



CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION to the **Review of the Disability Standards for Education**

25 September 2020

Review of the Disability Standards for Education Response from Catholic School Parents Australia

Preamble

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA), through our members, invited parents who have a child with disability in a Catholic school to respond to a questionnaire which was developed by CSPA based on the information provided for the review.

A relatively small number of parents completed the 'CSPA' questionnaire and the following discussion is based on their responses to those questions. Responses were obtained from parents in New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia. The responses have been also categorised as being from a parent of a child with disability in primary school or secondary school.

In the following discussion, when the opinion of parents is shared, it is dominantly the opinion of those parents who completed the 'CSPA' questionnaire. Words in italics are quotes from these parents.

It is also noted that some members of CSPA are making separate submissions.

1. Enrolment and access: As a parent/carer of a child with disability, what has been your experience with your child for accessing education?

Primary:

Parents were generally positive of their experiences around enrolment and access. *The school has been very accommodating with my son's additional needs. They always make the adjustments he needs and provide the extra support when needed.* This parent also believed that it was helpful that they as parents had flagged their child's needs prior to starting school.

Parents feel they have less options of choice of school with sometimes the more 'local' school not feeling that they can adequately meet some children's learning needs. *To date, we have attended schools which specifically cater for children with moderate to severe cognitive delays however there are fewer of them and they tend to be further away from home.* In this instance, the parent noted that *we haven't had any problems in accessing these schools that do offer additional support.*

Secondary:

Parents with a child with disability in a Catholic Secondary school were generally positive in relation to enrolment and access. *He has a clear Education Learning Plan that is assessed annually with adjustment on an as needs basis. For example, recently his performance in Maths dropped and he presented with anxiety and panic. He is receiving extra assistance from his Pastoral Care teacher. The Pastoral Care system is one reason his access to education is working so well.* At this school and where feasible, the students have the same pastoral care teacher for their entire time at the school.

Another parent felt that enrolment and access were *good although once in (the) Catholic system (it) needed advocacy and monitoring, with variable results in terms of effectiveness and priorities.*

2. Participation: Do you understand your right to expect that reasonable adjustments will be made to ensure your child with disability can participate in education? This includes your child participating in courses and programs as part of the curriculum, and their ability to use facilities.

Primary:

Generally, parents feel aware and understand the right for their child with disability to access education. However, some parents have some uncertainty around what they could/should expect. *I'm often unsure about what I can ask for or expect and what is reasonable.* Also, this parent was pleased with the length of the *waiting time for items to be approved, funded, ordered and delivered* in the Catholic school.

Secondary:

Generally, parents feel aware and understand the right for their child with disability to access education. Although, as one parent noted in response to this question, *Whilst it is said that this is the case it may not always be applied in the school - I felt that as a parent I had to make sure our daughter was included in participating in certain classes/ courses - if I did not raise it that it was our preferred option the school may not have offered the options.*

Another parent made reference to their child's Education Learning Plan, noting it *provides guidance and can be adjusted. It allows for extra time in tests, a change of venue (if required) and extra supervision. He is a student leader, so has the leadership opportunities this provides in addition to extra courses and programs.* This also demonstrates an opportunity for this child with disability to participate fully in the curriculum and the life of the school.

3. Do you know how to consult with school staff who have responsibility for making suitable adjustments to assist your child's learning? If you have had experience of the school making adjustments for your child's learning, could you please describe how effective these adjustments have been.

Primary:

Generally responses to these questions are positive however many parents noted some gaps. One parent noted that while they meet twice a year with the school's learning support officer *I am not sure what level of adjustments they are making for my child, supplementary or substantial.* This parent knew certain actions that were taken to give their child more support and felt that the adjustments that were made were effective as their child was meeting expected outcomes.

Another parent felt that finding out about how their child was actually managing within the school environment *has been the biggest challenge.* While this parent felt the school had been

great in making adaptations to meet their child's needs, they would like to have more consistency between the strategies utilised at home and those used at school. The parent noted, *we have been able to request meetings to communicate these strategies however are often left in the dark in regards to how they are going until an end of semester meeting is held.*

Secondary:

Generally, parents were positive about consulting with appropriate school staff about suitable adjustments to assist their child's learning and the effectiveness of these adjustments. Following are some comments that further describe this.

- One parent indicated how they have key communication with the school's Learning Enrichment Co-ordinator, the Pastoral Care Teacher and even the Bus Coordinator. These lines of communication greatly enhance the ability for subtle changes to make a great difference to a child's performance and wellbeing at school. In one instance, the insistence that their child look at a new teacher when he was engaged in conversation was causing stress as he only did this with people familiar to him. However, *once the issue was brought to the attention of the Enrichment Co-ordinator and PC teacher, and with our son's permission and awareness, a conversation was had with the teacher and the instructions ceased.* The parent also noted improvement in performance in that subject as a result of such interventions and no doubt useful professional learning for the teacher.
- Introducing adjustments for assessment tasks where, for example, more use is made of electronic formats (video, audio, keyboard) over hand-written tasks.
- Some parents engage with external agencies such as speech and occupational therapists who advise the school of adjustments to be made in the classroom - *the specialist teachers in the supportive centres were very good at making the adjustments and in supporting the classroom teachers to do the same;* and
- COVID and at home learning has led to a greater reliance on electronic written communication and this has generated more clarity over, for example, hastily hand-written notes which can be harder to read.

There are instances of where learning adjustments could be better applied – an example was shared regarding a 14 year-old with 4 year-old fine motor skills and instances where this seemed to be overlooked around teacher expectations for the child to write/draw. While teachers are no doubt informed of the various learning challenges faced by the young people in their classroom, at times, for a variety of reasons, learning adjustments are either not fully known-understood or appropriately taken into account. In these instances, what happens next is vital and the level to which parents and the school are in partnership around this child's learning will make a major difference to the learning outcomes of all parties – parents, teacher and most importantly the child/student.

4. Supporting students: In your opinion, has your child been appropriately supported during their education? This includes your child being able to access supports, including specialist resources.

Primary:

Many parents feel that their child with disability is appropriately supported however this is not always the case.

For example, by the time children with higher levels of need reach school age there is often a team of therapists (such as occupational, physio & speech therapists) and perhaps a psychologist who have known the child and the family of the child for some years and have assisted in setting strategies in place at home including behavioural support plans. In turn, a school may be part of a system which has its own therapists and psychologists and the same child then comes under their professional care and support. Where this 'school-based' team of support does not/is unable to communicate with the 'family-based' team of support *it is left up to us as parents to bridge the communicate gap and this is hard to do when trying to juggle the multiple demands that accompany looking after a child with high level additional needs.* In this case, while the parent was positive about these in-school supports being in place, it was felt that some professional collaboration between the two teams would be significantly helpful especially during times of transition.

Some parents might make the support work better through their proactivity as demonstrated by the following family. *When our daughter was in Year 1 and was starting to learn those early writing skills we had to source a writing program that was recommended and introduce school staff to this concept.*

Secondary:

Generally most parents feel that support for their child with disability has been appropriate, however most responders made additional comment of how improvements could be/have been achieved, these include:

- *being engaged as a parent in this space;*
- providing for a child with disability at home to the degree that little intervention is required at school;
- being mindful of *occasional limitations of resources* which can be sometimes exacerbated if, for example, allocated support staff hours to a child with disability are decreased; and/or
- times of transition in secondary (e.g. from Year 10 to Year 11) which can generate new learning challenges for a child with disability and sometimes it is not clear whether it is the learning disability that is creating/enhancing the 'new' heightened difficulty or the higher level of challenge within the subject content.

A general understanding is that the better the partnership between school and home the more likely the appropriate level of support will be provided. Further, having effective strategies in

place at home and having *good school-parent communication is often most of the answer* to adequate support being provided at school.

5. Harassment or victimisation: Has your child with disability experienced harassment or victimisation? If harassment or victimisation occurred, were the correct steps taken by school staff to address this?

Primary:

Some parents have no evidence that their child with disability has been victimised or suffered from harassment while this is not the case for others. One parent described how their non-verbal child had sustained injury (*scratches, bruises and bites without any explanation*) at school on a number of occasions and *once we realised the extent of the problem we stopped our son from attending school until a meeting was held and a plan developed to ensure his safety*. In this instance, the meeting resolved the situation as the school quickly followed up to intervene. Once again, proactivity by the parent and effective parent-school partnership played key roles in effective learning being restored for the child.

Secondary:

Responses from parents describe a range of reality from no victimisation/harassment to multiple instances of victimisation/harassment even with the best protocols in place.

Parent feedback suggests that where there is choice of schooling it is vital to choose the context which is most suitable for their child, including co-education or boys' only/girls' only schooling. Also, once again, the feedback suggests that immediate parent follow-up with the school to respond to bullying/harassment/victimisation is vital as one parent richly described in relation to bus travel to and from school for their child with disability. As the parent described, *the Bus Coordinator responded immediately to my emails and followed up with phone calls. He sat our son with the Year 10s (at the back of the bus) who did not tolerate the bullying and protected our son. Our son is now a school leader, has strong peer-support and is very well respected. He found his place*. It would seem that the experience made this boy more resilient, a resilience catalysed by proactive parent engagement.

6. Compliance: Have you ever contacted the school because you were concerned that they were not meeting their obligations in relation to the education of your child with disability? If so, please describe what you did and what was the outcome for your child?

Primary:

Once again, as for most of these questions, there is a variety of responses from *No* to parents feeling that they have to be on their guard to keep asking questions. A key is consistency between home and school where sometimes the school takes the lead and sometimes it is the parent(s). Where it is the parent taking the lead, this can be exacerbated when there is a teacher job share or a teacher change during the year as then *we have to coordinate with*

even more people. Importantly, for the sake of the child's learning, there needs to be good partnership between home and school.

Secondary:

All parents indicated instances of concern with regards teachers meeting their obligation in relation to the education of their child with disability. Some comments included:

- From the parent's perspective, a teacher's failure to follow clear guidelines and directions from the school's learning support staff for the teacher to provide appropriate resources for a child with visual impairment.
- The proactive follow up by a teacher with a parent after a school mistake had been made which caused unneeded, heightened anxiety for the child with disability. Importantly though, the teacher's *mistake was talked about, the problem worked around and solutions discussed.* A little time later, a meeting was scheduled to *discuss* (the child's) *wellbeing and education and solutions.* All in all this proved to be a positive outcome.

7. Transition: If you have had a child with disability transition from one education sector to another, for example, from school to university/TAFE, was your child's school helpful in assisting your child with this transition?

Primary:

One parent spoke of the transition for their child to commence school and how extra transition visits proved helpful as did meeting beforehand with the Learning Support Coordinator.

Secondary:

The transition from primary school to secondary school was described by parents as effective in that both the primary and secondary schools ran transition programs to assist their children with disability move into the new school. One parent stated, *the secondary school ran a transition program for the final term of Year 6 where our daughter attended the high school once a week for a half day. This proved to be invaluable for both our child and us as parents in reassuring us that the transition to high school was a smooth one.*

The transition from Year 10 to Year 11 may prove more a challenge which sometimes may lead to even a change in schools. This can be underlined further in contexts where schools only go to Year 10 and so a change of school is required. This may be unsettling for a child with disability and at times provide more expense to parents if professional reports are necessary to substantiate preferred subject choices.

- 8. Specific experiences: If you have a child with disability, their access and participation in education may be affected by other circumstances such as age, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, intersex status, ethnic origin or race, and culturally or linguistically diverse background. If your child with disability is affected by such other circumstances, how did the school assist your child to access and participate in education?**

Primary & Secondary:

All parents indicated that their children had not been affected by any of these circumstances.

- 9. COVID-19: Has COVID-19 impacted the experience of your child with disability in participating in education? Has their school education ever been impacted by other major events, such as natural disasters?**

Primary:

Parents who responded to the CSPA questionnaire feel that COVID lockdowns have impacted their child with disability. For some there was increased anxiety in their children, at least initially, and this made learning more challenging. For others, at-home learning was not really practical because of their child's inability to participate in on-line learning.

Secondary:

Most parent respondents feel that their child with disability has been impacted by COVID lockdowns. Different schools have responded to the challenges of COVID in different ways with some schools, and some teachers within schools, more effective than others. Following is some discussion that describes situations more fully.

- *Yes- COVID 19 has impacted on our child's participation in learning. The school was very supportive in providing resources but it was very difficult to engage in learning from home. (Our child's) usual supports in terms of therapy and intervention were obviously also impacted;*
- *Yes, home learning was poorly supported across all subjects with a few notable exceptions. Some teachers had little or no ability to run remote learning and focus on outcomes, use of tools such as video conferencing and setting of work was highly variable, each subject went their own way in terms of platforms, submissions and content distribution;*
- *Our (child) was self-motivated during lockdown and had no difficulty sticking to task. However, (our child) did miss the regularity of school life.*

10. In addition to drawing on your experience of being a parent/carer of a child with disability, this review is concerned with the Disability Standards for Education. You can access information about the Disability Standards for Education here. Are you familiar with the Disability Standards for Education and if so, where did you find out about these Standards?

Primary:

Familiarity with the Disability Standards for Education varied from no real awareness to highly familiar because of their own parent role as a teacher.

Secondary:

Familiarity with the Disability Standards for Education is highly varied among parents who responded to the CSPA questionnaire. This familiarity with the standards varied from no real awareness to increased awareness through involvement with the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for their child with disability to learning about the standards as part of some professional learning provided by the school.

11. As a parent/carer of a child with disability, do you think that school staff are familiar with the Disability Standards for Education and what they are designed to do?

Primary:

Once again, responses are varied driven by a parent's experience of their child's learning. There are very positive responses such as, *I think staff are familiar with the disability standards. They make a lot of adjustments and modifications to enable all children to reach their potential and thrive at school.* While there are other responses which describe why there is the parent belief that teachers are not familiar with the standards. One parent stated, *my husband and I have often felt our knowledge, skills and experience regarding our (child) have not been considered in many aspects of (their) schooling. In fact there have been times when our inputs have been denied; especially if it involved us being present in the classroom.*

A key point of contact and on-going discussion between the parent of a child with disability and the school is the IEP and the quality of this collaboration can greatly influence a parent's perspective on key school personnel's understanding of the Disability Standards for Education.

Secondary:

Parent responses on staff familiarity with the Disability Standards for Education vary between parents, and a parent's experiences within a school can vary considerably between teachers. There are highly varied comments such as:

- *I am sure they are aware, application and interpretation is highly variable in a high school context where everything from completely adapted personal content from a highly capable, caring teacher through to (other teachers) with no adaptation of content, assessments;*
and
- *In our experience the classroom teachers were probably not (familiar with the standards). The specialist teachers in the centres are far more aware of the standards;*
to

- *I honestly don't know! I know the Learning Enrichment teacher is (familiar with the standards), but I don't know about the other staff.*

12. Do you know if school staff have received training of any kind about the Disability Standards for Education? If so, do you know what this involved?

Primary:

Parents who responded to the CSPA questionnaire do not know whether staff have received any training in the Disability Standards for Education.

Secondary:

Some parents were not aware or did not know whether any school staff had training in relation to the Disability Standards for Education. Other parents note their awareness that Learning Enrichment Teachers have had training or that staff have had subject specific training related to the delivery of education to children with disability (e.g. use of technology aids) during personal development days.

13. Do you as a parent/carer believe that the school staff you have interacted with understand their obligations when it comes to your child with disability being able to access and participate in education?

Primary:

Parent opinions varied between feeling confident that staff understand their obligations to a belief that some staff *may be more aware or 'on board' with the Standards and their obligations than others.*

Secondary:

All parent responders generally agree that school staff they have interacted with understand their obligations when it comes to their child with disability being able to access and participate in education. Comments that demonstrate this include: *Our experience in (our child's) current high school is that all the staff are very aware of their obligations,* and from another parent, *in general yes, although interventions have been required to address issues of some sort virtually every year of (our child's) education.*

Another parent outlined in detail how the school's response to the bullying of their child demonstrated various staff member's effective understanding of their obligations when it came to their child with disability being able to access and participate in education.

14. Do you think that the Disability Standards for Education have helped school staff to understand their obligations?

Primary:

Parent response is mixed from agreement that the Disability Standards for Education have helped school staff to understand their obligations to uncertainty for others. One parent noted that they often feel like they are being *kept at arm's length from what is going on at school and in the classroom for my child which I find very frustrating.*

Secondary:

Key staff in secondary schools can play an influential role in ensuring that the Disability Standards for Education have helped school staff to understand their obligations. For example, such roles as the Learning Enrichment Teacher, Learning Support Teacher, and Inclusive Education Teacher often drive an agenda of these obligations being met through school protocols which are meticulously and strictly monitored.

Also, this is an area where the school's leadership can effectively enculture a shared vision. As one parent commented, *I feel the Principal of the school has an obligation to ensure their staff understand their obligation. If this message is not coming from the leader of your school it is difficult for staff to be on board with it.* Another parent noted that schools are very compliance focused so *one can only assume the standards are driving the process and requirements.* Each of these parents were unsure as to whether the Disability Standards for Education had helped school staff to understand their obligations.

15. As a parent/carer of a child with disability, do you feel that staff are confident in negotiating and implementing a reasonable adjustment for your child's education? Do staff understand how to determine if this would result in unjustifiable hardship?

Primary:

Generally parents believed that staff were confident in making reasonable adjustments for their children's education. Having said this, one parent indicated they would be keen to know more about what adjustments are actually made when their child is in class.

Secondary:

Most parent responders to the questionnaire believe that staff are confident in negotiating and implementing a reasonable adjustment for their child's education and that staff understand how to determine if this would result in unjustifiable hardship. A question is whether there should be more training re this in pre-service teacher education courses.

16. As a parent/carer of a child with disability do you think the Disability Standards for Education help your child with disability to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability? Please tell us why, or why not?

Primary:

Parent responses were quite varied and a number of the points raised are set out below.

- *My child's disability does not make it too challenging for him to participate in education with his peers. I am not sure the standards help him receive adjustments to enable him to thrive and learn.*
- One parent expressed the belief that if the standards were better adhered to that improved outcomes would be achieved by their child with disability.
- Effective communication between parents and the school is fundamental to the standards being used as a guide.
- The ability of a 'family team' of specialists being able to collaborate with a 'school team' of specialists is seen as a way to more efficiently and effectively identify common strategies around more successful learning and behaviour that can be reinforced both at home and at school.

Secondary:

Following are some of the parent responses as to whether the Disability Standards for Education help their children with disability to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability.

- The standards help to set an obligation, *but the challenge is delivering it in large school environments constrained by resources and focused on promoting academic excellence.*
- One parent noted that aside from practical subjects, *the school provides electronic learning adapted to (their child) in a majority but not all subjects and with an alarming lack of consistency (methods, tools, content) between departments.* It is presumed that if there were to be more consistency between subjects that this would be beneficial for the learning of children with disability.
- Another parent noted that problems arise *when schools just pay lip service to (the standards) and almost feel like they have ticked the box of inclusion when in fact they have not addressed the individual needs of the child.* This parent also noted that the average parent would not be aware of the standards or what they should expect for a child for whom there has been a new diagnosis.
- Another parent feels that the standards can indirectly have much influence through creating *awareness, reporting, and an expectation.* Further, this parent emphasised how early intervention from the age of two had set their child with disability on a successful path for future learning.

Concluding comment.

Catholic School Parents Australia thanks those parents who contributed to this submission through their response to the CSPA developed questionnaire on the Review of the Disability Standards for Education. While, as noted earlier, the sample of parents was

small, each parent contributed thoroughly and responded to each of the questions. These parents are highly respected for their sharing and for continuing their journey of what is best for their children.