



RESEARCH



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**STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS
IN NSW INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS**

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Students with special needs in NSW independent schools

Almost one in five students in NSW Independent schools has special needs. AISNSW explores the evidence on how schools provide the highest quality schooling experience for students with special needs and examines the data.

All Australian schools are seeing an increase in the number of students with special educational needs in the classroom. Independent schools in NSW are no exception. When broadly defined to include students with learning and behavioural difficulties as well as those students with a diagnosed disability, all 387 independent schools in the state now find that responding to individual differences and special needs is a normal part of their responsibility to their school community, with almost one in five students having special educational needs.

As the challenge to schools and teachers seeking to manage the diversity of the typical classroom has grown, so too has our understanding of what works to provide the best schooling experience for students

with special needs. This paper draws on that evidence to show that the recognised strengths of the most effective schools are even more critical in teaching students with special needs. These strengths include:

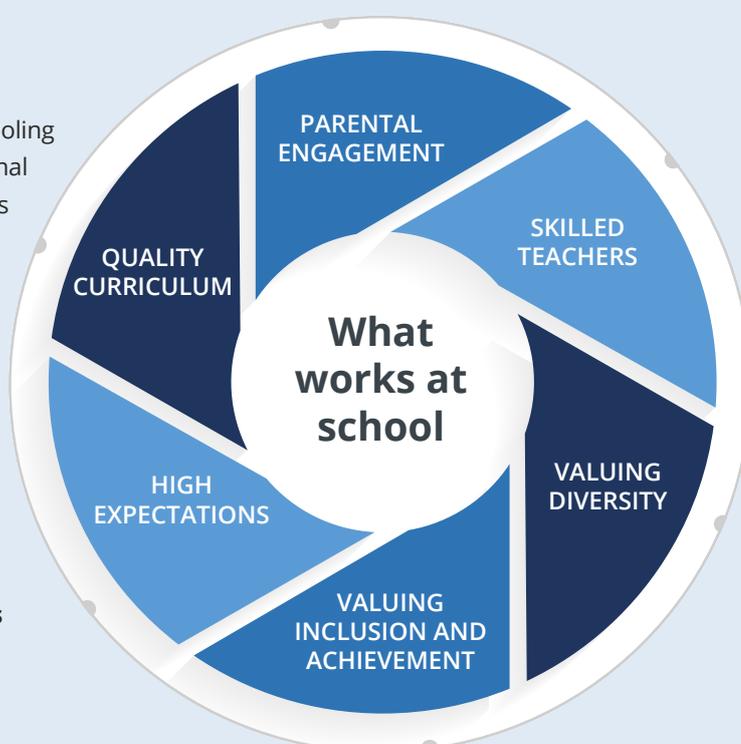
- high quality teaching and leadership
- a focus on high standards and the broad goals of schooling (including but not limited to academic achievement)
- a positive, safe and ordered school environment
- close collaboration with families
- a commitment to meet the needs of all students.

It sets this evidence in the context of recently released data on students with disability and the legislative and policy framework in which all schools operate.

What works for students with special needs at the school level

The important dimensions of a quality schooling experience for students with special educational needs are recognisably similar to the qualities that lead to good schooling outcomes for all students. These are:

- **parental engagement**
- knowledgeable and **skilled teachers** with a positive attitude to individual student needs
- a school culture that **values diversity**
- a school culture that values **inclusion and achievement**
- accountability, linked to **high expectations** for all
- a **quality curriculum**.



An inclusive school culture and leadership

Inclusion means more than the physical integration of students with disability in mainstream classes. Real inclusion entails acceptance, participation and valuing diversity. Research literature on special education shows that the way in which inclusion is understood and accepted by the whole school community is a crucial factor in addressing special needs, and that school leaders have a key role to play in promoting inclusion in practice and influencing teacher attitudes. Accepting that educating students with disability is an issue for the whole school, not just for individual teachers, is of primary importance.

The ethos and values which shape school culture are recognised as important factors in the overall effectiveness of independent schools, linked to parental satisfaction and high achievement. A school ethos that welcomes and caters for diversity, sets high expectations for all, provides a safe and ordered environment and develops strong family-school partnerships is a characteristic of the best schools. Nowhere is this more important than in addressing special education needs in mainstream settings.

This ethos permeates from the top down. Strong leadership fully committed to inclusion influences students' experience of schooling, and a positive school experience, regardless of achievement, makes a significant difference to how well young people fare in their post-school lives. Studies of the schooling experience of students with disability have identified three factors – rigour, relevance and relationships, all components of a positive school climate – as having particular importance in shaping their views of their education and strongly affecting their post-school outcomes. A quality schooling experience for students with special educational needs is dependent as much on acceptance by classmates and opportunities to play

a full part in the wider life of the school, including extra curricula activities, as achievement.

A school-wide commitment to inclusion is also critical to give teachers the confidence they need to deal with diversity in their classroom and to support them with specialist assistance. This commitment to inclusion extends to the release time teachers need for professional learning, for collaboration with colleagues, specialists and family and for developing and reviewing the individual plans, which are an essential underpinning of an effective approach to meeting the needs of students with disability.

Teachers' skills

For all students, teacher quality is without doubt the greatest in-school influence on outcomes. The most effective teachers are well prepared for a diverse range of students and equipped to use a variety of teaching practices and techniques adapted for

individual students. They practise the 'quality differentiated teaching' needed to respond to the educational needs of all students in a diverse class.

The new data collection system for students with disability brings into focus the professionalism of teachers. The system itself requires teachers to have a clear understanding of the educational needs of all their students, to make evidence-based decisions about

individual students needing reasonable adjustments to access education, and to assess the level of adjustment to be provided and the broad category of disability under which the student best fits. In this way, the process of identification assists teachers to design solutions and monitor progress.

Effective teaching for a diverse classroom calls for teachers to have a good knowledge of assessment and how to use it to remediate and extend students, and the ability to build positive relationships with students, and manage the classroom environment. The most effective teachers also set high expectations for all

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students to succeed, collaborate with colleagues and engage in continuing professional development.

All the research evidence points to the use of individual plans and programs as the hallmark of effective special needs education. A planned individualised approach is the centrepiece of effective special education. This approach:

- identifies the needs unique to each student
- outlines the adjustments and procedures needed to maximise their access and participation
- determines necessary support services
- builds in periodic review, evaluation of progress, and resetting of goals and strategies.

An individualised approach of this kind is demanding on teachers and time-consuming. It calls for expertise as well as collaboration with colleagues, family and sometimes outside professionals. Teachers repeatedly cite time constraints as a barrier to catering for students with special needs, as well as to giving adequate attention to non-disabled students. They highlight their need for more time as essential to working with a class of diverse students: time for individual planning, lesson planning and preparation, collaboration with colleagues, professional development and engaging with families.

Other aspects of teaching practice which have also been found to be important for students with learning difficulties include the effective monitoring of progress, having a good understanding of the critical factors associated with progress in academic areas such as reading and mathematics, and providing many opportunities for practice and feedback. A main difference in teaching students with learning difficulties is the need to be more direct and explicit, more intensive and more supportive. High quality instruction for students with special needs is also likely to involve small group instruction, emotional support through encouragement and feedback and supervised independent practice.

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While teachers' skills in adapting the curriculum to meet individual student's needs and goals in a diverse class are the key to improving outcomes for students with special needs, the success of inclusion as a policy depends on teachers being able to use these strategies at the same time as they meet their equal responsibility to the other students in their class, including high achievers. Teachers and parents often express concern about the effect of having special needs students in mainstream classes, especially students with behavioural difficulties. Research suggests that with high quality teaching, this concern is misplaced. Differentiation on the basis of individual educational need and using progress monitoring to inform teaching and learning have been shown to have the potential to promote gains in all students, increasing the achievement level of students with disability or at risk of failure at the same time as raising the scores of typical students and students labelled as gifted and talented.

Managing the range of differences present in most classrooms is recognised as one of the greatest challenges for teachers, especially for new graduates and less experienced teachers. Behavioural difficulties and high level needs are seen as especially demanding and disruptive for other students, hence the need for continuing

professional development opportunities to fill gaps and keep up to date with recent evidence and experience. Particular priorities identified by teachers for further professional development include training in explicit instruction and phonics, which are acknowledged to be important strategies for the early literacy development for many special needs students, and the development of good classroom management skills, with techniques and strategies for dealing with challenging behaviours. There is also interest from many teachers in having more training to increase their understanding of specific learning difficulties, such as those associated with autism.

Finland: every student has special needs – a model for inclusive education

Finland has consistently been among the highest performing countries in the OECD-led PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) testing. Teacher quality is well known to be the main pillar of Finnish education success. Teacher quality however underpins another key feature of Finnish education, an individualised approach whereby every child is considered to have special needs. The Finnish system gives high priority to personalised learning and to comprehensive support systems for learners who struggle at school.

The assessment of each student's particular learning needs is a natural part of the everyday teaching and learning process for Finnish teachers. Teachers identify learning difficulties and problems and the need for special support at any time, and support is categorised by level – general, intensified or special – with intensified and special support being based on careful assessment and long-term planning in multi-professional teams and on individual learning plans. Support often takes the form of part-time withdrawal from the mainstream class, focusing on the core subjects of literacy, mathematics and foreign

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languages (important in the Finnish context) and on behaviour. Withdrawal teaching is mostly done on a temporary basis and for short periods, and seems to be achieved without stigma.

A high proportion of students – about 15% – receive intensified or special support in a year, while many more – 29% – receive some additional support or remedial teaching. The additional support can take many forms, from team teaching to small group and individual sessions to placement in special classes. Each student in special education has a personalised learning plan based on the school curriculum, which adjusts expectations accordingly.

The result is that in the Finnish system, special education is hardly something special but a natural part of the everyday teaching and learning process. Almost half of the students leaving comprehensive schooling at age 16 have been engaged in some sort of special education, personalised help or individual guidance at some point in their schooling.

The role of specialist and support staff

Teachers themselves identify a need for more support from teaching assistants and teaching aides, especially aides with the capacity and experience to deal with specific learning difficulties, as important for them to be able to address the learning needs of all students in a diverse class. They see the lack of such support as a barrier to curriculum access for students with learning difficulties.

If additional specialist services and support are available, the evidence suggests it is necessary to look carefully at how they work within the school

and classroom. Teacher aides and support staff are associated with better outcomes when they operate in support of the classroom teacher's strategies and where they have the necessary skills, but not where they lack those skills or where they are used as a substitute for the teacher's role. Reliance on teacher assistants to provide instruction and to function as the 'primary' teachers for students with disability has been shown to have unintended detrimental effects, limiting the student's access to qualified instruction, interfering with peer interaction, stigmatising the student and promoting dependence, thus undermining the objectives of inclusion.

Qualified special education teachers with knowledge of specific pedagogies that work with particular disabilities and learning difficulties are also much in demand, although not always accessible to schools when they need them. Research has found that where special education teachers are most effective, it is their strengths in lesson planning and preparation, behaviour management and instruction techniques that have the greatest impact on the achievement of students with special needs. More experienced teachers in mainstream classes also tend to have more achievement gains through these same capacities.

A rigorous and relevant curriculum

Historically, some students with disabilities were taught different content from their peers. It is now recognised that low expectations and an uninspiring and restricted curriculum are major barriers to student progress and success, and that curriculum adaptation rather than a separate curriculum is best practice in meeting the needs of students with disability in the mainstream classroom. The expectation that students with learning difficulties will have access to the general curriculum underlines the importance of teachers' skills in assessing and reassessing individual needs and in adapting the curriculum to meet each student's needs and goals and to promote further learning.

The Australian Curriculum is designed to offer this flexibility, so that teachers can tailor their teaching in ways that provide rigorous, relevant and engaging learning and assessment activities for students with special education needs. The principle is that most students with special needs can engage with the curriculum if necessary adjustments are made to the learning activities and the way they are organised and presented. This may need to go hand in hand with adjustments at the school level to the learning environment, assessment strategies and the ways students can demonstrate their learning.

Reliance on teacher assistants to provide instruction and function as the 'primary' teacher for students with disability has been shown to have unintended consequences.

The assumption is that many students with special education needs will follow the same developmental progression, but not necessarily at the same rate, and maybe differently in different learning areas.

Some students may not reach the standards at the same time as their peers, but they are expected to follow the same sequence. Not every student will have the same experience, but they are expected to have access to age-equivalent content.

Research has found that in addition to a rigorous and relevant curriculum, the provision of vocational education programs in secondary schools is linked with good employment

outcomes post-school for students with special educational needs. Occupationally specific programs and work experience in the last two years of high school, designed around individual goals and needs, are valued by students and lead to better employment and education outcomes. Students participating in such programs have identified the accomplishment of personally meaningful activities and the emergence of self-awareness and self-confidence as important benefits to them.

Assessment of achievement

It is generally accepted that accountability measures for students with special needs should assess the difference schools and teachers are making, and focus on progress and student gains. Students with learning difficulties are likely to be beginning at a different level from their classmates, so what matters is the opportunity to access the curriculum and make progress, at a pace that works with appropriate support. Age and prior attainment are the starting point for developing expectations and setting goals.

It is usual to offer accommodations in testing regimes for students with special needs. This is so in NAPLAN testing. All students in mainstream schools are encouraged to participate in NAPLAN, but there is provision for reasonable accommodations to be made

for students with special needs including students with mild intellectual disability and communication or behavioural disorders. The special assistance that can be provided is meant to reflect the kind of support and assistance the student normally receives in the classroom. Students with significant intellectual or functional disability may be exempted from one or more of the tests. The expectation, consistent with the goal of NAPLAN at the school level to provide valuable information about a student's progress against national standards, is that the achievement of students with high support needs should be measured against the content and outcomes of their individual learning plan rather than against achievement standards.

The NSW Higher School Certificate also allows flexibility for students with special needs in the examination process, once an application by the school is approved by an independent panel.

Parental involvement

Research has long shown the value of direct involvement of parents in schooling – schools with a high level of parental engagement have better outcomes. The successful education of students with disability is even more dependent on close parental engagement. Through the processes of choosing the best school setting, the development of individualised plans, monitoring progress and seeking additional support, the best outcomes are achieved when families are engaged as partners with the school.

By definition, independent schools function in partnership with parents and this accountability to families is recognised as a strength of the sector. In many cases, schools and individual educators are the closest non-family support available to the parents of students with disability and they therefore play an important role in supporting parents to know what services are available.

A close collaborative relationship between parents and school staff, especially the classroom teacher, is a particularly important element in the development

of the individual learning plans which are the critical ingredient of special education in the classroom.

Making sense of the data

Counting the numbers of students with disability and special needs in Australian schools and categorising them has for many years been a fraught enterprise. Jurisdictions have used different definitions, some more restrictive than others, with the result that prevalence rates appear highly variable and making comparisons is unsound.

In NSW, the criteria for categorising students with disability for school Census purposes depend on medical diagnosis. Under these criteria, 8,219 students with disability were enrolled in mainstream NSW independent schools in 2015. A further 3,344 students were enrolled in 28 Special Schools and 23 Special Assistance Schools. In total, in 2015 the 11,563 students with disability in independent schools (including independent Catholic schools) made up 6% of enrolments in the sector. This contrasts with the parallel figures for NSW government schools of 91,000 students with disability, representing 12% of the NSW government school population.

This apparent difference between government and non-government schools in catering for students with disability is often used as evidence that non-government schools are not making a fair contribution to educating students with special needs.

The sense that the numbers reported using more restrictive definitions fell well short of a true representation of the challenge facing classroom teachers has often led to official reports on students with disability giving two separate figures: the number of students having a confirmed disability against departmental criteria; and the additional number of students with special needs relating to learning difficulties and/or behaviour disorders.

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A new national data collection

From 2013 to 2015, the Commonwealth and states worked together to refine a new Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on school students with disability, the first results of which were published late in 2016. This statistical collection adopts a broad definition of students with special needs and is intended to provide accurate information on the number of students with disability that is comparable across states. It is designed to rely on the professional judgement of teachers on the adjustments they need to make to meet additional learning and support needs.

There are many reservations about the detailed figures that have emerged from the first full round of the NCCD including the Commonwealth Minister's assessment that "This data . . . hasn't come to a credible landing point just yet", and the Commonwealth's recognition that "the quality of the NCCD at school level is still evolving". Only high level data have been publicly released, giving national and state statistics on the numbers of students with disability and their distribution by category of disability and the level of educational adjustment required. Sectoral data are only publicly available at the national level, although school authorities have access to some more detailed

TABLE 1: National distribution of students with disability by sector (NCCD 2015)

	Enrolment share of sector	Students with disability as % of total student enrolments in sector	Students with disability in sector as % of total students with disability
Government	65%	19.4%	70%
Catholic	20%	14.4%	16%
Independent	14%	18%	14%
All sectors	100%	18%	100%

TABLE 2: Distribution of students with disability by sector and by level of adjustment, as percentage of total students with disability, nationally

Level of Adjustment	Government schools	Catholic Schools	Independent Schools	All Sectors
Support within quality differentiated teaching practice	21%	4%	6%	31%
Supplementary	30%	10%	6%	46%
Substantial	12%	2%	2%	16%
Extensive	7%	1%	1%	8%
Share of all students requiring adjustment	70%	16%	14%	100%
Share of all Australian school students	65%	20%	14%	100%

* Some figures may not add due to rounding.

data which, while not regarded as sound enough for publication or deep analysis, are used to inform discussion.

The NCCD data demonstrate that nationally, independent schools are making a fair contribution in addressing special education needs. The statistics show that in 2015, 14% of all students with special needs attend independent schools, consistent with the sector's enrolment share. The national data also show that students with disability comprise 18% of the total student population in government and non-government schools. The picture for independent schools in NSW is similar. The total number of students with disability in NSW independent schools is more than double the 11,563 students counted for school Census purposes.

The NCCD makes provision for schools to identify the different levels of adjustment required to meet students' needs, ranging from a low level of adjustment, described as within 'quality differentiated teaching practice', through 'supplementary' and 'substantial' to 'extensive' adjustment. This is a point of differentiation between the independent sector and government and Catholic schools in NSW and nationally shown in the NCCD data. For government and Catholic schools, the most frequently reported level of adjustment is the second level, supplementary, whereas in independent schools, the greatest number of special needs students require the lowest level of adjustment.

In mainstream schools, the majority of students with disability are categorised as having cognitive or social/emotional difficulties. These are the numbers that have grown significantly in recent years, presenting considerable challenges to classroom teachers. The numbers of students with physical and sensory disorders, who can require resource-intensive adaptation by schools, have remained fairly stable.

A universal phenomenon in special needs education is the preponderance of boys, with the greater differences found in relation to learning difficulties rather than physical disability.

Mainstream and special schools

By far the majority of students with special needs attend regular schools and participate in mainstream education. Under the more restrictive state definition, about 29% of students with disability in independent schools in the state attend special schools or special assistance schools, which offer highly specialised intervention and support. When the broader NCCD definition is adopted, which encompasses students with special learning needs as well as diagnosed disability, the proportion of students in special schools is much lower. Compared with other states, NSW has a high number of special schools. This is explained in terms of the history of special needs provision in the state, and is seen as an important dimension of parental choice. The majority of the students in independent special schools in NSW have learning difficulties associated with autism spectrum disorder.

The policy framework

An inclusive approach to educating students with special needs, explicit in Australian education since the enactment of disability discrimination legislation in 1992, has been embraced by independent schools. The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* requires educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of students with disability, unless the changes needed would cause major difficulties or give rise to unreasonable costs. The *Disability Standards for*

Education under the act are a guide for schools to ensure they are compliant with the legislation and provide needed support. The NCCD is founded on this legislation and the standards.

The rationale for the inclusive approach enshrined in the legislation is that students with special education needs should have the same opportunity to experience a quality education as other students, taking into account the broad goals of schooling which involve social and emotional development, the development

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of dispositions towards learning and general wellbeing as well as academic achievement. The principle is that students with special educational needs are best educated in the most typical, least restrictive setting possible, able to access the general curriculum and participate as part of the whole school community.

Pursuing the goal of good school and post-school outcomes for all students places the onus on each school to recognise, value and support diversity, and on all teachers to provide learning programs that respond to individual difference.

For all that the policy of inclusion strongly favours mainstream schooling and that this is also the first preference of most parents, special schools continue to have an important place in the education of a small proportion of students with disability. They can

be particularly important for students with high and complex support needs and for students who need a more specialised setting, sometimes just temporarily, with, for example, the scope for more individual attention, special provision for therapy, staff with specific expertise, or a more intensive approach to behaviour regulation.

Research studies generally conclude that there is no one best place or one best way – no ‘one size fits all’ – for students with special educational needs. The choice of a special school over a mainstream setting is one that can only be resolved on an individual basis, with guidance from special educators and other specialists, taking account of the individual needs of each student as well as parental preference.

Support for NSW independent schools

Independent schools in NSW have access to specialist support services for students with disability through the AISNSW. A small team of special education consultants is able to respond to requests from schools for assistance with the development and implementation of individual student plans, determining what adjustments are needed in schools, completing applications for government funding and providing best practice advice.

AISNSW consultants are also available to provide guidance to schools on the relevant legislation and assist schools to access support and services. In particular, AISNSW offers a range of special education professional learning activities including conferences, courses, programs of study, in-school consultancies and up-to-date resources.

A longer discussion paper on students with special needs in NSW independent schools is available on request from AISNSW. This includes more detailed analysis of the data, a discussion of the policy of inclusion and additional commentary on research findings about effective educational approaches for students with special needs.