

## Questions for educators and providers of education and training

### Tell us about your experiences with students with disability.

Enrolment and access: *In my role as a Learning Support teacher I have been involved in enrolment interviews for students who are entering the school and living with disability. Before these interviews, I would prepare by reading through any documentation supplied by the family and prepare a list of questions to help me better understand the young person and any external/internal interventions that had been taking place for them in the past. In early interviews, I participated in a observational capacity so that I could witness a more experienced teacher acting according to best practice in an interview.*

*After the initial interview and depending on the young person's personal circumstances, part of this process may include an educational consultant or a member of the students occupational therapy team coming in to the school for an additional meeting to help advise how to best enable access for the student. This may be in terms of accessing the curriculum, or to discuss access in the physical environment of the school.*

#### Participation:

*I understand my obligations for making reasonable adjustments to ensure that all students with disability can participate in their education. In my role, I am not just adjusting for my own students, but also assisting other teachers with making adjustments for the students in their classes. This requires knowing about the needs of particular students and responding to those needs in a way that displays best practice. In my role I have mentored early career teachers in providing reasonable adjustments through collaboratively planning units of work and demonstrated reasonable adjustment in action through inviting them to observe my lessons and team teaching.*

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.

#### Harassment or victimisation:

*In order to address the incidence of harassment and/or victimisation of a student with disability, it is important to ensure that you allow the student to relay the information in the way in which the student feels most comfortable (spoken, using assistive technologies, written etc), it can be also be useful to offer a support person (such as a trusted staff member or peer). The incident then needs to be dealt with in a timely fashion according to the school's policies surrounding this. An important aspect is what comes after; offering opportunities for and support of reconciliation between parties, educating offenders and providing relevant support services to victim and offender (eg social skills training, behaviour management intervention, counselling services, support groups etc).*

- Compliance:

*Unfortunately, issues of compliance to the DSE are raised amongst both students and parents from time to time. Usually when this comes from a student regarding a particular teacher/subject/task I respond by listening non judgmentally and talking to the student about their own rights and go through the school's relevant policies and procedures for how to address this. I would then typically talk to the teacher to find out what has happened and if needed, remind them about their legal obligation to uphold the DSE.*

*If the complaint is raised by a parent/ caregiver, I will again listen non judgementally and investigate further into the matter. I feel it is important to be cognizant of the fact that, often when parents of students with disability are placing a complaint, it is a highly emotionally charged encounter for them. It is a time when your empathy is crucial. It is also important to be mindful of the fact that the parent/caregiver themselves may also be a person living with disability. What is necessary is that data records are kept in terms of interventions taking place for the student, evidence of this (records of conversation, task/ program samples, work samples etc) and clear collaborative planning (usually in the form of an IEP) has taken place. As a Learning Support teacher, I have found that this is essential as it ensures that you are able to track and monitor what is in place for the young person. It doesn't mean that all staff members will be following the DSE, but having transparency from a Learning Support department perspective places that onus back on the individual teacher. It is the responsibility of all staff members to play an equal role in upholding the Standards.*

*Transition: Transition planning should always be a collaborative process. Many times I have worked with staff from different educational settings, parents and individual students to facilitate successful transitions of students, either to or from the school I was currently employed at or future planning for post school options. In order for a successful transition post school, I have worked with careers counsellors, the individual student and their parents/ caregivers to arrive at a solution. I have also taught classes which prepare students for the skills that they will need to successfully enter the workplace as well as organising work place opportunities for students living with disability to see what they like and to help further hone their skills prior to leaving school. My concern here is that some schools seem to do this very well, while others seem to not have the same knowledge of this stage of planning. Transition planning was not covered to a significant extent in my Masters (MSpedEd) degree, leaving me to gain this information through a combination of mentorship, experience, cross collaborative planning and professional development opportunities.*

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability: My approach, when supporting students living with disability from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, was to initially start by familiarising myself with the student's particular cultural background. This was completed in consultation with the primary carers of the students (one of which was also from an ATSI background) and the students themselves. I found that through understanding cultural setting, socio linguistic etiquette and history, I was better able to create opportunities for inclusion and access. This included mentoring one particular Australian indigenous student living with disability through to a student leadership position where she was able to educate her peers and form meaningful connections with her culture. This process, as an educator, was ongoing. It included mentoring the student, collecting data on the student from colleagues, individual instruction 2 x weekly during study periods, frequent communication with caregivers, monitoring of student progress, supporting the student to meet and manage her leadership responsibilities and facilitate access to an indigenous mentor for the student.*

- Specific experiences:

- *Sexual orientation – One particular student I was supporting was a young person who was living with disability and whom was in the process of exploring his own sexual orientation. He had been involved in a serious incident due to inappropriate online behaviour, that he was socially unaware of at the time of initiating the communication. It was important, again, to take a collaborative approach between Wellbeing and Learning Support. Understanding the appropriate action to be taken as harassment and victimisation had already occurred (externally), was essential to ensure the student's safety. Following seeking the appropriate legal action in this situation, collaborative planning took place between the parents, Learning Support and Student Wellbeing. We started a social skills training program for the student, counselling with the school psychologist and assigned the student a mentor. We found programs for the student where he was able to meet young people similar to his age, living with disability and coming to terms with their sexual orientation.*
- *Ethnic origin/ race – Having worked in schools which represent a wide range of cultural backgrounds, I have discovered time and again that it is crucial to ensure that you have an understanding of different cultural backgrounds, particularly in relation to cultural views around disability. I have found that for some cultures, there is a real stigma attached to disability and that this idea of shame prevents parents/ caregivers from seeking intervention for their child/ren. Parents/ caregivers of young people living with disability who come from NESB also are presented with the challenge of not being able to access the information which supports them in making decisions on behalf of their child/ren. To illuminate this, I was once supporting a student who was achieving a high academic standard but had been observed by his teachers as struggling with handwriting in examinations. Upon meeting with the student I was able to find out that his family were refugees, and while his parents held highly qualified positions overseas, they were now working in minimum wage jobs due to the language barrier and non recognition of their studies. He felt too ashamed to ask for help, and while his parents had attended information sessions where they were told about Disability Provisions, they were not able to access the language. Upon accessing a translator to discuss how best to enable their son access, the family felt they were un-deserving of assistance and had no idea that the DSE existed. While providing translated pdf versions is a great start, it doesn't cover all languages, ability levels of parents (eg. Some parents/caregivers are unable to read their native language) and the parents/caregivers need to have enough applied English language to be able to access the website in the first place. Greater community outreach is needed in the area of understanding the rights of people living with disability in diverse communities.*

COVID-19: *Many students living with disability have struggled to participate in education as a result of COVID-19. Online learning provided the perfect opportunity for students who are typically school avoiders to take it up a notch. Many students struggled with having to adapt to a new learning style (delivered all online) and the cognitive requirements of students were increased significantly as to even begin to engage with the work, they also had to access the ICT information needed to access the work/ class that their teacher was providing.*

*Another significant issue that has resulted from COVID-19 is the social implications for many students living with disability. Like many people, social disconnect has been an issue. However this appears to be significantly increased for young people who have very limited social interactions outside of formal school and for those who perhaps do not have the social skill development to be able to readjust socially when re-entering formal schooling. We have seen a rise in anti-social behaviours amongst students living with disability, such as: inappropriate online interactions, breakdown of social groups, difficulty emotionally regulating both in and outside of class, self isolation from peers, increased mental health crises etc.*

*From a teaching perspective, upholding the Standards has been challenging for teachers also. This is an area of education that needs to be seriously addressed, so that in the event of future school closures, all students are able to access their education.*

### **We want to know what you think about the Standards.**

- Are you familiar with the Standards and what they are designed to do? If so, where did you find out about the Standards?

*I am familiar with the standards. I have completed professional learning which covers the standards and also have completed refresher courses.*

- Have you received training of any kind about the Standards? What did this involve? *The training I completed involved the individual completion of online modules. It took approximately 45 minutes to complete and multiple attempts were afforded to participants in order to pass the course. The Standards were also covered early in my Masters of Special Education studies at Macquarie University.*
- Do you understand your obligations when it comes to students with disability being able to access and participate in education? How have the Standards helped you to understand your obligations? *I do understand my obligations and I find that the standards are an incredibly useful framework for talking to other staff about creating access for students with disability.*
- Do you feel confident negotiating and implementing a reasonable adjustment? Do you know how to determine if this would result in unjustifiable hardship? *I do feel confident in this and am able to determine the grounds under which an adjustment would result in unjustifiable hardship. We developed a user friendly rubric for teachers to better understand what did and didn't count as unjustifiable hardship in adjustments based on our particular school and facilities/ staffing.*
- Do you think the Standards help students with disability to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability? Why, or why not? *The Standards provide a framework which guides the access and participation of young people with disability that is equitable to that of their peers living without disability. This is due to it giving educators a very clear guide to best practice in this area.*
- Do you think the Standards help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability? Tell us why you think this. *The Standards have enough generality to be applied to all students. However, I believe that there is more that could be done with the standards to address the needs of Indigenous Australians.*

This Review will help us to consider if we need to improve the Standards and how they are used and implemented. **We want to know how you think the Standards could be improved.**

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

*The Standards provide a level playing field for all students and are succinct enough that if they are followed correctly, students with disability should experience equity in their education.*

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

*Other than considering the accessibility of the standards, there are two things I would like to specifically address:*

*The use of "he or she" should be removed from this document to so as to not exclude people who identify as being non-binary. It is not used frequently, but could just as easily be replaced with 'the young person' or 'the student'. This document is about inclusion and accessibility, moving forward I believe we need to apply this type of language.*

*As this is a document from the Australian Government, I think it needs a section that applies specifically to creating access for indigenous students. This needs to be done in such a way that maintains a high level of respect for and protection of indigenous rights, values, and political integrity. The Standards need to be able to demonstrate that they have historical, legal and cultural knowledge of indigenous nations. They should support indigenous interests, values and institutions.*

- What should be done to improve awareness of the Standards?

*The document itself, I feel, is inaccessible for many people. Educators, who are familiar with the terminology and the overall concept of standards, are at a distinct advantage when accessing the standards. People from a NESB, certain individuals with disability, individuals with low literacy would find this challenging to access and therefore may not be aware of the rights of individuals with disability in education settings and also unaware of the responsibilities of educators towards these young people. Anecdotally, from my own experience, when I have worked in schools with a low socioeconomic and NESB population vs. schools in more affluent areas with a demographic of parents/ caregivers with higher levels of education, I have observed a stark difference between the overall engagement with the Standards and the understanding of what this does and doesn't entitle the young person to. I fear, that when this knowledge is lacking in communities that so desperately need it, some educators may feel less community pressure to observe and uphold the standards in their setting. There is a big difference in schools when you have parents/ caregivers who will phone to ask why certain things are/ aren't happening for their child compared to families who do not even have a working phone or enough knowledge/ language to make that phonecall.*

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

*Personally, I can access the standards. However, I have much training and experience behind me to be able to do this. Not all people are in this same situation and we need to be cognisant of that.*

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

*I think the Guidance notes are useful and are something that needs to remain in the Standards. I wouldn't honestly say that I refer to them all the time, but if you are unsure in a situation, it is very useful to have this additional information.*

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

*Again this comes down to access. We need to find ways to share this information in ATSI communities that is accessible for all people. There needs to be opportunities for reminder/ refresher sessions also. This also needs to be advertised and promoted so that people are aware. If you look at the statistics, we can see the incredible impact that access to education has on indigenous people living with a disability. We can also clearly see that ATSI students living with disability have a distinct age, geographic and health profile which greatly differs to that of the equivalent in the non indigenous population (N. Biddle, 2014). Furthermore, we know that there are cultural differences in the approach to disability and many young people living with disability are cared for by individuals with disability. I urge the consideration of the needs of the indigenous population be very carefully evaluated in this review, with particular focus on how the Standards can be developed to be culturally and linguistically responsive to the needs of indigenous peoples and how they can be delivered in remote communities where access to services and trained professionals is limited.*

I am happy to be further involved in the consultation process.

## Bibliography

N. Biddle, F. A.-Y. (2014). Delivering Disability Services. In F. A.-Y. N. Biddle, *Indigenous Australians and the National Disability Insurance Scheme* (pp. 79-81). ANU Press.