

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

New Directions for School Leadership and the Teaching Profession

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Association for Children with a Disability

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About ACD

Established in 1980, the Association for Children with a Disability (ACD) is a non-profit community based organisation representing children with a disability and their families living in Victoria. Our current membership includes over 2,000 families.

Statement of Purpose

- To empower parents of children with a disability to be as self-sufficient as possible in advocating on behalf of their child and family.
- To promote and advance the rights of children with a disability and their families.
- To advocate on behalf of children with a disability and their families to ensure the best possible support and services are available.
- To work collaboratively with other organisations to improve the service system for children with a disability and their families.

Guiding Principles

- To be responsive to the needs of children with a disability and their families.
- To provide a professional, quality service.
- To be proactive by raising issues with government and building awareness in the community about the rights of children with a disability and their families.

Introduction

ACD applauds the Victorian Government's commitment to continual improvement in education outcomes for all students across our State.

Over many decades, students with a disability have missed out on optimal learning opportunities, to the point where discrimination legislation was introduced in an effort to overcome the myriad of barriers that these students and their families were and continue to be confronted with. This was recognised by the Federal Government when it announced the disability standards for education in 2005. In relation to participation these standards provide:

The education provider must take reasonable steps to ensure that the course or program is designed in such a way that the student is, or any student with a disability is, able to participate in the learning experiences (including the assessment and certification requirements) of the course or program, and any relevant supplementary course or program, on the same basis as a student without a disability, and without experiencing discrimination.

New Directions for School Leadership and the Teaching Profession (New Directions) should include a commitment that students with a disability must not be left behind. ACD is very concerned that if academia, educators and department staff have their

eye of the prize of global top tier within ten years, this will be to the detriment of students with a disability.

In 2009, of the 5.44 million individuals residing in Victoria, one million identified as having a disability (18.4%). Approximately six per cent of the total Victorian population (338,200 people) had a profound or severe disability. ACD believes that to avoid discrimination, any strategy change must take this into account.

In addition some areas of the community experience higher levels of disability than others. The discussion paper recognises that "students from rural communities do less well than their city peers". Taking into account the Australian Bureau of Statistics' data that there are more people with a disability living in rural and regional Victoria than in metropolitan areas, any strategy must consider how it will reach and deliver results to these areas, all their students (including those with a disability) and their teaching staff, as well as those in regional and metropolitan arrears.

It is inevitable that every educator in Victorian schools will at some point in their career have a student with a disability in their classroom, regardless of where they are located. Being properly equipped to teach every student in every class should be society's minimum. A good education provides the foundation for a good life. People with a disability have the right to equality of opportunity to grow, to learn and to contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of our community.

In 2009 the labour force participation rate of people with a disability, who were of working age, was 52 per cent (32 percent for those experiencing severe and profound disability) compared to 83 per cent for Victorians without a disability. School completion figures show that of people aged 15 to 64, 26 per cent of people with a disability do not go beyond year 10, compared to 18 per cent of people without a disability. Figures on tertiary education, report 19 per cent of people with a disability have a bachelor degree or above, compared to 25 per cent of people without a disability.

Higher benchmarks for the education outcomes for students with a disability are required.

WHAT IS MISSING? Are there significant areas of action or ideas for reform that are not addressed by the paper, or are given insufficient treatment?

Include Disability

The discussion paper appears to only be concerned with academic excellence and reaching the benchmark of entry to the global top tier in the next 10 years, falling far short of what is currently required to improve the prospects for students with a disability.

In 2008 the Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing found that 15% of Australian students needed additional support with their learning, although only 5% receive specific funding to do so. How will the progress of students with a disability

be incorporated in evaluating whether or not Victoria has attained global top tier status within ten years?

ACD believes that New Directions for education in Victoria needs to focus more broadly on the overall goal of all students gaining the skills they need to fully participate as active citizens in the social, economic and cultural life of their community. Educating students with a disability should be a primary expectation of principals, educators and the department and not a 'retrofit' response once students receive funded support. Initiatives that flow from New Directions will require embarking on ambitious reform that goes beyond pursuing academic excellence.

Pre-Service Training

ACD agrees that high quality training coupled with attracting the most appropriate candidates to the teaching profession provides the best guarantee of achieving success for all students.

Pre-service teacher training needs to focus on building greater knowledge of the social model of disability to ensure that teacher engagement with students with a disability is authentic and dignified at all times. This can be achieved through:

- targeting skill development in curriculum modification
- enhancing the learning of all students using a strength-based approach
- the identification of candidates with innate skills and the right approach to supporting the education of all students (Finnish model of trainee teacher selection)
- utilising a variety of pathways into teacher training that will ensure the right skill set, experience and potential to work effectively with students with a disability, are identified and nurtured (English model of trainee teacher selection).

ACD agrees with the New Directions statement that pre-service education needs to fit the 21st century learning environment which should also include the assistive technologies that enhance the learning outcomes of many students with a disability. In some instances assistive technologies are already available in Victorian schools but teachers are not competent in using the equipment, rendering it inaccessible to the student.

ACD agrees with the New Directions statement that greater transparency about how well universities are training teachers requires attention. From the requests ACD receives for assistance in resolving issues between teachers and students, it is apparent that many teachers have limited skills to support students with a diverse range of abilities.

A better combination of theory and practice based learning is recommended. Trainee school placements and practical experiences should be provided in a variety of settings and should include the need to demonstrate learning outcomes in all education settings.

Assessment to determine progress

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) does not include participation by the overwhelming majority of students with a disability. ACD receives calls from many parents who are dismayed at the manner in which their children have been either discouraged or excluded from sitting the NAPLAN. In 2008 the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identified that overall 20% of students fall below the NAPLAN benchmark and this figure does not include those students with a disability that are actively excluded from participating. To date there is no alternate measurement with which to track the progress of students with a disability. This was recognised by the Auditor-General in 2012 when he concluded that the Department does not identify and monitor the achievement of educational and broader outcomes of students with special learning needs and therefore does not know how effectively its policy and resource commitment is working.

ACD agrees with New Directions that NAPLAN should only be used as a reference point, it is recommended that an assessment process which identifies the progress of students with a disability should be implemented across all education settings. While the Ability Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) resource currently available in Victorian schools, has some capacity to measure progress, its take-up is optional and roll-out is in its infancy.

Improving teacher performance

ACD fully supports the Victorian government's resolve to reward teaching excellence, particularly in relation to recognising the importance of both technical and emotional intelligence, the ability to be flexible in responding to conflicting demands and the courage and commitment to help students find and fulfill their potential every day. However we recommend that tools used to measure teacher performance include the capacity to specifically evaluate their engagement with students with a disability.

In New Directions the view is expressed that in a decentralised system demand from principals as the direct employers of graduates will drive improvements in pre-service education, rather than the Department. ACD is concerned that unless principals truly value the diversity and richness of experience that active participation of students of varying abilities brings to their school community there will no significant improvement for students with a disability. Sadly it has been the experience of countless parents over many many years, that there are far too many principals and schools who at best barely tolerate the presence of disability amongst their student population and at worst actively discourage enrolments.

Rewarding teacher performance

When considering what constitutes high needs in schools, such as low socio economic status communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and rural and regional areas, a high concentration of students with a disability should also be afforded extra consideration.

Tension may exist between rewarding individual teacher performance and a willingness to share knowledge and skills. Experience across a wide range of workplace settings has revealed that unless collaboration itself is acknowledged and rewarded, individual competitiveness dominates and creates an environment not conducive to the development of collaborative relationships that are genuine and sustainable. ACD believes that the sharing of information and experience between educators will result in better outcomes for all students particularly those with high needs.

Professional learning and collaboration

As New Directions draws comparisons of professional collaboration and school improvement in high performing systems, it is important to have regard for the geographic, demographic and cultural differences between Victoria and other jurisdictions. There is no guarantee that such successes are easily duplicated, particularly in instances where cultural attitudes towards disability have had a negative impact on participation in community life by people with a disability. Such differences should be central to determining the possible effectiveness of adopting such approaches.

Although New Directions highlight recent professional development incentives such as scholarships and investment in math and science specialisations, it fails to highlight the opportunities provided through the More Support for Students with Disabilities National Partnership Agreement and other Department initiatives. This is another example of disability being sidelined from the dominant discourse on leadership in education.

Through ACD's work supporting parents as they strive to get the best education outcomes for their child with a disability, it is very clear that the beliefs and values principals hold and promote with regard to educating students with a disability and their approach to supporting their learning, has a greater influence on teacher attitudes and individual student performance than the policies, protocols and procedures set down by the Department. With the policy shift to greater autonomy for individual principals and school communities, it is even more urgent that the flexibility and freedoms such autonomy affords, is matched with the responsibility to engage in positive inclusion and active participation of all students regardless of their abilities.

Equally professional development in the first instance, should be linked to identified gaps in a teacher's capacity to meet the needs of all students rather than what learning opportunities might appear the most interesting, and/or have the greatest

potential to enhance a teacher's individual career prospects. When identifying ways to improve teachers' capacity to use information about their students' progress to better determine teacher professional learning needs, ACD believes that professional development which addresses the challenges students with a disability in the school community are facing while supporting their improved learning, should be prioritised.

ACD believes that teachers would benefit from more professional development which focusses on working more effectively with parents who have a child with a disability. Collaboration between parents and teachers would enable a teacher to access the knowledge parents have about how their child learns, their behaviour and socialisation patterns. Instead of responding to individual events, parents and teachers would work to resolve the underlying causes that may otherwise jeopardise positive teacher-student relationships.

The teaching community is relatively small in Victoria particularly in rural and regional areas. The independence of classroom observation and feedback as part of professional development and mentoring would need to be carefully managed, to maintain the integrity of the process. This is equally relevant when considering the evaluation of principals' performance and peer feedback.

WHAT ARE THE PRIORITIES? In an environment of fiscal constraints the Government needs to ensure it is investing in areas that will deliver the greatest return. We also need to determine what combination of levers will work best together. What do we need to focus on?

New Directions state that achieving the global top tier will also create a stronger and more cohesive Victorian society. Strong education outcomes lead to reduced crime and better physical and mental health, increased social cohesion and reduced reliance on welfare. It is ACD's view that if the Victorian Government is to achieve these outcomes, striving to reach the global top tier within the next ten years, will not provide the key to overall success. Retaining and enhancing the engagement of students challenged by the curriculum and the education environment itself, should be the Department's highest priority. Investing in educating all Victorian children must be based upon improving their life chances, from an economic, social and cultural perspective. The need for each child to acquire basic skills as well as competencies that will secure future employment and engender greater confidence and capacity to actively participate in community life are of utmost importance. ACD recommends that New Directions for School Leadership and the Teaching Profession should expand its focus beyond the 'global top tier' to include achieving these outcomes.

WHERE SHOULD EFFORT NOT BE DIRECTED? Are there areas of action which should be avoided and if so why?

As outlined above ACD does not believe that having a single focus on lifting education performance to attain the global top tier status is sufficient. Improving opportunities for all children including children with a disability to realise their full

potential should be the primary purpose of New Directions and the goal of every academic, principal, teacher, specialist educator, student support officer and department staffer involved in the education of children in this State.

CONCLUSION

ACD is very concerned that New Directions is focused on academic excellence and reaching the benchmark of entry to the global top tier in the next 10 years and not investing in the education of all Victorian children. As a consequence it will not deliver what is currently required to improve the prospects for students with a disability. It fails to highlight the opportunities provided through the More Support for Students with Disabilities National Partnership Agreement and other Department initiatives.

Parents' of children with a disability come to ACD:

- requesting assistance to resolve issues between a teacher and their child
- dismayed at the manner in which their child has been either discouraged or excluded from sitting the NAPLAN
- concerned that their child's principal (prospective) and/or school barely tolerates the presence of disability amongst their student population and at worst actively discourage enrolments

The beliefs and values principals hold and promote with regard to educating students with a disability and their approach to supporting their learning, have a profound influence on teacher attitudes and individual student performance. Higher benchmarks for the education outcomes for students with a disability are required. Education's focus should be on the overall goal of all students gaining the skills they need to fully participate as active citizens in the social, economic and cultural life of their community

Educating students with a disability should always be part of the dominant discourse of education reform, therefore it needs to be front and center of the current quest outlined in New Directions to improve learning outcomes within 10 years.



Elizabeth McGarry
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