

Students with disabilities in mainstream schools

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1. How do parents choose a school for their child?

Parents consider many things when choosing a school, such as location, finances, where siblings go to school and existing friendship groups. All children of school age in Victoria have the right to go to their local school. In addition to the range of school choices available to all children, children with a disability may also be eligible to attend a specialist school.

Parents may feel that attending their local school supports their child's inclusion in the local community and may lead to greater acceptance and community support. There may also be more opportunities for their child to be exposed to typical language and social interaction.

Parents may choose a specialist school because there are specific resources that may benefit their child. Some parents choose 'dual enrolment', where their child spends part of each week at a local school and part of the week at a specialist school.

As for any family, parents of children with a disability are entitled to choose a school that they believe best suits the needs of their child and family.

2. What are the Disability Standards for Education?

The [Disability Standards for Education](#) set out the rights of students with a disability in the area of education. They also set out the obligations that education providers, such as schools and universities, must meet in order to support students with a disability.

Under Section 32 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, education providers must comply with the Disability Standards for Education. To comply with the Standards, an education provider must make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate a student with a disability. A reasonable adjustment takes into account the student's learning needs while balancing the interests of the student, school, staff and other students.

Information about the Disability Standards is included in [Section 4.6 of the 2010 Program for Students with Disabilities Guidelines and Handbook](#).

The main aim of the Standards is to give students with a disability the right to participate in educational programs on the same basis as students without a disability. This means having the same educational opportunities and choices as other students.

3. What practical things do I need to consider when teaching a student with a disability?

Supporting the needs of a diverse group of students requires a positive approach, good planning and a willingness to engage with the student and their family. Each child in your class is a unique individual with different strengths and challenges. If there are a number of professionals working with the student, you may be able to ask them for support and advice.

Teaching a child with a disability may mean allowing more time to plan, collaborate and learn new skills. This means being even more efficient with your time and energy.

Practical things that you can do to include a child with a disability will depend on the individual needs of the student, and may include:

- physically re-arranging the classroom
- working together with other professionals, such as therapists
- working with a broader team at school
- working closely with parents
- learning how to use a communication device or system eg. Makaton, COMPIC
- modifying activities, be it sports, maths or an excursion

While it may seem like a challenge, many teachers find teaching a child with a disability to be a rewarding experience.

4. What is the Student Support Group?

The Student Support Group (SSG) is a group of people who come together to form a co-operative partnership to support students with additional needs. The roles and responsibilities of the group are outlined in the [Student Support Guidelines](#).

Members of the Student Support Group must include:

- parent/guardian/carer
- class teacher
- principal or nominee
- a parent advocate (if requested)
- the student (where appropriate)
- consultants as agreed by the group

An SSG is strongly recommended to any student with additional learning needs, irrespective of whether they are eligible for support through the Program for Students with Disabilities.

The focus of the SSG is not limited to the academic needs of the student. The group can also develop care plans for safety, access, behavioural, medical or personal care needs.

It is best to hold an SSG meeting early in the year and then regularly, such as once per term. Minutes of SSG meetings should also be recorded on the [Program for Students with Disabilities Management System \(PSDMS\)](#).

5. What is an Individual Learning Plan?

An Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is a working document for the planning, provision and evaluation of a student's education. The main purpose of an ILP is to link the student's specific learning needs to the curriculum.

A good place to start is to refer to the [Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority Victorian Essential Learning Standards Progression Points](#).

An ILP only needs to be developed for those learning areas where the student requires additional support. The plan should include information about the student's entry (or baseline) skills, goals and teaching strategies.

There is no one-size-fits-all design or template for the perfect ILP. It should be easy to understand by all who use it and flexible enough to allow for changes. As a working document, it should be frequently referred to and updated.

Any student with additional needs can benefit from having a Student Support Group and Individual Learning Plan, even if they are not eligible for funding from the

Program for Students with Disabilities. The ILP is developed in conjunction with the Student Support Group and is usually written up by the teacher.

6. How can therapy be managed at school?

Physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech pathology are often an essential part of a student's educational program.

Therapists may be DEECD professionals who work under the Student Support Services Program. If the student needs professional support that is not offered by the Student Support Services Program (such as occupational therapy), or if there is limited availability, the Student Support Group can discuss the possibility of purchasing that professional support as part of the Program for Students with Disabilities, and then make this recommendation to the principal.

Therapists can work directly with the student and school staff to give advice about modifications to the environment and the curriculum. Therapists may also be able to contribute to support plans for personal care, behaviour and safety.

While teachers are not expected to be therapists, there may be aspects of a child's therapy that can be incorporated into their learning. For example, an occupational therapist might suggest specialist seating, a sloped writing board and pencil grips to optimise the student's positioning for writing. A speech pathologist might recommend an alternative communication system for a non-verbal student, and a physiotherapist might advise on mobility issues.

The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute publishes a [School Guide: Occupational therapy and physiotherapy service delivery in schools](#).

The [Speech Pathology Australia](#) website includes a 'Find a speech pathologist' search function on their home page.

7. How can complex medical needs be managed at school?

All complex care needs should be discussed with the Student Support Group and lead to the development of a management plan. Conditions that require complex care can include epilepsy, percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy feeding (PEG) or tube feeding, and tracheotomies.

Management plans should identify:

- staff training needs
- responsibility for tasks
- storage of medication and care supplies
- a private area for personal care

Management plans for complex care needs are often developed together with the child's doctor. These management plans can sit alongside the ILP.

While managing complex care needs may seem like a daunting task, with support and training school staff can gain confidence by learning these skills. Parents can also feel reassured that their child is in good hands.

For more information about Complex Medical Care Support see [Section 4.5.9 of the Schools Reference Guide](#).

The [Better Health Channel](#) website includes general information about disabilities and medical conditions.

8. What resources are available to support students with disabilities at school?

Student Support Services Officers (SSSOs)

Student Support Services Officers are a group of DEECD professionals who provide specialist support to students and schools, and may include:

- Guidance officers or psychologists
- Social workers
- Visiting teachers
- Speech pathologists
- Curriculum consultants

Program for Students with Disabilities

The [Program for Students with Disabilities](#) (PSD) is available to Victorian government schools to support the education of eligible students who have moderate to severe disability. The PSD funding allocated to the school may be used for a variety of supports including teacher professional development, specialised equipment, education support staff, specialist support such as occupational therapy, or a special needs co-ordinator. The Student Support Group may provide advice to the principal on the appropriate use of this funding.

Language Support Program

The [Language Support Program](#) is a framework for teaching oral language to students requiring additional support. Professional development is provided to teachers to develop skills to support students in the classroom. The Language Support Program also provides schools with resources to support the delivery of teaching and learning programs for students with language disorders.

Schoolcare Program

The [Schoolcare Program](#) is a joint project between DEECD and the Royal Children's Hospital that provides additional support to teachers and school staff who teach students with complex medical needs.

Visiting Teacher Service

Most regions have a Visiting Teacher Service with expertise about specific disabilities, including hearing loss, physical and health disabilities and visual impairment. Check with your region for details about services and availability.

9. How can I best utilise education support staff?

The teacher has overall responsibility for the student's educational program, which may be implemented with assistance from education support staff.

Education support staff work under the direction of the teacher and may perform a variety of duties, including:

- Support with class work, including literacy, maths, art and sport
- Assistance with personal care
- Supervision if there are safety concerns
- Attending therapy sessions with the student so that therapy can be applied in the classroom if appropriate. This might include learning how to use aids or equipment, or to support speech therapy goals and strategies.
- Preparation of teaching materials

Education support staff can work with children individually or in a small group. Under the direction of the teacher, education support staff might spend some time working with the student with a disability and other time supervising students while the teacher works with the student with a disability.

Increasing independence is a goal for all students. As a student with a disability progresses with a particular task, consider whether the assistance can be decreased.

When working with education support staff, make sure they are included in the educational team. Specify clear roles, responsibilities and daily tasks. Utilise their strengths and work to develop and maintain good communication.

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