

Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations (NTCOGSO)

Submission to the 2025 Review of the Disability Standards for Education

Date: November 2025

1. The Northern Territory Context

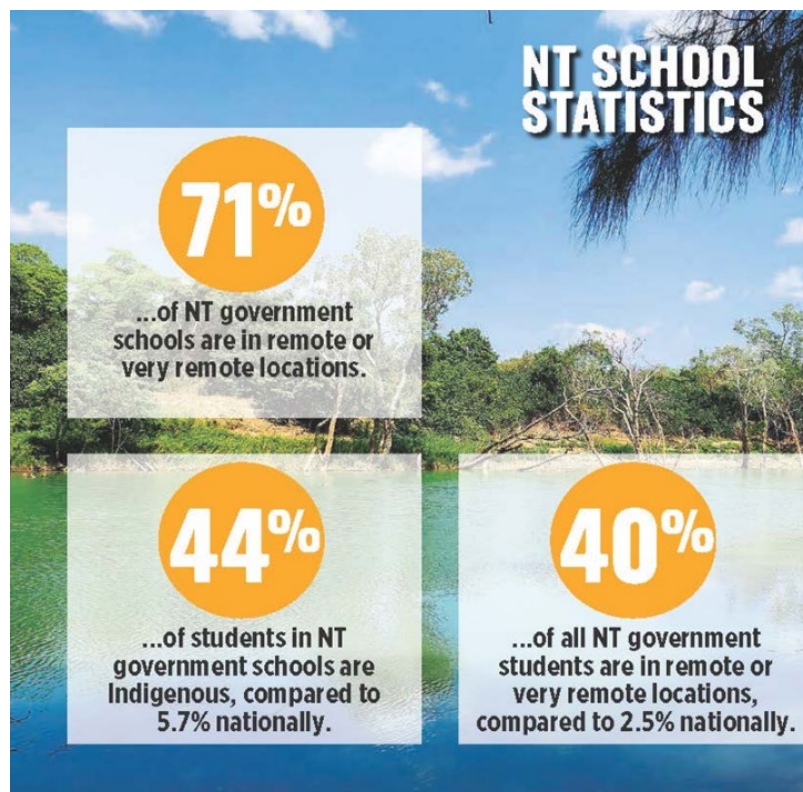
The Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations (NTCOGSO) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the 2025 Review of the Disability Standards for Education.

NTCOGSO is the peak body representing families of children attending Northern Territory government schools. We advocate for quality public education that is inclusive of every child, regardless of location, background or ability. Our members represent parents and carers from all 152 government schools across the Northern Territory.

This submission reflects the lived experience of Northern Territory families and school bodies. It draws primarily on our 2025 Disability Standards survey, supplemented by feedback from other NTCOGSO consultations and the ongoing advocacy of the NT Full Council.

Limited access to allied health and specialist support remains a major barrier to inclusion.

A one-size-fits-all national approach will not succeed without equity-based funding and place-based flexibility. NTCOGSO urges the Australian Government to ensure additional support for jurisdictions with high levels of educational isolation.



2. Consultation and Timeframes

Families across the Northern Territory consistently report that short consultation windows, limited communication channels and the absence of culturally safe engagement prevent meaningful participation in national education processes.

Our members frequently report that concerns raised by families of students with disability are sometimes minimised or misunderstood, and that Aboriginal families in remote communities face additional barriers to being heard or receiving timely responses.

These concerns are supported by the following evidence from NTCOGSO's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review submission (June 2025):

“Students with disability experience disproportionately high rates of bullying, exclusion and harm in Australian schools. Despite the heightened risk, these students’ experiences are often underreported, misunderstood or dismissed.

This can occur when:

- Communication barriers or fear of reprisal prevent students from speaking up.
- A lack of inclusive practice or disability awareness leads to minimisation of harm.
- Behaviours are misinterpreted, especially when the student is neurodivergent or uses communication support.”

“The needs of remote NT First Nations students and families are not adequately addressed in current consultations or policy settings... engagement processes are too short for meaningful feedback, fail to use first languages or culturally safe methods, and rely on digital access not available in many communities.”

NTCOGSO therefore recommends that all future Commonwealth education consultations, including those arising from this Review, adopt a minimum engagement standard to ensure families in regional and remote communities can genuinely participate.

3. Awareness and Implementation of the Standards

NTCOGSO's survey on the Disability Standards for Education received 69 responses from across Northern Territory regions and school types. Given this broad participation including individuals closely connected to schools, a higher level of awareness of the Standards might reasonably be expected. However, only 62 per cent of respondents reported having heard of the Standards before participating.

This indicates that awareness and understanding of the Standards remain inconsistent across school communities and highlights the need for clearer communication, stronger professional learning and improved access to information in every region of the Territory.

Respondents described positive examples of inclusion, such as strong collaboration between teachers and NDIS professionals, the use of therapy dogs, and adjustments to timetables or curriculum to support student participation.

At the same time, nearly 70 per cent of participants identified significant barriers, including inaccessible infrastructure, exclusion from school events, and unresponsive leadership. Many also raised that relief teachers were often unprepared for students with Education Adjustment Plans and that staff understanding of neurodivergence remained limited.

Direct quotes from survey respondents illustrate the challenge:

"Lack of understanding by staff of what ASD, ADHD, Sensory processing disorder means. Teachers take behaviours personally. There is a lack of training on presentations of disabilities and how to respond."

"Relief teachers are not prepared for my son's EAP needs and that creates chaos with changes to staff."

"When we take the special education students to mainstream classes a lot of the mainstream teachers don't know how to differentiate for them so that they are included."

"Being in a remote location can make it harder for staff to access professional development, particularly face-to-face training in specialised areas like inclusive education, disability support, trauma-informed practice, and early childhood intervention."

"Supporting inclusive education in the Northern Territory needs to include greater advocacy for remote First Nations communities, where cultural knowledge, community voice and connection to Country are central to student wellbeing and engagement."

These findings demonstrate that awareness alone does not ensure consistent practice.

Implementation must be supported by accessible training, practical guidance and appropriate resources for small and remote schools. Equitable implementation also depends on safe, accessible government school infrastructure that enables students with disability to participate on the same basis as their peers.

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 explicitly state that their intent is to ensure students with disability can "access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers", including in admission, participation, and use of facilities and services.

However, the Commonwealth continues to rely on states and territories to fund government school infrastructure, despite being aware that the Northern Territory lacks sufficient own-source revenue to address critical access and equity gaps.

Without targeted Commonwealth investment in inclusive and accessible facilities, the full intent of the Standards cannot be realised across the Territory.

NTCOGSO urges that the Standards be supported by:

1. Funded national professional learning accessible to remote educators.
2. Targeted resources co-designed with families and schools in diverse contexts.
3. Culturally responsive materials for Aboriginal families and EALD communities.
4. Targeted Commonwealth investment to improve the accessibility and safety of government school infrastructure in the Northern Territory.

4. Inclusive Decision-Making

Families value genuine partnership in decisions about their child's education. Many reported that consultation processes can feel one-sided or limited to paperwork rather than collaborative discussion.

NTCOGSO supports strengthening the Standards to include enforceable principles for consultation and issue resolution. These principles should require that consultation be timely, culturally appropriate and supported by plain-language information available in multiple formats.

In small and remote NT schools, leadership changes and workforce turnover also affect consistency of decisions about reasonable adjustments. Families often need to re-explain their child's needs each term or year. A national framework that sets expectations for continuity of support would help address this issue.

NTCOGSO recommends that the Standards include enforceable principles that mandate:

5. Consultation in culturally safe and accessible formats.
6. Reasonable timeframes for family engagement.
7. Recognition of community-based decision-making protocols.
8. Clear national expectations for continuity of support.

5. Responsibilities for Assessment and Course Developers

Parents frequently report that adjustments made within the school do not always continue during assessments, exams or external courses. This disrupts student confidence and access to fair assessment.

NTCOGSO supports clarifying shared responsibilities between schools, assessment authorities and training providers to ensure that reasonable adjustments follow the student across all education settings.

The Standards should:

9. Clarify shared responsibilities between schools, assessment authorities and training organisations.
 10. Require transparent recording and transfer of reasonable adjustments.
 11. Ensure vocational and tertiary providers in remote areas are accountable under the Standards.
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6. Embedding Cultural Safety and Wellbeing

Cultural safety and student wellbeing are essential to inclusion. NTCOGSO supports amending the Standards to explicitly require that educational settings provide culturally safe learning environments and address psychosocial hazards such as bullying and exclusion.

NTCOGSO recommends that the Standards embed explicit expectations for:

12. Recognition of bullying and exclusion as psychosocial hazards.
13. Whole-school wellbeing frameworks, incorporating early mental health intervention.
14. Culturally safe design, policies and engagement practices.

Appendix 1 – NTCOGSO 2025 Disability Standards Survey Summary

This summary, drawn from respondents across multiple NT regions, highlights both strengths and barriers in school inclusion practice.

Contact

Dr Ruth Mirams

President, NTCOGSO
president@ntcogso.org.au

Michelle Parker

Executive Officer, NTCOGSO
executive.officer@ntcogso.org.au

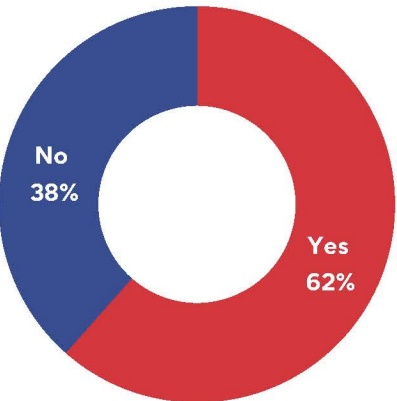
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2025 Review of Disability Standards for Education - Survey

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This summary highlights key findings from the NTCOGSO survey on the 2025 Review of the Disability Standards for Education (DSE). 69 individual responses were recorded, with representation from all school types across most regions of the NT.

Have you **heard of the Disability Standards for Education** before today?



How confident do you feel that **your school or education provider supports students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students?**



Have you (or the student/s you support) experienced any **positive examples of inclusive education or reasonable adjustments at school?**

- Just over half** of responders indicated they have **received positive examples** of inclusive education or reasonable adjustments at school. Some of these include:
- Strong collaboration between staff and external professionals (e.g. NDIS psychologists).
 - Teachers adapting and supporting students with diverse needs.
 - Individualised planning and communication about student supports.
 - Timetable, class, or curriculum adjustments to aid participation.
 - Access to targeted supports like therapy dogs and intervention programs.

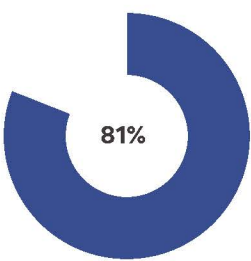
Have you (or the student/s you support) experienced any **challenges or barriers to inclusion at school?**

- Almost 70%** indicated they have **faced challenges** or barriers to inclusion at school. Some of these include:
- Limited accessibility and infrastructure barriers.
 - Exclusion or lack of recognition during school events (e.g. Sports Day).
 - Scheduling challenges for therapy or support sessions during school hours.
 - Unresponsive or unsupportive leadership creating obstacles to inclusion.
 - General experiences of exclusion from learning or social opportunities.

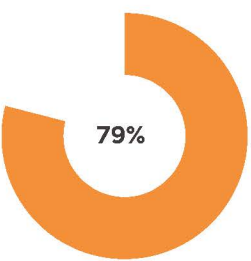
What would **help schools better meet their obligations under the Disability Standards?**



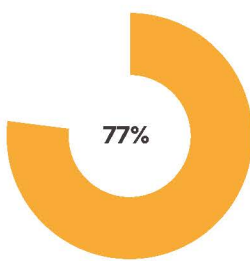
More training for teachers and staff on supporting students with disability



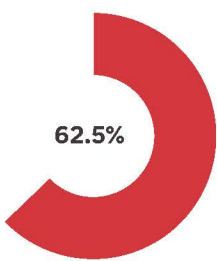
More resources to help other students understand inclusion and disability



Clearer processes for consultation with families about reasonable adjustments



Better guidance or advocacy tools for parents and carers



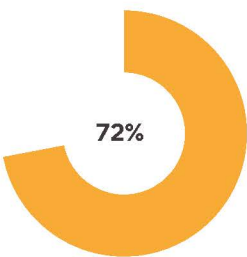
Just under 50% of respondents provided 'other' suggestions including:

More special needs programs and full-time support staff, disability loadings and funding passed directly to schools, better access to allied health professionals and faster access to assessments, smaller class sizes and more time for teachers to plan and implement supports for students with disability, accessible training and professional development for remote staff, better school facilities that meet diverse learning needs, and more culturally responsive supports and approaches.

What would make it **easier for you to raise concerns or resolve issues about inclusion or support at school?**



Regular communication between schools and families



Access to an independent advocate or support person



Clearer complaints processes at the school level



Information in plain language and accessible formats



About a third of respondents suggested 'other' ideas including:

Better support from the Department of Education, more supports in schools to reach all students - not only those with the highest needs, an independent advocacy person with authority to act without departmental pressure (especially around suspensions and exclusions), improved communication and feedback systems - especially for special needs classes, and better training for teacher assistants, who are most hands-on with students