

*2020 Review of the
Disability Standards for
Education (2005)*
AUSPELD submission

This submission has been prepared by **AUSPELD** (The Australian Federation of Specific Learning Difficulties Associations) comprising: The Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation (DSF) in Western Australia, SPELD Queensland, SPELD New South Wales, SPELD Victoria and SPELD South Australia. We have drawn on our extensive educational experience in all Australian States and Territories as well as the results of three comprehensive surveys designed to seek information and feedback from:

- parents of students with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) and other learning or language disorders;
- teachers working with students experiencing learning difficulties (including SLDs and other learning or language disorders); and,
- students with SLDs and other learning or language disorders.

AUSPELD received almost 1000 completed surveys and a summary of all questions and responses is attached to this submission. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the many teachers, parents and students who took the time to respond to the survey and who spoke so honestly about their experiences and views. Hopefully, we have captured your thoughts and voices in our submission.

Mandy Nayton OAM

President AUSPELD

Thousands of comments and suggestions were made by education staff, families and students, in response to our survey. The following two comments, the first from a teacher and the second from a parent, reflect the views of many of the respondents –

- *“This is a social justice issue. I am tired of watching our vulnerable children head off to high school with a reading age of grade 2 and under, or the high cost to their mental health, either through teasing, embarrassment or the shame of repeating another year - usually at the cost of leaving any friends behind to start again at another school.”*
- *“We have worked hard to ensure our son has a healthy self-esteem and understands his learning difficulties. He understands self-advocacy and knows that if he shares a struggle we will all work together to find a solution that works for him.”*

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Introduction

The **key question for this Review is whether, and to what extent, the Standards are making a positive difference** towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disability.

Specific Questions:

- Are the **rights, obligations and measures of compliance** set out in the Standards (and its Guidance Notes) **clear and appropriate**?
- Do students, families and carers, educators, education providers and policy makers **know about, understand, apply and comply with** the rights, obligations and measures of compliance in the Standards?
- In the 15 years since the Standards were developed, **have the Standards contributed towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities** on the same basis as students without disabilities?

It is our intention to consider these three specific questions under the following headings:

1. **enrolment**
2. **participation**
3. **curriculum development, accreditation and delivery**
4. **student support services**
5. **elimination of harassment and victimisation.**

In the final section of our submission, we will offer some **specific recommendations** in terms of changes to the Standards that we believe would lead to greater clarity and understanding. In this section we will make specific reference to a number of documents, including the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005).

1. Enrolment

Generally, students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) and other learning and language disorders not refused school enrolment due to their disability; however, it is frequently the case that the students are dissuaded from enrolment in specific courses because of the functional impact of their disability. It may appear to the school that a student struggling with aspects of literacy and/or numeracy will find the course requirements too challenging and will not be able to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understandings. In other words, the decision is made without due consideration being given to the standards – in that the student **could** achieve on the same basis as students without a disability, if appropriate intervention and support were to be provided. For example, students with SLDs may be steered away from enrolling in ATAR level subjects due to concerns held by school staff about the students' capacity to achieve at a high enough level.

- i. **Are the rights, obligations and measures of compliance set out in the Standards (and its Guidance Notes) clear and appropriate?**

The current Standards (and the associated Guidance Notes) are **not clear** in this area. It is likely that most educators reviewing the enrolment section of the Standards will view them as relating specifically to enrolment in an institution – rather than a program of study or a specific course. It is also possible that the concept of 'on the same basis as students without disability' is misunderstood in this context. That is, schools do argue that in order to be procedurally 'fair' they need to apply the same set of pre-requisites and expectations on all students enrolling in a course and, as a consequence, will restrict entry to students who

struggle with literacy. This, essentially, results in all students with SLDs (in either reading or written expression) missing out on those courses with a strong literacy component, even when they have the capacity, knowledge and motivation to participate and/or enrol in a particular course of study.

One parent responding to Q. 23 of the survey indicated that:

“My son was told to just give up on some subjects, such as English.” (Q. P23)

- ii. Do students, families and carers, educators, education providers and policy makers **know about, understand, apply and comply with** the rights, obligations and measures of compliance in the Standards?

This is an area of concern for many families and does not appear to be well-understood by schools. The issue generally arises in the secondary years but is established in the primary years with students and families becoming aware of declining expectations of the student (and consequently reduced options). It is also the case that at the time of enrolment, students with disability (including those with SLDs) should be provided with **both** information about the school’s disability policies and procedures, and an explanation of the student’s rights under both the DDA and the Disability Standards. It appears that this rarely happens.

The transition from primary school to secondary school is a time at which students with SLDs (and their families) should be provided with information about their rights and an appropriate transition and enrolment plan developed.

In response to **Q 20** of the **Parent Survey**, 48% of parents indicated that there was little, if any, support provided at the transition - with a further 25% indicating that only minimal support was provided. Only 15% of parents indicated they had been well supported. Specific feedback from families suggested that parents were worried about how they should best support their children as they had not been provided with any information.

An additional finding from the survey was that 78% of teachers responding to question 7 identified a ‘Reduction in the amount of work completed’ as a commonly used adjustment for students with SLDs (Q. T7). It was also the case that 78% of students identified a ‘Reduction in the amount of work to be completed’ to the same question (Q. S3). The cumulative impact of this ‘reduced work’ over many years is less knowledge, less skill development and, frequently, less opportunities for enrolment in future courses and programs.

- iii. In the 15 years since the Standards were developed, **have the Standards contributed towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disabilities?**

It is our view that the situation regarding enrolment in specific courses has remained largely unchanged, at least for students with SLDs and other learning or language difficulties.

Teachers responding to the survey indicated that **only** 3% of students with SLDs and other learning or language disorders had a documented learning plan in place that was being adhered to. This obviously means that, in their view, 97% of students did not have a plan that was being adhered to (Q. T10). It may be that there are a high number of students who have plans in place that are not being followed, and it is likely that some of these plans have been agreed to at the **time of enrolment** (e.g. transition from primary school). Unfortunately, the stark reality is that if there is no plan, or if there is a plan but it is not being followed, the student’s access to education will **not** be on the same basis as students without disabilities.

2. Participation

The Standards make clear that students with SLDs are eligible for adjustments in the classroom to facilitate their **participation** in both learning and assessment. Many families are, however, unaware of the Standards and are therefore unclear about their child's rights in terms of access and participation. In order to participate on the same basis as their peers, students need to be provided with both appropriate instruction (to address any gaps in their skills, knowledge and understandings that are the result of their learning disability; i.e. the functional impact) and appropriate adjustments, to ensure that they can access the curriculum.

- i. Are the rights, obligations and measures of compliance set out in the Standards (and its Guidance Notes) clear and appropriate?

Although the rights, obligations and measures of compliance set out in the Standards appear to be **clearly worded**, it is apparent that many teachers and school leaders either do not understand them or are not familiar with them. It also appears to be the case that they do not outline or stress the need for **participation** to include ensuring that students are given effective, evidence-informed instruction and intervention, thereby allowing them **to** participate.

In addition, as discussed in section 1 (Enrolment), it is frequently the case that students are dissuaded from participating in programs and/or courses (e.g. ATAR courses) without appropriate consultation (in relation to their SLD) and without the opportunity to explore the possible use of adjustments that would allow them to participate. This can be exceptionally disheartening for students who are motivated, have a keen interest in the subject, or for whom the subject represents a pathway towards their chosen career path.

For this reason, we would argue that, although the Standards are reasonably clear they may need additional wording to emphasise the expectations in relation to participation in courses and programs, particularly in the upper secondary years.

- ii. Do students, families and carers, educators, education providers and policy makers **know about, understand, apply and comply with** the rights, obligations and measures of compliance in the Standards?

While some schools are proactive in terms of providing adjustments to students with SLDs, many families feel as though they have to "fight" for their child to receive necessary adjustments. This is sometimes related to schools lacking an understanding of student rights under the Standards.

Many families of children with SLDs feel as though schools fail to provide reasonable adjustments. They find it necessary to specifically request adjustments for their child to facilitate participation as the adjustments offered by the school are insufficient or inappropriate (or, in some cases, adjustments are not offered at all). This often involves seeking professional advice and the provision of documentation to the school to demonstrate need and to justify specific adjustments.

In response to Q1 of the survey, 74% of 520 parents responding to the survey suggested that they only knew a little about their child's rights in terms of access and/or participation under the DSE – or did not know the Standards well at all. Students responding to Q1 of the student survey indicated that they did not know the Standards well at all (53%) or knew them a little (43%).

Many parents commented that they were not aware of the Standards or that the Standards had never been brought to their attention:

*"I've never been aware that there were disability standards in education until I was shown this link."
(Q. P29)*

It was also the case that 85% of parents felt that there were times that their child's school was not meeting their obligations in terms of access and participation and 78% of parents reported that they had raised concerns about the lack of provision of reasonable adjustments with their child's school. (Q. P14).

School-based support (particularly as the student enters high school) is often more directed towards available classroom adjustments (eg, assistive technology) and less directed towards improving the areas of weakness that an individual student may have. This may (in cases where it happens) serve to improve access to content but does not serve to improve the student's skills – and therefore their capacity to **participate**. Many parents are required to access external supports to improve literacy (and numeracy) to a high enough level to enable the student to access the curriculum and demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understandings. This in turn results in a stark division between families with the financial means to engage specialist teachers and/or allied professionals, and those who cannot. Clearly, this means that a significant number of students with SLDs (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) are **not** getting the support they desperately need and failing to achieve at a level remotely in line with their potential.

Unfortunately, it is often suggested by schools that they cannot provide the professionally recommended curricula and instruction needed (particularly at the intervention level) due to constraints of time, access to adequately-trained staff, and / or a lack of resources.

Parents report that some schools are not willing to provide adjustments for varying reasons.

Specifically:

- Schools state that they do not have the funding needed to provide an intervention to teach a student literacy or numeracy skills (for example, a small group literacy intervention group using evidence-based methods of instruction to teach students with SLDs to read);
- Schools indicate that they cannot implement suggested adjustments (changes to classroom practices and/or changes to instruction) unless students have been formally diagnosed with SLD by an external specialist; and,
- Schools state that SLDs are not disabilities and as such they are under no obligation to offer adjustments.

The notion of **unjustifiable hardship** is often inappropriately used by schools to justify failing to provide the instruction needed by students with SLDs.

- iii. In the 15 years since the Standards were developed, have the Standards contributed towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disabilities?

Over the past 15 years there has been a growing awareness of the Standards and the implications of the Standards for students with disability in schools, the classroom and in education more broadly.

The associated action that needs to be taken to ensure that students with disability can access education and training opportunities is still, in many cases, not occurring or is occurring inconsistently.

In response to the second and third question on the student survey, 58% of students reported that some adjustment options had been offered (Q. S2) but that in only 4% of cases were these then used consistently across the school (Q. S5).

Some of the comments from students on this topic included:

"Lots of options were offered by the learning support team, but my teachers are not very good at following through." (Q. S2)

"We had to fight for support." (Q. S2)

"Sometimes I get them in English but marks can be deducted." (Q. S2)

This theme was also apparent in both the teacher and the parent survey. Many teachers indicated that although they viewed their knowledge of the Standards as reasonably strong (51% suggested they knew and understood them ‘very well’), they rated the knowledge of their colleagues as quite poor, with the view that 74% of them understood their obligations either ‘a little’ (49%) or ‘not well at all’ (25%).

One teacher commented:

“It is my role, so I feel confident however I meet significant resistance by staff who do not understand or agree with the Standards.” (Q. T4)

3. Curriculum development, accreditation and delivery

Students with SLD require both high quality teaching and appropriate adjustments in order to access the curriculum on the same basis as their peers. They need to be taught using evidence-based approaches if they are to effectively develop literacy and numeracy skills. This does **not** mean that students with SLD and/or other learning or language difficulties receive a different course or curriculum to students without these difficulties, but rather the approach to delivering the literacy and numeracy aspects of the curriculum should be evidence-informed.

Some approaches to curriculum development and delivery that are commonly used in school settings are at odds with what is now widely recognised and understood to be best practice. The continued use of such approaches is of significant detriment to students with learning difficulties (as well as to the majority of students who do not have a disability). These teaching practices (including, for example, the Whole Language approach to teaching reading, and constructivist approaches to teaching mathematics) will almost certainly result in students with SLDs and other learning and language difficulties falling even further behind their peers.

While there are many schools that do use evidence-based approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy, there are equally as many that do not and that do not understand that this may be a requirement under the Standards.

i. Are the rights, obligations and measures of compliance set out in the Standards (and its Guidance Notes) clear and appropriate?

The Standards make clear that the education provider must ensure that the design of a course or program must be appropriate and accessible to students with disability. It is also clear that consultation with the students is needed in the development of adjustments, and that regular review of adjustments is necessary. The measures of compliance explicitly state that learning materials must be made available in an accessible format and teaching and delivery strategies should be adjusted to meet the learning needs of students with a disability. Assessment procedures and methodologies should also be adapted.

It is our view that this section of the Standards is, in the most part, clear and direct in the structure of rights, obligations and measures of compliance; however, there are some points of clarification which could be made in relation to the use of evidence-informed programs and approaches to curriculum content and delivery.

Many educators would interpret the requirement that education providers ensure courses and programs enable the participation of students with disability to mean that existing courses and programs should be modified to allow access. This includes the provision of adjustments to enable the students to participate in learning experiences. It is not made clear (and could be misinterpreted) that the curriculum content, scope and sequence, and structure should also be developed more generally in a way to ensure access.

This issue relates directly to students with SLD (and other learning or language disorders) as they are much more likely to respond to a literacy and numeracy program if the content is well structured and taught in an explicit and systematic manner, using evidence-based techniques and materials. Research shows that the

impact of a learning or language disorders is significantly reduced when the curriculum is developed and delivered through a high quality, evidence-based program. This is not solely a matter of using a specific program, it is about whole school approaches to literacy and numeracy instruction which are essential for many students (including those with learning and language disorders) and harmful for none.

It is also clear (from 6.1) that the Standards for curriculum development, accreditation and delivery apply if “the provider has a reasonable expectation that students with disabilities may undertake the course or program”; however, this suggests that this standard needs to be applied before a student with such a disability is identified in the school or educational organisation. The prevalence rates for students with SLD (being 5-15% of the student population) mean that there is a reasonable expectation that students with SLD will undertake the literacy and numeracy curriculum. In practice, however, adjustments to curriculum tend to be made reactively, after difficulties arise – and with learning and language disorders, this is frequently at a point when the student has already been disadvantaged in their ability to participate in education on an equal basis to their peers.

The lack of specificity in the curriculum makes it challenging to determine whether the tasks and activities students engage in, or the learning outcomes expected of students at any given year level, are sufficiently ambitious or appropriately pitched. For example, “Re-read and edit text for spelling, sentence-boundary punctuation and text structure (ACELY1672)” does not clearly state the level of performance required to meet this outcome. Arguably, a student who re-reads a simple sentence, fixes one simple spelling error and places a full stop on the end performs at the same level as a student who: is able to re-read a sentence to make sure it is grammatically correct; can decide whether or not they require a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark; and, who corrects spelling requiring strong knowledge of English orthography.

It is our view, therefore, that the Standards could be clearer with regards to the need for curriculum development and delivery to be well structured, specific, systematic and evidence based in order to reduce the disadvantage faced by students with SLDs and other learning and language difficulties.

- ii. Do students, families and carers, educators, education providers and policy makers **know about, understand, apply and comply with** the rights, obligations and measures of compliance in the Standards?

Some schools understand the rights, obligations and measures set out in the Standards very well and consistently provide appropriate adjustments to students with SLDs.

One parent reported that,

“My child’s school were very proactive in taking on board and adapting things for my son based on the recommendations of his therapists.” (Q. P7)

As indicated in section 2 (Participation) of this submission, only 15% of 520 parents responding to our survey felt that their child’s school consistently met their obligations in terms of implementing reasonable adjustments for their child. The results of the survey also indicated that 89% of parents had either raised concerns with their child’s school (78%) or were intending to (11%) – Q. P15.

Parents also reported that there are situations where adjustments are not implemented unless requests are made (sometimes repeatedly):

“My child’s school are finally offering some assistance, but only after years of me complaining.” (Q. P7)

“The support offered by my child’s school has been very ad hoc, not proactive and continually parent-led.” (Q. P7)

While some parents are well informed about their child's rights under the Standards, there can be a significant disparity between perceptions of parent and teacher knowledge, with parents often suggesting that they have been the driving force behind the implementation of appropriate adjustments to access the curriculum:

"I request the adjustments through regular meetings and they are implemented." (Q. P4)

"My child was declined adjustments until I quoted the obligation under the Standards." (Q. P4)

"As parents, we had to educate ourselves and explain what was needed to the school. Any adjustments and modifications were made as requested." (Q. P4)

Many teachers are keen to improve their knowledge and understanding of the Standards in order to provide better support to students. Comments from the teacher survey support this desire to be better equipped:

"We should be talking about learning difficulties just like we would if a student wears glasses." (Q. T23)

"We need compulsory training for all educators as well as better resources for schools." (Q. T23)

"There should be greater emphasis in pre-service training on awareness of learning difficulties as well as formal training within the first five years of service." (Q. T23)

- iii. **In the 15 years since the Standards were developed, have the Standards contributed towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disabilities?**

It is our view that in the 15 years since the standards were developed, improvements in curriculum development, accreditation and delivery have occurred in many schools, however, it is apparent that such improvements have not been consistent across all Australian schools. While a good number of teachers have a reasonable understanding of their obligations under the standards, others lack the knowledge and experience required to offer and implement appropriate adjustments to ensure access to the curriculum. There is also poor understanding of the need to implement high quality, evidence-based instruction more generally in order to meet the needs of students with learning and language disorders in the classroom.

The majority of parents and carers surveyed by AUSPELD believe that the Standards have had no impact on the support provided to their child (34%) or are unsure about how the Standards affected the support offered (18%). This finding indicates that there is work to be done to ensure that families are aware of the Standards and that teachers are implementing the Standards appropriately. It is important to note that some families are very positive about the influence of the Standards on their child's experience at school, with 12% of parents indicating that the Standards have had a significant impact on the support provided to their child. 35% of parents indicated that the Standards have had some impact.

4. Student support services

Information relating to specialised support services for students with SLD and other learning or language disorders is often not available in, or provided by, schools. Teachers may be unsure who they (or their students) can approach for advice regarding appropriate support and, consequently, many families remain poorly informed about the options for support available to them.

It is vitally important that appropriate support services are available in the school setting and that all students with disability (including those with learning and language disorders) are both aware of these services and can access them. These internal support services should include staff with knowledge and expertise in both learning and language disorders who are able to provide evidence-informed support and advice. It is also important that school personnel are aware of the external specialist support services that may be of benefit to the students they work with. These services frequently provide additional, more targeted, advice and support to both families and schools.

All state SPELD provide highly specialised support and advocacy services for both schools and students with learning and language disorders, often as a component of state-based service agreements. Unfortunately, many schools and families remain unaware of these services and there is currently no formalised way that schools are informed about or encouraged to access, or provide information relating to the services.

- i. **Are the rights, obligations and measures of compliance set out in the Standards (and its Guidance Notes) clear and appropriate?**

The Standards state that schools must take reasonable steps to ensure that students with disability (including students with SLDs and other learning or language disorders) can access the support services that are used by students without disability as well as ensure students have access to specialised support services in order to allow them to participate in the learning activities in which they are enrolled. It is also made clear in the standards that school staff should be aware of support services in order to facilitate student access, including access to necessary specialised equipment, appropriately trained staff, and, if necessary, specialised services, and that access to these supports is done with consultation with the student or their family. While these rights, obligations and measures of compliance are clear and appropriate in the Standards, they appear to be poorly understood and poorly applied in many schools.

It is our view that the rights, obligations and measures of compliance could be improved by including reference to the need for schools to be aware of, and maintain a register of, appropriate external service providers. Ideally, schools should be provided with clear information regarding the support services available to students and teachers, including how they can be accessed, and there should be a formalised mechanism for sharing information regarding these support services.

Results from the survey indicated that 30% of parents and 26% of teachers were not aware that SPELD offered support in their state – despite the fact that the questionnaire was largely circulated through platforms associated with the organisation (e.g. AUSPELD and state SPELD Facebook pages, email lists, etc.).

Given that SPELD is recognised as the peak body providing services and support for students with SLDs, their families and their teachers in each state, this lack of awareness even across the population targeted, is of concern.

- ii. Do students, families and carers, educators, education providers and policy makers **know about, understand, apply and comply with** the rights, obligations and measures of compliance in the Standards?

School knowledge of appropriate support services for students with SLD (and other learning and language disorders) appears to be poor, and many schools lack appropriate policies regarding how and where to access support.

When parents were asked, “What do you believe are the most significant barriers students with learning difficulties face with regards to accessing and participating in their education”, 336 parents (out of a total of 520) indicated that a **lack of student support services** was a significant barrier. 438 parents stated that a **lack of understanding of how students should best be supported** was another significant barrier. It is essential that all students, at the time of enrolment (or at the point of identification of an SLD) should be provided with information about appropriate school-based and specialised supports. (Q. P25)

This process rarely occurs in schools which means that both parents and teachers feel uncertain and unclear about the support options available.

The level of support provided to students with both learning and language disorders varies greatly from school to school and depends largely on the training and experience of individual staff members. It is of enormous importance that training is viewed as a priority and that there are some teachers in every school with strong knowledge in both learning and language disorders and that all teachers have at least some knowledge of the fundamentals. There are students with learning and language disorders in every classroom, meaning that every teacher is needing to make informed choices about how best to respond every day.

The lack of training of school staff in both learning and language disorders, and the Standards is of concern to many parents. Many indicated they were frustrated by the apparent lack of resourcing for students with SLD in the school system. It was also apparent in the responses to the survey, that in some cases parents believed that adjustments would only be offered for school-based assessments and formal examinations (e.g. a student with a reading disorder may be given additional reading time in an exam), rather than in day-to-day lessons. This lack of appropriate adjustments is a cause of concern as it essentially prevents access to the curriculum for the students with disability on the same basis as their peers. These poor decisions can often be tracked back to inadequate support services and knowledge at the school level.

In the survey, one parent commented that they:

“...had meetings with the principal, teacher, school psychologist. They could not help nor recommend how to get tests done, this is a very expensive option to choose for a single family. Was informed even if I had all the testing done all they could offer was coloured paper as learning difficulties are not a disability.” (Q. P16).

In addition, many students with SLD are reluctant to ask for support within the classroom for fear of ridicule or feeling as though they will get into trouble for not being able to work independently. While many schools try to make classrooms as inclusive as possible, students with SLD often feel excluded and less supported.

A student with SLD who responded to the survey said,

“Teachers forget I can't read like everyone else. Relief teachers yell at me for not knowing how to read. I tell them I am dyslexic and they ignore me.” (Q. S16).

One form of support for students with SLD is assistive technology, such as the use of laptops/devices with appropriate support software (e.g. text to speech), audio books, and reading pens. For students with SLD who have been provided with appropriate assistive technology, it has made a significant difference to their ability to access the curriculum.

In the survey, 88% of parents indicated that the assistive technology used by their child in the classroom helped either a little (48%) or a lot (27%) – with 13% stating that their child could not manage without it. (Q. P13). While there have been significant improvements in the range of assistive technologies available to students with SLD in recent years, the uptake across schools has been highly varied. 41% of parents who responded to the survey indicated that their child’s school does not encourage the use of assistive technology with a further 27% of parents reporting that they are unsure whether assistive technology is used at their child’s school. (Q. P11).

These findings demonstrate that the understanding of appropriate support strategies for students with SLD (and other learning and language disorders) is highly varied and some schools lack relevant knowledge in this area.

Advocacy services for students with learning and language disorders are also severely restricted. While advocacy is an important service provided by state SPELDs, we are limited in our ability to advocate for students because there is no clear mechanism for advocacy within the school system. Currently, if a family seeks the support of SPELD to assist with the development of an educational plan for their child, this can only occur at the school’s invitation. In some instances, schools refuse to include an external specialist (e.g. SPELD psychologist, teacher or speech pathologist) in scheduled meetings and case conferences, limiting the support that can be provided and highlighting a lack of compliance with the Standard’s requirement to encourage collaborative arrangements with specialised service providers. It is our view that a formalised partnership between state SPELDs and state education departments should include a clear statement about the need for support and advocacy for students with SLD (and other learning and language disorders) which includes collaboration between specialised support services staff and school staff.

A number of teachers who responded to the survey highlighted the need to improve handover or transition systems so that the year can start with an understanding of the student’s strengths and weaknesses, their needs, and the strategies that do and don’t work for them. Without this information, the implementation of strategies can take many weeks - or even most of first term. (Q. T21). As indicated in section 1 (Enrolment) of this submission, the transition from primary to secondary school was also a concern for parents, with the majority (55%) suggesting that no support was provided by the school and some (28%) indicating that minimal support was provided. (Q. P20).

One parent who completed the survey reported,

“The support was cosmetic only, i.e. extra visits for familiarity. There was no real support for academic needs.” (Q. P20)

Another indicated that,

“the transition to year 7 was well managed but by year 8 many supports dropped off.” (Q. P20)

Teachers report learning about specific conditions if and when a student with that specific disability is enrolled in their class, and that it may take weeks or longer to gather the information they need and to know how to respond. Knowledge of appropriate student support services could be improved through the provision of training to key staff in schools. It is our view that policies regarding how and where to find information regarding support services should be developed, with clear directions as to when information should be delivered to students and families (i.e. at enrolment or when identification of a learning or language disorder occurs).

- iii. In the 15 years since the Standards were developed, have the Standards contributed towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disabilities?

It is our view that the situation regarding student support services for students with SLD (and other learning or language disorders) has changed very little over the past 15 years, although improvements in the availability and affordability of assistive technologies has had an important impact on the level of access achievable by some students, in some schools. It is important to highlight that knowledge and the provision of support services varies greatly between schools, and that support for students with learning and language disorders goes beyond the use of assistive technologies.

It is our view that, more generally, the knowledge and understanding of appropriate support services for students with SLD in many schools is poor, or, in the case where there is knowledge of these services, they are not shared with the student and their family, and staff are unsure of how they can be accessed or used to best support the student. This situation could be greatly improved by mandated training and policy implementation designed to increase awareness in schools of support services.

5. Elimination of harassment and victimisation

Evidence from research shows that students with learning difficulties are at increased risk of mental health issues. Schools and teachers are generally well aware of this, as are families, with increased anxiety and low self-esteem being the most frequently reported concerns.

In response to Q 22 of the Parent Survey, 70% of parents reported that their child had experienced anxiety, and 68% indicated that their child had poor self-esteem. Students self-reported similar rates (74% of students reported having experienced anxiety, and 61% indicated experiencing low self-esteem; Q. S14). Depression or decreased mood, and insomnia were each reported by parents to occur in about a quarter of cases, and 43% of parents reported that their child also experienced somatic complaints (i.e. experiencing physical pain, such as feeling sick of having headaches, which is exacerbated by emotional stress). About half of the students surveyed reported experiencing insomnia, depression, and somatic illness. Parents and students also reported increased negative behaviours (28% and 17% respectively). Only 10% of parents reported that their child had not experienced mental health difficulties. Ninety-two percent of teachers had observed low self-esteem in at least some of the students they have known with learning difficulties, and 89% had observed anxiety; only 2% of teachers reported that they had not observed students with learning difficulties to display mental health difficulties, or that the question was not applicable to them.

However, as is the case with other sections of the Standards, the steps necessary for eliminating harassment and victimisation are not generally well understood or applied; in addition, support provided to students with learning and language difficulties frequently focuses on the areas of participation, curriculum development and accreditation, and support services as they relate to academic skills, rather than student mental health and wellbeing.

- i. Are the rights, obligations and measures of compliance set out in the Standards (and its Guidance Notes) clear and appropriate?

The current Standards, and Guidance Notes, state that harassment includes an action taken in relation to a person's disability that is reasonably likely, in all circumstances, to humiliate, offend, intimidate, or distress the person. This appears to be **clearly worded**, and is prominent as a leading and oft-repeated statement.

It is also **appropriate** in the case of learning disabilities. The harassment and victimisation that students with learning and language difficulties experience tend to involve humiliation, offence, and distress, with experiences of intimidation appearing to be rarer, but still evident. The clarity of the Standards in defining harassment as including these features is therefore highly appropriate; however, this does not mean it is understood or known to teachers.

Embarrassment was consistently rated by teachers, parents and students to be one of the factors contributing to mental health difficulties in at least 57% of cases (Q. T14, Q. P23, Q. S15). Other factors reflecting included fear of failure, ongoing poor performance, frustration, and inability to complete schoolwork independently, with each factor being considered to play a contributing role by at least half of respondents.

- ii. Do students, families and carers, educators, education providers and policy makers **know about, understand, apply and comply with** the rights, obligations and measures of compliance in the Standards?

This is a clear area of concern. Issues regarding harassment and victimisation appear to be well-recognised as they relate to instances of bullying by other students.

Teachers and schools generally report that they aim to address the self-esteem and self-perception of students with learning difficulties, with 44% regularly and 37% sometimes working to address these issues (Q. T16).

However, issues regarding harassment and victimisation appear to be far less well understood in relation to the actions of teachers or schools. Yet this appears to be a significant problem, including both overt and subtle forms of harassment and victimisation.

Responses to the survey from by teachers, families, and students alike included references to students being labelled 'dumb' or 'lazy', or being told they needed to work harder by a teacher or teachers. At least one student reported being teased by a teacher, or being denied an accommodation, such as reading written questions aloud or access to assistive technology. One student commented that:

"Teachers forget I can't read like everyone else. Relief teachers yell at me for not knowing how to read. I tell them I'm dyslexic and they ignore me." (Q. S16)

While poor performance may be more correctly considered a factor reflecting participation and curriculum, the failures of schools and teachers to implement the Standards appropriately in these areas could be construed as being an action that, at least indirectly, contributes to humiliation and distress when students are unable to perform or engage academically at the level of their potential. Students who are consistently denied the opportunity to participate in academic tasks due to curriculum design, who experience inconsistent implementation of strategies intended to accommodate their learning and language difficulties, or who are dissuaded from enrolment in certain courses of study, are highly likely to experience humiliation, distress and offence, as well as intimidation in cases that involve denial of participation.

One parent commented that her son was told:

"to just give up some subjects, such as English." (Q P23)

Students' comments on the topic clearly indicated their perception of how teachers view students with learning difficulties.

"I am not stupid you just don't understand how I learn." (Q. S17)

The Covid-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to observe to extent to which students feel harassed or victimised at schools as a consequence of factors relating to academic tasks. From the perspective of schools and teachers, the move to online learning posed significant and concerning academic challenges for students with learning and language difficulties, and the impact is likely to be a gap in academic progress that may be difficult to address. Furthermore, the access to resources, including the appropriate technology and support from someone with the capacity to provide help with schoolwork, is certainly not consistent across all students. Those students with learning and language difficulties who did not have access to appropriate resources experienced greater challenges during the move to online learning than their peers who had such resources, and they are now likely to be academically even further behind. Even with the appropriate tools, technology, and the availability of an adult with the time and capacity to provide support, many students with learning and language difficulties struggled with online learning.

Nevertheless, many (although certainly not all) families and students with learning and language difficulties appear to have experienced a reduction in mental health difficulties during home-based and online learning.

Responses to the **Parent and Student Surveys** indicated that there were surprising positives to regarding online learning (Q. P19, Q. S11). Anxiety reportedly decreased, and confidence increased for some students. This was felt to be in part due to the opportunity to slow down in working on a concept until they 'got it', or take breaks at a time that suited their needs. Parents also noted that their child seemed more willing to ask their teacher questions or request additional support, because they could ask privately, avoiding embarrassment in front of their classmates. Additionally, both parents and students reported that online learning allowed for easier use of assistive technology than was possible in the classroom. In those cases, the return to face-to-face learning was not all positive:

*"Then I had to return to school and everything went back to how it was before. I feel dumb again."
(Q. S11)*

(It must be stressed that not all students with learning and language difficulties had a positive experience with online learning, or that those who experienced positives did not also experience challenges. Many teachers and parents indicated that students with learning and language difficulties frequently felt overwhelmed with online learning and self-directed tasks, and parents frequently reported difficulties getting their child to engage in online learning, particularly when access to technology was difficult, or when the families were unable to provide the high level of support their child required. The above examples are provided to illustrate the humiliation, distress, offence and intimidation students with learning and language difficulties experience at school, not to mount a case for online learning as a solution to mental health, learning, or any other difficulties experienced by students, their families, and teachers.)

- iii. In the 15 years since the Standards were developed, **have the Standards contributed towards students with disability being able to access education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disabilities?**

There appears to have been a growing awareness of the Standards and their implications for students with learning and language difficulties; there is also a clear desire from teachers, schools, and parents alike to prevent students with learning and language difficulties experiencing harassment and victimisation as it relates to their learning difficulties. However, there continues to be limited understanding or recognition by teachers and schools in general of how reduced participation in education, whether for reasons of enrolment, curriculum design, or student support, contributes directly or indirectly to students' experience of harassment and victimisation on the basis of their learning difficulties.

Students, teachers and families all noted that adults and/or teachers with limited understanding of learning difficulties contributed to students' mental health difficulties (Q. T15, Q. P23, Q. S15). They reported a lack of understanding, a lack of appropriate supports in the classroom, and consequent exhaustion from students who continue to try hard despite the circumstances. Some parents reported that the presence or absence of mental health and behavioural difficulties were a factor in whether their child received support, and not always in consistent ways; for example, in one case, a parent felt that their child was:

"... well-behaved so not on the radar for additional help." (Q. P29)

In contrast, another parent reported:

"They said my daughter was too emotional and we had to work on those issues first – she has huge issues with going to school after constant failure in the classroom affected her self-esteem to the point where she could no longer cope." (Q. P29)

Some teachers who responded to the survey did recognise that reduced educational outcomes as a consequence of restricted participation and poor curriculum design contributed to harassment and victimisation:

"This is a social justice issue. I am tired of watching our vulnerable children head off to high school with a reading age of grade 2 and under, or the high cost to their mental health, either through teasing, embarrassment or the shame of repeating another year." (Q. T31)

The extent to which this is reflective of teachers and schools generally is not certain; respondents to the survey received the invitation through a SPELD organisation, and are therefore likely to have some awareness of the breadth of the challenges facing students with learning difficulties. Parent reports suggest that changes are happening at different rates across schools; unfortunately, students' difficulties with learning and the associated issues with mental health are not easily resolved, as this parent observed:

"Before we changed schools it was much worse due to no adjustments, no support and a very strict teacher so my child was often told off and very unhappy. She has lots of support now but still gets very frustrated and anxious." (Q. T29)

Final Comments and Recommendations

In this submission, we have highlighted the finding that students with SLDs and other learning or language disorders are often not given full access to enrolment, participation and the curriculum as a result of the current interpretation of the Standards and the impact this has on their educational outcomes. Students are often not provided with effective, evidence-informed instruction and intervention which would enable them to fully participate in their education. The impact of this is not only evident in the students' struggles academically but frequently on their mental health as well.

Several key themes emerged from our survey of parents, students and teachers with many commonalities identified across all three groups.

These included:

- An ongoing lack of knowledge, awareness and understanding of the Standards.
- Reduced opportunities and expectations for students with SLDs and other learning or language disorders due to a failure to comply with the Standards.

- Students with SLDs (or other learning or language disorders) in schools generally do **not** have an education or learning plan that is closely adhered to.
- An alarmingly high number of students with SLDs (or other learning or language disorders) experience forms of harassment and victimisation in the school system.
- A high level of frustration was reported across all three groups in relation to current identification, recognition, planning and grievance processes.

An effect of the current interpretation of the Standards is that people with SLDs and other learning or language disorders continue to have lower levels of educational attainment than their peers. This is the case for all students with disability. In 2015, around 32% of people with disability aged 20 and over had completed Year 12 or equivalent.¹ This was much lower than the 62% of people without disability in this range. Not only does access to education affect participation in other key areas of life, including employment and the ability to achieve financial independence, but the level of education **attained** while being provided with access is critical.²

To ensure that the learning needs of students with SLDs and other learning or language disorders are more effectively and appropriately addressed, it is our view that the aim of the Standards will be better achieved by amending a number of key definitions. It is hoped that these amendments will clarify the extent of the rights of students to equality and non-discrimination provided by the Act and will enhance both learning outcomes and the educational experience of all students with disability (substantive equality).

We recommend that the definition of “on the same basis” under Part 2.2 of the Standards and also Part 3.3 relating to what the Standards consider an “ adjustment” be amended to allow improved access to the curriculum in order to improve learning outcomes. The right to be treated on the same basis in a much broader sense as required under the Act would be encompassed by amending the definition of “on the same basis” to:

A person with a disability is able to participate in education on the same basis as students without disabilities where the student with a disability is provided with reasonable adjustments that give them the opportunity to access, comprehend, process and undertake the courses and programmes of the education provider and the opportunity to reach the same level of educational attainment and outcomes as students without disabilities, taking into account the nature of their disability.

Further, we recommend that the concept of an adjustment be amended as follows to include provision not only for material and physical adjustments but also adjustments to curricula content and teaching methods ensuring the opportunity to achieve learning outcomes for students with disability:

A measure or action (or a group of measures or actions) taken by an education provider that has the effect of giving a student with a disability the opportunity to access, comprehend, process and undertake the courses and programmes of the educational provider to enable them to achieve a satisfactory level of educational attainment – to achieve that outcome.

In addition, the Standards currently include a range of examples under the measures of compliance. These examples are often applied to limit the interpretation of the Standards and to restrict access to adjustments to students who need adjustments beyond those included in the Standards. We recommend that the provided examples be reviewed and expanded, and it be clarified in the Standards that the examples are not intended to limit the nature of available adjustments.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Disability in Australia: changes over time in inclusion and participation in education’, available [here](#).

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Disability in Australia: changes over time in inclusion and participation in education’, available [here](#).

Access to Adjustments Under the Standards

In our submission we have highlighted the fact that many families seeking adjustments on behalf of their child report a lengthy period of negotiation and advocacy with varying rates of success.

If they are not successful, families are able to pursue a complaint under the Act, however, even where a complaint is pursued, most matters are settled through conciliation meaning that, while an adjustment may be made for that particular student, there is no systemic change to benefit other students with the same disability. This has a disproportionate effect on students from disadvantaged and low socioeconomic groups who are less likely to have the resources or networks and support to pursue a complaint. In the 2018-19 financial year, only 2% of complainants under the Act were Aboriginal,³ despite Aboriginal people being 1.8 times more likely to have a disability than non-Indigenous people.⁴ In addition, only 9% of complainants under the Act were born outside of Australia.⁵

To ensure that students gain better access to adjustments under the Standards, we recommend that they be amended to clarify the rights of students with disability when seeking an adjustment. We suggest that it may be of value to set out clear obligations such as the following:

- Every student with a disability seeking an adjustment should receive a learning plan in writing.
- Consultations about the adjustments to be provided and the plan must be undertaken within 14 days of the request being made.
- Consultation should involve the student (if appropriate), the student's parent/s or carer/s, and if requested the student's disability advocate/s, professionals involved in the assessment or support of the student (including but not limited to psychologists, speech pathologists or tutors), and relevant parties from the education provider.
- The adjustments to be provided must be reflected in the learning plan and it should be developed, and copies of the plan distributed to all parties involved, within 21 days of the plan being agreed to.
- The adjustments and the plan must be reviewed every 6 months or less and a consultation phase prior to its review must be carried out.

Improved access to information and resources

It was evident from our survey that the effective implementation of the Standards would be enhanced significantly by improving the understanding of SLDs and other learning or language disorders by all parties, as well as the range of possible, effective adjustments.

A significant issue in providing equal access to education for students with SLDs, or other learning or language disorders, is a lack of knowledge regarding both the impact of the disability on the educational needs of the student and what the most effective evidence-based approaches to providing instruction and intervention will be. This is true for **all** students with disability, not only those with SLDs, and can impact students, parents and carers, and education providers and staff. Increasing access to credible sources of expertise and relevant professional learning would provide a substantial benefit to all who are attempting to provide the best educational outcomes to students with disability. We recommend that the Standards could address this in the following ways:

- All staff involved in decision making regarding adjustments for students with disability undergo compulsory bi-annual professional learning on the obligations of education providers under the Disability Discrimination Act and the Standards;

³ Australian Human Rights Commission 2018-19 Complaint statistics, available [here](#).

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Disability support for Indigenous Australians, available [here](#).

⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission 2018-19 Complaint statistics, available [here](#).

- A body consisting of disability and education experts be established in each State and Territory to advise and consult with both education providers and students with disability and their associates in relation to the impact of various disabilities on how a student might learn and adjustments to overcome or mitigate any disadvantage. This body should consist of academics experienced in disability, disability advocates from peak organisations, experienced allied health professionals, and teachers.

As indicated in the introduction to this document, this submission draws on the wealth of knowledge held by SPELD groups across Australia, but more importantly includes the voices of parents, teachers and students, all of whom live with disability or support those who have a disability, on a daily basis. We will leave the final word to one of the students who responded to our survey in answer to the final question (Q. S20. Is there anything else you would like to add?)

“Thank you for listening. I hope your questions create change.”

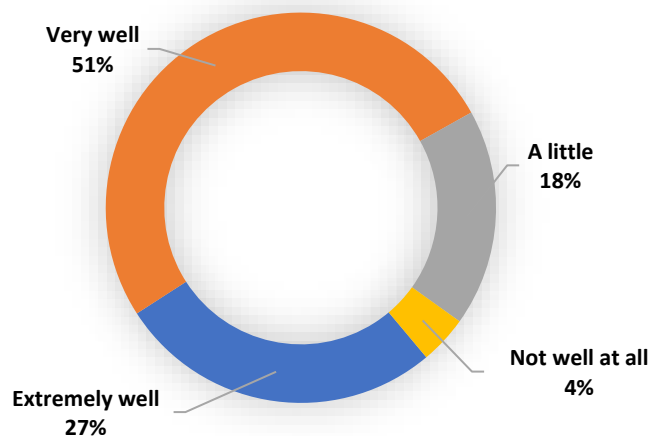
AUSPELD Teacher / Educator Questionnaire Data Summary

There were 310 teachers/educators who completed the questionnaire. 62% of respondents were working within government schools, 16% non-government Catholic schools, 15% other non-government schools, with 7% working in other settings which included tutoring, home schooling and educational consultants working within education departments.

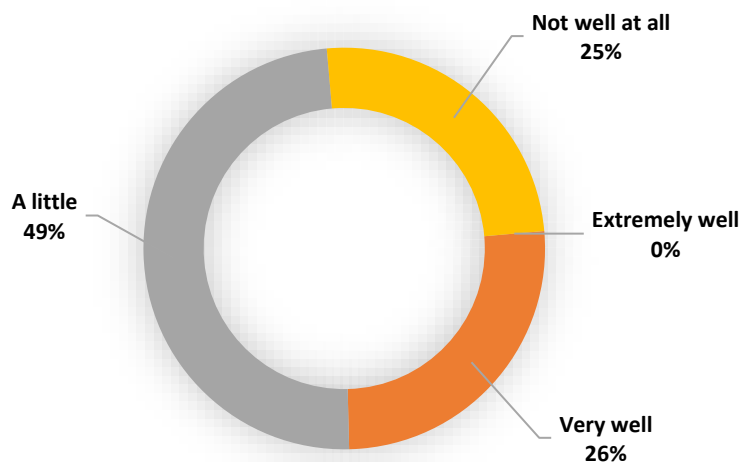
Submissions were received from all over Australia, with 32% of respondents working in a regional area and 3% in a remote location. 34% of respondents were working in Western Australia, 23% in New South Wales, 18% in South Australia, 16% in Queensland, 5% in Victoria, with 4% located within Tasmania, the Northern Territory or the Australian Capital Territory.

Knowledge and Understanding of the Standards

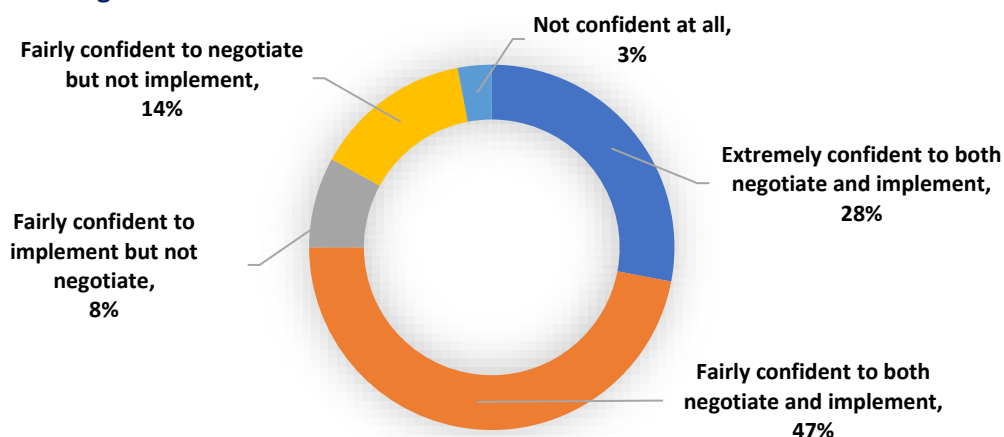
Q.T1: With regards to working with students who have learning difficulties, please rate how well you know and understand your obligations in terms of supporting access and/or participation as specified in the Disability Standards for Education.



Q.T2: From your experience, how well do most of the other staff at your school/s understand these obligations?



Q.T3: Please rate your level of confidence to negotiate and implement reasonable adjustments for students with learning difficulties.



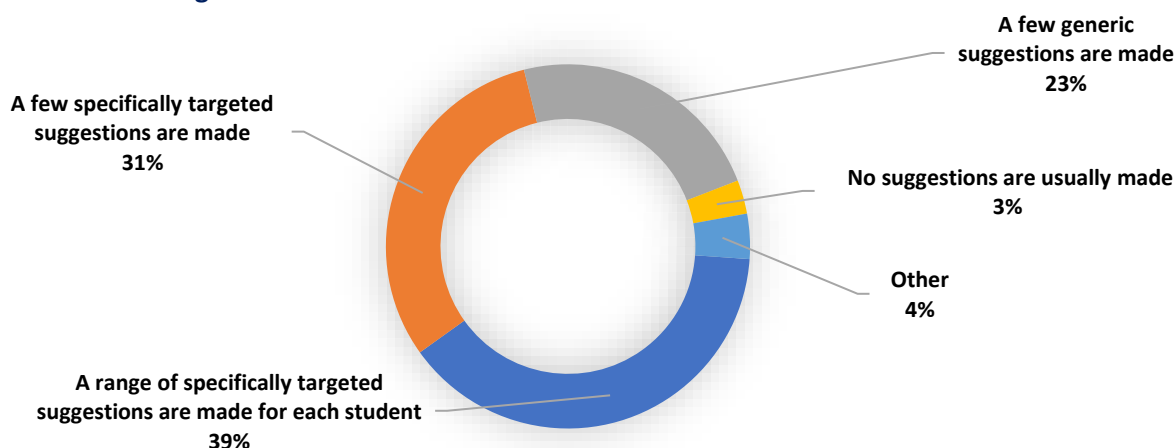
Q.T4: Please comment on any factors that contributed to your level of confidence:

197 teachers/educators provided a response to this question.

- By far the most common factors teachers/educators listed related to the amount of experience and/or specialised training they had received in the area (this included online NCCD or OLT training modules).
- Other factors included having an experienced mentor, being provided with a list of options to choose from (such as “lists provided by SPELD”), having seen other educators model the process and/or adjustment options and having parents who were supportive of the process.
- Some respondents noted that having their own child with a learning disorder meant they were more confident in making suggestions as they completed their own research and wanted to get it ‘right’.
- Another common factor relating to confidence in implementation was the availability of funding and/or additional staff support.
- Quite a few individuals noted that they sought out training for themselves as their school had not provided it.
- One respondent noted – “It is my role, so I feel confident however I often meet significant resistance from staff who do not understand or agree with the standards.”

Experiences with Students with Learning Difficulties

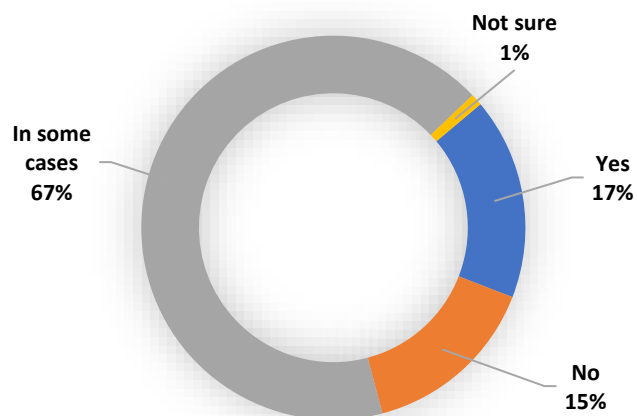
Q. T5: How proactive is the school you work in/with in terms of suggesting ways to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties?



A number of teachers/educators provided additional information regarding how proactive their schools are, with comments including:

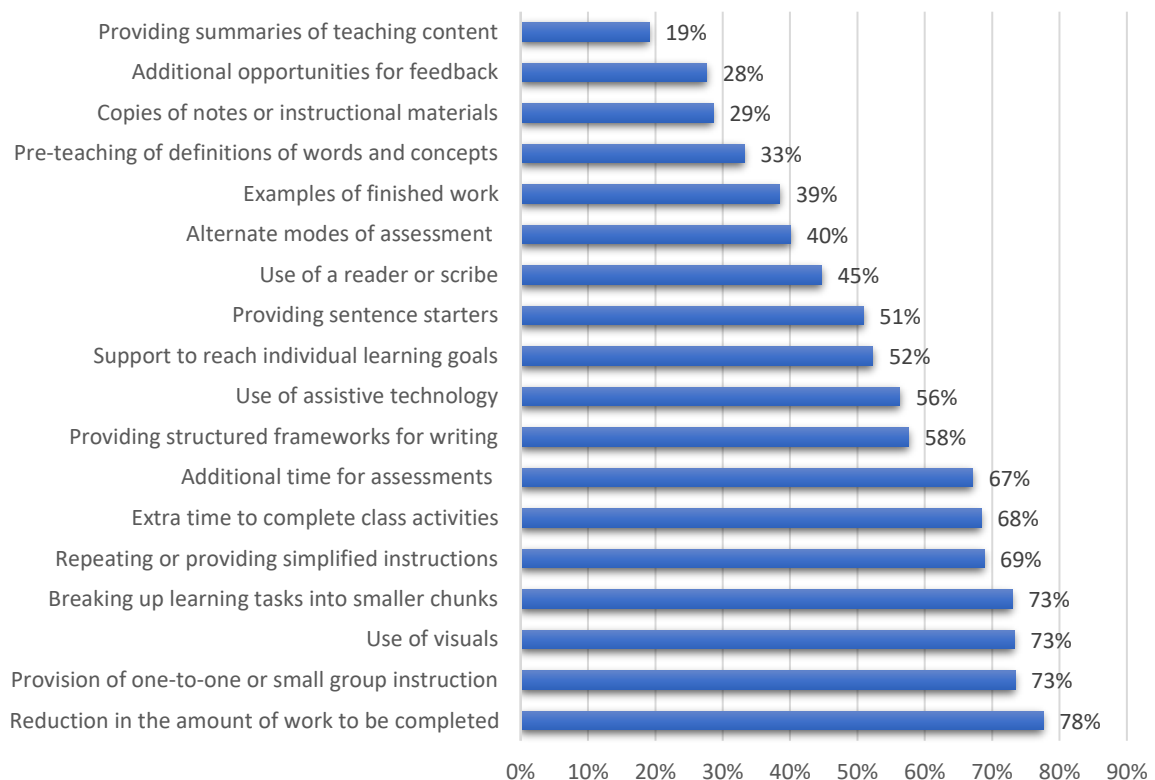
- “My school can be great at suggestions but a little lacking in follow through. Many classroom teachers are woefully lacking in sufficient knowledge to assist students with learning difficulties.”
- “Not all teaching staff I come in contact with have good knowledge in how to approach students with learning issues.”
- “I feel fairly isolated, as if because the children are in my class they are solely my problem.”
- “Parents pay for me to work with schools. Some schools/teachers are willing to make adjustments some are not. Needs to come from principal and teachers need PD in this area.”
- “Depends on the school. Private schools are better than state schools.”

Q. T6: If adjustments are made, do you believe they are sufficient to support a child with learning difficulties to successfully access the curriculum and participate in assessment tasks?

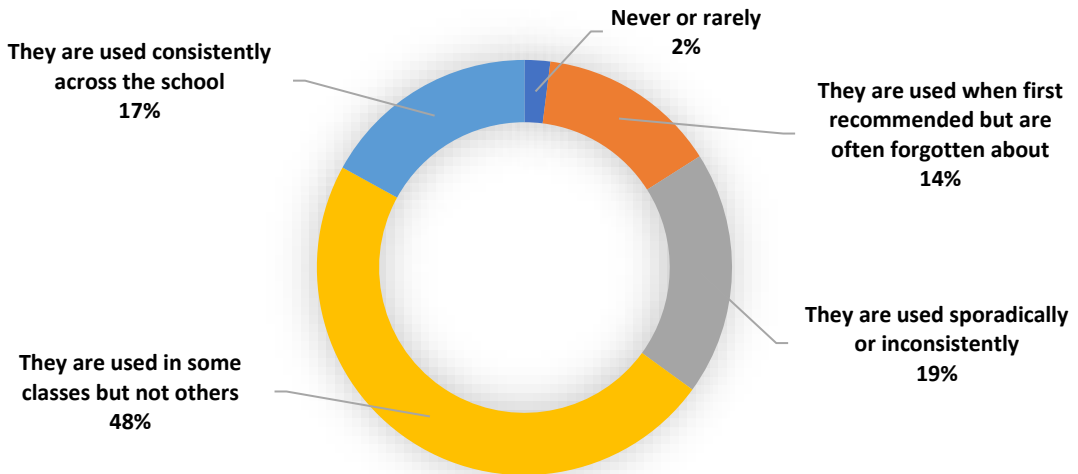


Q. T7: What are some of the more common adjustments made and used in schools? (Tick any that apply)

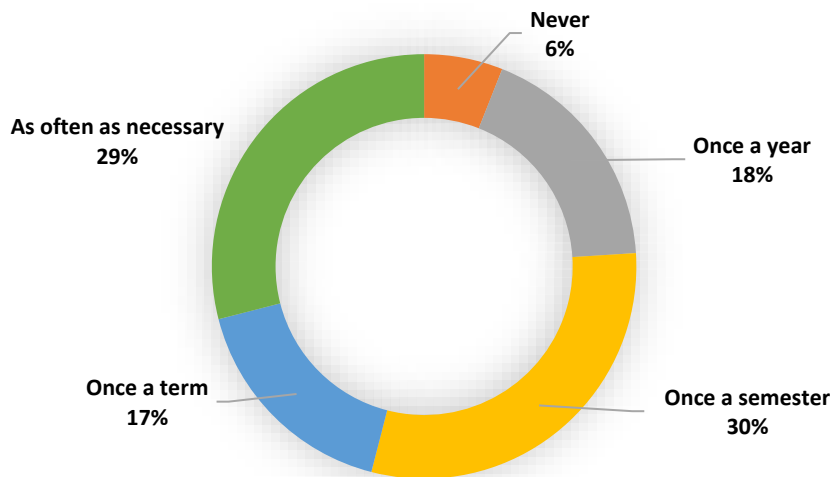
Percentage of teachers/educators indicating what common adjustments are used in schools



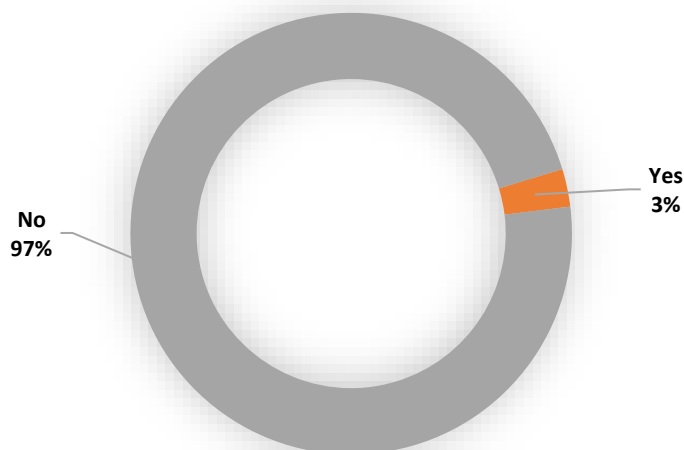
Q. T8: In general, how frequently are the suggested adjustments used within a classroom?



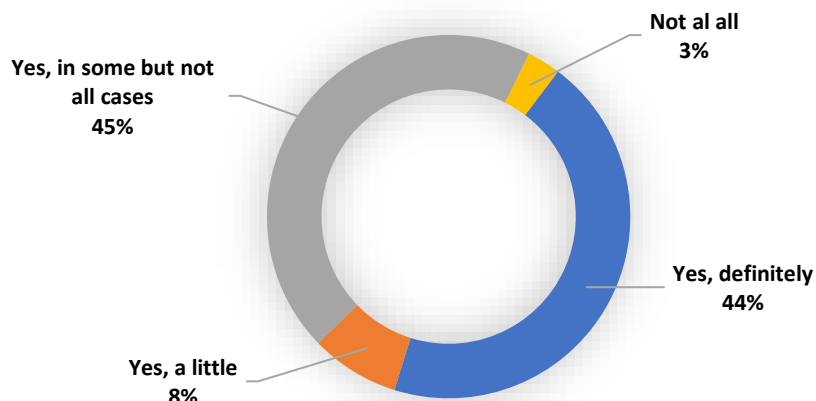
Q. T9: How often are adjustments reviewed or updated?



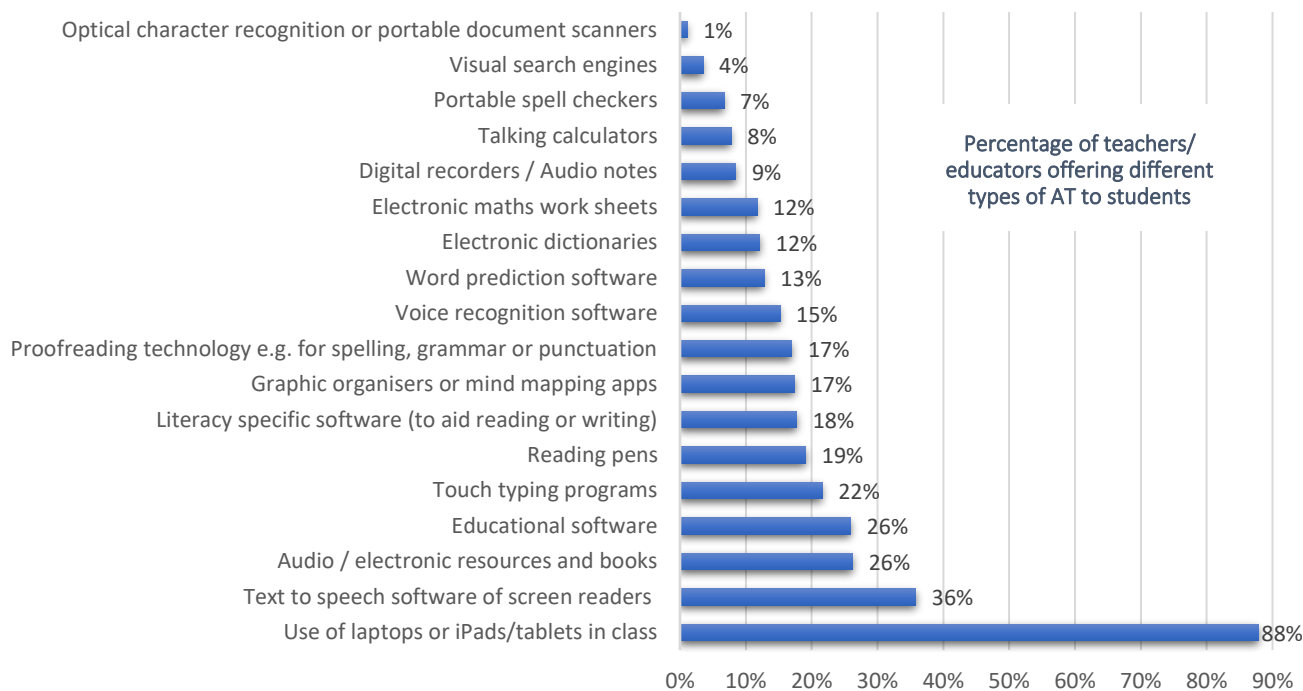
Q. T10: Do many of the students with learning difficulties in your school have a documented plan (e.g. an individual education or learning plan / IEP or ILP) that is closely adhered to?



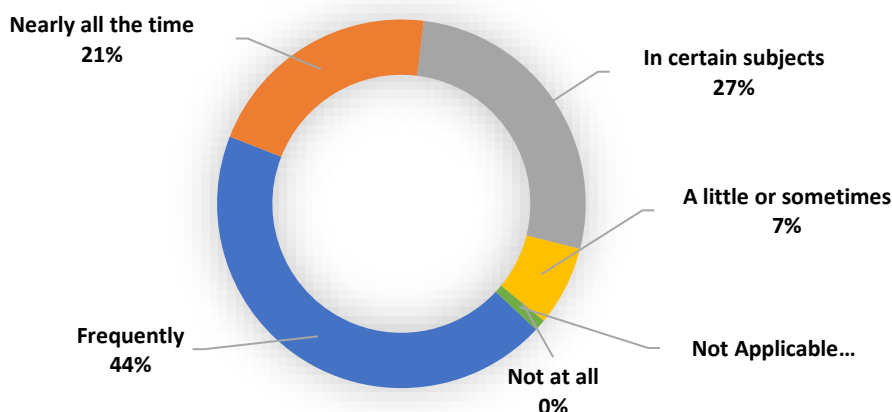
Q. T11: The Assistive Technology (AT) used in schools often takes the form of electronic devices or computer hardware or software and can be used to reinforce or support the learning process. Do you believe better use of Assistive Technology (AT) can improve access to and/or participation in the curriculum for students with learning difficulties? (Note: specific examples of AT can be found below.)



Q. T12: During the last term, what were the most common AT options utilised at your school/s?

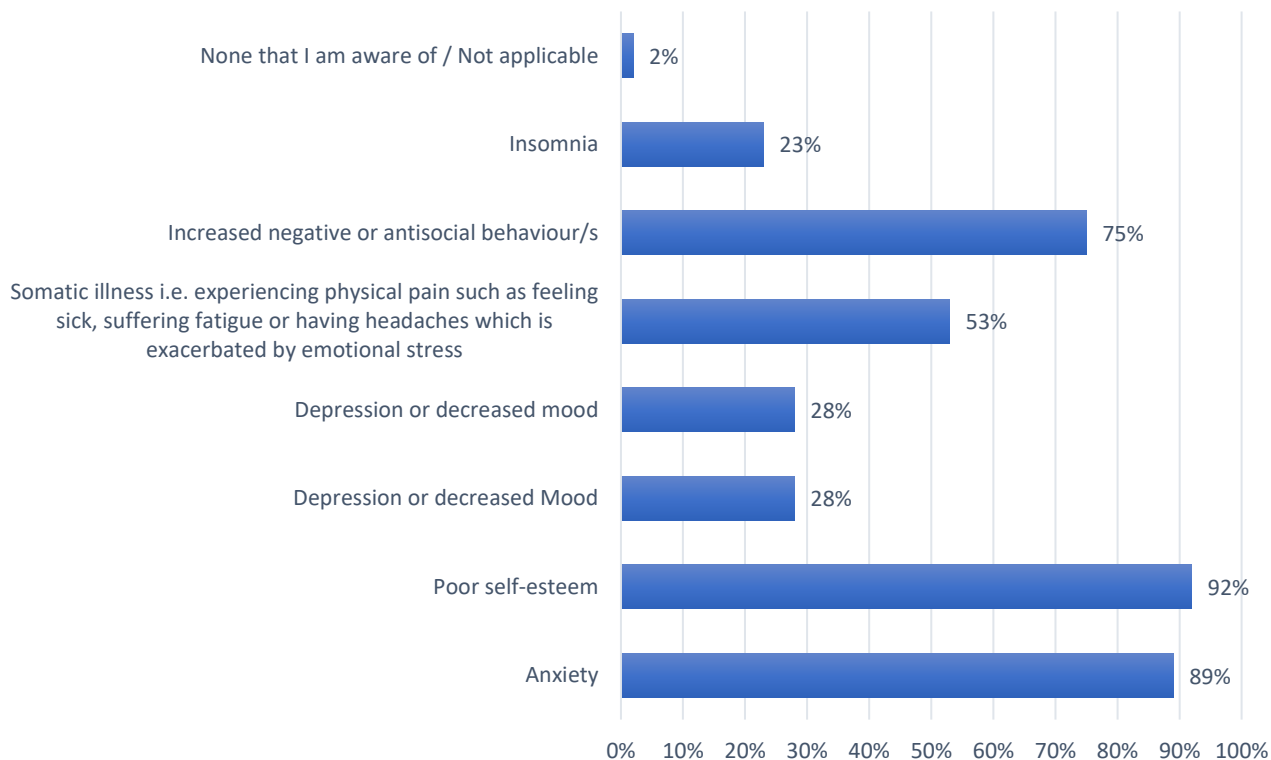


Q. T13: From your experience, to what extent do students struggle to remain motivated or engaged at school due to barriers resulting from their learning difficulty?



Q. T14: The challenges associated with having a learning difficulty can, in some cases, contribute to the development of mental health difficulties. Please indicate the mental health difficulties that you have observed in students with learning difficulties.

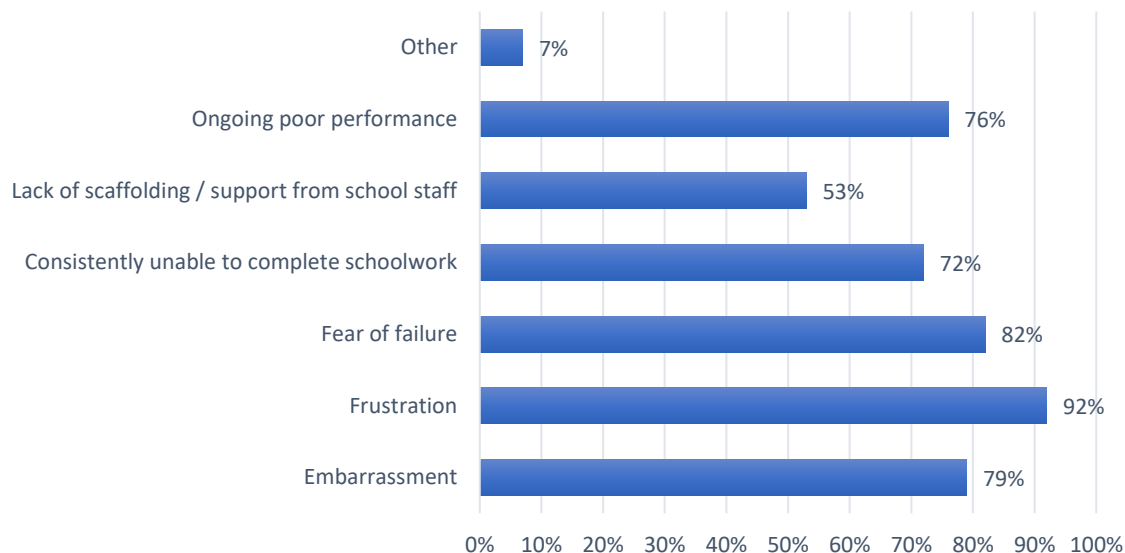
Percentage of teachers/educators indicating they have observed students displaying different types of mental health difficulties



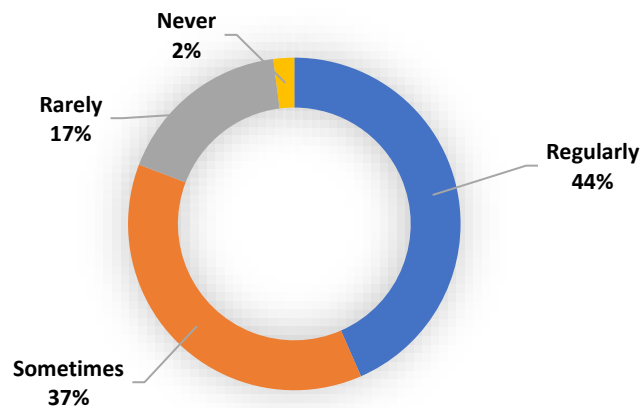
Q. T15: Please select any factors below that you believe may have contributed to the presence of mental health difficulties.

- *Other factors listed by teachers/educators included: bullying/teasing, being labelled as lazy, having no clear pathway for the future, effects of peer judgement, not being identified early enough, fatigue, teacher based, having other comorbidities.*

Factors believed to contribute to the development of mental health difficulties in students with learning difficulties (percentage of teachers/educators selecting a factor)

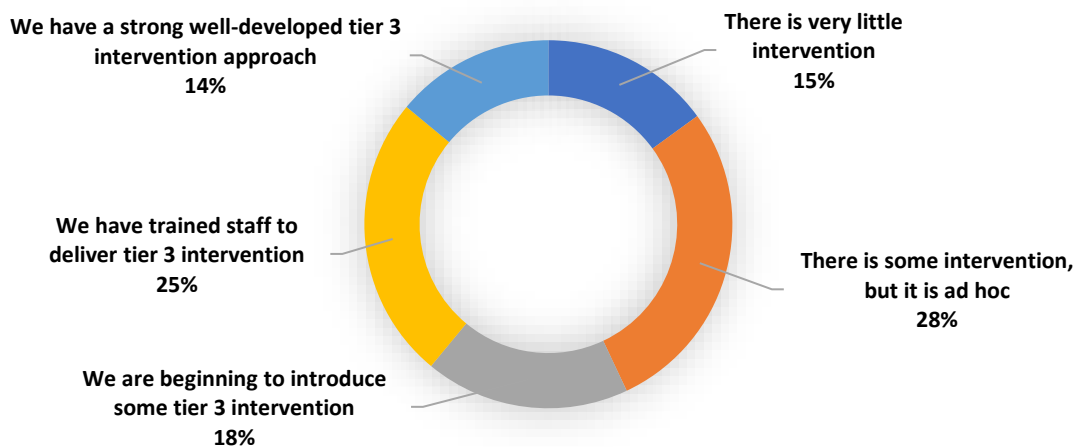


Q. T16: Optimal learning opportunities occur when students are not experiencing additional stress and don't have an overly negative view of their abilities within a classroom. To what degree does the school you work in/with seek to address these issues with students, particularly for those with learning difficulties?

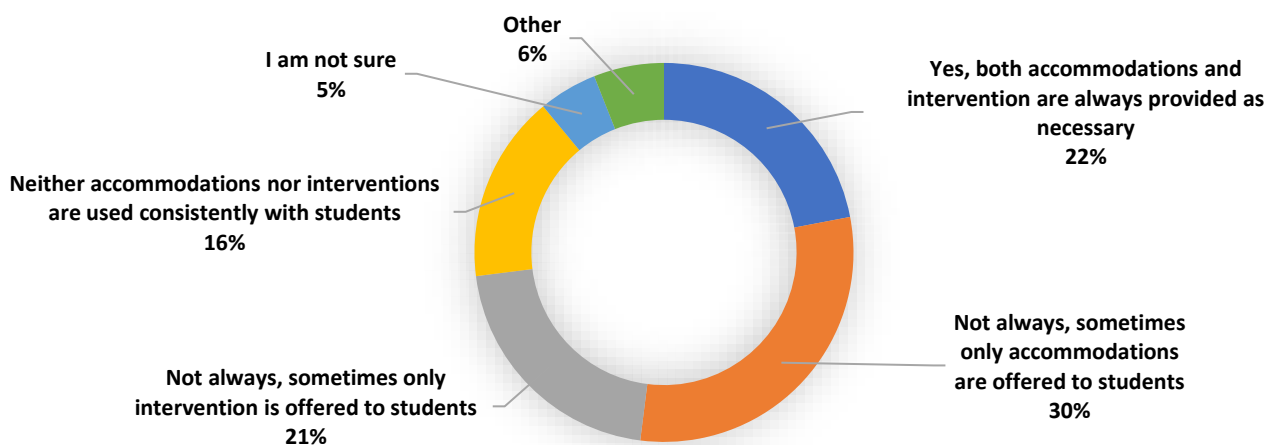


Other Experiences in Education

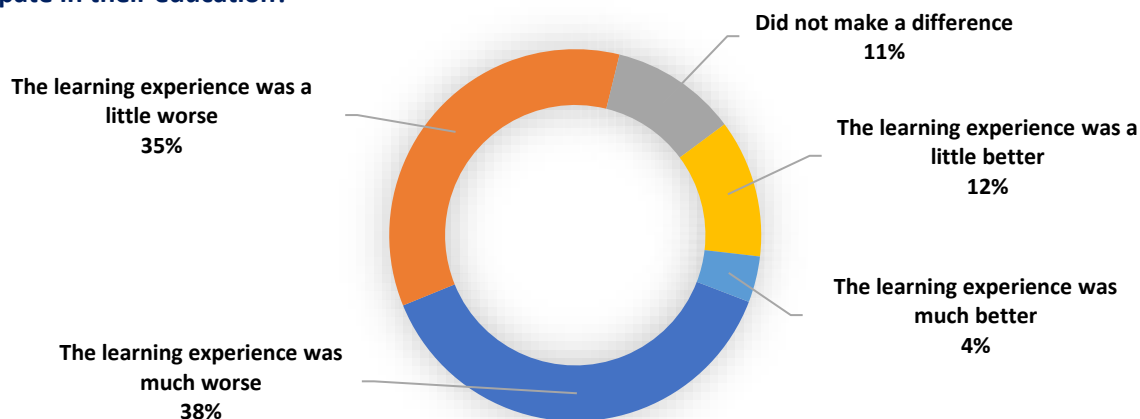
Q. T17: Students with learning difficulties need both accommodations (to ensure access to the curriculum) and intervention (to improve their academic achievement). How well do you believe intensive intervention (tier three) is provided in your school for students with learning difficulties?



Q. T18: To the best of your knowledge, are both accommodations and intervention provided consistently in your school (or the schools you are familiar with) as part of the support for students with learning difficulties?



Q. T19: Over the past few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted schools. To what extent did the move to home-based or online learning affect the ability of students with learning difficulties to participate in their education?



Q. T20: Please comment on the impact on specific students by way of example:

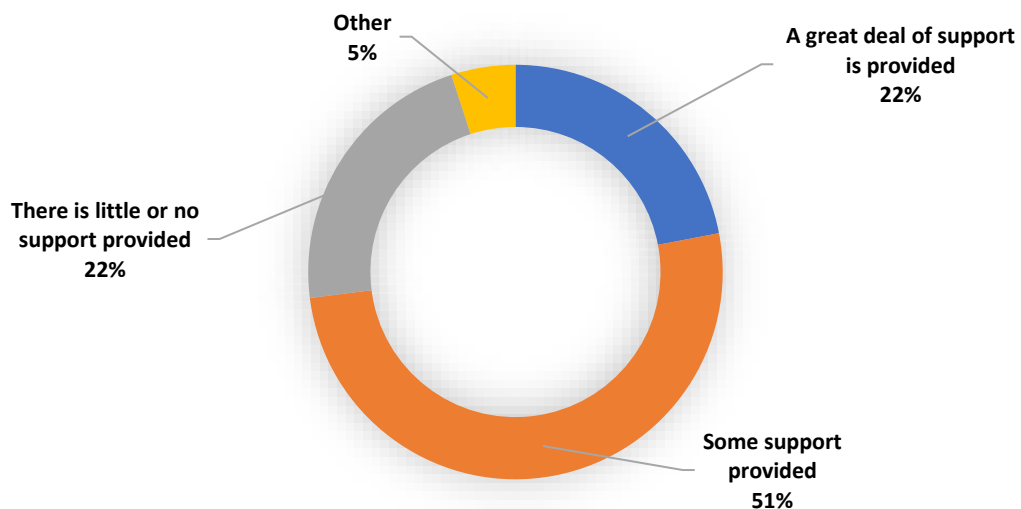
180 teachers/educators gave examples for this question. Key points and comments were as followed:

- A number of teachers shared similar statements, with one summarising it as - "I think remote learning has impacted different students in different ways. Some students have thrived with remote learning, while others have found it particularly overwhelming."
- Some students with learning disorders found it hard to keep up with fast paced synchronous sessions, with a number of educators/teachers commenting that other students would jump in and ask questions before they were able to, with the topic moving on too quickly. Conversely, when sessions were not live an advantage was that students were able to learn at their own pace.
- An educator pointed out that "students with learning difficulties have largely disengaged, many are not attending." Another commented "many students did not access remote learning at all. Parents reported extreme difficulties in getting their students to complete work remotely - it caused a great deal of stress in the home. Also, the normal Tier 3 interventions which we provide could not be provided due to our workplace not allowing individual Zoom sessions for child safety reasons."
- Success was often said to be dependent on what support was available at home i.e. if parents/carers were working and unable to provide support, if their primary language was not English or if they had their own difficulties with literacy/academic learning then these students faced significant disadvantage.
- Younger students and/or those with weaker computer skills or lower attentional capacity found it more challenging to engage with their education during this time.
- Although some students continued to be offered learning onsite at schools, if this was not available a significant negative issue related to families who did not have access to any technology.
- For some students, self-efficacy and personal accountability of their learning increased; however, the opposite was the case for others, with some not accessing remote learning (even when they had technology to support it).
- Several teachers/educators indicated intervention was generally not being provided during this time. Also, if lesson instructions were in written format then this generally disadvantaged students with learning disabilities.
- An advantage raised was that some students experienced a reduction in anxiety symptoms.
- One teacher commented – "Being in a remote Aboriginal community we have lost many children to outlying communities, with no schools. These children will come back to us eventually but will have missed so much of this year and will be completely out of routine."
- Another stated – "Some students felt overwhelmed at not being able to have direct access to teaching staff when needed, started to fall behind, then lost motivation. Some parents were unable to help their children - either because of internet quality, their own inexperience, or the busyness of the household. If the family provided good support, it helped. Where a parent had a learning difficulty and their strengths/business are non-academic, they gave support (limited) as they were able. These children have not progressed."

Q. T21: What has been your experience with transition planning and support for students with learning difficulties between Primary and Secondary School or from Secondary School to further education/training? Please indicate below to what extent transitions are supported.

300 teachers/educators provided information regarding their experiences with transition planning and support. Common points and comments included:

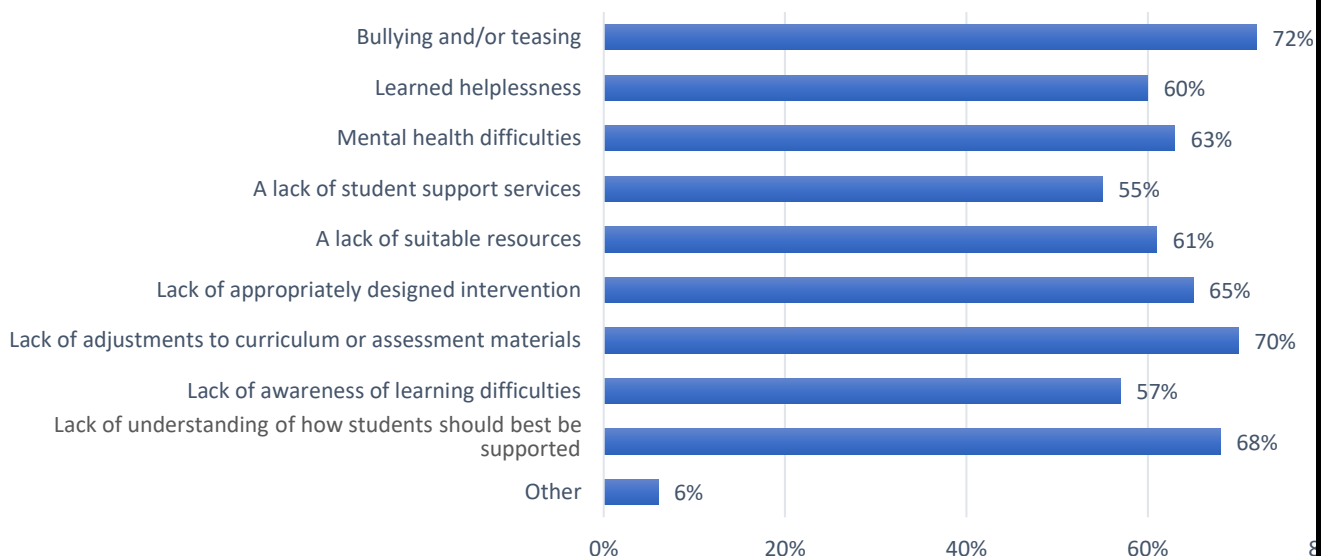
- A large variance in what is provided or how well it is managed was evident, with respondents often commenting that it largely depended on individual schools and teaching staff i.e. some were much better than others.
- More High Schools were noted to have better systems in place than Primary Schools.
- Students who already had documented plans and/or more significant difficulties were better supported and catered for.
- The level of planning and outcomes was also dependent on funding and staffing considerations.



Improving the Standards and Identified Issues – What needs to change?

Q. T22: What are the most significant barriers that students with learning difficulties face at school or in later education and training? (Tick any that apply below)

Percentage of teachers/educators indicating what common barriers students with learning difficulties face at school or later education



Other comments and notable factors teachers/educators identified as significant barriers which students with learning difficulties face at school, or in later education, included the delay in providing adjustments and the limited funding in order to be able to provide these appropriately so students didn't experience disadvantage.

Other comments from teachers/educators included:

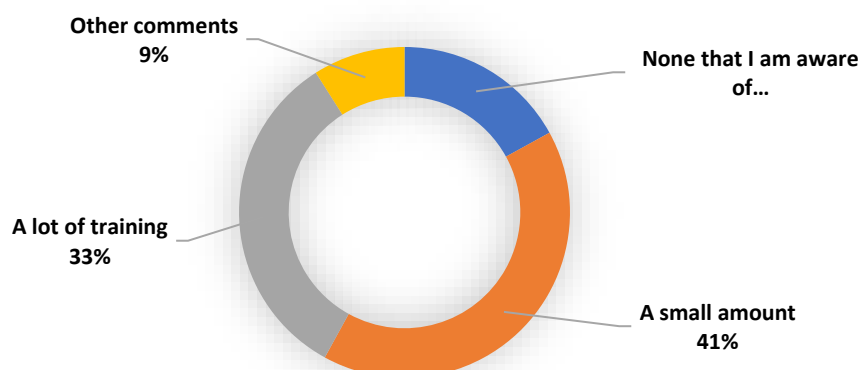
- "There is a level of teasing that often goes under the teaching staff awareness, that is often expressed by our students with LD and other disabilities."
- "A lack of the students being educated about their own learning difficulty and what their specific accommodations and barriers are."
- "The restrictions of the education system - particularly the older they get. Yes, we can make adjustments, but unless we modify the curriculum it is very hard for them to keep up with the pace of learning required to meet the curriculum goals. Learning in classrooms is often really tricky for these kids and the way schools are set up works against them."
- "Student experiences are inconsistent depending on what resourcing and emphasis is provided by school executives."
- "Lack of understanding need for accommodations – even though I'm a teacher only in Year 8 have I discovered and implemented for my son: speech to text, text to speech."

Q. T23: What do you think could be improved to help address these barriers?

169 teachers/educators provided suggestions or information on this topic, with key points and comments including:

- Many teachers/educators noted better accountability and/or consequences for schools not adhering to the DSE would result in student barriers being better addressed and/or accommodated for.
- One teacher commented "We should be talking about learning difficulties just like we would if a student wears glasses."
- Improved awareness raising was often suggested, such as having a campaign initiated at the government level. This could include visible awareness around schools including things like posters listing possible adjustments that could be considered so that students can also be involved with requests and their own planning.
- There being a need for better transition planning between primary and high school, as well as needing increased awareness of staff at the TAFE and Tertiary level.
- More frequent and/or mandated training (including at the pre-service teacher level) in the areas of DSE, specific learning disorders and on how to choose and deliver reasonable adjustment choices targeted at individual needs, with one educator commenting "Increase/include learning difficulty modules in undergraduate teacher training. Increased promotion of visiting teacher services available to state schools. Partnerships between state schools and supports such as DSF."
- The issue of documented plans just being 'tick a box' but not actually being utilised was often raised.
- Addressing the issue of schools and education settings using non evidence-informed intervention, with stricter systems level response or restrictions made at a government level.
- Addressing intervention earlier, potentially via screening and having accountability built into the system as is the case in the UK, was seen as an important way to minimise the severity of barriers.

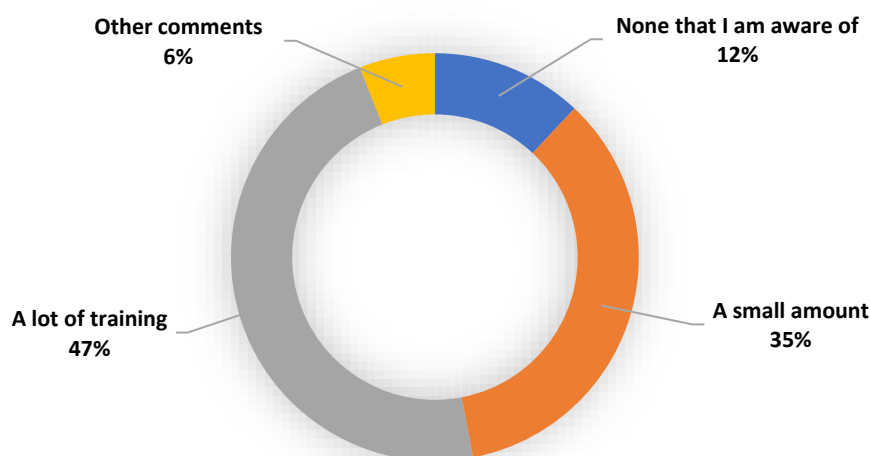
Q. T24: How much training have you received on the Disability Standards for Education (DSE)?



Other comments regarding the amount of DSE training:

- Whilst some people had received DSE awareness training, so they were aware of their legal obligations, they commented it was not specific enough to be able to implement targeted and reasonable adjustments for individual students.
- There was significant inconsistency between what DSE training respondents had received (frequency and quality of), with some having received none at all and others being provided with yearly refreshers, including being provided work time to complete online NCCD DSE modules.
- Some teachers/educators mentioned that they were required to complete the training they did have in their own time and so there was no incentive to do so or repercussions if they did not.

Q.T25: How much training have you received regarding the selection and provision of reasonable adjustments for students with learning difficulties?

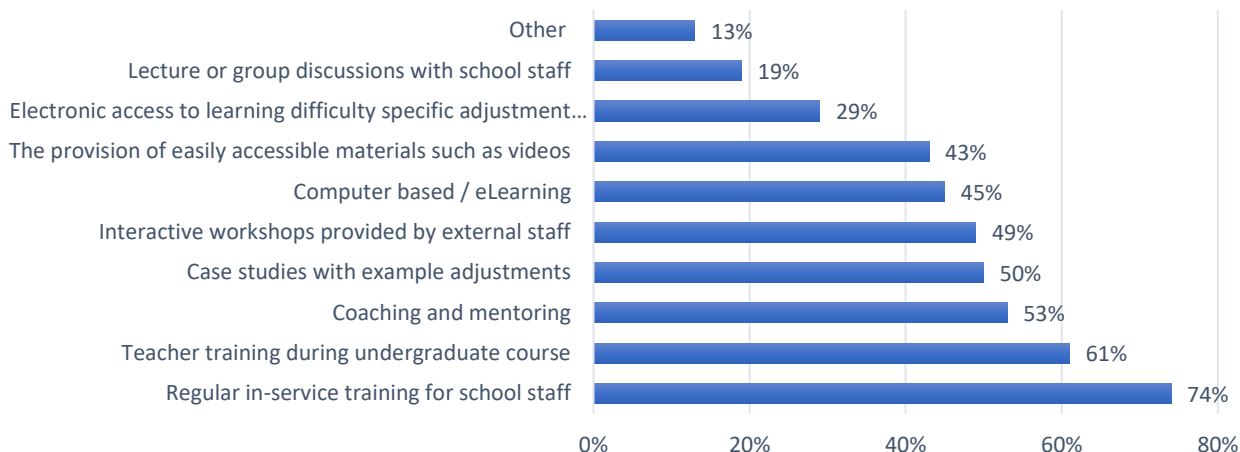


Other comments regarding the amount of training related to learning difficulties and reasonable adjustments:

- More teachers/educators had received training on specific interventions/programs, as opposed to having received any on making appropriate and reasonable adjustments/accommodations.
- Similar to previous topics, teachers/educators noted they had to seek out and fund their own training on this area as it was not provided for by their school or education setting.
- Others mentioned that whilst they had no specific training, they learnt it all from working from other staff.
- A number of respondents who had participated in training, noted that they had not had any for a long time and/or did not update their skills and knowledge in the area at a later stage.

Q. T26: If training was to be developed, what format would you prefer it take?

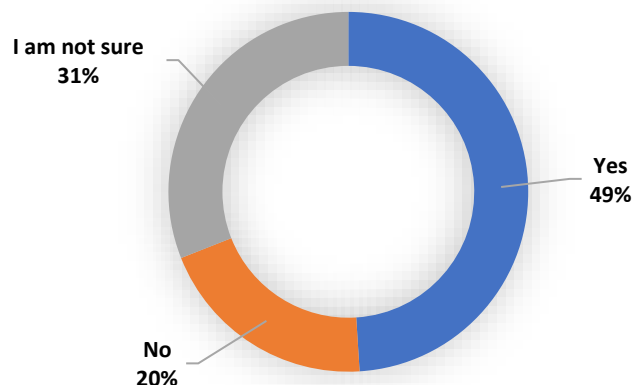
Training option suggestions (Percentage of teachers / educators recommending)



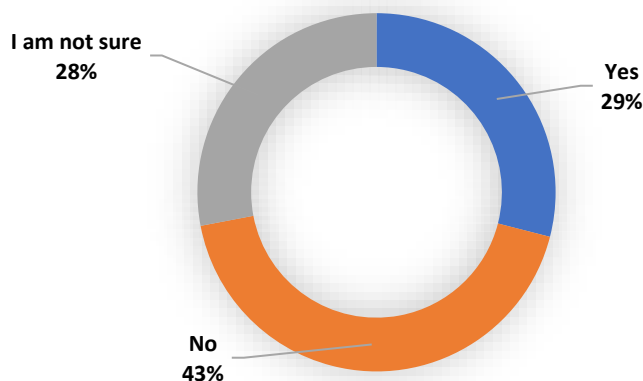
Other comments and suggestions regarding the format of possible training included:

- A ready reckoner of adjustments suitable for particular disabilities.
- The importance of ongoing and in-service training was often referenced with one teacher commenting - "The need for ongoing follow up to support use of skills learnt so it's not a box ticked and never used."
- Downloadable resources that can be used as they are or adapted and individualised as needed.
- External staff to train DOE staff. LDC staff are amazing but beyond that DOE consultants are overpaid and lack up to date knowledge
- One teacher commented – "There are already many available opportunities. The challenge is the time for these. There are so many online opportunities, but it is often expected that these are completed out of hours. PL is powerful when it is whole school to enable professional dialogue and clarity about whole school practices."
- Some respondents commented they felt comfortable training staff in certain subject areas but not others, such as one stating – "I would feel comfortable training staff at my school in MSL for Tier 1 students. However, I believe for maximum impact those assisting tier 2/3 students should attend courses delivered by professional trainers."
- A number of teacher/educators noted that staff within a school may not be the best equipped to provide the training and so external agencies should be sought with one commenting that – "Teachers entrenched in their own ideologies are hard to steer towards evidence based practices. The training needs to come from an experienced and knowledgeable trainer, but I also think without the endorsement of Catholic Education, no change will happen."
- It was common for respondents to reiterate that training should initially also be provided at pre-service times such as during TAFE (for educational assistants) and undergraduate courses level. Others commented this should also be for other allied disciplines such as for Speech Pathologists.

Q. T27: Is there a clear process to follow in your school if a family or carer makes a complaint regarding the support provided to their child, or challenges what has been provided for their child with a learning difficulty?



Q. T28: Are you aware of an occasion (or occasions) when a family or carer has made a complaint due to a school not meeting their obligations in relation to the Disability Standards in Education?



Q. T29: If yes, please describe the outcome of the complaint process.

68 teachers/educators provided information regarding complaint processes they had been involved in.

Themes and comments included:

- Most complaints were made at the school level with only a few made directly to a regional office.
- The arrangement of and attendance at a case meeting was commonplace as an initial step in schools, sometimes followed by the development of a workable documented plan for the student.
- More comments relating to the complaint process were negative (including it being awkward for the student following the process) than positive, some respondents outlined positive outcomes including:
 - "The complaint was followed up accordingly and the outcome saw the student in question being supported fully according to their specific learning needs" and another,
 - "SSEN-D provides support to the school & teacher for the particular student. The school was also able to access professional learning for all staff."
- More successful outcomes were often noted to hinge on timely and good communication between stakeholders and having a case manager that could also monitor and follow up as needed.
- One teacher stated if "families don't know about the DSE how can they complain about it? If families did know, more funding would be required."
- Staff who had been involved in a significant complaint process indicated they, as well as the families involved, had felt significant angst and stress related to it for minimal outcome changes.
- Some teachers/educators noted that whilst the changes made following a complaint were consistent initially, they often went back to normal at a later stage, with one teacher making saying there was a "short-term flurry of discussions with strategies for intervention promised, but which often grew less with passing time."
- One teacher commented that nothing was done and that their school kept "telling the parents they were doing all that was possible. There was no funding so they couldn't do much. Said it was the bottom of the things they worried about."
- One educator commented - "the parent was advised to be more appreciative of the considerable effort already being put into their child" and another "the parent was treated as the problem. The child was excluded and suspended multiple times in Kindergarten and sent to a behaviour school. They were subsequently sent to a multicategorical support class at a different school where the child thrived. The parent was sufficiently scarred by this experience that she is reluctant to advocate on behalf of her child now when things go wrong and has significantly reduced trust in teachers."
- Some families chose to remove their child following a complaint process with, a tutor commenting that a student they worked with "changed schools due to lack of support/ understanding and the dismissive attitude they gave the parent."

Q.T30: Is there anything else you could suggest that may encourage more successful use of the Disability Standards in Education, or that may improve the quality of education or quality of experience in school for students with learning difficulties?

102 teachers/educators provided statements to this question, with comments including:

- "For government schools, an annual online short e-learning course that refreshes knowledge and understandings of the DSE."
- "DSE are not used widely by teachers in the secondary school I am in despite in-school in-servicing. Some teachers would know them well. Electronic access to learning goal examples for different difficulties at varying levels of the school would be helpful."
- "Encourage adults, and older teens with learning difficulties to share their education experiences, both good and bad. Then implement changes based on the insights gained."
- "The DDA and DSE are too vague to instil change, because our schools' think they are meeting their obligations."
- "Training and understanding needs to start at the top - Literacy and Mathematics cluster leaders, principals, specifically trained psychologists and speech pathologists, thoroughly trained intervention teachers and finally the teaching staff."

- *“The free SPELD courses are amazing and should continue to be free.”*
- *“Suitable external monitoring of adjustments is required - not school just self-monitoring.”*
- *“Better access to evidence-based intervention training and programmes.”*
- *“Every school should complete at least one PD on this topic per year. Use case studies or their own student information to make sure they are meeting suitable standards.”*
- *“The accountability factor for schools and teachers needs to be raised.”*
- *“Schools need to be using the evidence that is available to them. The Science of Reading and its overwhelming evidence is not being used by many schools, instead they are continuing on with programs that have been proven to be ineffective. Students with learning difficulties are usually the ones who are most disadvantaged when the evidence is not used, as they don't have the ability to readily access learning. If we start to act like professionals and adhere to the science, there is a greater chance this will have a flow on effect in all areas, including best practice for how we support students with learning difficulties.”*
- *“Students with learning difficulties must be given a voice, so their needs can be heard, and adjustments made, so ensuring they have equal educational opportunities alongside their peers!!”*
- *“Teachers struggle to manage maintaining accommodations and intervention in a mainstream classroom. They are mindful of workload and lack skills in this area. Too often an aide (who is not paid well) ends up assuming responsibility for the student and they don't have the skills or training either. Without an aide or SSO the accommodations for the student are not maintained for long.”*
- *“Teachers need to be up skilled and supported. Administration need to take an active role in modelling this support and knowledge base. Graduates need to be rigorously trained at the undergraduate level.”*
- *“I do find that other professions - eg speech therapists sometimes make recommendations to parents that we are in no position to implement in schools. We had a number of parents demand a full-time support person for their child with writing difficulties as a result of OT recommendations. I am not sure parents realise what schools can and can't provide. Perhaps more realistic collaboration between professionals may help us all work better together and thus achieve a better result.”*
- *“The development of an ongoing conversation around this point combined with effective policy and practice.”*
- *“Continual update of understanding around the Disability Standards in Education has been occurring due to NCCD and the nature of this. We discuss this in staff meetings and all of the Leadership team including Head of Primary and Principal expect that we are adjusting learning for individual students and providing the children with quality education.”*
- *“An understanding that learning disabilities and differences should be an integral part of any teacher training program. It is essential that teachers see working with students with disabilities as part of their role. My team in Learning Enrichment have had to spend a considerable time changing the culture where teachers seem to think that if a child is not managing that it becomes the learning support department's responsibility to manage their organisation, engagement and completion of assessments rather than seeing it as a collaborative approach.”*
- *“Inclusion of a trained learning support staff member on every school's senior executive; extensive research based AITSL accredited training provided for staff with requirements that each staff member complete a minimum number of hours as part of their maintenance of accreditation; mandatory review & auditing of schools' practices, documentation etc of support and adjustments provided to individual students, with the review including randomly selected interviews with students identified with additional needs and their parents.”*
- *“Clearer expectations provided by department of education Officials and emphasised by ARDs and principals. Needs to be top down approach. Often support staff and SLPs are the ones driving for change and support but have little leverage.”*
- *“University courses need to cover these issues in order for new teachers to recognise and make necessary adjustments to their practice. In my experience I know they want to but don't know where to start.”*
- *“It needs to be mandatory in schools, like Fire Training and First Aid. I worry it sometimes gets lost.”*

- *“More transparency in PLPs being followed through. Goals get written but very often no real adjustments are made to enable the students to reach the goals on their PLP. The amount of students in our school that are on PLPs and adjustments are written down but nothing actually gets done in class to help the student. They get forgotten about and support staff can't do anything unless the teacher directs and it's frustrating to watch students who need the help but don't get it when they are diagnosed and or in PLPs”*
- *“Increased education by external agencies and training on what adjustments look like and how best to implement these.”*
- *“I can't emphasise enough the importance of trained staff, and of system-wide acknowledgment of the importance of recognising learning difficulties. Systems must be put in place and there should be some sort of quality control in terms of the sort of teaching methodologies that schools use. Schools must be informed by evidence (and be trained to recognise high quality evidence) rather than by ideology.”*

Q. T31: Is there anything else you would like to add?

48 teachers/educators provided final statements, with comments including:

- *“This is a social justice issue. I am tired of watching our vulnerable children head off to high school with a reading age of grade 2 and under, or the high cost to their mental health, either through teasing, embarrassment or the shame of repeating another year - usually at the cost of leaving any friends behind to start again at another school.”*
- *“I feel that NCCD has certainly brought the issues to the front and ensured that children are being catered for. I am a member of a facebook group of parents where they discuss provisions given. I note that there is a lot of misconceptions from parents and also schools. I don't understand why there isn't a clear understanding and why schools aren't ensuring that they are catering. I do find it confusing for all that there are differences in expectations from state to state.”*
- *“In my experience children who more likely reach their potential have teachers along the way who make connections with their students and get to know them well and so are more aware of their strengths and difficulties and make adjustments or offer suitable guidance. In turn these students feel valued and are then motivated to do the best with what they have and not give up.”*
- *“Although we have wellbeing programs, there is not one that specifically targets general student understanding of any form of disability and the result of the teasing that often goes unnoticed by others.”*
- *“We have some extremely competent teachers and learning leaders but many who still have no idea after all these years - some don't think they should have to know anything other than content and some are simply pushed for time in our overcrowded curriculum and day.”*
- *“Having spent a long time teaching in the UK and specialising in the field of dyslexia, I think it is imperative for teachers in Australia to receive more comprehensive training about learning difficulties such as dyslexia. In addition to this, it has become increasingly apparent from my own children's education, that teachers aren't trained to teach children to read. There seems to be a real gap in their knowledge in this area in such a fundamental area of education.”*
- *“Anything that DSF can provide to support Schools and Teachers will be welcomed.”*
- *“We are under- resourced in mainstream schools to achieve the optimal teaching and learning adjustments and outcomes for all students.”*
- *“I'm an Education Assistant trying to tell teachers they need to make these adjustments. I don't think the teachers that don't are held accountable.”*
- *“I think most teachers and schools (in my experience) are doing their absolute best. However, with limited support, funding and resourcing for students with additional needs and an overcrowded curriculum it becomes difficult to provide what each and every student needs to progress their learning goals, even after you've done additional training and study to support your students.”*
- *“Schools in the ACT are so far behind the eight-ball in this area. There are very few schools who take learning difficulties seriously and too many that leave it to the parents.”*

- *“Our school consistently provides support to many students and keeps getting better at it. We have a programme in place to screen students who are not performing as expected for their age or known abilities. Less students are slipping through undetected.”*
- *“We need far more professional development and resources allocation.”*
- *“It is awesome when a student gains an understanding of their learning needs and realises they are “not stupid”.”*
- *“Perhaps bring in uniform documentation between schools.”*
- *“This whole area needs to be made a priority. The standards need to be legally enforced, schools checked for compliance and funding provided to enable teachers to have adequate time and resources to learn about, plan interventions and communicate and collaborate with struggling and special needs students and their families.”*
- *“The seriousness needs to be addressed because I have visited many local schools as an advocate and LD tutor and there are issues in all of them. The key is the Principal-and leadership team we need them on board to make real change.”*
- *“If PD starts now then by the time those first new graduate teachers come into schools with the knowledge re LD then hopefully schools can already be on their way with it.”*
- *“Teachers often feel helpless under expectations of self and others, lack of time to research what to do, feelings of inadequacy re: help provided to SPELD students and lack of knowledge about difficulties and how to assist. Parents expect teachers know this stuff but teachers often don't.”*
- *“Many schools have the physical resources and skills in staff for intervention, they just need targeted funding for additional Staff supports to run these programs as they are very successful.”*
- *“This is a huge issue. While those of us trained in special education understand our obligations under the DDA, my experience as a Primary school Principal has shown me that many mainstream teachers do not understand their obligations or how to meet them.”*

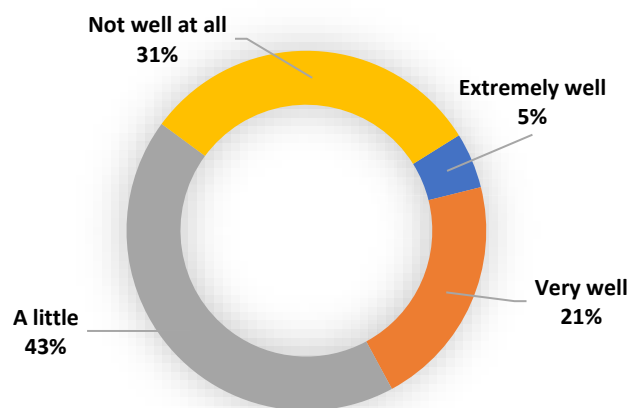
AUSPELD Parent / Carer Questionnaire Data Summary

There were 522 parents/carers who completed the questionnaire, 4% of whom identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and a further 6% of which spoke a language or dialect at home other than English. 58% of respondents' children attended government schools, 18% non-government Catholic schools, 19% other non-government schools, with 2% either having finished their schooling or attended other schooling or educational settings. An additional 3% of students were being home schooled. Most parents/carers had children still in primary school (30% in Kindergarten to Year 3 and 45% in Years 4 to 6). 16% of parents'/carers' children were in lower high school (Years 7 to 9) and 8% in upper high school (Years 10 to 12). 2% of respondents' children were no longer at school (1% did not specify the age of their child).

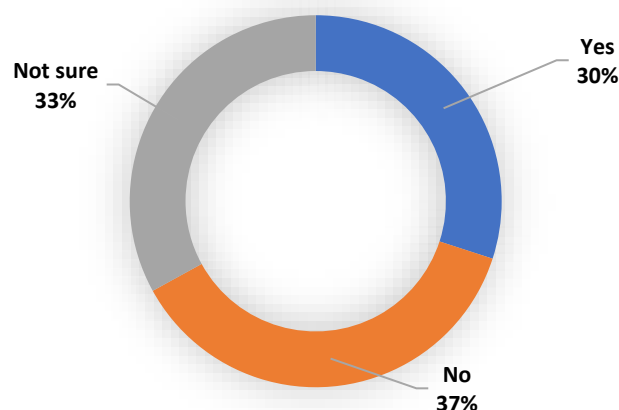
Submissions were received from all over Australia, with 30% of respondents living in a regional area and 2% in a remote location. 33% of parents/carers were from Western Australia, 19% from New South Wales, 17% from South Australia, 17% from Victoria, 12% from Queensland, and 2% were located within Tasmania, the Northern Territory or the Australian Capital Territory.

Knowledge and Understanding of the Standards

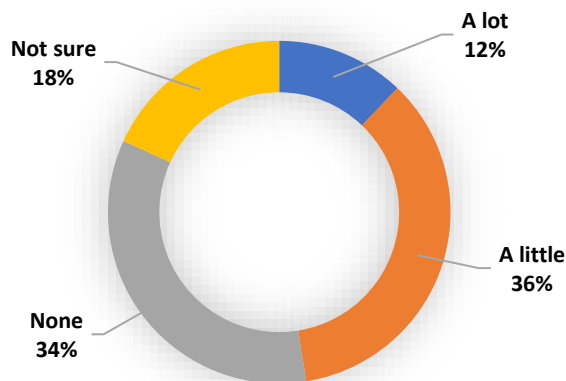
Q. P1: As a parent of a child with a learning difficulty, please rate how well you know and understand your child's rights in terms of access and participation as specified in the Disability Standards for Education.



Q. P2: Do you believe that the Disability Standards for Education influence the level of support provided to students in schools?



Q.P3: What impact do you believe the Disability Standards for Education have had on the support provided to your child?

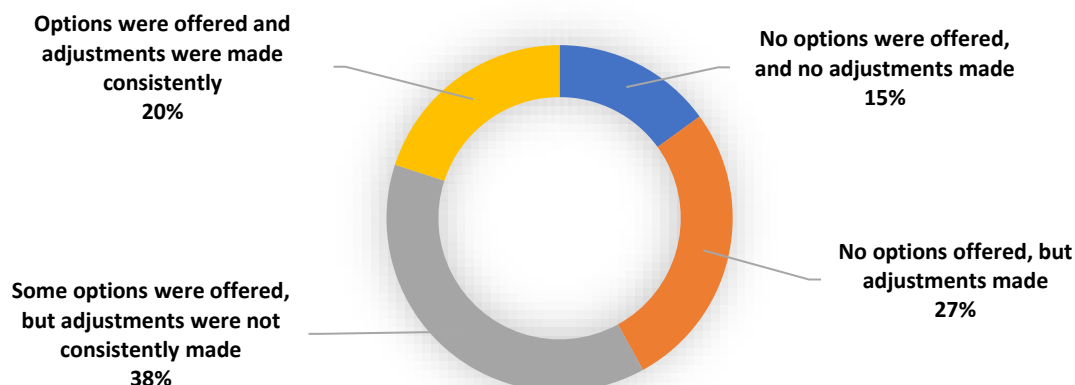


Accessing and Participating in Education

Q. P4: How proactive has your child's school been in terms of making adjustments to course content or instruction, with the aim of helping your child to participate effectively in their education? (Adjustments may include, but are not limited to, providing additional working time, use of Assistive Technology such as a reading pen, regular review meetings, provision of writing templates, assistance with goal setting, coaching etc.)

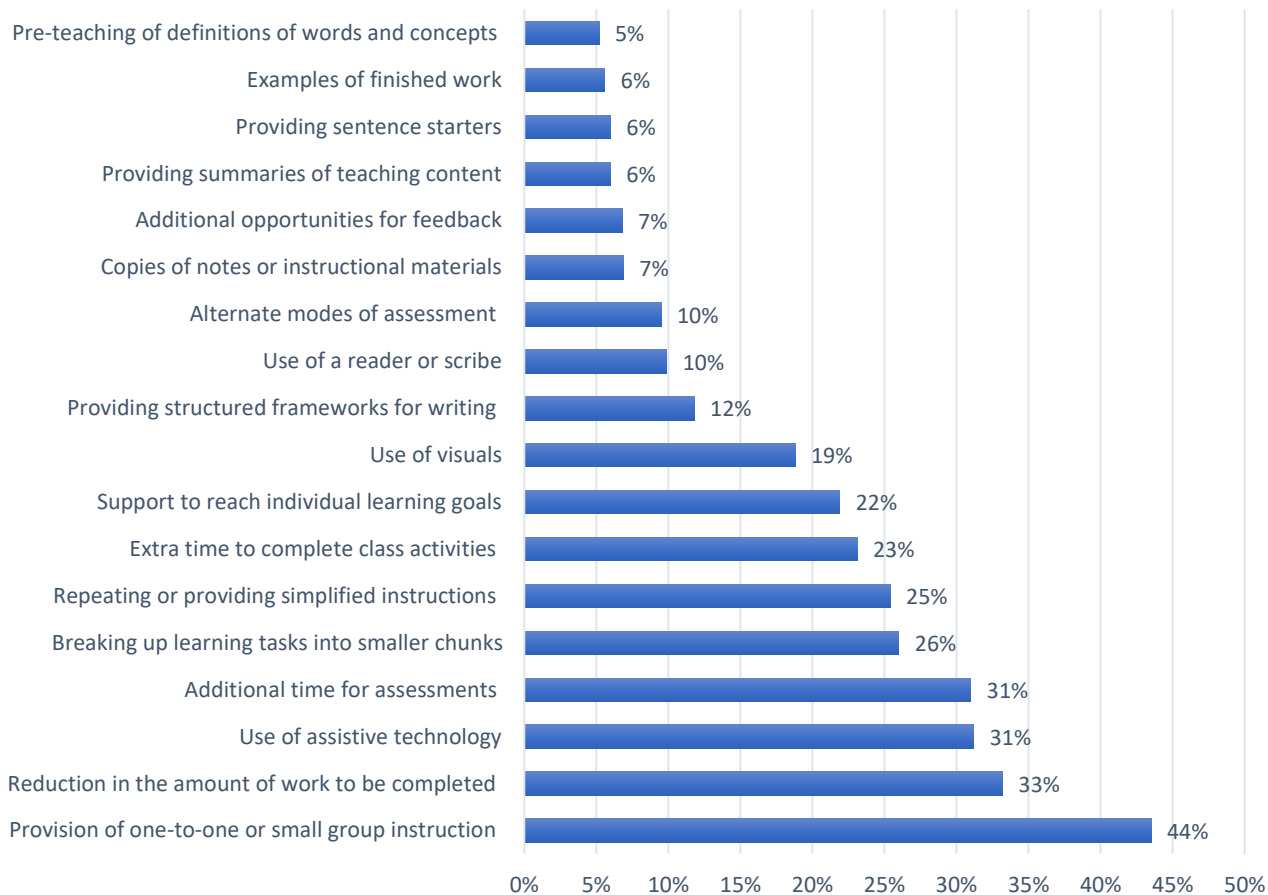
74 respondents provided additional information related to this topic. Themes and common answers from parents/carers included:

- Acknowledgement that some schools were doing their best to implement suggestions (some from external providers); however, there was often a lack of consistency in their application.
- A common finding was that families were told that an adjustment could not be made unless there was a formal diagnosis in place.
- Some parents were unaware if any adjustments were being made for their child or even that these could be asked and planned for. Conversely, some parents were better informed than schools with one parent commenting "my child was declined adjustments until I quoted the obligation under the Standards."
- Sometimes adjustments were too general or not designed to target a specific need which meant they were ineffective for certain students.
- Parents/carers often noted that adjustment planning and implementation success hinged on specific principals or teachers i.e. some staff were better than others.
- Common statements included parents/carers feeling like it was an ongoing battle with school staff to ensure adjustments were offered and implemented consistently.
- A number of families cited issues with handover or transitioning i.e. having to 'start again' every year.

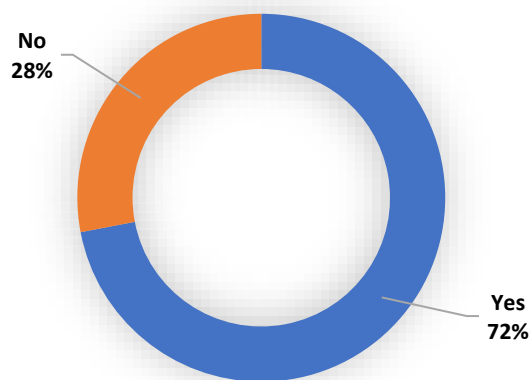


Q. P5: What types of adjustments were suggested by your school? (Tick any that apply)

The most common adjustments suggested by schools
(percentage of parents/carers indicating they were offered to their child)



Q. P6: Did you request any adjustments (based on external recommendations) that were in addition to the adjustments offered by your child's school?



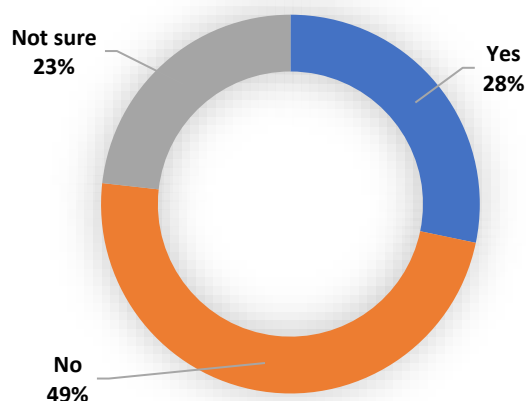
Q. P7: If so, what were the adjustments that you requested? Please indicate whether the adjustment was provided or not.

369 parents/carers provided feedback on this aspect of their child's support and planning.

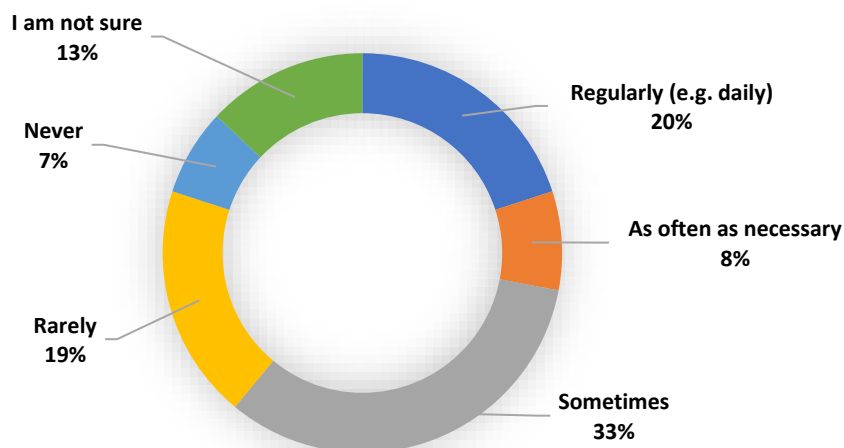
- The most common requests related to intervention programming at school or additional one on-one support, preferential seating, provision of additional breaks, access to assistive technology, scaffolding in class (including visuals and breaking down tasks), additional time for assessments and exemptions from curricular areas (e.g. L.O.T.E.) so that therapy/remediation sessions could occur.
- Very few adjustment requests related to non-academic aspects, such as supporting positive social and emotional development of students.

- A large number of the adjustments advised were reasonable; however, not all were evidence informed such as requesting coloured filters for reading. In contrast, a number of parents were more informed about higher-quality remediation and noted that they had requested that their child be excluded from programming that involved Reading Recovery, PM or levelled readers.
- A number of parents requested external professionals (such as tutors and/or Speech Pathologists) to provide therapy/intervention to their child at school.

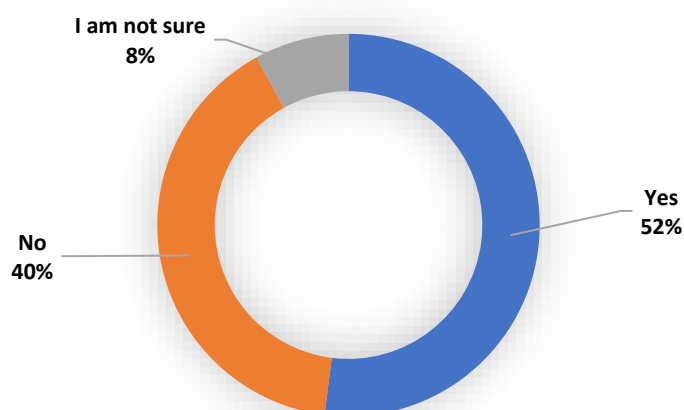
Q. P8: If adjustments were made, do you believe these were sufficient and that they allowed your child to participate in curriculum tasks and assessments?



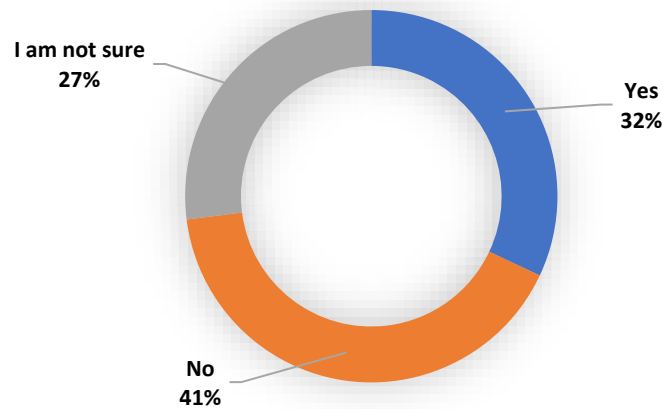
Q. P9: How frequently were the adjustments used within the classroom?



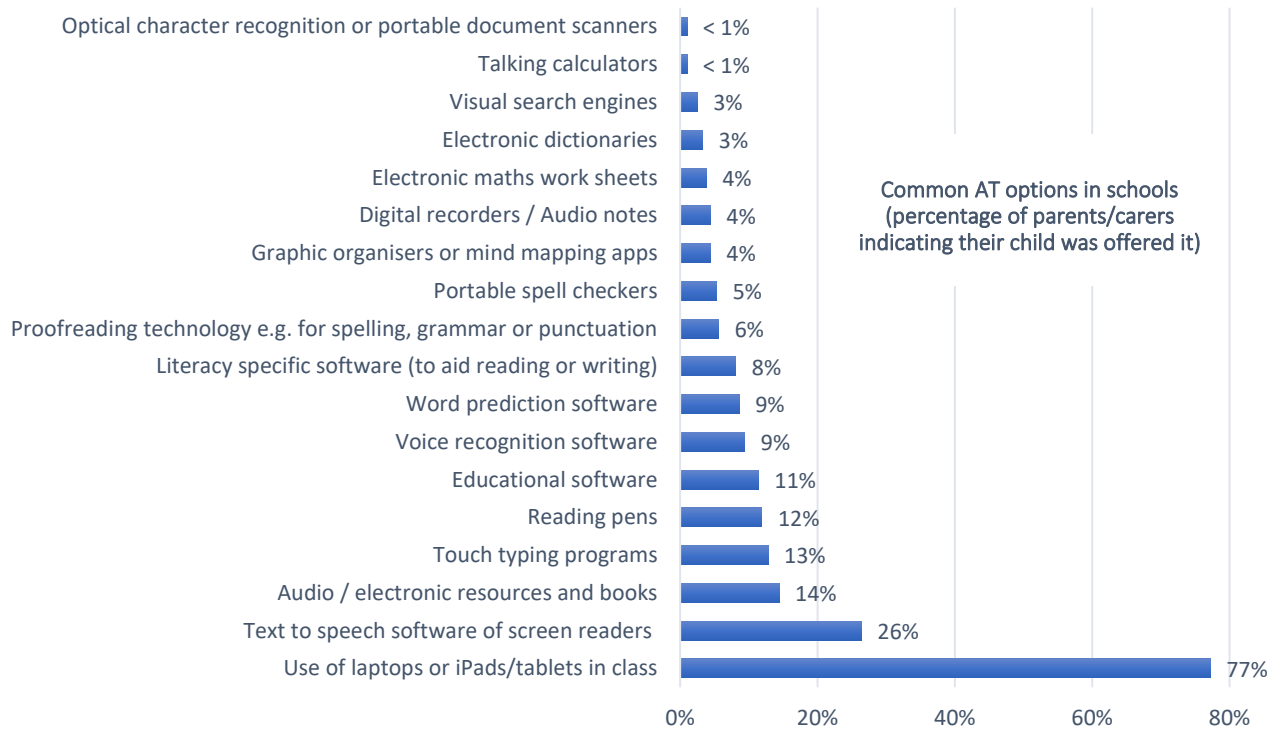
Q. P10: Does your child have a documented plan (e.g. Individual Education or Learning Plan / IEP, ILP) that is closely adhered to at their school?



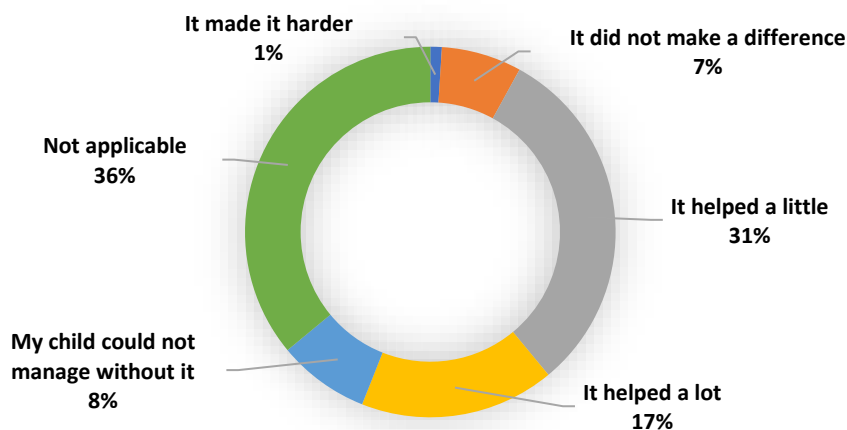
Q: P11: The Assistive Technology (AT) used in schools often takes the form of electronic devices or computer hardware or software and can be used to reinforce or support the learning process. Does your child's school encourage the use of AT for students with learning difficulties (including your child)?
Note: specific examples of AT can be found in the question below.



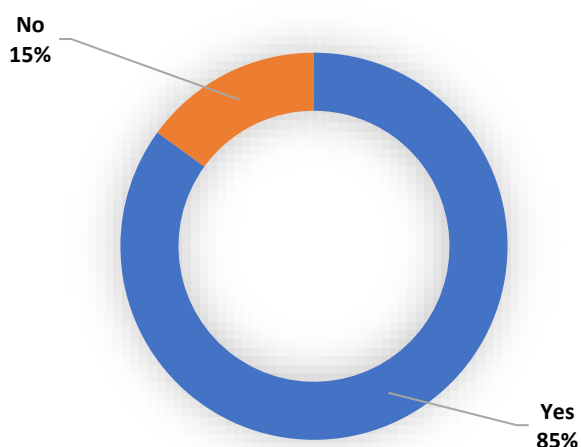
Q: P12: Which AT options below have been used in your child's school? (Tick all that apply)



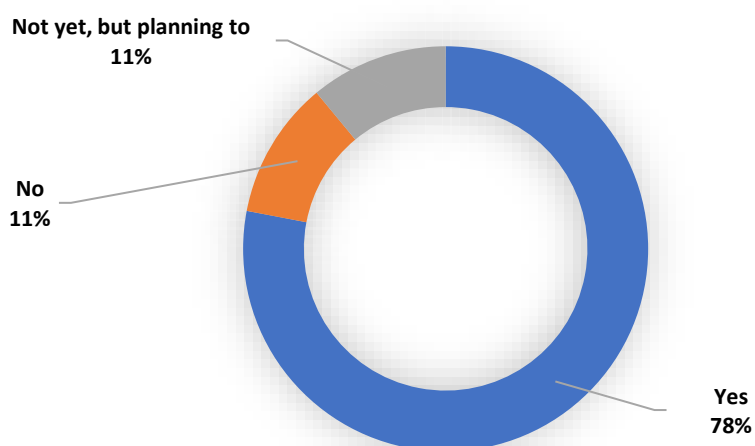
Q: P13: If AT has been used, has it helped your child to participate in their education?



Q. P14: Has there been a time when you felt that your child's school was not meeting their obligations in terms of implementing reasonable adjustments for their learning difficulties?



Q. P15: If yes, did you raise your concerns with the school or make a complaint?



Q. P16: If your answer was Yes to either of these questions, please describe the outcomes of the complaint process.

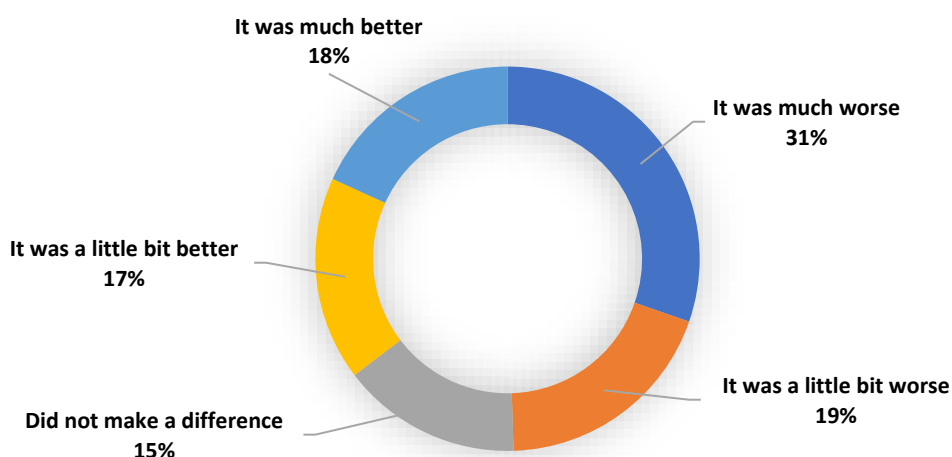
364 parents/carers provided feedback on the outcomes of the complaint process and/or what happened if they raised concerns with their school or education setting. Key points and comments included:

- 58% of complaints were from families where the student was attending a government school, 16% were completing their education in Catholic schools, 19% were attending other non-government schools, with an additional 7% not stating the type of school they attended or were either home-schooling or no longer at school.
- Nearly all concerns were only raised and/or resolved at the school level, with only a few parents/carers noting that their complaint had reached either the government or departmental level (such as the Catholic Education department).
- Although there were a large number of neutral comments regarding the process, as well as a few positives, most parents had a very negative view of the process and outcomes.
- The most common response to a complaint was the arrangement and attendance at a school based meeting with relevant stakeholders (sometimes with a documented plan to follow); however, many parents voiced their frustration with a lack of change subsequent to the initial case conference. At times further assessment (such as with the School Psychologist) was also completed, as well as a recommendation for additional training of staff e.g. in use of evidence-based approaches (such as in phonics) and/or skills in developing targeted documented plans for students with learning difficulties.
- Parent/carers frequently commented on issues relating to a lack of communication and/or follow through once a concern had been raised with a teacher or principal.
- Parents/carers who had moved schools noted quite big differences between processing and accommodations being provided at each school.

- Issues raised regarding a lack of transparency and/or length of time for the process were common. Parents/carers quoted average timeframes of twelve months to three years for the full process, with the longest being seven years.
- A large proportion of parents noted that they were told by school staff that as learning disorders are not funded, they were not able to provide additional support or programming. Alternatively, that class based staff did not have the capacity to work on individual learning goals or adjustments, given the amount of students with other “difficulties”.
- Following a lack of information provided at the school level, a number of families relied on completing their own research regarding appropriate supports and adjustments, with some deciding to withdraw their child and move into home schooling instead.
- One parent commented that they “had meetings with the principal, teacher, school psychologist. They could not help nor recommend how to get tests done, this is a very expensive option to choose for a single family. Was informed even if I had all the testing done all they could offer was coloured paper as learning difficulties are not a disability.”

Other Experiences in Education

Q: P17: Over the past few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted schools. To what extent did the move to home-based or online learning impact your child’s ability to participate in their education?



Q: P18: Has online learning increased the disadvantage (or the level of difficulty) your child experiences?

- 438 parents/carers shared their experiences in this area, 38% of which noted several negatives or some level of disadvantage during this time, many of which cited increased levels of stress and mental health concerns impacting participation and engagement during this time. Conversely, the level of disadvantage was sometimes traded off against benefits from additional one-on-one support being able to be provided at home vs what is available within a classroom.
- For those that were most affected, the most common issues cited by parents/carers related to internet and/or connectivity issues, students not having sufficient computing skills, a lack of suitable resources or materials being provided that sufficiently differentiated or supported students with additional needs.
- During this time a large number of parents/carers commented that it was difficult for them to manage their child’s schooling activities during this time (either due to work commitments and/or a lack of skills themselves). Additionally, that there were often increased levels of stress and/or fighting with their children on these tasks which negatively impacted the relationship with their child.
- In general, the less synchronous or more static lessons provided by schools were (such as only having access to worksheets or pre-recorded videos) the less successful it was, with the exception of when students had no access to technology.

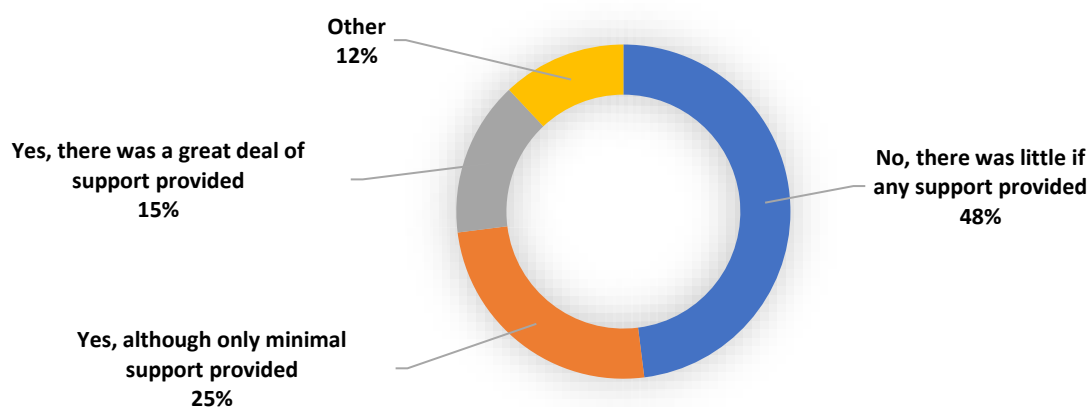
- Some parents/carers advised that their child had completely disengaged with their schooling, with their child doing little or no work during this time. Some parents commented that they did not feel confident or did not know how to support their child with their education.
- Given some areas of Australia were less affected during restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (due to shorter lock downs, such as in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory), families in these areas noted minimal disruptions to their child's participation and engagement with their schooling.

Q: P19: Has online learning had an unexpected positive impact on your child's learning?

408 responses were provided to this question, with 45% of respondents noting at least some positives, although it was generally acknowledged that there were both pros and cons during this unique time.

- Some of the positive impacts cited related to a reduction in student anxiety or improved emotional wellbeing associated with reduced social stressors as their child felt safer and/or was not having to be compared to their peers academically. Additionally, that they were able to ask their teachers questions or for support privately without being embarrassed to ask in front of their peers.
- Another common comment related to their child's confidence levels improving. Factors cited as being linked to this finding included their child receiving higher levels of differentiated and/or one-on-one support (provided at home), online learning being more fun and engaging for them, and for those who had access there was a greater range of assistive technology that was available in the home.
- Other positives included improvement in typing and/or other assistive technology skills, the increased flexibility allowing students to take longer on tasks or take more breaks as needed, with a number of families noting the advantages of self-paced learning and for some the increased ownership around their schoolwork tasks.
- Another point that families noted was that they only 'discovered' their child's learning difficulty, or the degree of difficulty their child was experiencing academically, because they observed it firsthand.
- Some families said that they were not happy with the materials provided by their school and so instead paid for provide tutoring or subscribed to online programs such as Nessy.

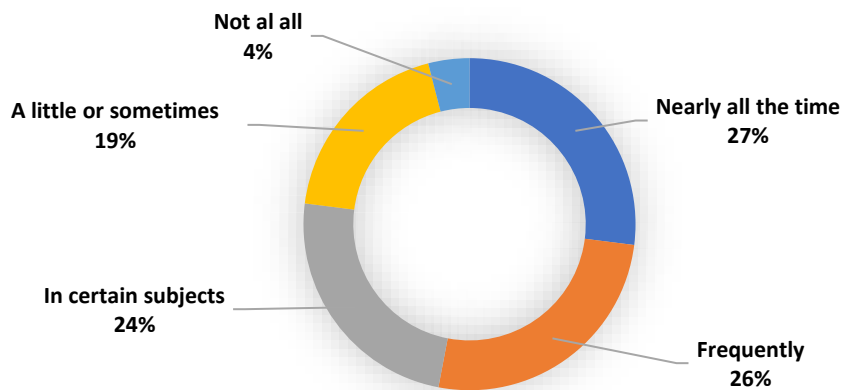
Q: P20: If your child has transitioned between Primary and Secondary School or from Secondary School to further education/training, was support provided?



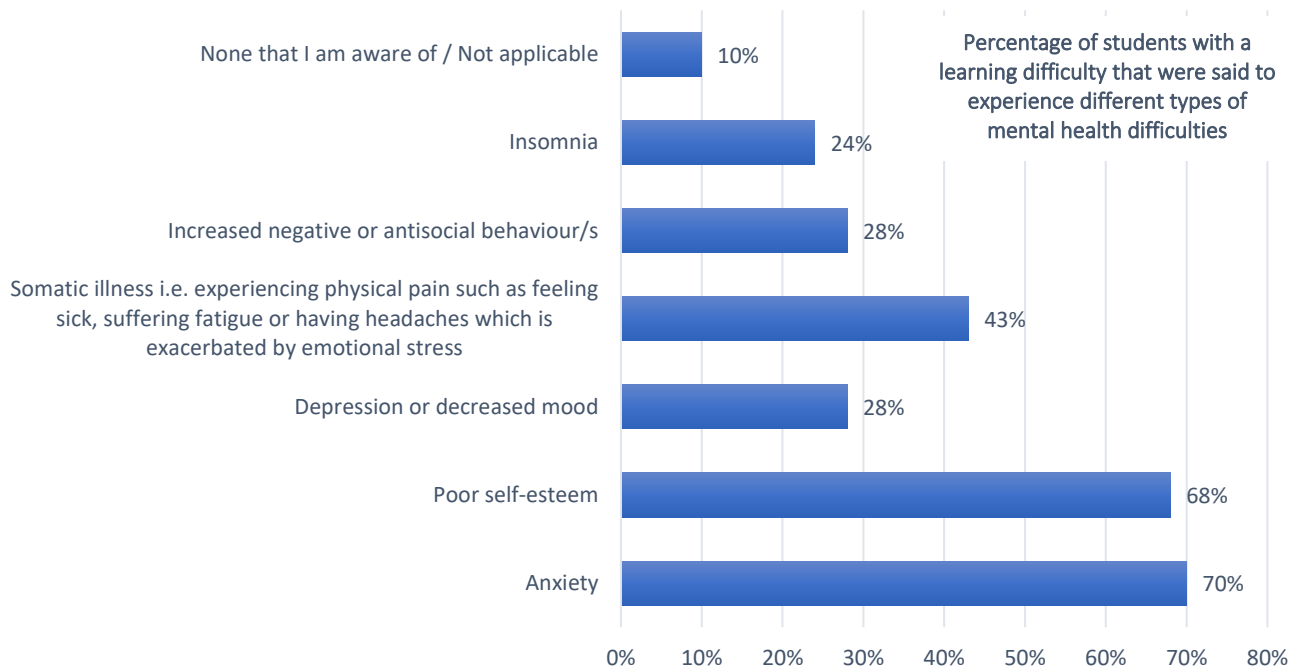
143 parents/carers provided additional comments and feedback regarding their experiences during transition times.

- There was a large variance with regards to what support, if any, was provided.
- Some parents/carers noted that primary school staff were better at managing this area, with the opposite being stated by other respondents.
- A number of parents/carers raised concerns and said they were worried about how to support their child during these times, as they have not or were not provided with any information.
- A common statement from parents/carers related to processes being discussed or put in place initially, with them either not eventuating or not continuing shortly after starting.

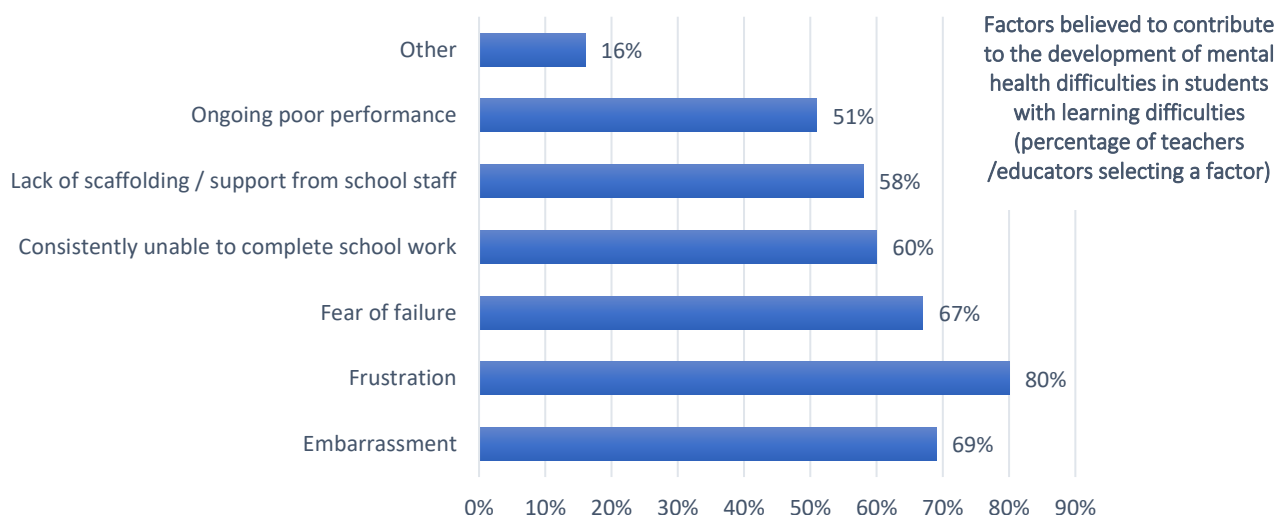
Q: P21: Has your child struggled to remain motivated or engaged at school due to barriers resulting from their learning difficulty?



Q: P22: The challenges associated with having a learning difficulty can, in some cases, contribute to the development of mental health difficulties. Please indicate below whether your child has experienced any mental health difficulties.



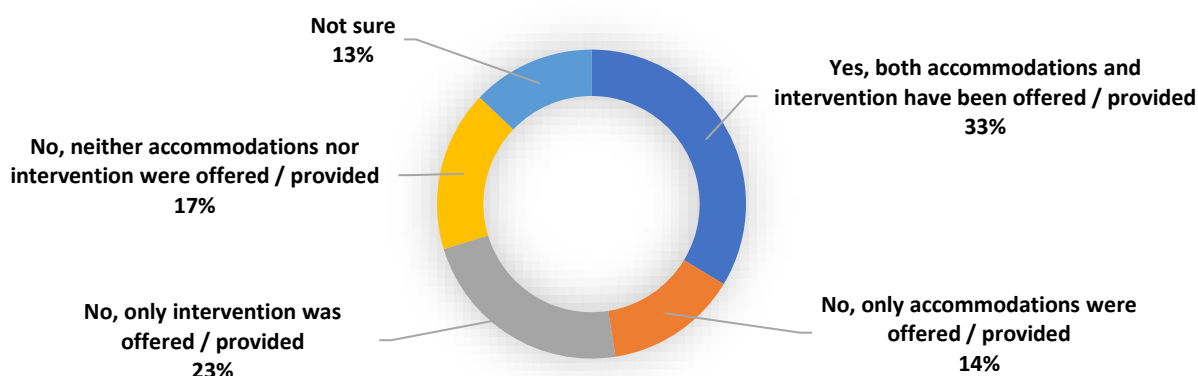
Q: P23: If your child has experienced difficulties in any of the above areas, what factors do you believe may have contributed to this?



487 respondents provided feedback to this topic.

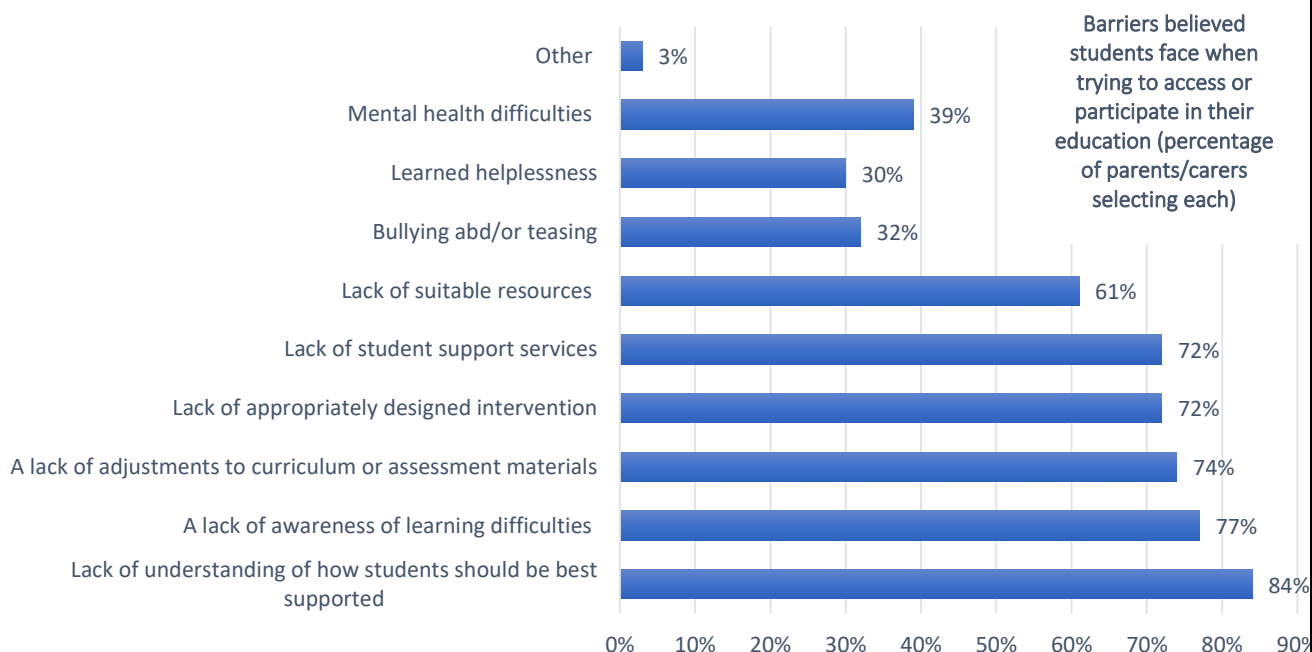
- ‘Other’ factors listed by parents/carers included impacts from constant academic comparisons to peers, being teased or bullied, exhaustion from trying hard, made to feel “dumb,” learned helplessness, a lack of understanding or appropriate supports to engage within the classroom, being told that they are lazy and just need to try harder to succeed.
- One parent commented that her son was told “to just give up some subjects, such as English”
- A number of parents/carers had tried to support this area of development with one stating “We have worked hard to ensure our son has a healthy self-esteem and understands his learning difficulties. He understands self-advocacy and knows that if he shares a struggle we will all work together to find a solution that works for him.”
- Some parents who had changed schools noticed significant differences in understanding and supports with one saying “Before we changed schools it was much worse due to no adjustments, no support and a very strict teacher so my child often was told off and very unhappy. She has lots of support now but still gets very frustrated and anxious.”

Q. P24: Students with learning difficulties need both accommodations (to ensure access to the curriculum) and intervention (to improve their academic achievement). To the best of your knowledge, has your child’s school provided both accommodations and intervention to your child?



Improving the Standards and Identified Issues – What needs to change?

Q: P25: What do you believe are the most significant barriers students with learning difficulties face with regards to accessing and participating in their education? (Please tick any that apply)

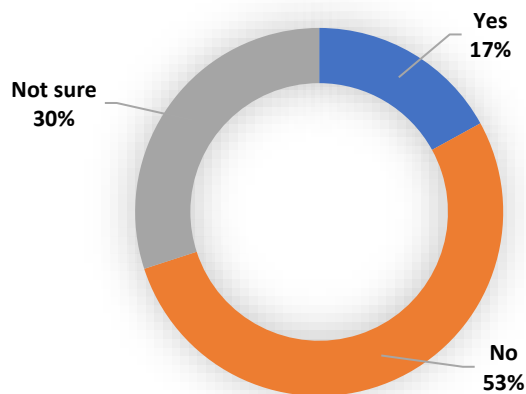


Q: P26: What could be improved to help address these barriers?

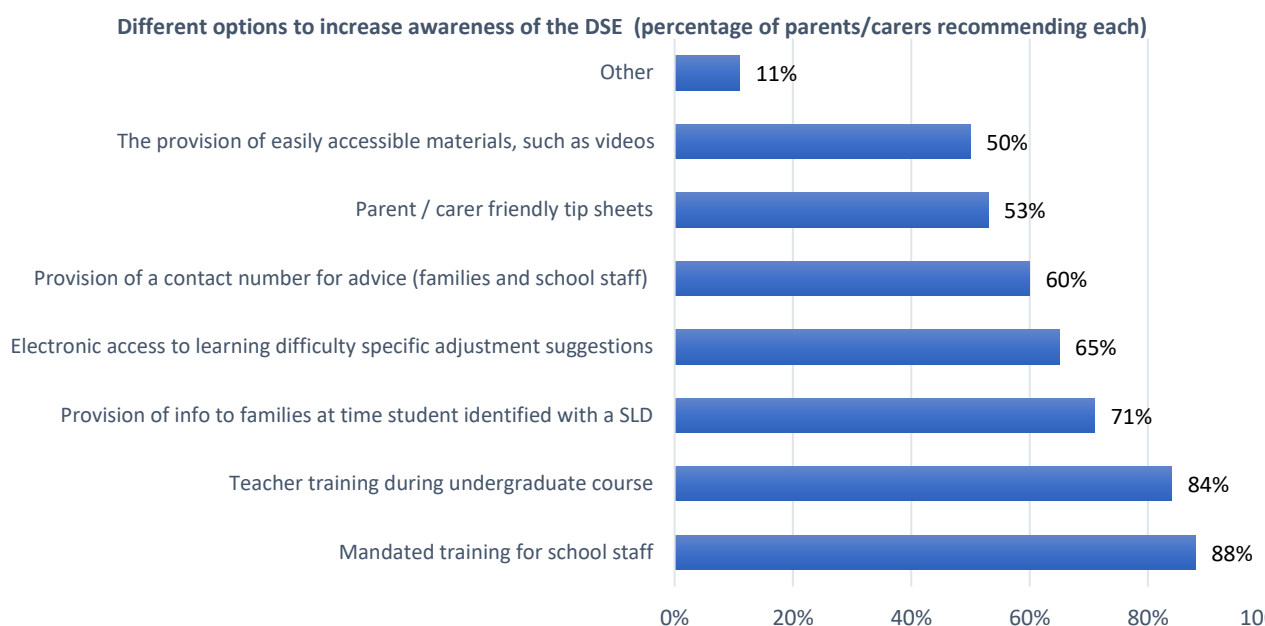
405 parents/carers provided feedback for this question.

- Whilst parents/carers often acknowledged that the Standards are important (and have used information from them to gain better access to their child's education), a lack of transparency and accountability from school systems meant they often were not followed. Suggestions surrounding this issue from parents/carers related to the possibility of there being a tracking system at a school level that is monitored or reviewed at a systems level (external body to the school).
- A large number of respondents indicated better and/or compulsory school staff training on best practice for Standards would be useful. In addition, more specific training on appropriate adjustments for specific learning disorders.
- Some parents/carers raised questions regarding differences between government and non-government school requirements.
- Other suggestions included better advocacy and support within schools from external agencies, such as SPELD organisations.
- Funding was often cited by schools to parents/carers as limiting their response and supports.

Q: P27: Have staff at your child's school shown a good understanding of the Disability Standards in Education and/or how to use these Standards to support students with learning difficulties?



Q: P28: What steps could be taken to increase awareness for school staff and/or families about the Disability Standards in Education and what they mean for students with learning difficulties and disabilities?



513 parents/carers provided feedback to this question.

- Parent/carer comments relating this question commonly related to a greater need for funding and inconsistency of use of the Standards, as well as the need for better schoolwide programming.
- Additional suggestions made by respondents included having informational posters at every school that help both parents and teachers identify either struggling children and/or possible adjustments, compulsory involvement of a disability advocate or external party to help plan or review suggestions and information given to all parents when starting school.
- One parent commented - "These are great suggestions I wish someone had provided me with any of this at the time of diagnosis and I wouldn't be struggling so hard to obtain support for my child for years" and another made the suggestion for a "mandatory conversation with an expert in the disability, the parents and the/carers and the teacher at the beginning of the year. The third-party expert is key to teacher education."

Q: P29: Is there anything else you would like to add or comment on?

166 parent/carers provided a final comment, a number of which restated that they had minimal understanding of how the DSE could assist their child at school, which comments including "I've never been aware there were disability standards in education until I was shown this survey link."

- Other comments included –
 - "I feel lost with how to advocate for my child. She isn't failing and is well behaved so not on the radar for additional help. The school doesn't care that she isn't reaching her potential."
 - "As a parent I am so disheartened by the lack of knowledge and understanding of my daughter's dyslexia and dysgraphia from her school. I see her struggling and sad and her self-esteem plummeting. She says she's dumb and asks what is wrong with her. I feel like I can't get the help she needs. I can't advocate enough for her. I feel like my complaints fall on deaf ears. I'm so frightened for her future and scared that in two years she will be in high school and her primary school just can't provide the support she needs."
 - "The interpretation of the disability standards is inconsistent from school to school."
 - "While my school has been very open to accommodate my son, I was surprised by their lack of understanding in how to best help a child with specific learning disorders, especially in reading. There is a wealth of information online about what works best for these kids so I just expected my school teachers and support team to be aware of them too and was surprised that they were not."
 - "Am extremely disappointed in my son's school in its response to his SLD diagnoses. He receives little to no help or accommodations, and is left to falter on his own. Choosing a different school or seeking external help is extremely difficult in a small rural / regional area."
 - "Families are tired of having to fight so hard for their kids to get the right support. School staff need to be better trained and equipped to help kids with learning difficulties to achieve their full potential"
 - "I feel that we have 100% not been assisted by the school despite their requirement to help. They constantly said that there was no funding and therefore no assistance for intervention or adjustments they were able to offer, they did not want to provide an IEP. They said my daughter was too emotional and we had to work on those issues first - she has huge issues with going to school after constant failure in the classroom affected her self-esteem to the point where she could no longer cope."
 - "The DSE is deficient because it doesn't show a teacher what inclusion looks like. Teachers who get it do a fabulous job, but those who don't are generally lacking in skills and resources. Mandatory PD won't work because it's not relevant until there is a child in their classroom who needs them to be open-minded. An IEP meeting should be run by a third party."

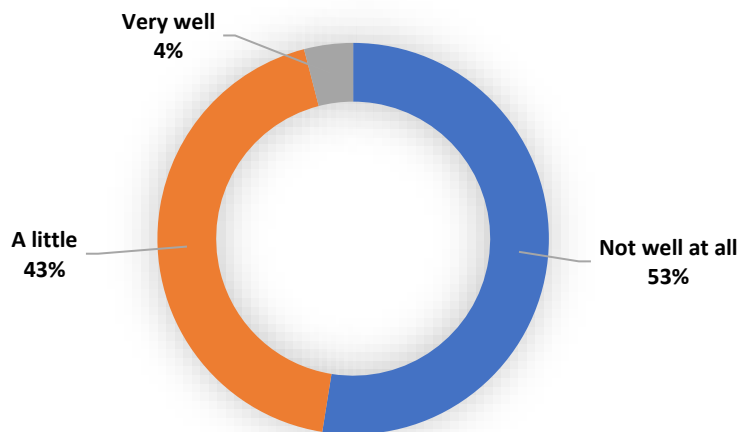
AUSPELD Student Questionnaire Data Summary

Twenty-seven students shared their voice and completed the questionnaire, some with the support of a parent or carer. 7% of students spoke a language other than English at home. Most students attended government or non-government Catholic schools (46% and 42% respectively), with approximately 12% attending other non-government schools. 65% of students providing information were in Years 4 to 6, 22% were in Years 7 to 9 and 13% were in Years 10 to 12.

Students were located across Australia, including eight living in regional areas. Nine students were from Western Australia, eight from Victoria, three from Queensland, three from South Australia and two were from New South Wales (two did not designate where they were living).

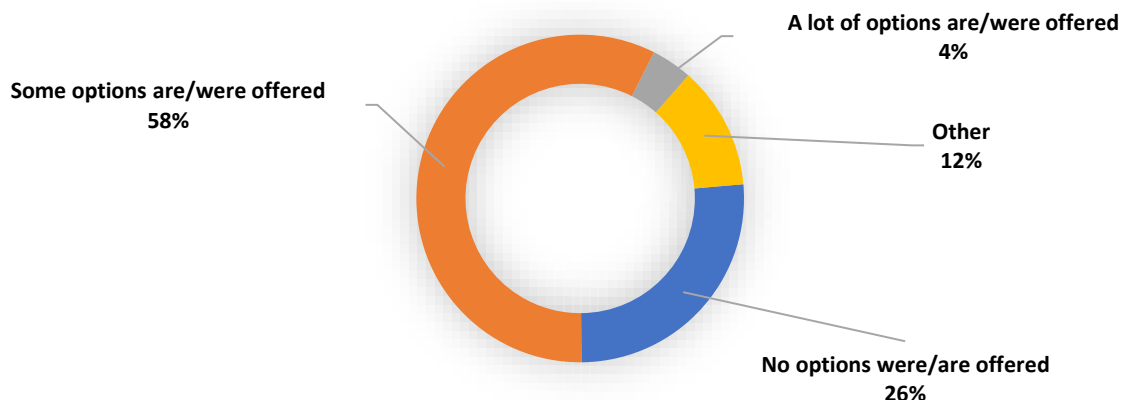
Knowledge and Understanding of the Standards

Q. S1: As a student with a learning difficulty, how well do you know your rights in terms of what should be provided by schools in order to support you in the classroom?



Accessing and Participating in Education

Q. S2: How proactive has your school been in providing you with adjustments to course content or classroom instruction so that you can achieve success academically? Adjustments made for students with learning difficulties can include things like being given additional time, the use of assistive technology such as a reading pen, provision of writing templates, changes to the way you are assessed etc.



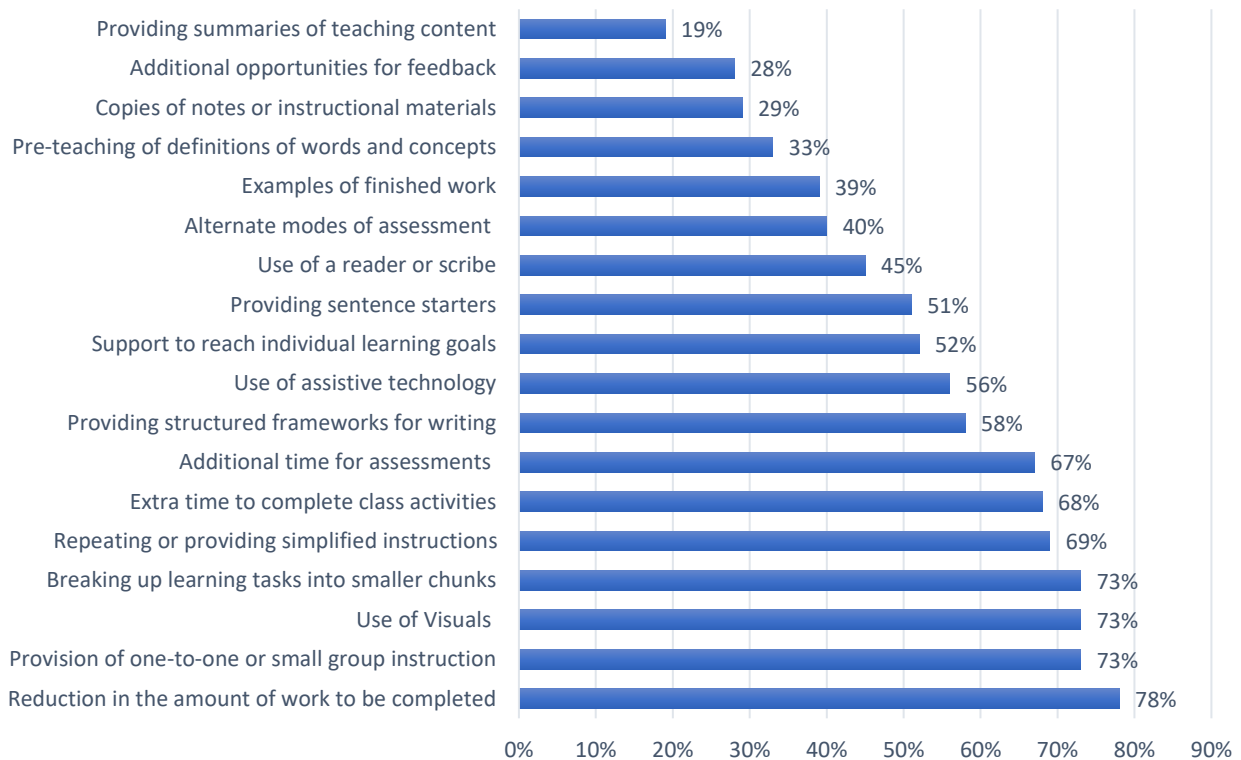
- Other comments from students included:
 - “Lots of options were offered by learning support team but my teachers are not very good at following through.”
 - “We had to fight for support.”
 - “Sometimes I get them in English but marks can be deducted”

Q. S3: What types of adjustments have you been provided with at school? (Tick any that apply)

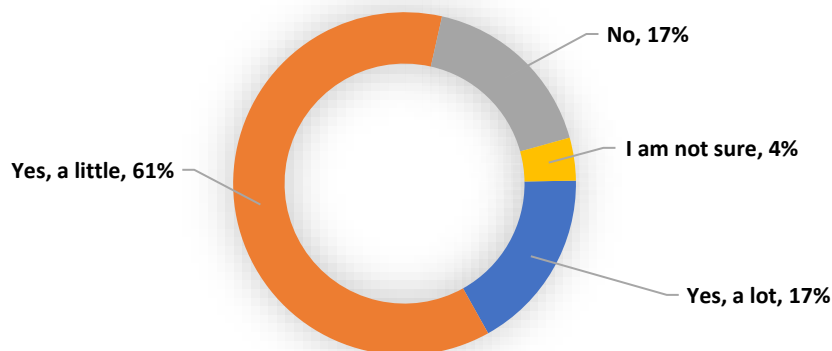
Other adjustments students commented they were receiving included:

- “Use of pc, when rest of class is writing”
- “My teacher talks to my tutor about what work is coming up”
- “Some of the above and IEPs but they don’t appear to be enforced and it’s a constant battle”

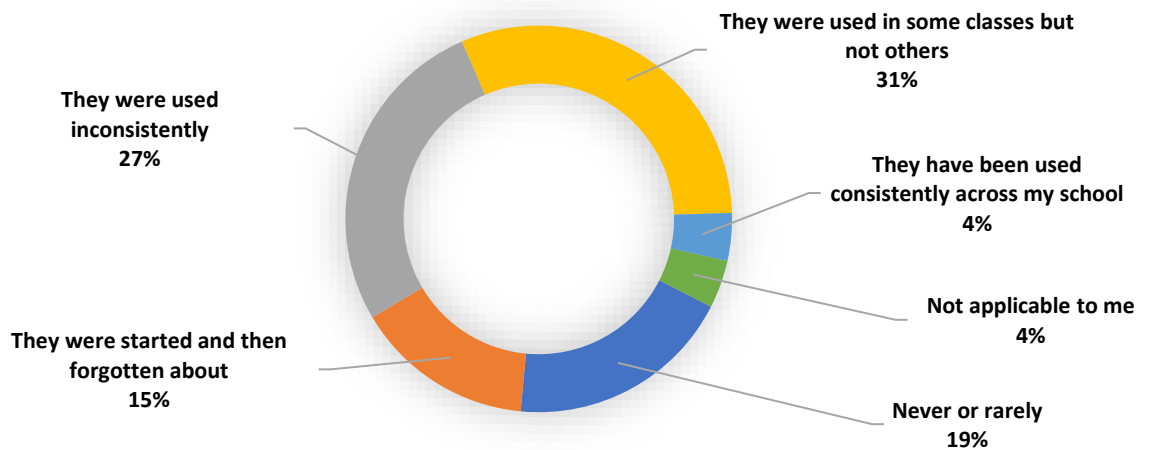
Percentage of students being offered different types of adjustments



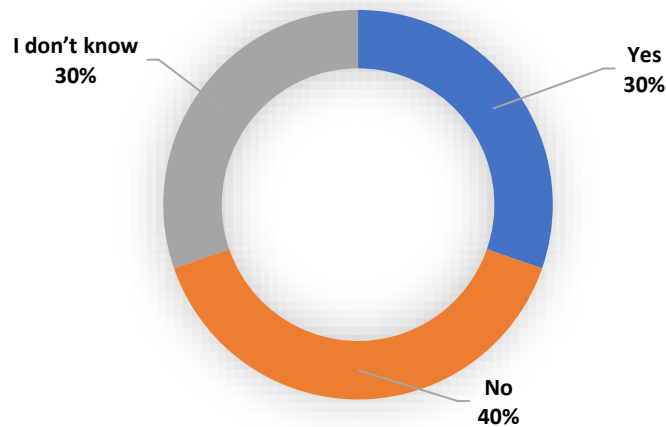
Q. S4: If you have received adjustments at school, do you believe they have helped you to complete assessments or classroom tasks?



Q. S5: How often were these adjustments actually used in your classes?

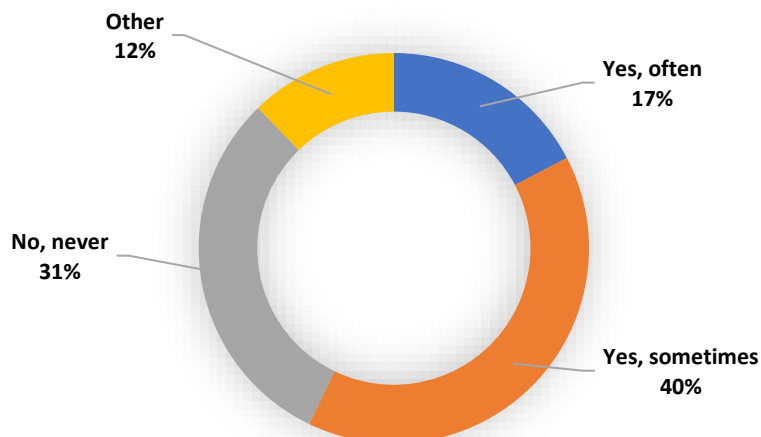


Q. S6: Do you have a documented plan (such as an Individual Education or Learning Plan / IEP or ILP) and does your school follow it?



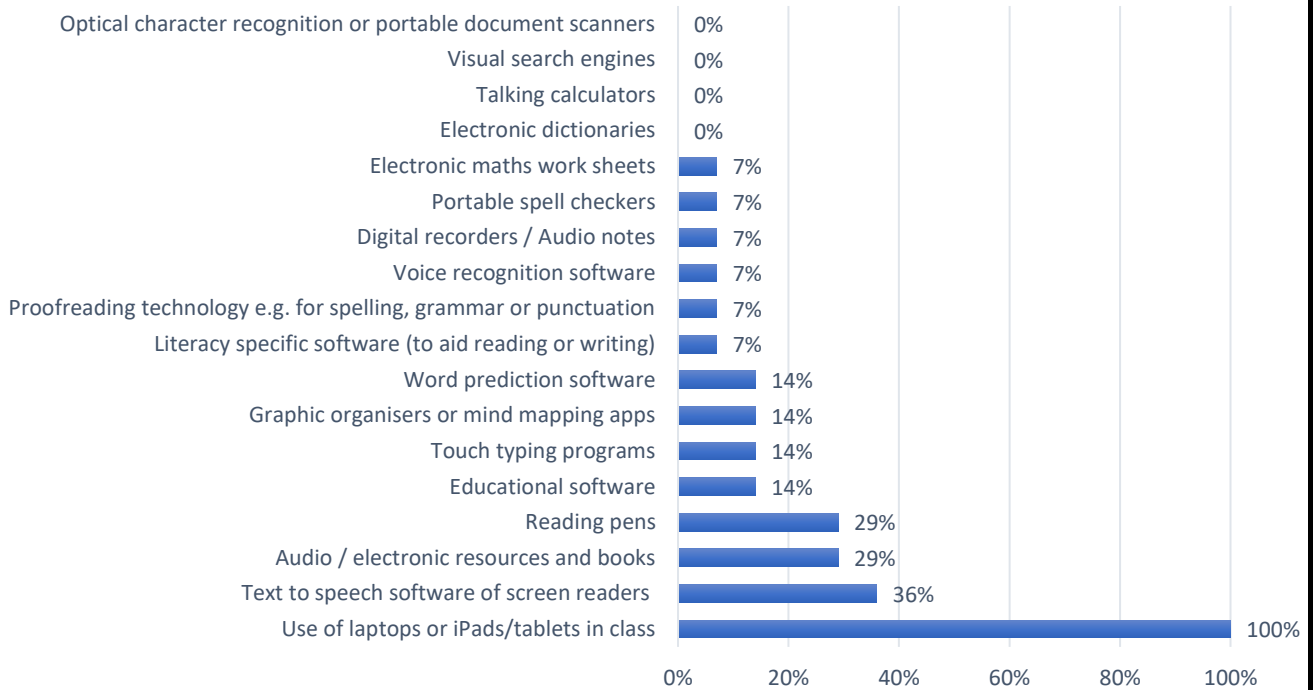
Q. S7: Have you been offered the use of any Assistive Technology (AT) at school? AT in schools includes things like electronic devices or computer hardware or software and can be used to support learning. (Note: specific examples of AT are provided below this question).

- *Other comments from students included:*
 - "Only sometimes voice to text and computer no apps"
 - "I have a Cpen but rarely use it. I am not offered any AT at school"
 - "We have a laptop at high school anyway"

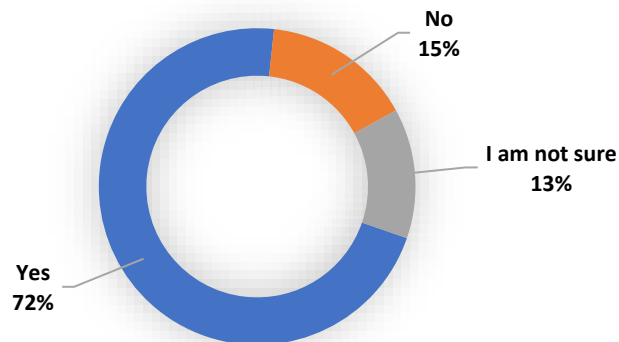


Q. S8: Which AT options have been offered to you at school? (Tick any that apply)

Percentage of students offered common AT options

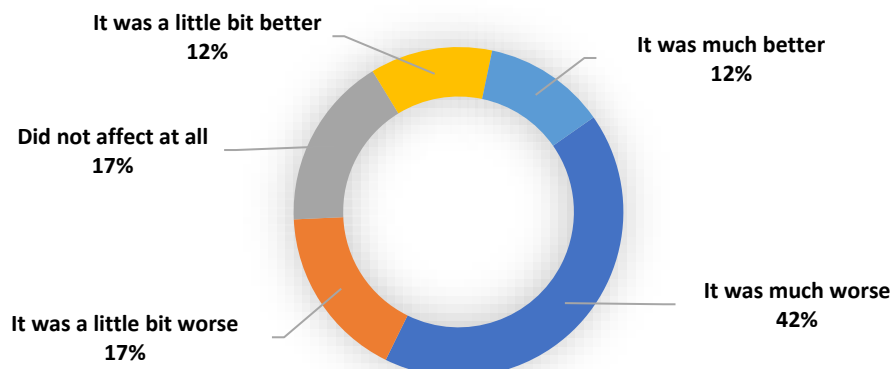


Q. S9: Have you ever felt that your school was not providing you with the right support or adjustments?



Other Experiences in Education

Q. S10: Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has really impacted schools. How much did the move to home-based or online learning affect your ability to participate in your education?



Q. S11: Were there any surprising positives to home-based or online learning?

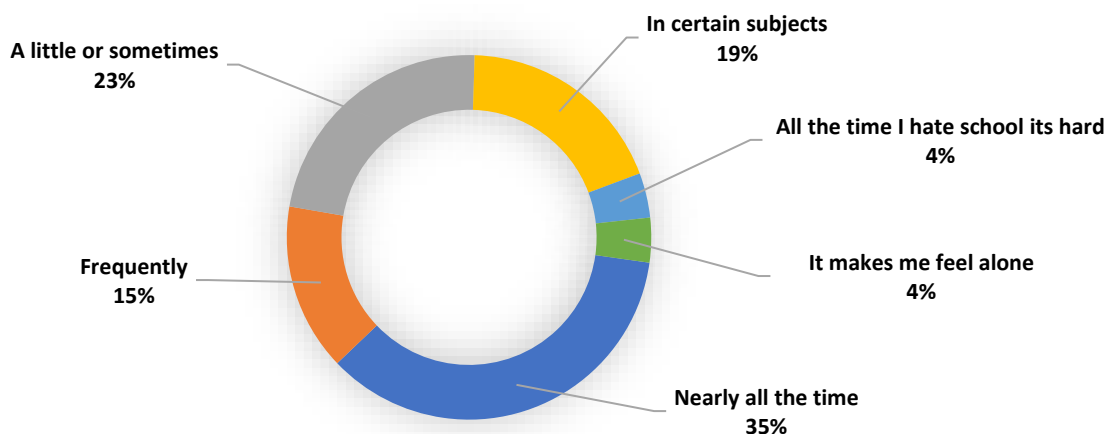
17 students commented on their experiences whilst learning from home, comments included:

- "I went from feeling like the bottom of the class in everything to feeling like I really understood and could get my work done. Slowing down was the best part. Slowing down until I get it"
- "Yes. I was able to use a computer to communicate and I was so much faster. I didn't have to think about letters or spelling. Then I had to return to school and everything went back to how it was before. I feel dumb again."
- "My anxiety reduced."
- "I could get one on one help from my mum and dad."
- "I felt that I could focus more on the work that needed to get now and work more at my own pace. I also found that I was able to use things like speech to text more which allowed for my work to be better and to be complete quicker. this would normally not happen."
- "It was a more relaxing environment learning from home."
- "It was good being able to ask my mum for help."
- "Schooling shorter and tailored flexibility/breaks."
- "Staying in bed."
- "Had more time to complete work so not stressful."
- "When I could do the work I got it done much faster than I would at school. I think it's because no one was interrupting my thought process and I couldn't distract others if the work was too hard I just had to do something else instead. Also I could work to my own attention span and take breaks when I wanted and do the work I was most motivated to do."
- "Yes, I got to use assistive technology."
- "Yes. I get to watch my YouTube video series."

Q. S12: If you have moved from Primary School to Secondary School or from Secondary School to other education and/or workplace training, how well did this go?

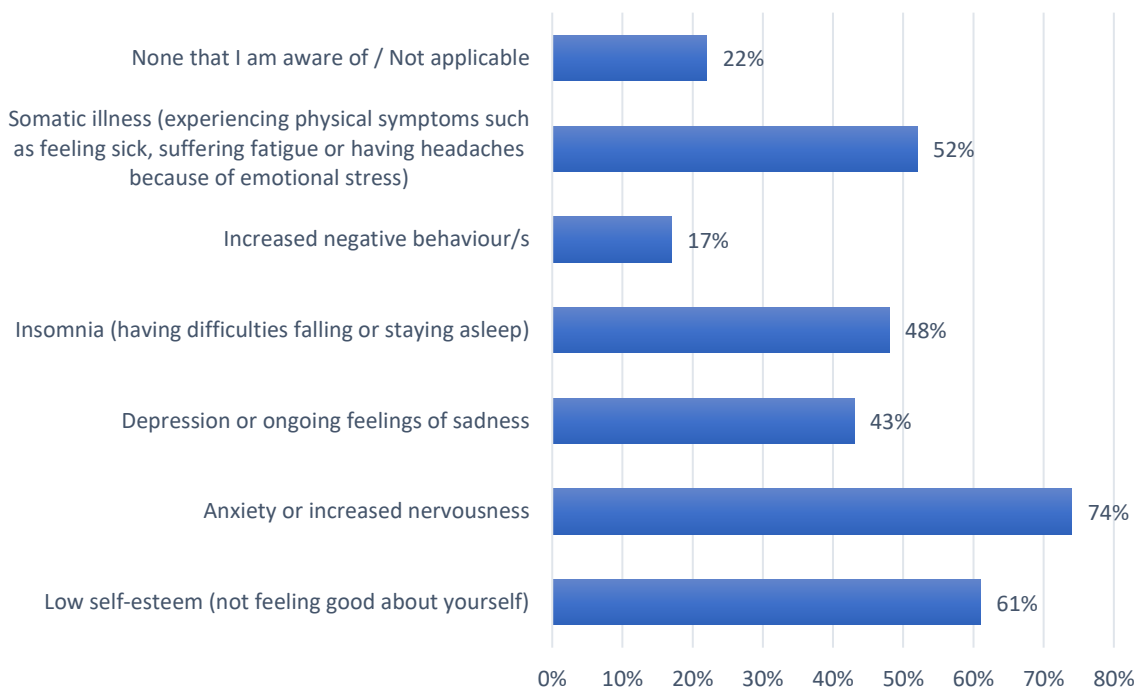
- Five students had transitioned between Primary School and Secondary School, with another planned to do so next year.
- Two of the six students recorded this transition period as being very hard, with them not receiving much support during that time.
- One student noted it went smoothly, with another saying there were a few issues, but that they received support to manage them.
- One student advised they have received less help since moving to high school.

Q. S13: Have you struggled to remain motivated or engaged at school as a result of your learning difficulty?



Q. S14: The challenges of having a learning difficulty can, in some cases, play a role in experiencing mental health difficulties. Please tick any mental health difficulties that you have experienced from the list below.

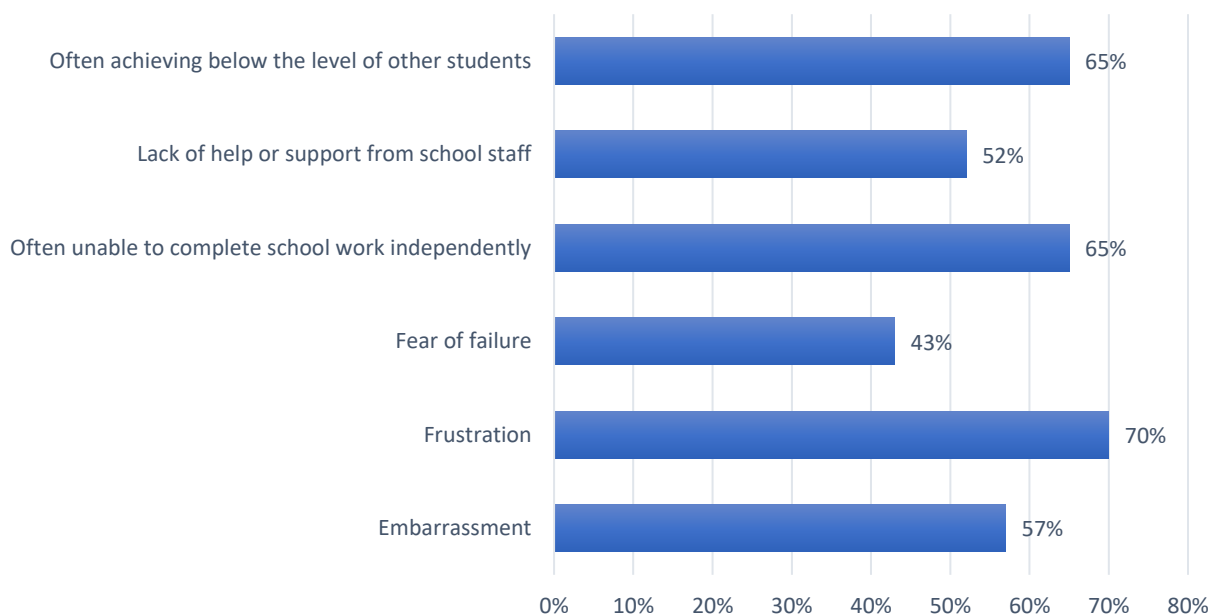
Percentage of students experiencing different types of mental health difficulties



Q. S15: What do you think may have contributed to these mental health difficulties?

- One student commented “most of the time it has been just too hard to focus, thus I get behind” with another adding a contributing factor of “Adults with little understanding”.

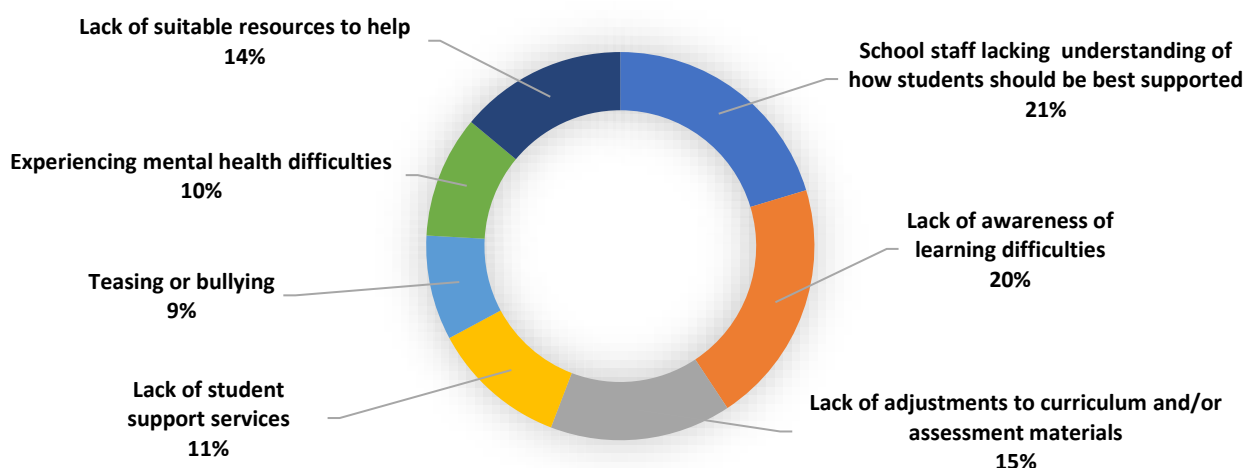
Contributing factors of mental health difficulties (percentage of students for each)



Improving the Standards and Identified Issues – What needs to change?

Q. S16: What are the biggest barriers you or other students with learning difficulties face at school? Please tick any that apply or write your own in the box below.

- One student provided the comment - *“Teachers forget I can't read like everyone else. Relief teachers yell at me for not knowing how to read. I tell them I am dyslexic and they ignore me.”*

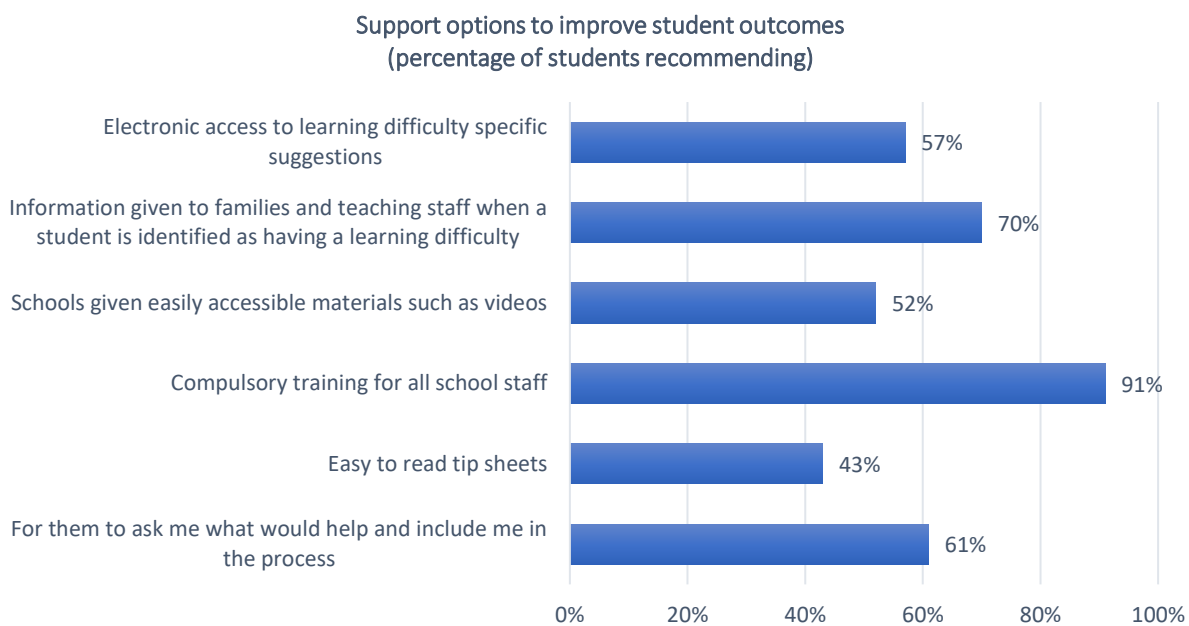


Q. S17: What do you think could be improved to help address these barriers?

17 students provided additional comment regarding this area. Comments included:

- *“Having adjustments that teach us to be independent when dealing with our disabilities and not being reliant on others. I know I am very reliant on my learning support teacher and as I get closer to finishing school I am terrified I will not be able to do things on my own as I get so much help at school.”*
- *“Having student groups with others who have disabilities. Educating other students that don't have disabilities. Having intense personal development days for teachers with regular reminders because they often follow my ILP at the start but then quickly stop.”*
- *“More help to stop telling me I can do it when I can't. Also, not to tease me in front of the kids.”*
- *“I think teachers knowing about learning disabilities and things they could do to help me. I feel like they don't get it. And I don't think there are any adjustments made in the classroom for me & I don't ever get offered to use AT.”*
- *“More teacher education and more rules which makes teacher follow education plans.”*
- *“A little more insight from teachers to question if anything else is going on with the child which affects their grades. If the teachers understood dyslexia.”*
- *“Having more one-on-one with teacher, having a c-pen, getting more time with tests (currently only getting 5 extra minutes per 30 minutes), sometimes need a time out during class, to see a psychologist during sport time (instead of missing out on core subjects).”*
- *“Adjusting the work given. Extra classes to help with areas falling behind in.”*
- *“Learn how teach kids with learning difficulties.”*
- *“Teaching the teachers about learning difficulties and how they can affect people.”*
- *“Make people aware that having dyslexia is normal. I am not stupid you just don't understand how I learn. Let them know what it looks like to be dyslexic. Is reading a question that bad for a child? And no I am not faking it.”*

Q. S18: What could help schools choose and provide the right supports for students with learning difficulties?



Additional comments made by students include the below:

- *“Let parents know, even via a newsletter article, if they think something maybe wrong with their child, provide a list of places that can test and help, starting with the school.”*
- *“Let kids know in the class. Don't hide it from my friends. They all know I can't read I have been asking them to read for me for years when the teacher is not looking.”*
- *“Often we don't know what we need and we don't know what the options are so giving us a list of thing they could do and then asking me what would help. But whatever they do always include me in the process so I know what's going on and am ready in case teachers ask me questions about it.”*
- *“I find it hard to explain how I'm struggling and expressing what it is I need help with or not understanding.”*

Q. S20: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Final comments provided by students included:

- *“I think my teachers try to help me as much as they can but they just don't get it. They don't understand what I find hard and they don't let me do things that would be easier for me to get stuff. I really like drawing but I get in trouble for it, that is just dumb.”*
- *“Rules which make teachers follow education plans.”*
- *“I feel I have fallen through the cracks mostly at high school, its only through perseverance of a parent it has taken years to work through things with the help of DSF. It's not always cut and dry with what is going on, and sometimes a number of issues are at play. Thanks a lot for your survey.”*
- *“Sometimes I feel ignored by the teacher as they are busy with other students.”*
- *“Teaching us independent methods where possible is key to helping us grow! If we are always reliant on other people it is hard to build self esteem and feel like we can do things on our own. Once we are confident it will be easier for us to figure out our own methods to cope.”*
- *“Thank you for listening. I hope your questions create change.”*

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