



Association for  
Children with a  
Disability

## Association for Children with Disability

### Snapshot: School experiences of children with disability and their families

2023

---



#### Background

Association for Children with Disability (ACD) is the leading advocacy service for children with disability and their families in Victoria. We are a not-for-profit organisation led by, and for, families of children with disability.

In April 2023 eight families and their children with disability met the Minister for Education, Hon. Natalie Hutchins MP to talk about their school experiences.

Families shared what works to create a positive school experience and areas that need change.

All of the families wanted their child to be able to access the supports they needed to thrive.

## Recommendations

1. Give all principals and school leaders training that builds their knowledge and skills to foster a culture of inclusion.
2. Increase accountability and transparency about principal decisions that impact the education of students with disability. This would help monitor outcomes at a school-level, identify systemic issues and reduce gatekeeping.
3. Track and monitor the reasons families move schools to increase accountability of principals when students are informally forced out of the school. The Department of Education should mandatorily follow-up with families who move schools when it is known the child has a disability.
4. Provide intensive supports to principals where it's found a student at their school was informally forced to leave the school.
5. Give teachers the skills and training to work with education support staff effectively to increase student's inclusion and educational outcomes.
6. Give education support staff more support, including creating a centralised place where they can seek advice or raise concerns without risking their employment.
7. Create more strengths-based professional development opportunities for teachers to build best practice ways of working collaboratively, including with NDIS funded therapists, to support students with disability.
8. For children starting prep start the Disability Inclusion Profile process while they are in kindergarten so it can be built upon in school, rather than starting from scratch.
9. Give teachers more time to plan for success so they can plan for all students in their class.
10. Ensure specialist schools promote the use of communication devices. Address the replacement of communication devices damaged at school as currently this results in a reduction in the children's NDIS plan.
11. Ensure specialist schools have equitable allied health support, more positive behaviour support and a stronger focus on literacy and numeracy.
12. Review standards for specialist schools to make sure all students have access to consistent quality support, that it not dependent on principal discretion.

## 1. Principals make a difference

Families were clear that they didn't expect principals to be experts in disability, but that it was vital for principals to lead by example and foster a culture of inclusion.

*"At the start of primary school, [the principal's] words to me were, 'I've never had a child like Steve\* in my school but I'm willing to give it a hard damn crack if you are.'"*

Families spoke about the length principals went to, to ensure their child could be included. This spanned advocating for the child's needs for funded supports to the Department of Education, to starting a mentor program between children to support the transition from kinder to prep.

Families also spoke about devastating school experiences when principals made it clear their child was not welcome. Experiences included:

- Pressuring families to enrol their child in a specialist school instead of retaining enrolment in a mainstream school
- Gatekeeping by reducing the child's attendance
- Limited collaboration and coordination between staff and allied health professionals, including experiences where allied health were not permitted to enter the school.

Families discussed the trickle-down effect leadership had on other staff. If principals didn't champion inclusion, inclusion was often missing for teachers and inclusion professionals within the school.

At times lack of funding was used as justification by school leadership for telling families mainstream school was not appropriate for their child.

*"There's always high pressure to only be part-time. It's a common tactic from senior management at the school. If the attitude at the top comes down, you really are in a lot of strife."*

## 2. Effective staff

Families shared experiences of teachers and school leaders discarding expertise shared by allied health and medical professionals to the detriment of their child.

*"The person at the top of the inclusion chain [at my child's school] has no knowledge at all. She said to me, 'Oh, they're not real seizures because [my child, who has epilepsy,] doesn't shake.'"*

It's important that teachers are supported to understand that working collaboratively with an allied health or medical professional does not undermine their expertise, but instead views a child holistically and is important to meet the child's needs. One family shared their experience when a teacher didn't understand the importance of a collaborative approach,

*"... there's very poor follow-up from what the OT [occupational therapist] suggested from the teacher because they 'feel it's an intrusion on their professional behaviour'. We heard this verbatim."*

Families said education support staff had positive intentions and wanted to support their children. However, families raised concerns about the effectiveness of education support staff without the backing of school leadership, inclusion staff and sufficient direction from teachers.

*"Inclusion aides are the most beautiful people, but they have no agency within the classroom. So as an inclusion aide they're often used as an aide of exclusion... [For example, my child will] be taken out to walk around the school grounds and that may take up the majority of their time at school."*

Families noted some education support staff were directed by the school they were not allowed to speak to disability or advocacy organisations in order to boost their knowledge and understanding about the best ways to support students.

### 3. Setting up students for success

Planning is key in ensuring children with disability are included in all school activities.

One student said,

*"I wish teachers planned before class for all students, no matter how [they] do their work."*

Families said their child needed access to support from day one of school. When appropriate supports were in place, it set children up for success. Families raised concerns about:

- The 10-week observation period before the commencement of Disability Inclusion Profiles, and the delay this caused in implementing the suite of needed supports
- The reduction in support when students transitioned from primary school to secondary school. This is a time when students are likely to need additional support because of the significant increase in teachers they are working with
- Lack of specialised supports in mainstream schools. Families spoke about the need for the same specialised supports available in some specialist schools to be available for students with disability in mainstream settings. This would support student's access and engagement, family choice, and educational outcomes
- Difficulty accessing supports for students with multiple diagnoses who are on the 'borderline', making it difficult to access the right supports in government mainstream schools, but being unable to access specialist education settings. For example, a student with an IQ of 72.

## 4. Accountability

Many families reported their child's access to mainstream school was severely and consistently restricted. Families identified several barriers to full-time education:

- Poor attitudes and school culture around disability and inclusion
- Insufficient access to individualised supports
- Lack of systemic accountability.

*"At one stage [my child] was allowed 45 minutes at school per day."*

*"We're in mainstream and we were encouraged by the school to go to specialist... the principal was trying to force us to move [my child] to a specialist school. He had everyone say it."*

In addition, families identified two key systemic issues with specialist schools:

- Insufficient focus on literacy and numeracy
- The need for greater consistency and quality, including investment in therapists and resources.

*"My child's school has 22 paid therapists on staff that they have access to. The classrooms have five to seven children, and a kitchenette and toilet off every classroom... Another specialist school in the area has one OT once a fortnight... Why are there such discrepancies between specialist schools?"*

Families were clear students who attend specialist schools shouldn't miss out on educational opportunities because they need additional support. More work is needed so students in specialist schools have access to high-quality literacy and numeracy education.

Families raised other gaps in specialist settings, including the need for more positive behaviour support practitioners, and a greater focus on and supporting the use of communication devices. The quality and consistency of specialist schools shouldn't be left to the discretion of school leadership alone.

*"I want to see improved accountability and publicly listed information about how we're spending money, how we're measuring inclusivity and the role of inclusion coaches. This shouldn't be seen as a negative as it gives us a baseline to build inclusion."*

## 5. A sense of belonging

Families shared devastating experiences of their children being excluded from social activities and raised concerns about social isolation.

*"We found [our child] in the corner eating by themselves. Then we found out with some investigation [the school] had not allowed them to eat with their fellow students because they were eating too messily and so they were extracted."*

A concerted effort needs to be made to build inclusion of the whole school community. This could include investment in student-led approaches that champion and celebrate the diversity of students with disability, and the creation of social programs that support peer-to-peer connections.

*"[Our child] feels lonely because we're putting the burden on the kids to be social with him. They're all neurotypical and don't see why they need to make an effort to be friends with a kid to who has some difficulties."*

These joint programs could work across specialist and mainstream schools. As one student said when asked what they most liked about school,

*"I'm in a Lego group and a Nintendo Switch group."*

Families valued the opportunity to choose the school for their child, based on their child's needs and available supports. For several families whose children attend specialist education settings, these schools were the only place where their child would be able to access small class sizes, sufficient engagement with allied health, and the right support to sustain their engagement in school. As one parent said,

*"I'm an advocate on the specialist school side... I researched schools and selected a school based on my children's needs."*

Other families were distressed when their local government school did not support their child's inclusion, and felt pushed into the non-government or specialist education system. As one parent said,

*"I'm a thorough believer that all children deserve a mainstream education. Not only is it better for people with disability but by having segregated education we deprive the community of the wonderful experience we're getting today."*

## Conclusion

Much of the discussion and many of the recommendations in this snapshot compliment the eight areas identified by ACD in our 2022 Victorian Election Platform – Making education better for students with disability.

Through our Support Line, ACD supports 1500 Victorian families each year. Education and the NDIS are the two biggest issues raised with us by families, including the interface between the two systems.

While this snapshot captures the voices of eight families, it reflects ongoing systemic barriers that Victorian children with disability and their families face in accessing high-quality education.

As a grade one student said when asked what they thought about school,

*"I love it."*

### For more information contact

Karen Dimmock CEO

[karend@acd.org.au](mailto:karend@acd.org.au)

0448 912 786