

## Disability Standards Review- Survey responses

Enrolment and access

***What has been your experience when accessing education? What was the process like to enrol in school or other education and were you happy with the outcome?***

When first thinking about school for my son, I thought mainstream all the way. He had been diagnosed as Autistic with an intellectual disability and had many other issues. He was non-verbal, not toilet trained and had extreme sensory issues. In my mind though - we was not disabled. Therefore, why should he attend a "disabled school". I sought out our local school and was told that although he could attend there, they did not have the staff or the knowledge to help him with an education. Government funding would at best be used to keep him safe at recess and lunch and that was about it. Our speech therapist at the time suggested a school for intellectually disabled that was close by. My husband and I agreed to have a look, but were not keen.

We were taken through the school and honestly could not tell that the students had any disabilities at all. The class sizes were half that of the other school and 1 teacher and 2 aides to each class. Therapy was welcomed and supported and all aspect of a "normal education" as well as the extra help that my son needed were addressed and encouraged. We were amazed and decided that this model was certainly a better fit for our son.

The process to get a place and the right funding was difficult. My son had to do a test that went for several hours. He was non-verbal and had a very short attention span so after the first half an hour he was deemed not able to do most of the proceeding tasks.

This was not designed for a child with his capabilities. It was extremely distressing for him and us as we felt we were not showing His abilities at all.

Once accepted into the school, our son flourished. He began to speak, 20 words at first, then by the end of grade 1 he had over 10,000! He was engaged. Education was different for him than it was for our oldest child (who was attending a mainstream school). When practicing the Alphabet, they would write with their finger in shaving cream on the window, or lay upside down under their desks with paper stuck under the table and draw. The teachers and staff were so different. Therapy and life skills were introduced, we planned together and achieved our goals as one, teachers, parents, therapists and student. It's this difference that makes a specialist school so vital.

Years later we needed to relocate for work and moved to a Specialist school in our new town. The process was seamless. The school had not only students with intellectual disabilities but all disabilities and our son continued to grow.

We have been extremely happy with the outcomes for our son in Specialist School settings and know that it would be very different had we settled for the alternative.

There has been no bullying, no "special treatment" "everyone is treated the same and everyone feels the same however they are abled. We couldn't have wished for anything else.

## Participation

***Has your education provider/s made reasonable adjustments to ensure you or your child can participate in education? This includes participating in courses and programs, the curriculum, and using facilities. How did your education provider consult with you? Were you happy with the outcome?***

As my son was non-verbal until he was 6-7 years of age, his understanding and development has always been 3-4 years behind his peers. The specialist school setting has supported his learning and adjusted to his needs, assisting in speech therapy to enhance his language skills and working with technology to give him reasons and tools to use to have HIM feel the need to learn and engage with his education. For example using SIRI or voice to text to encourage him to speak clearly and form the right sounds so people can understand him. Every child is taught in their only special way by the teachers so they can all do the curriculum and continue their learning. It is remarkable.

The specialist school teachers involve the student in their own progress and have them present to us as parents their work on a regular basis. Showing us via Seasaw (app), in person, or at parent interviews where we go through our students individual learning plans. These are formulated together with us and the student so we are all on the same page and know the path ahead for the next term. This is invaluable as we can then work all together on achieving the goals together, both educational and life skills with therapists and teacher alike. This is not available in the mainstream setting and we could not be where we are at today without the specialist school structure.

We have been extremely happy with the outcomes from the Specialist school.

## Supporting students

***Have you or your child been appropriately supported during your/their education? This includes being able to access supports, including specialist resources.***

The school has been very supportive of our son's education needs and specialist needs. The specialist team have assisted him with continence training, food and nutrition training, speech and OT therapy and the like. He has a very limited diet and only drinks chocolate milk which can cause problems for his health as well as be difficult to sustain. The school has taken him through different food programs to broaden his ideas on food and had him stay in their ERU for 5 weeks. This is an educational training facility that he lived in day and night and only came home at weekends. He had to live, cook and eat with other students and teachers for that time and had to learn to "try" other things. He learnt resilience, compassion, patience, laundry, cooking, independent living, and more. This was invaluable for his progress and since his stay has become more adventurous and independent with his food and his everyday life activities.

Harassment or victimisation

***If you or your child experienced harassment or victimisation in an education setting, what happened? What steps did your/their education provider take to address this?***

Luckily we have not experienced harassment or victimisation at all at both of the specialist schools that my son has attended. I feel that this is due to their efforts of everyone being treated equally. The students do not see any disabilities among themselves. They just see other children. People. Not abilities and disabilities. I remember when my son had a birthday party and I asked him about another student (friend) that was coming that was wheelchair bound and non-verbal - I asked him with interest "how do you play together" - he looked at me as if I was stupid and said "Mum, we play together for hours, he is my best friend, we have so much fun together, what do you mean...?? We just play....." He did not see him as any different or differently abled, he just saw him as a friend. His Friend. The same as him. Unfortunately that is not the case in mainstream schools and we are thankful that our son is not subject to ridicule, bullying, special treatment and isolation that could make him feel not validated or different from the others, etc.

Compliance

***If you considered that an education provider was not meeting their obligations, how was it dealt with? Did you know how to make a complaint? What happened?***

We had an issue with my sons reading skills. We felt not enough time was being spent getting him to engage and his skills were non-existent. After raising our concerns the school put into place extra study for him to complete with us at home. We worked on it together and had his speech therapist also work on the same goals. When all of us were working in the same plan, we saw results. Our concern was dealt with immediately. We received extra updates on classes and were involved all the way.

COVID-19

***Has COVID-19 impacted your or your child's experience in participating in education? Have your experiences ever been impacted by other major events, such as natural disasters?***

Covid has played a role in our sons education. The first lock down he was home schooled. As he cannot read or write, we had to sit with him to help him through his work. My husband and I are both essential workers, so we had to do this after work each day. This was difficult as he would be tired from sitting around all day doing nothing then have to try and do school work. We ended up having to take time off to do in school time instead. The option to attend school would not have helped our son as the setting would have been the same, sitting in front of a computer to do online learning that he could not read, but with only 1 teacher for a large number of students - not able to individually assist with his needs.

The second lock down the specialist schools were open. Thank goodness. Normal classes and pretty much back to normal schooling. This then enabled him to progress in his schooling and get back to working on his goals, whereas the previous stage was a lot of something to do for the sake of doing something.

Awareness of the Standards

***Are there any particular actions that you think could be taken to increase awareness of the Standards and/or to make sure they are better understood?***

The standards should be presented to all parents annually so that we know what they are and that they exist. People do not know what that do not know. Expecting parents to even know what these are is ridiculous. Only when your child has been in “the system” for years would you even know that these exist. By then your child is probably nearly completed their schooling. And then where do we find them? Should we seek them out?? Are they even relevant to my child and to the current environment??

Improving the Standards

***How do you think the knowledge and capabilities of educators and education providers could be strengthened to ensure they comply with the Disability Standards for Education 2005?***

I think the standards need to be reviewed more regularly - they are 15 years old!

## **Disability Standards for Education - 2020 Review**

Submission by parents of a 17 year old boy with Down Syndrome – medium functioning, currently attending Ballarat Specialist School.

### **1. Enrolment and Access:**

Accessing education for a child with an intellectual disability was both positive and confronting when enrolling in primary school. Positive as the chosen school embraced disability and actively encouraged integration; confronting for a first time parent trying to navigate the system and understand the internal and external assessment requirements for the school.

Both specialist and mainstream schools were considered, however in these early formative years, the decision was made to enrol our son in a mainstream primary school. Excellent positive behaviours were learned, integration was complete and our son was encouraged in all aspects of school life.

When integrating into secondary school, the same rigorous review of both mainstream and specialist schools was conducted however our understanding of the assessment requirements and our sons’ abilities and needs made for a more informed decision.

Recognising that the intellectual gap between our son and that of his peers had increased, the decision was made to enrol in the specialist school stream. This decision was not made lightly and made after discussion with both public and private mainstream schools. The best interests of our son would be met in the specialist environment where he would be fully supported and able to achieve at a challenged but capable level. Mainstream schools could not guarantee the support, inclusion and friendship base he would achieve in the specialist system, showed minimal understanding of the social, self-respect/confidence and awareness needs of a child with an intellectual disability or simply were not interested even though they were morally and legally obliged to do so.

## **2. Participation:**

Excellent adjustment has been made to ensure our son achieves his goals and participates in a relevant educational experience. Where discrepancies have existed between our expectations and those of the school, a conversation with the class teacher has in most instances ensured a satisfactory outcome.

Introduction of VCAL and VET have provided valuable opportunities for students to learn numeracy and literacy relevant to their chosen vocation. It also enables them to experience a workplace setting on a regular weekly basis and study subjects within their sphere of interest. The work experience element is particularly important as many students with an intellectual disability learn from hands on experience rather than absorption of written material. This may also provide the opportunity for ongoing mainstream employment at the conclusion of Year 12.

The opportunity to participate in the vocational stream was clearly explained and supported by the Senior School staff. Although the program, in our particular circumstances, has been impacted by COVID-19, the school and the TAFE provider have worked to ensure ongoing work experience and remote learning.

Providing VCAL and VET should be considered a high priority in all specialist environments as it gives students with an intellectual disability the same opportunity as their mainstream peers to achieve independence relevant to their abilities in an understanding and supportive environment.

## **3. Supporting Students:**

Both primary and secondary school environments have provided a very supportive education. At secondary level, the specialist school speech therapist worked closely with our private speech therapy provider to ensure consistency in program delivery. As our child's advocate we have at all times been supported to ensure the best educational outcome is achieved.

Instances where our expectations have differed from that of the school have been rectified by an honest conversation between the classroom teacher and ourselves. Where differences remain after discussion, we have always found the Principal to be fair and understanding.

Our son has been fortunate to participate in the independent living program which provided the first steps towards independence and living away from family support. This provided us with an excellent opportunity to identify the gaps in our son's development and the steps needed to achieve this particular goal. The teachers supported his first steps toward independence and recognising his reticence in living away from home, remained engaged with us to ensure the experience was positive.

In general, the Specialist School with which we have been involved, has provided an excellent environment for learning, friendship and personal development.

## **4. Harassment or victimisation:**

To date, our son has not experienced harassment or victimisation.

**5. Compliance:**

The education provider has met their obligations, however if such an incident were to occur we would feel quite confident in discussing our concerns with the school principal.

**6. Transition:**

Transition from primary to secondary school was well facilitated. Our son was placed in a Year 7 class with other students from mainstream schools which allowed for common interests and behaviours. His educational level was quickly assessed and integration into the school was well effected.

**7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability.**

Not applicable

**8. Specific Experiences:**

Our son has congenital heart disease and has required significant surgery to repair 3 valves. The Specialist School provided lessons whilst he was absent from school and assisted with his transition back to the classroom where close supervision was required to prevent bumps or potential infections. Care and support provided by the school was consistent with past learned experiences of vulnerable children with similar needs.

**9. COVID-19:**

As a consequence of congenital heart disease, our son was considered at a heightened risk should he contract COVID-19. In response, we chose to keep our son home from school initially for the first lockdown however this has been ongoing since March.

Although not required to provide remote learning beyond the initial stage 3 lockdown, the school, recognising that there are a number of vulnerable children in the specialist school cohort, continued to provide this learning platform. Remote learning gives a very clear snapshot of the academic ability of a child and this enabled us to ensure, in discussion with the class teacher, appropriate numeracy and literacy lessons were provided to both challenge and engage our son in the home environment.

Recognising that although home schooling provided the academic element, our son would not be able to enjoy the social element of schooling which he craved. The class teacher, in response to our discussion, enabled a Webex meeting with his class each Wednesday morning which is eagerly awaited.

Similarly, the TAFE provider also enabled remote learning allowing our son to continue with his VET course. An alternate workplace setting than that originally nominated was also sourced which was safe and continued to provide the learning required to complete his Certificate 2.

**Summary:**

Acknowledging our experiences are indeed ours alone, we have been satisfied with the support and access to an appropriate education provided by the Specialist School with which our son joined in Year7. Although our expectations and the schools have varied along the way, we have been able to find a solution and amend the set goals to accommodate our son's perceived needs.

The appointment of a new principal in 2018 with a mainstream educational background was a particularly important and positive development in the life of the school. Enthusiasm and the insights brought from mainstream such as VCAL and VET have emphasised both the academic and vocational focus giving students an option to participate in mainstream subjects in a supportive and understanding environment. Similarly, students are given opportunities to present to their peers during assembly, giving them confidence and self-esteem whilst the productions/performances by the students allow the broader community to gain insight into the skills and abilities of the Specialist School students.

Although work in progress this is, in our opinion, an exciting and positive pathway for our school.

In our experience, the Specialist School provides a vital format for the educational needs of children with an intellectual disability. Mainstream schooling can be confronting and demoralising for a student who doesn't always comprehend the actions of some students who lack empathy with them. Obviously, some students with a mild to moderate intellectual disability may thrive in mainstream, however it would be inadvisable to assume all would.