader range of children with a disability.

1.4 Program for Students with Disabilities

The Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) is a key support for students with a disability. The PSD application process occurs before the child starts school and must be included in the context of early childhood intervention services and the 0-8 framework.

1.5 Consideration of portable funding

The new department provides an opportunity to re-think funding for children with a disability and the consideration of a portable per-child funding allocation model. A funding model that follows children from birth into adulthood would support the Blueprint's focus on successful transitions as well as enhance real choice for families.

1.6 Streamline information collection and assessment for children with a disability

Throughout their child's life families may have to apply for a range of DEECD services (Early Childhood Intervention Services, Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services, Program for Students with Disabilities) and repeat information to many service providers. These application processes usually require the same specialist documentation and this can become arduous and costly for families. There should be a centralised data collection and assessment process to save unnecessary duplication of information and/or the UltraNet should be further enhanced to deliver this capacity beyond primary and secondary schools. Parents must be able to have access to all data and information collected about their child and this should be made available in a range of formats.

1.7 Better relationships between DEECD, DHS and community organisations

To deliver a holistic response to learning outcomes and smooth transitions for children with a disability, there must be better relationships between DEECD, DHS and community organisations. Currently, when a child with a disability moves from early years services to school there are often changes in the type and level of service provision which is confusing for families. Departmental policies should be aligned and informed by better relationships across DEECD, DHS and community organisations.

1.8 A transparent and independent complaints process

We are concerned that with the creation of the new department the Disability Services Commissioner is now unable to receive complaints about ECIS. Avenues should be explored to develop a transparent and independent complaints mechanism relevant to the new department.

1.9 Strengthen cross-sector partnerships

The new department should embrace every opportunity to actively contribute to reform agendas across other relevant areas of government with specific recommendations relating to improvements for children with a disability and their families.

1.10 A word about words

There must be stronger continuity and consistency of language and terminology across the Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform papers to better reflect the lifecycle approach and to ensure transparency.

Improvement targets and progress measures

2. Are the individual improvement targets realistic and sufficiently challenging?

Students with a disability are often unable to reach the same targets and benchmarks as other students within their age cohort, and are often exempted from state benchmarking assessments such as the AIMS (now NAPLAN) assessments. Some students with a disability cannot be assessed for the new report 'A,B,C' report format, and individualised reporting is not captured.

3. As a set, are the improvement targets comprehensive and do they address the right outcomes?

None of the proposed targets and measures will capture data about children with a disability in the early years or at school. Unless specific measures are put in place for children with a disability as a cohort they will be not be represented and there will be no accountability or redress at the departmental level. Children with a disability are likely to be over-represented in the 'ones left behind'. For example, children with a disability are under-represented in four-year-old kindergarten and the proposed target would not provide accountability for the percentage of children with a disability who participate in four-year-old kindergarten.

4. Are there other improvement targets we should consider?

4.1 Disability specific improvement targets should be considered and there must be indicators which refer explicitly to children with a disability.

Examples of disability specific improvement targets include:

- Increase the proportion of schools that comply with and meet their obligations under the Program for Students with Disabilities
- All children with a disability have an Individual Learning Plan with measurable achievable goals
- Reduce the number of complaints from parents of children with a disability in education
- Increase the attendance rates of children with a disability in school
- Reduce the ECIS waiting list
- Increase the equity of access to ECIS for children living in rural and regional areas
- Increase the number of children accessing the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Scheme
- Increase professional development and disability content in early years and teacher qualifications
- Increase the number of schools that meet disability standards
- Increase the proportion of schools that comply and understand their obligations under the Commonwealth Disability Standards for Education
- Increase the confidence of parents with a child with a disability in public schooling
- Increase the number of teachers and integration aides with qualifications to support children with complex communication needs
- Increase real pathways to post-school options for children with a disability

4.2 Disability Action Plans for schools

All schools should develop and implement a Disability Action Plan.

4.3 Introduce targets for improving outcomes for individual students

The achievements and progress of students with a disability should be planned for, measured and celebrated in way that is commensurate with their individual needs and capabilities.

All of these targets focus on cohorts of children and young people and none focus on improving outcomes for individual students. There must be specific targets and measures for children with a disability so that their needs can be clearly identified and met.

4.4 A holistic approach to children with emotional and behavioural problems

A reduction in the number of children entering school with emotional and behavioural problems cannot be achieved through early childhood services alone. DEECD must engage with DHS-funded family support services and the range of community and mental health providers to achieve this target.

More investment is also required to support the increasing number of children with emotional and behavioural problems in the transition to school. This target could be framed in a more positive way as 'Increase the proportion of children with emotional or behavioural problems receiving early intervention services before they start school'.

Early Childhood Development Discussion Paper – Focus Questions

Partnerships with parents and communities – children thriving in supportive home and local environments

1. Is the focus of the reform proposals to support parents to create the best possible home environment right?

We agree that assisting families to create nurturing home environments is a particularly critical area of reform and we welcome the emphasis on supporting parents.

Family experiences of identifying a child's disability vary greatly. The early years are often the time of diagnosis and parents can experience a wide range of emotions during this time. Families may also be dealing with other issues such as housing, complex family relationships and the additional financial cost of medical expenses, therapy, aids and equipment.

To create a nurturing home environment, families of children with a disability need timely specialist services that support the family as a whole.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

1.1 Increased capacity of specialist service provision

In the early years, families of children with a disability tend to focus on the importance of specialist intervention and may only have the energy to prioritise attendance or connection with one activity. Families who are still coming to terms with the long-term ramifications of their child's needs may not be in the right 'headspace' to understand the value of attending activities such as supported playgroups.

Improved information and support must be complemented by increased capacity of specialist service provision for the child so that families can then afford the 'luxury' of attending other activities such as supported playgroups. It is also imperative that leaders of supported playgroups have the skills to nurture continued involvement and offer peer support.

1.2 Information that is relevant for families of children with a disability

Information given to families of children with a disability must be inclusive and expand on the value of participation for all children. In addition to general information about development, learning, health and well-being, services and support, families of children with a disability also need specific information that demystifies learning and development in relation to their child and the progress and outcomes they can realistically expect.

This information must be delivered in plain English, free of jargon, be culturally and linguistically appropriate and accessible in a range of formats. For example, Program for Students with Disabilities handbooks and information must be made available to families in hard copy.

1.3 Better planning and service co-ordination

Support for families of children with a disability to create the best possible home environment cannot be done in isolation. There should be better planning and co-ordination between DEECD, DHS and families to develop timely, dynamic plans to support children and families for known and likely events such as early childhood intervention services, support for kindergarten and school, and aids and equipment. DEECD must also have stronger linkages and communication with other relevant services to provide a co-ordinated approach that supports the family as a whole, particularly in times of increased need.

2. Is the focus of the reform proposals to provide outcomes-focused information right?

For children with a disability commonly understood developmental goals may need to be considered in a different context. Services need to be able to focus on individual children and the progress of their development.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

2.1 A holistic approach to developmental goals and progress

Services should focus not only on commonly understood developmental goals, but how developmental goals may be impacted by disability, disadvantage or other circumstances.

2.2 Information from service providers must be relevant to children with a disability

Published information about service providers should be relevant to children with a disability and their families. Services must provide information about their capacity to include a child with a disability, their track record on inclusion and their relationship with early childhood intervention services. Families also need information on the accessibility of facilities.

2.3 Outcomes-focused information

Families provided with outcomes-focused information may be able to make informed choices but these must be supported by a service system that offers genuine options which are actually available to families.

3. Do you agree with our reform proposals to strengthen local service planning, coordination and delivery?

We strongly support the strengthening of local service planning, co-ordination and delivery of early childhood services. The integration of multiple early childhood services on a single site will increase access to early childhood intervention services in the community, and extend opportunities for children with a disability and their families to participate in mainstream services and the broader community.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

3.1 Strengthen local government services that support families of children with a disability

Stronger partnerships with local government services are needed to improve support for families of children with a disability in their local community.

3.2 Children's and community hubs must be inclusive of families of children with a disability

Children's and community hubs must be accessible and inclusive of children with a disability and be able to meet their needs. The co-location and integration of services may also provide the facilities for specialist diagnosis of disability in a location that is more accessible for families, particularly for those in rural and regional areas. Transport infrastructure must be available for families to get to the hubs.

Attending specialist appointments is often a daunting and stressful experience for families. Integrated children's services may provide a more inclusive and welcoming environment where families can access specialist services such as paediatricians, occupational therapy, speech pathology or physiotherapy.

System development and reform – families accessing connected services

4. Do you agree with our reform proposals to improve seamless delivery of 0–8 learning, care and health services?

We strongly support the integrated delivery of learning, care and health services and welcome the proposal to improve co-ordination of approaches to support children with a disability from initial identification through to adulthood. The seamless delivery of these services will improve outcomes for children with a disability and provide additional support for families.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

4.1 A planned and co-ordinated approach

At any one time, families of children with a disability are often interacting with a multitude of services. It is vital that there is a planned and co-ordinated approach to the provision of services and information to families of children with a disability.

4.2 Transition plans for children with a disability

Transition plans for children with a disability must link information from all the services that the child is interacting with to the Program for Students with Disabilities and other specific supports in schools.

Transition plans for children with a disability may be complex. There must be resources to allow early childhood and education staff to develop, implement, and review these plans. Parents of children with a disability should be included in this planning.

The introduction of a new 0-8 learning and development framework must be supported by training for early childhood and education staff to ensure suitable adjustments can be made for children with a disability.

4.3 Develop a formal support group for every child with a disability in the early years

The Student Support Group model under the Program for Students with Disabilities could be extended into the early years. The Student Support Group model should be convened and formalised early in the life of a child with a disability, as the basis for all learning and development planning and decision making through to adulthood.

4.4 Parents must have access to data collected about their child

Parents must be able to have access to all data and information collected about their child and this should be made available in a range of formats.

4.5 Education for families

Parents of students with a disability should be provided with education about the Program for Students with Disabilities processes, to strengthen their capacity and confidence to be an active partner in their child's learning and development.

5. Do you agree with our reform proposals to increase access, affordability and the level of participation in services?

Improving access, affordability and participation in universal services for children with a disability is vital.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

5.1 Increasing the participation of children with a disability in kindergarten

Increasing the level of participation of children with a disability in four-year-old kindergarten will require increased Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services funding and broadening of the eligibility criteria. Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services must also be available for three-year-old children with a disability to increase their participation in three-year-old kindergarten.

5.2 Innovative service delivery to increase engagement for children with a disability

Flexible and accessible models of service delivery that meet specific needs are most welcome. Innovative approaches are more likely to keep a child with a disability engaged, and reduce exclusion and isolation. But this will only work if the professionals delivering these services also have a high level of engagement.

6. Is the focus of the reform proposals to enhance early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, such as disability or development delay right? – Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

We welcome the review of early childhood intervention services. We are excited by the opportunity to develop an integrated approach for children from birth-18 and we look forward to being an active participant in the review.

Workforce reform – skills and knowledge to deliver for children and families

7. Is the focus of the reform proposals to establish a high quality workforce right?

We support the proposals to establish a high quality workforce and offer a number of other reform proposals to improve the skills and knowledge of the workforce to deliver services to children with a disability.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

7.1 Increase disability content in pre-service training and professional development

Pre-service training and on-going professional development must include greater content on working with children with a disability. This must include increased knowledge and capacity across the sector in supporting children with complex care needs and complex communication needs.

7.2 Increase knowledge of family perspectives and partnerships with parents

As members of the formal support group for every child with a disability (see proposal 4.3 in Systems Reform), every early childhood worker must have an understanding of family perspectives on disability to be able to work effectively with parents in the learning and development of the child.

7.3 Increase staff ratios for services working with children with a disability

There must be increased staff ratios in early childhood services and schools working with children with a disability. There is the potential for these professionals to work fluidly across the early childhood and school sectors, providing greater access to a more qualified staff pool.

School Reform Discussion Paper – Focus Questions

System development and reform – creating a culture of excellence

1. Is the focus of the reform proposals to ensure every child makes good progress right?

This is a laudable reform but the proposals will not ensure that every child makes good progress unless the particular needs of students with a disability are addressed.

Students with a disability still require challenging learning opportunities in the context of realistic expectations, but they are at risk of under-representation and of falling outside a data collection framework that is based on VELS, VCE and VCAL due to limited engagement with these programs, individualised learning plans and individualised reports.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

1.1 Significant focus on data collection and accountability for students with a disability

The proposal to 'Develop better data to allow the progress of individual students to be measured and reported, and form the basis of accountability throughout the system' is most welcome. We would hope to see this substantially developed to enable accurate data collection and transparent accountability from the level of the individual student with a disability, through to the school level, and up to the departmental level.

1.2 Mandatory Student Support Group processes

There must be mandatory and transparent processes that ensure all students with a disability have meaningful Student Support Group processes and Individual Learning Plans developed, implemented and reviewed.

2. Is the focus of the reform proposals to improve transition to and from schools right?

While the focus to improve transitions to and from school is welcome, for students with a disability, every transition stage requires planning.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

2.1 Planning for all transitions

Detailed formal planning for children with a disability should occur at every transition level, including early years transitions, from primary to secondary school, between year levels and from school to adulthood and post-school options. Transition planning must be enhanced by increased capacity to deliver meaningful learning programs for students with a disability.

2.2 Improve the Program for Students with Disabilities

Any improvement in transitions for students with a disability must take into account the currently arduous process of applying for the Program for Students with Disabilities and subsequent reviews. There should be better cohesion and interface between early years services and the broader education system. Current PSD levels are inadequate, with increases being less than CPI. Excellence for all students cannot be achieved when there are such barriers to equal participation.

2.3 Develop a seamless system of support services

There is an opportunity to align early years and education policy around the provision, level and type of service. To ensure a seamless support service, there must be an increase in Student Support Services Officers, particularly speech therapists and psychologists. Occupational therapists should also be included in the SSSO group.

Schools must be able to respond in a timely manner to the needs of students with a disability who remain undiagnosed or are diagnosed in the school years. Funded interventions must be made available for these students across the lifecycle.

A comprehensive lifecycle approach must include real opportunities for students with a disability to link into age appropriate inclusive post-school options and further learning in the community. The lifecycle component of the DEECD approach cannot be achieved unless this sector is further developed.

2.4 Linkages with other departments

It is essential that the Blueprint is in line with the considerable reforms currently occurring in the disability sector as students are often interacting with disability services.

3. Do you agree with our reform proposals to increase expectations and provide greater support for government schools?

While it is important to increase expectations in government schools there is an implication that a 'school's performance' refers only to academic performance.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

3.1 Expand the parameters of expectation

A system of accountability and intervention that is solely based on school performance must go hand in hand with an effective response system which does not stigmatise a school or individual students. Schools should strive to improve not only their academic performance, but their performance on inclusive practices as well. High performing schools should be schools that are inclusive of all students.

3.2 Provide greater support to enable good teaching practice for students with a disability

Teachers need dedicated time to plan and interact with students with a disability. Good planning for students with a disability can lose priority in the face of competing demands. Teachers need increased professional support for these processes. Funds should be made available for teachers to have the time to develop, implement and progress plans for a students with a disability.

4. Do you agree with our reform proposals to establish clearer expectations and provide greater support for non-government schools?

Many families of children with a disability choose, or would like to choose, to send their child to a non-government school, particularly if siblings attend a non-government school. It is important that non-government schools are accountable to students with a disability, including compliance with relevant disability legislation.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

4.1 Portability of funding

Funding that is attached to students, rather than to schools, should be considered. Portability of funding will ensure that students can access the same levels of support irrespective of the type of school. This will provide genuine parent choice and enhance transition processes.

Workforce reform – the best people doing the right things

5. Is the focus of the reform proposals to further develop teachers and school leaders right?

We support the reform proposals to further develop teachers and school leaders. We believe there should be mandatory pre-service training or professional development around inclusion and working with students with disabilities and their families.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

5.1 Promoting an inclusive culture through training and professional development

We acknowledge the many dedicated teachers who work hard to teach all students. However, inclusion cannot be left to individual goodwill. The rhetoric of inclusion must become practice.

All teachers should have professional development or pre-service training so that they can meet the various additional needs across the spectrum of all children, and to instil a culture that is inclusive. Training should extend to practical aspects, including how to modify the curriculum, and understanding family perspectives on disability.

The culture of a school is set by its leadership. It is essential that all school principals engage with, and be accountable for, inclusive practices.

It is not enough to imply that the Blueprint proposals also include children with a disability. The wording must clearly set out how each proposal will specifically address children with a disability, to ensure that they can be the best they can be in all aspects of learning and development.

6. Do you agree with our reform proposals to attract and reward the best people?

Rewarding teachers and school leaders who demonstrate innovative ways of supporting students with a disability will help to motivate other teachers and develop a culture of inclusion across the teaching profession.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

6.1 Mandatory pre-service training for teachers about teaching students with a disability

Comprehensive pre-service teacher training should include mandatory and substantial content about teaching children with disabilities. This would assist teachers by reducing their fear of the unknown and give them strategies and confidence to teach all students.

Partnerships with parents and communities – partnerships for learning

7. Is the focus of the reform proposals to better partner with parents and families right?

From time to time all parents have some anxiety about their child at school, but it is important for teachers to understand that this is often magnified for families who have a child with a disability.

Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

7.1 Develop strong partnerships with parents of students with a disability

Life for a families of children with a disability is in some ways different from other families, with different dynamics and priorities. Understanding and appreciating these can only enhance the parent/teacher partnership. Sometimes families of children with a disability need more information, feedback, or detail than is provided for the general class. Teachers can benefit from good partnerships with parents, who have knowledge about their child's learning style, management of medical conditions or behaviours, and approaches that work well for their child.

7.2 Greater inclusion for students with a disability through school/community hubs

It is important that the broader school community and families are welcoming of families and children with a disability. By developing schools as children's and community hubs, there is an opportunity for DEECD to break down barriers and negative stereotypes for people with a disability.

7.3 Consider the needs of siblings of children with a disability

The needs and experiences of siblings of children with a disability need to be recognised and supported by teachers and schools. The performance of siblings of children with a disability at school and their ability to learn may be prevented or hindered by their family circumstances or home environment. With better understanding of the unique challenges that siblings face teachers will be able to better support siblings in their learning and development.

8. Do you agree with our reform proposals to utilise and mobilise community resources? – Are there other reform proposals we should consider?

We welcome this proposal as it increases children's access to holistic supports and learning. Broader cross-sectoral networks that include schools have the opportunity to inform practice and generate positive outcomes for early childhood services, schools, students and families alike.

We welcome the focus on strengthening existing networks which must include not only disability and health services but also all levels of government and the relevant departments. These networks need to be adequately resourced perhaps by a community development worker to facilitate and build the network.