

Royal Commission Response

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

AASE acknowledges the contributions of people with lived experience of disability to the Royal Commission and the work of the Commissioners. AASE is committed to achieving a more inclusive society that supports the independence of people with disability and their right to live free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. AASE endorses the recommendations intended to reduce violence, abuse and neglect of people with disability.

What follows is an initial, brief response to Volume 7 Part A **Inclusive Education**.

AASE has always been, and will continue to be, committed to supporting the education of students with disability and their teachers regardless of educational setting. As is acknowledged in the Report, people with disability are not a homogenous group and individual students' support needs may vary over time. The emphasis must always be on what is best for a student at any point in time with decisions made collaboratively with parents/caregivers and the student (where possible).

Disability expertise

Within the Report the need for Disability Expertise is recognised:

- It is essential schools have access to people with specific disability expertise.
- We recommend all states and territories employ lead practitioners specialising in inclusive teaching, behavioural support and deaf education.
- These staff should be shared between groups of schools and across school sectors to build workforce capability in inclusive practices.

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AASE endorses the call for specialist educators, given the profound importance of education to the lives of people with disability. As the report notes, appropriate adjustments, social participation and behaviour supports are crucial in any education setting. There were many reports of students not receiving these supports in educational settings, likely because their teachers did not have the capacity to provide them.

Qualified specialist educators (special educators) have the expertise to adjust curriculum and teaching, to teach and support pro-social behaviour, to assess and design supportive interventions for behaviours of concern and to assist in planning and implementation of transitions into, through and out of school. They also have the expertise to teach independent and supported decision making, critical skills for people with disability. They have the skills to work with mainstream teachers to make adjustments, increase teacher capacity through coaching and feedback and to provide consultation. They are able to collaborate with families, students and other professionals to plan educational programs to meet individual needs. Special education is a process not a place.

AASE believes the critical role of special educators is not fully acknowledged in the report, although a role for specialist support in schools is noted. The importance of appropriately qualified personnel and specialist services, especially for those with cognitive impairment is acknowledged in the report in the sections on health and mental health. The need is even greater in education, where students spend much more time

than in medical settings. This lack of acknowledgement of a role for special education teachers/consultants, may mean that Recommendation 7.8 **Workforce capabilities, expertise and development**, in particular, will fail in its intent to build teacher and school capacity to improve the learning outcomes of students with disability. A focus on human rights aspects of inclusive education without building core skills in delivering adjustments will do little to improve teacher confidence.

What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools?

AASE believes that access and attainment would be improved by ensuring all students with a disability are taught by teachers with the required skills and knowledge. If students with disability are to receive an education on the same basis as students without disability access to appropriately qualified special educators and support teachers is essential. Systems and sectors should be required to employ appropriately qualified teachers for students with disabilities in all settings.

As well as requirements for well-trained specialist teachers, it is crucial that mainstream class teachers have the skills to differentiate teaching strategies and curriculum to meet diverse needs. At times this will only be possible with the support of a specialist educator, but initial teacher education could certainly be improved.

AASE believes that teacher education courses must have at least one stand-alone unit that addresses pedagogy for students with disability and special education needs. Course content must include the legal obligations of schools and teachers, information on assessment, programming, instruction, making adjustments and collaboration with specialist teachers and teacher assistants and families. This unit should be linked to a quality practicum reflective of the content described above.

In addition, all units in content areas should include the full range of teaching methodologies, including teacher-directed explicit instruction. This is particularly important for key areas such as early literacy and numeracy instruction and gives regular teachers the tools for effective differentiation. The recent report on teacher education *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (2023)* has recognised the need for all teachers to have skills in explicit instruction. As the report notes, the AITSL standards need to be revised to ensure all teachers have the capacity make some appropriate adjustments to teaching and curriculum using research-based practices. AASE would also support the further development of AITSL standards for specialist teachers.

Mainstream classroom teachers need sound preparation in practical, research-based classroom and behaviour support strategies. Students with disability may not receive the best education if teachers do not have requisite skills to both teach pro-social behaviour and discourage inappropriate behaviour. The report notes that exclusionary practices and physical restraint are often misused in educational settings. Part of the r carry out appropriate assessment, design supportive and positive interventions and to make plans for crisis management. Once again., the support of a qualified special educator is critical.

Additionally, there is a clear need for curriculum authorities at both commonwealth and state/territory levels to ensure that mandated curriculum outcomes and content take account of the full range of students with disability, including students with significant intellectual disabilities who have high support needs.

On-going professional learning for in-service teachers covering research-based approaches, which includes in-class instructional coaching and feedback, should be provided as required. Single shot professional learning sessions and online programs without a coaching component are likely to be ineffective in changing teacher practice. Part of the role of qualified specialist teachers in schools would be to co-teach and coach teachers and teacher assistants to increase their skills.

Within the Report it is recognised that teachers feel ill equipped to provide for students with disability. AASE believes that an emphasis on evidence-based teaching practices in Initial Teacher Education and 'Inclusive

Education' courses, along with in-school support as proposed in the Report and an inclusive curriculum, will help improve outcomes for students with disability across the full range of settings.

AASE endorses the call for better accountability for provision of adjustments and data on the outcomes of education for students with disability. All schools must be accountable for student learning, and the need for appropriate documentation of individual adjustments, ongoing monitoring of the impact of the adjustments and of student learning is clear.

Over time it is anticipated that AASE will respond in more detail to Recommendations contained in the Report that have a focus on education.