Review to **Achieve Educational Excellence** in Australian Schools

Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Australian Association of Special Education Inc.
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: ACT

Summary

The Australian Association of Special Education Inc. (AASE) is the national peak body of professionals, other paraprofessionals, and community members with expertise and/or interest in the education of children and young people with special education needs.

We recommend that

- All instruction and programs for students with disability be evidence-based, regardless of teaching setting. We endorse an explicit teaching approach for academic skills, strategy instruction, and social skill instruction
- Teachers in special schools and units and support teachers in inclusive settings hold an appropriate qualification in special education.
- The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) produce standards for the certification of special educators.
- Preservice teacher education and in-service professional learning courses provide teachers with knowledge of effective, research-based instructional strategies.
- Research-based practices be used to facilitate the transitions of all students with disability into, through, and out of the education system.
- Formal and informal processes nationally and within schools be developed to assess the educational progress of all students with disability, including the outcomes of individual interventions and supports.
- Data be collected to provide accountability and transparency around educational outcomes for students with disability who do not participate in NAPLAN, particularly those with more severe or complex disabilities.

Main submission

Students with disability should leave school equipped for meaningful employment where possible, looking forward to a high quality of life with full participation in the community and living as independently as possible. At present, people with disability are at greater risk of unemployment and of living in poverty. The National Disability Strategy document notes the significant gap in educational achievement between students with disability and those without. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported in 2017 that people with disability continue to have lower levels of educational attainment than those without disability There is an ongoing failure of education systems to respond to the needs of students with disability despite the existence of the Education Standards of the Disability Discrimination Act. In 2017, the NSW Ombudsman reported "Complaints to our office and consultations with stakeholders identify that the suspension of students with disability for behaviour that is associated with their disability continues to be a significant issue"

Schools need to do a better job of meeting the diverse needs of students with disability. Consideration must be given to literacy and numeracy, social/communication skills, self-determination, and preparation for meaningful employment and adult life. We believe that the use of scientifically supported assessment and instructional practices would considerably increase the attainment of students with disability

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) advocated for all students to be successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens. These broad ambitions continue to be relevant for students with disability, along with the Declaration's commitment to individualised learning to fulfill the diverse needs of our learners.

In determining what capabilities should be learned, consideration should be given to what the research evidence tells us can be taught and how it is best taught. Capabilities such as problem solving and critical thinking are discipline specific, and need to be taught within specific disciplines; they cannot be developed in a vacuum. This means content and knowledge are crucial if students are to be critical consumers of information. Moreover, capabilities should be taught with the methods learnt from the effective instruction evidence.

Self-determination and self-advocacy skills are crucial for successful transition to post-school life. Self-determination includes a student's knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses. Self-advocacy is the ability to use this knowledge to set goals and act on them. For many students with disability, these skills will need to be specifically taught. This can be done by using research-based practices, such as a self-monitoring strategy and social skills instruction. Research shows that self-determined adolescents are more likely to secure employment post high school.

AASE believes the evaluation of quality and success should be based on an objective assessment of student outcomes against predetermined learning criteria. Student outcomes should be directly measured and evaluations should not depend only on teacher reports. The measurable achievements of many students with significant levels of disability, in particular those students with moderate and severe levels of intellectual disability, have rarely been reported on, other than on an individual basis to parents and carers, and many thousands of students with special needs are exempted from any form of national or standardised assessment. A significant improvement would be the development and use of accountability measures for students with disability who are currently not included in NAPLAN. For lower-achieving students with mild disabilities or with severe learning difficulties, there is anecdotal evidence that schools suggest parents withdraw these children from NAPLAN and they then do not appear in the school data. Students who are judged unable to participate in NAPLAN, even with suitable adjustments, are exempted and simply included in the data as being below the minimum standard. This means, in effect, that there are no external accountability measures for schools educating students with more severe disability.

AASE acknowledges the considerable resources that have been committed to improving education for students with disability, with the federal government budgeting $5.2 billion over 2014-2017. In general, we believe cost-effectiveness should be a major consideration. We endorse the principle of funding allocation being related to individual need, rather than disability label, as levels of spending are not always related to outcomes. Research in the US has shown that levels of spending on special education services are not necessarily related to student outcomes. When students require adjustments to access the curriculum, for example, money is often spent on teacher aides to support students with disabilities. Although well-trained aides implementing specific evidence-based programs can be an asset, there is currently no requirement that aides receive such training and their roles are often general and ill-defined. Research from the UK shows that when aides are employed with no clear educational roles, educational outcomes may actually be poorer than when no aide is employed, and can also result in the isolation of students from their peers, and over-reliance on adult assistance. For these reasons, systems and school should be encouraged to use a much wider range of adjustments, including the employment of qualified special educators.

As a general approach, AASE recommends the Response to Intervention (RtI) model, particularly for students with less severe disabilities and special education needs who are included in regular classes. RtI is a three-tiered system of providing quality instruction and interventions matched to student need and using data on student achievement for both decision-making and progress monitoring. In Tier 1, all students are given quality, research-based core instruction in the general education

classroom, with regular assessment to ensure students reach appropriate benchmarks. For students who do not make good progress, Tier 2 additional support in small groups of five or six students is provided. For students who do not progress with Tier 2 support, Tier 3 provides for intensive supports that may be provided by specialist teachers.

This model has been implemented in the US and led to improved outcomes for students, with fewer students being formally identified as having special education needs. This allows for the provision of special education resources to students who need them, regardless of disability classification, and students with special education needs may be identified much earlier before they experience failure. AASE supports this approach, as it clearly links the provision of funding and additional resources to educational need, and includes the use of effective, research-based practice for all students. Currently in Australia there is no requirement that Tier 1 instruction reflects research-based practices, and students who fail to master skills are often withdrawn from class, rather than receiving additional research-based instruction in areas of need.

In the social behaviour area, a similar three-tier continuum of support system is Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (PBIS) or Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL). This has been formally adopted in several states, but without strong systems for monitoring implementation fidelity. It is designed to provide all students with effective instruction and support on appropriate behaviour, and allows for targeted resources for students with significant behaviour problems. The foundations of PBIS are socially valid, evidence-based, and aligned with systems change and sustainability considerations.

Priority should be given to funding for research-based programs and benchmark assessments. The importance of research-based assessment tools for benchmarking student learning is an essential element in RtI/PBIS approaches.

We strongly advocate that support teachers, and teachers in special education units and schools, MUST have a qualification in special education or inclusive education that incorporates:

- curriculum-based assessment and monitoring of student learning
- effective programming
- effective explicit teaching strategies in basic literacy and numeracy skills, cognitive skills, social and communication skills
- teaching, mentoring and modeling effective practices for other teachers and teachers' aides.
- an understanding of the principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis, which underpin many effective pedagogical and behavior management strategies

In order for effective research-based strategies to be used in schools, there is a need for suitably qualified special educators in both segregated settings and as support teachers in inclusive settings. At present there is a lack of suitable qualified teaching staff, surveys of teachers in special education positions in Australia show around 30% to 40% are not qualified. The introduction of additional standards for qualified special educators to extend and refine the existing AITSL teaching standards would help ensure a teaching force with knowledge of evidence-based practice for students with disability.

Since most students with disability are educated in regular classes, all teachers need skills in differentiating instruction, providing adjustments, and monitoring student progress, with or without the support of a special educator. All initial teacher education programs should contain a stand-alone unit on special education, and in addition, strategies to meet the needs of students with disability should be incorporated throughout teacher education programs. Initial teacher education courses and professional learning after graduation must include research-based practices in content, including direct instruction teaching approaches (for example in literacy and numeracy) and behaviourally-based classroom management strategies.

The importance of timely and ongoing transition assessment and planning for and with students with disability is sometimes neglected in Australia. Yet, it has been established that research-based transition planning and practices increase students' post-school outcomes, in employment, further education, and independent living. It is essential that students with disability actively participate in transition planning, and receive instruction in self-determination and self-advocacy skills in order for them to do this successfully. Both special educators and mainstream teachers need to participate in transition planning and prepare students for transitions.

For students with disability, research shows that the use of direct and explicit instruction is more effective in teaching basic skills and knowledge than child-centred constructivist approaches espoused by most universities and education departments. Effective approaches for students with special education needs are likely to include direct, teacher centred instruction, regular formative evaluation of teaching programs and individualised planning Many of these strategies, often drawn from applied behaviour analysis, are likely to be beneficial for all students, as a recent analysis of research on education has shown. It is important to note, that many of these effective practices are not routinely used in schools, and are not included in many teacher education programs. Research also shows that while factors such as the student's background and aptitude have some bearing on outcomes, these are insignificant compared with the quality of the teacher.

Although Australian jurisdictions often use some form of individualised education plan or program to support students with disability, there is no national policy approach to their use or to monitoring student outcomes, apart from the

requirement in the Disability Standards for Education that schools consult the students and/or their carer when making adjustments. Student outcome data would provide one source of information to allow consideration of the effectiveness of adjustments that are provided. The lack of outcome data means that although schools are making adjustments, there is no way of judging the general effectiveness of these adjustments, or knowing whether additional targeted funding and supports for students with disability are effective. Data are required not only on specific supports and adjustments provided but also on outcomes for students. The educational progress of ALL students must be monitored.

The most significant barrier to improved teacher practice and student outcomes is the failure to engage with high quality scientific research at all levels of education. The NSW Department of Education has moved in the right direction with the establishment of the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), but it is worth noting that this section of the Department does not have a direct role in determining what programs are adopted in NSW schools. The evidence rating given by CESE to both the literacy and numeracy interventions rolled out by the NSW Department of Education as part of a $500 million state government initiative is the lowest level of its evidence hierarchy. In relation to the same initiative the Ministerial Advisory Group on Literacy and Numeracy noted that:

“Based on the criteria used for the review, among the literacy interventions reviewed there is no research evidence or very limited evidence available for the efficacy of:… Best Start… [or] Language, Learning and Literacy” (Meiers et al., 2013 p.xi)

“Based on the criteria used for the review, among the numeracy interventions reviewed there is no research evidence or very limited evidence available for the efficacy of… TEN” (Meiers et al, 2013 p.xii)

When research-based practices are identified, there should be a requirement that these are taught in teacher education programs, professional learning courses and implemented in schools. See for example, What Works Best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance, CESE 2014. Where practices are unproven or disproven (such as the use of sensory integration-based approaches for students with disability), schools should be actively discouraged from using such approaches.

Schools must be accountable for student progress. This requires the development of adequate monitoring and benchmarking that are based on scientific research and evidence, not on particular theoretical and ideological approaches. Students, teachers and taxpayers deserve better than benchmarks that are developed by committees of who support a particular point of view, such as constructivism, over available research evidence. The proposed phonics check is one example of an

assessment that is based on sound research and is an objective measure of student skills. Implementation of this check would ensure early identification of children who are likely to struggle to learn to read, allow early intervention and encourage teachers and schools to use research based early reading instruction.

The experience in NSW schools where programs and/or student learning has been evaluated against the Best Start Literacy Continuum, Best Start Numeracy Continuum, the K-10 Literacy Continuum and the K-10 Numeracy Continuum has not resulted in improved student outcomes as measured by NAPLAN. The recently developed ACARA learning progressions reflect many Best Start and NSW Continuum indicators rather than objective measures of student performance. They too are unlikely to be particularly effective in exacting change in teacher practice or student outcomes.

Evidence based assessment processes must be an absolute priority. Teachers are extremely busy people. Time spent on the inevitable professional learning that will accompany the launch of the ACARA learning progressions would be better spent on developing teachers' and principals' knowledge of evidence based teaching and assessment practices.

We have noted several of these actions in prior responses. To summarise, AASE believes we need:

- ATSL to develop research-based standards to accredit special educators as specialist teachers. This should cover teachers working in stand-alone settings and those providing support in regular classrooms.
- Accreditation of teacher education courses (initial, later qualifications, and professional learning) to ensure the content is research-based. This would require provision of the evidence base for scrutiny by the accreditors.
- Accountability measures for students with disability who do not participate in NAPLAN.
- A focus on cost-effectiveness to ensure money is spent on introducing, supporting and implementing research-based practices.
- Research-based approaches to transition
- The development of evidence based assessment and monitoring tools (such as the proposed phonics check) and accompanying professional learning for teachers.
- Leadership standards that require school principals to have a deep understanding of what constitutes credible research evidence

Cognitive load theory is providing further scientific evidence to support the use of explicit and direct instruction, especially for students in the early stages of learning in a discipline area.

Although explicit and direct instruction has been known to be effective for over 50 years, a major barrier to its use has been the philosophical commitment to constructivism and practices such as problem-based and discovery learning, especially in universities and education bureaucracies. We believe all teachers should be competent in the whole range of instructional strategies and should be able to use direct instruction with beginning learners and with those who struggle, and move to more discovery-oriented approaches when students have a firm grasp of basic skills and knowledge. Developments such as the ACARA numeracy progression, which reflects a constructivist approach to the exclusion of any other theory of learning, is a potential barrier to improved teacher practice. This progression excludes many essential skills identified in the mathematics teaching literature, assumes one particular approach to teaching and fails to be inclusive of all learners.

There needs to be a change in mind-set in all education authorities, including ACARA, education departments, and universities to start treating education as a profession with a research-based foundation. This move is unlikely to come from within university education departments or established state education bureaucracies. As with medicine in the early years of the 20th century, change is likely to be driven by inquiries and evaluations from those outside the existing education system.

Such inquiries could drive the development of mechanisms that hold education departments and schools accountable for both program selection and student outcomes. This would include both programs that are endorsed for classroom implementation and programs of professional learning for teachers and

If requested AASE Inc can provide references and sources for our positions. These have been omitted to save space.