Disability Standards for Education 2020 Review

Submission - Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is the national professional association for primary school principals in Australia. APPA represents affiliated state and territory Government, Catholic and Independent primary principal associations, and through these associations, over 7600 primary school principals across the nation.

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APPA believes strongly that all children, irrespective of disability, have the right to an education that meets their learning needs.

APPA believes every child is entitled to access an education at school, and to the greatest extent feasibly possible, where undue hardship is not caused to all students and/or educators, children with disability should be included in regular school settings. Ideally, all children should, where possible, be able to attend a local school of choice and receive the benefits that belonging to a local school community brings.

APPA does not support universal full-time inclusion of children with disability as a practical policy position, however, APPA is fully supportive of inclusivity when schools have access to the resources required to make the necessary adjustments, and other students' education and safety is not negatively impacted upon.

With reference to the APPA submissions in the 2010 and 2015 Reviews, APPA continues to be committed to ensuring that there is a full understanding of the real costs of educating students with disability and highly disruptive behaviours in mainstream settings, and that these costs are met in the form of services to schools and teachers and, most importantly, to individual students themselves. Failing to recognise and meet these costs risks the futures of all students in our primary schools.

APPA believes the funding available to schools to assist in meeting the entitlement of students with disability to a high-quality education in a mainstream setting remains significantly inadequate.

While the Review is not responsible for funding issues, it is essential that the Review take account of the feasibility of implementing the Standards under current arrangements. Unless funding and support levels match the expectations set out in the Disability Standards in Education, those expectations will be empty.
APPA has been consistently clear about this issue over many years.

AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION
Hedley Beare Centre, 51 Fremantle Drive, Stirling ACT 2611
PO Box 4112, Weston Creek ACT 2611

PHONE   0407 295 977
EMAIL   natoffice@appa.asn.au
WEB   www.appa.asn.au

APPA's position remains that a universal commitment to mainstream settings for all children is inappropriate in some cases, and leads to expectations and decisions that are not in the interests of some children. APPA supports the provision of mainstream education for most children with disability, but does not support its application as an automatic expectation.

Each case should be decided on its merits, and on the basis of a thorough, consultative and professional analysis of the evidence and the options. This is only possible if there are legitimate options other than mainstream settings.

APPA proposes that a range of alternate settings continues to be available to be used where appropriate in the best interests of fostering the learning of children with disability and with other learning and behaviour difficulties that constitute blockages to learning.

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Enrolment and access:

➢ What has been your experience with students with disability accessing education?

Mainstream schools are often seriously ill equipped to effectively support students with disability, at times with little support for teacher training and best practice education, coupled with significant lack of support from specialist care to assist families and teachers to handle specific needs, all at the cost of watering down education given in a mainstream context.

Teachers in mainstream schools are generally only taught how to teach mainstream students. The expectations and demands put on schools to enrol children with disability then becomes extremely taxing on the time, energy and emotional well-being of staff and other students, ultimately to the detriment of the students with disability, due to the lack of support to enable these students to succeed.

In this context, there is a need for greater clarification in the Standards of the terms 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' adjustments, to support both schools and families. This clarity is needed as an integral part of all enrolment discussions.

Although the Standards are clear, there is a lack of proper mechanisms in place to clarify the enrolment process when there is acknowledgement or demonstration that the child has a disability. At times this has led to pressure on schools who feel challenged to meet all needs of all students wanting to enrol. As a result, some schools 'curate' their enrolment and give up too easily on supporting a student, while some schools work diligently to ensure inclusion, developing a reputation for this and consequently being sought out by more families, resulting in the '1 in 5' requiring adjustment, becoming '3 in 5' in a classroom.

Participation:

➢ Do you understand your obligations for making reasonable adjustments to ensure all students with disability can participate in education? This includes participating in courses and programs, the curriculum, and using facilities. Would you know how to consult with a student or parent / carer? If you have had experiences in making reasonable adjustments, tell us about this.

'Reasonable adjustments' has multiple facets. These include …

- significant financial implications where large scale modifications must be made to enable access.

- the needs of the child with a disability and in what setting their needs can be best met.

- the ability of the educator/s providing the adjustment.

- the needs and rights of all children to learn without undue disruption (this is especially applicable around children whose behaviour is problematic and highly disruptive).

- students with significant mental health issues (not catered for currently, particularly in primary schools).

Making reasonable adjustments is extremely difficult when schools do not have the specific resources already in place to provide the adjustments, and when they don't have the financial capability to provide the level of adjustments that are actually required.

Resourcing of a reasonable adjustment is currently nowhere near the level of actual cost of the adjustments that children require

Funding must be fully available, in a sector blind approach to all schools (government, catholic or independent; mainstream or special education) that have students with disability, to be able to succeed in appropriately and effectively catering for the needs of these students.

When reasonable adjustments are able to be made with the support of families, all students benefit in an inclusive environment. Problems arise when schools do not have adequate resources, and/or parents are unreasonable in their expectations, and/or when a student's disability/behaviour impacts on the safety of staff and students.

Greater clarification of the terms 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' adjustments is needed to support both schools and families.

The real question around the definition of reasonable adjustments is an important one. What is considered reasonable by a parent may be unreasonable for a school, especially without adequate funding to fully support the adjustments required.

Consultation with parents and students is important. Mutual respect and trust are paramount.

Longer lead times into enrolment for children with disability is preferred, but not always possible.

At times, schools have been frustrated by recommendations from allied health reports, that 'suggest' a child should have x and y, which is clearly unmanageable in the classroom environment. This can contribute to conflict as parents expect these recommendations to be implemented.

Some schools have also experienced similar challenges with family advocates encouraging unrealistic expectations.

Consultation with specialist care services required to support schools is important.

Ensuring staff well-being is also a major concern in this space.

Supporting students:

> How have you appropriately supported students with disability during their education? This includes the student being able to access supports, including specialist resources.

This is always dependent on what support is required and the capability of schools and staff to provide that support.

Many schools feel unsupported and ill equipped to do this at a basic level. Mainstream teachers struggle to cope with the multiplicity of normal classroom demands, working with students who may have anxiety, auditory processing disorders, ADHD, Autism, ODD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and/or dyscalculia, all while trying to manage academic differentiation as well. To cater effectively and equitably for all needs in a mainstream classroom is a huge task.

All students should be provided with access to the supports and resources they require. This is a major financial challenge for schools and appropriate sustained funding models must be implemented for all schools, across all sectors and all jurisdictions.

Continued availability of a variety of educational settings, able to be tailored to a variety of student needs is important in ensuring the needs of all students with disability are appropriately and effectively met.

Sector/system level triage structures that inform parents of the best learning environment for their child could be considered, with sectors/systems detailing which schools provide different levels of appropriate support based on their resourcing, compared to mainstream schools.

Educators need opportunity to increase knowledge through quality professional learning, with funding provisions for this to occur within normal school time.

Consultative IEPs are essential, in order to set appropriate and effective goals, and plan support and interventions to support those goals. Working with allied health providers is also essential and requires additional personnel to be appointed to support students in our schools.

Rural and remote schools are often hindered by lack of access to specialist support or by high turnover of staff (e.g. OT). Currently there is not enough support for schools and families, and wait lists can take months (e.g. CAMS). Consideration needs to be given to facilitating shared access to specialists across all school sectors in regional areas.

Reports from specialists need to be written in language accessible to educators and families, and the specialist support process should facilitate ongoing consultation with educators and families.

Student voice, if possible, is important in this space. If the student with disability is able to articulate the support they want, we have even greater understanding of the need.

Harassment or victimisation:

- ➢ Have you had a situation where one of your students with disability experienced harassment or victimisation? What steps did you take to address this?

Feedback indicates limited experience with this issue. It would seem generally to be the exception, rather than the norm.

Feedback is that children are becoming more accepting of students with disability and generally show great empathy and tolerance. They find difficulty however, in responding to children with aggressive or intimidating behaviours, tending to pull away from these students and withdraw friendship.

Discrimination at any level should not be tolerated and a broad education program for students and educators is essential. Discriminatory, victimising and/or harassing behaviour needs to be called out. Swift action to support all students in the face of harassment and/or victimisation is essential.

Developing a culture that welcomes diversity and inclusion as appropriate, and promoting the view that every child matters and everyone belongs.

This issue needs to be considered from all perspectives and education of all parents, to better understand the rights of their respective children when coming from different perspectives is vital. Better resources and easy access to these is vital. Currently there is a void in the availability of this support.

Provision of funding is needed to ensure educators have access to professional learning or resources that support them to build student and adult understanding. (e.g. videos, brochures, posters etc. that build understanding across whole of community, ideas for how to engage collaboratively in this work, how to build peer mentors and how to talk to a colleague about inappropriate behaviour.)

Compliance:

> ➢ Have any of your students or parents / carers said that you were not meeting your obligations? How did you address this?

Feedback indicates varied experience in this area. A selection of specific responses received has been included here:

- Rarely experienced this, however we are aware that it happens. Sometimes it has to do with unrealistic expectations of parents/carers, other times it has to do with the ability/skills that a classroom teacher has, or the school has. If it's a school culture issue, the school leadership team needs to address this. May require additional PL.

- Yes, this was due to facilities not meeting needs or not being able to be adapted. Also, unreasonable demands (such as additional support hours above what was allocated being needed to support the child's needs).

- We had an incident several years ago with a child in a wheelchair who was non-verbal. Although we had staff supervising, their attention had been distracted for a moment, which was enough for the child to fall out of their wheelchair. All we could do in the situation was to review the matter, put into place very clear guidelines, spend time with the staff reiterating the expectations, and going back to the parents to determine whether or not they believed revised guidelines were suitable. But it didn't take away from the incident itself and nothing ever will.

- At one time there was a parent who felt that we were not meeting her child's needs. This caused great anxiety for the classroom teacher and for the aides assigned to the child. We responded with frequent meetings, providing resourcing double the allocation recommended, and counselling for the teacher and aide.

- A parent became upset that the IEP was not as detailed or specific as she would like. She wanted more 'smart goals' and more input into the teacher's programs. This was a parent who is a Level 3 teacher. High expectations from parents. Teachers not given enough support or training.

- Yes, due to the unreasonable expectations thrown at schools. The rights of the other side are not often thought of and comes at considerable cost. Parents do not understand that teachers are not trained specifically for children with disabilities. Schools are floundering and having to throw an imbalance of their resources that they might not be able to afford. Schools do not have any training or realistic support to put obligations or compliance in place and are often left to drown in the sheer work load and emotional drain that is placed on them.

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A common response, however, was that where there is respect and trust, these things can be worked through. Working on respectful relationships with parent/carers, teacher & paediatrician/ allied health workers is imperative, so all are on the same page.

Establishing clear processes and structures aligned with legislation and respective government, school, and/or department policy will create a much more favourable space for this collaborative work.

Compliance is easier to define when experts in the field of the disability define compliance. What is needed is then not a matter of subjectivity or opinion on the part of the parent/student or teacher/school.

Recognising that for parents, this can be a very fraught time and ensuring they feel they are being listened to. Often compromise can be reached and the child has a successful school experience.

If the school is not able to meet the child's requirements, then it is imperative they support the parent to transition to a site that is more suitable.

Every parent should feel that their child belongs and is able to be supported in the journey to a successful school placement. Sometimes they are left to do this alone and that is not OK.

Transition:

> Tell us about your experience assisting a student with disability to transition from one education sector to another; for example, from school to further education.

This can occur very successfully if ample time and appropriate resourcing is provided to manage the transition. Open and honest conversations of what is and what is not possible are needed throughout the process. There needs to be extensive lead time and multiple conversations to ensure quality communication is achieved.

Transition requires very clear processes, many of which are currently not in place.

Children may be moving between schools which are funded completely differently, and currently it often depends on the staff at both schools as to whether or not they will engage with the other school. The availability of a clear standard transition document that is signed off by both schools would be a good start.

The same applies when children transition out of school at the end of secondary schooling. Currently there is often just a piecemeal approach to transition for students with disability into the workforce.

Incremental transition plans are essential, which develop the goal and backward map the steps or milestones that are needed. Effective communication and specialist support from involved schools/sectors will make transition easier, including the sharing of safety plans, risk management plans, behaviour plans and IEPs.

Child and family need support to do transition well and to enable positive relationships to be established at the new site.

A transition 'coach' or 'mentor' to ensure that voices are heard, needs are addressed and that data is shared is a successful model. This may be a current site staff member who is allocated (and appropriately funded) to ensure all the transition support and compliance work is done properly, enabling the student and the new site staff to all feel supported, ensuring the rights and well-being of all are covered, not just the student.

This includes meeting with the parents and student prior to enrolment commencing, visiting the school in which the child is currently learning and having access to medical/supporting documentation from health professionals. Additionally, mutual trust needs to be progressively built where positive intent is assumed and maintaining the relationship is paramount.

Connecting parents through a buddy system as well as students is a key to success, placing emphasis on relationships at all levels.

Transition for children with disability is not so much 'where' a child is going to, but 'who' they are going to, that makes the difference in their feelings of comfort and belonging.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability:

➢ Tell us about your experiences supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability. How did you help them to access and participate in education? How did you consult with them and their families and carers?

Primarily it is about relationships, belonging and communicating in a manner that is effective and suitable for the family involved. The main priority should be to work on developing trust relationships with the students and families involved. Asking parents and students how we can assist them and listening to their story helps.

We need to bring families/carers along in a case management approach with the school team in planning and supporting the needs of the child. Tapping into ATSI supports is also an imperative and engaging appropriate consultants who are available to advise and liaise with families.

Continual consideration needs to be given to the question of how is culture supported, the cultural competency of staff involved, how is student voice and agency actioned, and how are we accessing and engaging ATSI staff or community people to build connection and advocacy.

Supporting parents to have the questions to ask of specialists and educators is vital.

This area can at times be quite problematic, particularly when schools are also needing to deal with caseworkers and/or foster parents. Children in these situations, apart from their diagnosed disability, often have a number of other trauma related conditions that are possibly not being addressed or are too complex for external organisations. Schools generally try to manage this as best they can, but in the end often feel quite powerless to intervene appropriately. The carers are often also in a very similar position and look to the school to support them. These situations can be extremely complex and require consistent communication with and ongoing support from respective appropriate specialist agencies.

Working towards the availability of ATSI staff working in each school would be helpful.

Specific experiences:

> ➢ Access and participation in education for students with disability may be affected by other circumstances such as age, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, intersex status, ethnic origin or race, and culturally and linguistically diverse background. If you have had students with disability who were affected by other circumstances, tell us about how you helped them to access and participate in education.

Great wisdom, patience and knowledge is necessary to find a pathway that models integrity and compassion in such circumstances, recognising there will be many different and unique situations represented.

Recognition and acceptance are the key for educators and building a sense of security in belonging is paramount.

Schools need to build an awareness of the particular circumstances in each situation, and develop an understanding as to if and how they impact on the student's ability to engage in education.

Schools need to work collaboratively with the student and parents, engaging them actively in the decision-making progress in order to develop a plan that will enable the student to maximise their learning, and ensuring that in developing a plan, there is an appropriate and effective conversation to build the full picture of who the child is.

This requires additional time and resourcing, not only in the initial stages, but as an ongoing evolving process, requiring regular check-ins and adjustments, particularly as students move into and through adolescence.

Schools need to consider questions such as 'How culturally diverse is the workforce?' and 'What is the knowledge and understanding we believe staff should have?' Access to professional learning will be important to build capacity and establish key contacts in each site.

This will require additional and sustained funding support to ensure safe spaces, and appropriate specialist care.

COVID 19:

> ➢ Has COVID-19 impacted the experience of your students with disability in participating in education? Have their experiences ever been impacted by other major events, such as natural disasters?

2020 has been an unprecedented year of challenges, particularly in schools, and even more profoundly felt by students with disability and in special education schools

Covid-19 has had enormous and divergent impact on health compromised students and their families, with some families withdrawing their children from school, whilst other families who struggle to cope with their child at home, are sending them to school, but in an increasingly anxious state regarding their health & safety.

Routines have been in disarray for the children who most need routines, and anxiety levels are further heightened as a result.

Educators have struggled with how to keep students with a disability safe, engaged and learning in these difficult times. They have adapted as best as they can, but any success has largely been due to teacher innovation and agility, rather than an effective system response.

Use of technology has been shown to have great possibilities in Covid-19 times, but this is not always accessible or inclusive of all student need.

Many families during the initial stages of Covid-19 were extremely stressed, with little clarity available regarding attendance and support at school. As this slowly became clearer, students with disability were often the first to return fully to school, as many parents needed school to provide a respite environment for their children.

The provision of offsite learning packages, although useful for most mainstream students, required significant parent input over several hours each day for students with disability, and in many cases, were simply unworkable in the home environment.

Schools struggled in the planning for these students during the lockdown period, particularly in supporting parents with work that was meaningful and linked to classroom tailored work.

In some cases, the impact of Covid-19 has increased access to specialist online support and this could be an effective measure to enhance support availability if maintained into the future.

Any major event, or natural disaster, such as last summer's bushfires, can have a considerable impact on all students, and we can never underestimate this impact on any students, whether they have a disability or not.

How do you think the Standards could be improved to help overcome barriers for students with disability in accessing or participating in education?

Generally, for schools dealing in depth and on a regular basis, the Standards are well known and clear.

For schools, trying to interpret these for a range of students with different disabilities, or where students with disabilities are not prevalent, coming to know the Standards adequately and understanding how to apply them appropriately and effectively in each context, is not always as easy.

Developing and defining a continuum, which articulates the level of support required respective to the disability, and which outlines available sector/system level and/or allied agency support, would be a significant step forward.

The current challenge is not a need to improve the Standards, but rather having access to more support on how schools can practically implement the Standards. This requires resources (time and staffing allocation) for PL on implementing the Standards and strategies to accommodate students with disability needs.

Defining the term 'reasonable adjustments' more appropriately and more specifically in the Standards (or support documentation), will provide greater clarity for students, parents and educators about what is practically possible.

This must then be followed by increased resourcing to ensure that all education providers are able to meet the standards as required.

Sector blind, needs-based, portable funding, is essential to practically implement the Standards appropriately.

We currently have different sectors funded completely differently and a child whose needs are funded appropriately in one system, may not be in another.

This is bigger than just disability funding

Greater awareness of the Standards must be included in pre-service teacher training. Expectations for teachers and schools must be achievable and realistic, and all teachers, whether in mainstream or special education school settings, must feel empowered in this to allow for success.

There needs to be a greater focus on mental health included in the Standards. Children in increasing numbers are presenting at primary schools with more severe issues in mental health, including self-harming behaviours, violent or aggressive behaviours, school refusal, and disengagement.

Schools are often not able to make reasonable adjustments to ensure these children are getting a quality education. e.g. Often no diagnosis is made under the current system, resulting in schools using school funds to try and provide some level of support for the child (e.g. full-time EA). Often, they do not have the capacity or resources to provide appropriately for these children and then as a result, other children are affected negatively.

Do the Standards need changing? If so, please let us know how you would change them.

Generally, the Standards are concise and generally they give clarity about what needs to occur.

More exploration of the 'reasonable adjustment' section and more support or information for children who require 'unreasonable' adjustments would be helpful, with better explanation on what these terms actually mean.

The Standards could also be articulated in a way that more clearly describes the need for and the process of collaboration and co-construction between the school, family, system and outside agencies.

More PL and support are needed in schools as to how to practically meet the Standards. It's not so much a need to change the Standards, as aligning them to the reality of what is practical and manageable and realistic in different schools and educational settings.

What should be done to improve awareness of the Standards?

All school executive staff must complete PL in this area. This should be extended to pre-service training and included as an ongoing requisite of staff accreditation, as is undertaken currently for child protection training.

Experts need to unpack this with schools, to give schools greater voice and understanding.

Specialist educators and those involved in supporting students with disabilities need to be readily accessible to principals and teachers directly responsible for supporting students with disabilities. In this way expert advice can be sought in a timely manner.

All parents should receive as part of an enrolment interview, in all schools, a copy of the parent engagement fact sheet as well as the Standards. This should become a consistent accepted approach for all enrolment processes across each jurisdiction.

Similarly, schools could be better supported by government funded programmes giving visibility and understanding of the Standards for the wider community.

Do we need more or different support to help you to understand and apply the Standards? What kind of support would be useful?

Yes, particularly in understanding the application of the Standards.

Professional Learning available on-line or face-to-face, with provision for access and completion within school time.

Better access to experts with in-depth knowledge, to enable more informed decisions to be made in a timelier manner pertinent to the nature of the disability.

More support readily available to support schools in providing for more difficult cases.

More practical ways to support classroom teachers meeting the needs of children with disability is important.

Schools need to feel empowered in applying the Standards, rather than feeling here is another thing for you to take on, with limited understanding, on top of everything else.

Do you find the Guidance Notes for the Standards useful? If not, why not?

Generally, yes, the Guidance Notes are sufficient, somewhat useful and seem to work, although they can be interpreted differently according to the audience.

Again, more importantly, it's about the capacity of schools to meet them - funding and timelines can be barriers.

Many mainstream sites will never be able to meet the needs of all students with disability and an expectation of universal full-time inclusion of children with disability as a practical policy should not be the goal.

What would you change to make the Standards work better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability and their families and carers?

APPA believes strongly that the views of the ATSI community are paramount in responding to this question and must be integral in any ongoing change process. We need to do all we can to ensure social justice and cultural needs are considered at all times.

Considerations would include:
- How culturally appropriate/accessible is the language?
- Cultural awareness training for all staff and availability of trained staff to assist families on this journey
- Ensuring people within the ATSI community, who have the cultural understanding, also have knowledge and understanding of the Standards
- What do the ATSI community say about this?
- Who is available to support a family navigate the system?
- Allowing flexibility within the Standards
- the physical environment and how it reflects the community and the learner must be considered carefully. Sometimes community wants a space or strategy that doesn't align with the Standard
- if it builds belonging is that OK?