

NTCOGSO Submission to Northern Territory Department of Education

Review of Policy and Practice for Students with additional Needs

2018



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Review of Policy and Practice for Students with additional Needs

- 1. What are the strengths of the current definition and scope of Students with Additional Needs?**
 - **Are there any groups of students with additional needs not included in this definition?**
 - **In your view, how could the definition be improved?**

Clarity is required prior to wider consultation as current policy terminology is 'Students with a Disability' rather than this current review of policy and practice for 'Students with Additional Needs'.

The definition should be based on evidence of need not evidence of diagnosis. For example, evidence as demonstrated through a moderated Student Needs Profile.

Definitions and references should use gender neutral and inclusive language.

Remove gender-specific third-person pronouns, he/she and replace with gender neutral language, 'they'.

We consider the scope needs to widen to specifically address the mild to moderate hearing loss which affects at any one time the participation and scholastic performance of nearly half of the NT's indigenous students. This is a major issue in our jurisdiction and should be a focus area of this Review and the revised Policy and Procedures for SWAN.

- 2. What are the main benefits of promoting 'inclusive schooling' in the Northern Territory government school system? What are the main challenges?**

Potential benefit:

Inclusive education models authentically represent our community and the world around us. It ensures that all children wherever possible attend their local school and become active members of their school and community.

Inclusive education addresses the challenges of exclusion which assists us to ensure that all students have an opportunity to learn and to expect a high-quality education.

Inclusive education transforms schools and learning centers to cater for all children that are more tolerant of student differences, ideally lead to less bullying and increased overall student wellbeing.

Inclusive school communities lead to more inclusive societies through tolerance and acceptance of student differences, ideally leading to less bullying and increased overall student wellbeing.

Challenge:

The system and culture to support SWANs is based around a language of the student's deficits and not their strengths. This permeates through the entire school, affecting the SWAN and the attitude of their fellow students. To foster a truly inclusive environment the language used in Policies, Procedures and Guidelines all the way to the Classroom needs to change from deficit focused to strengths based, to celebrate the diversity of the student population instead of isolating the deficits of the SWAN.



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3. To what extent is inclusive schooling being provided to Student with Additional Needs in NT government schools?

We must ensure the funding model is able to sustain the adjustments each student needs in any school they attend.

We have high needs students who would attend a specialist school if one were available in their location and would then qualify for a higher level of funding to meet their education and care needs at school.

The Northern Territory covers an area of 1,349,129 square kilometers and has four (4) specialist schools. Where a specialist school is not geographically available to students, the higher level of funding is not available for the school they do attend as it is not a specialist school. The school budget does not have available the funding required for adjustments such as full school hours individual support to ensure access and equity to the full educational program.

4. How well is the Departments philosophy of inclusion being carried out in the government school system?

Most schools have clear goals that all students feel they belong and all students are supported in their learning. The Departments shift towards looking at progress rather than grades has supported celebrating every student's achievements and is bringing a more inclusive framework.

5. How important are accountability mechanisms to ensure Students with Additional Needs receive the support they need?

- **If important, what kinds of mechanisms would you include in the Accountability and performance Improvement Framework focused on the Student with Additional Needs?**

Accountability for the implementation of a student's EAP (educational adjustment plan) is extremely important. This is the document that outlines the adjustments a child will have made to allow equity of access to education. Importantly the parents, school and student support create and sign off on this document, so making sure that it is implemented and evaluated is essential.

Currently there is no transparent or known accountability for implementation and evaluation. Many staff report the high workload and limited assistance outside of the school available to them. Many parents report that despite the development of an initial EAP there was no subsequent review or follow up. Schools require an appropriate level of specialists and support staff to offer ongoing support and mentoring for these processes. Parents require an accountability process that they alone are not responsible for ensuring review and continuation of support.

Many of our families in the NT have limited or nil capacity to follow up and advocate for processes and outcomes. The department is then best placed to take on accountability for implementation, review and evaluation.

We need to ensure that Disability Advisors actually know the students and their families. This should incorporate an expected requirement of visits to the students and teachers a minimum of once a term and include observations of the students in these visits.



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6. What are the strengths of the departments current organizational structure to support Students with Additional Needs?

- What are the key areas requiring improvement or reorganization?

The department is using a Response to Intervention approach. We consider this to be a good model which demonstrates clearly to a school a whole school approach that is inclusive and responsive to all learner needs.

Many of our students live a transient lifestyle. Almost half of our total number of students live in remote locations and have poor attendance. How do we intervene, across agencies, and ensure those families who require information and support receive it and their children are evaluated and receive a diagnosis?

7. Where does the current approach to funding and service delivery for Students with Additional Needs support the provision of inclusive education in the Northern Territory government schools?

- Where could it be improved?

- How well does the current approach enable schools to make reasonable adjustments for students?

Only students with a diagnosis attract funding to address their additional needs within SESP.

This does not offer equal access to educational opportunities to SWAN where a diagnosis has not been obtained. Barriers to obtaining a diagnosis include;

Systematic Barriers

- Little to no access to allied health professional to produce assessments within the Department of Education.
- Non-existent /ineffective collaboration between Department of Education, Office of Disability and Department of Health to improve diagnostic pathways.
- Early childhood screening occurs but there is no standard approach to addressing the concerns with the family. (Families need written evidence of how their child is developing/interacting/behaving differently and information relating to the suspected diagnosis, e.g. developmental delay, hearing loss, learning disorder.)

Other Barriers

- Families do not recognise the significance of the information being provided to them about their child (hence the need to provide evidence of the difference and information relating to suspected diagnosis).
- Families own stigma may prevent them from pursuing a diagnosis.
- Families do not have the knowhow, stamina or economic resources to pursue a diagnosis in the public or private health system.
- Families do not have sufficient evidence or understanding of the issue when presenting the case for diagnostic assessment to the private or public pediatrician (hence the need for written evidence relating to the difference).



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- There are literally no services in the area to perform the necessary assessments. Alternately families are expected to make significant journeys on multiple occasions to complete the assessment and diagnostic process.
- Clinicians are not receiving the full student picture from the school and are making judgements having observed the child for only small windows of time.

SWAN students, particularly older students, can be more difficult to engage and participate at school. The median age of onset for mental illness is mid to late adolescence and there is known comorbidity between mental illness and disability. The cutoff for funding at 60% attendance will likely act as a slippery slope to complete disengagement for those SWANs on the fringe of participation with their education. This cut off criteria for funding should be reviewed.

8. In the Northern Territory context, how would you distinguish between what is reasonable and unreasonable in providing adjustments to support access and participation for Students with Additional Needs?

- **Can you give examples of what you see as reasonable and unreasonable adjustments?**

In the Northern Territory context, many of our school's encounter difficulty with facilitating the social, physical and education needs of students with disabilities due to a lack of funding and access to services and specialists.

We know that lower educational outcomes stem from factors such as remoteness and high proportions of indigenous students.

In the Northern Territory 40% of our total student population are indigenous. A total of 44% of NT students live in remote or very remote locations, compared to 2.2% nationally.

Almost 70% of our schools are classified as remote or very remote and almost half of NT government schools have an indigenous enrolment of 95% or higher.

The Northern Territory has one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged populations in Australia. In 2015 the average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage for NT Government schools was 758, compared to a national average of 1000.

Of the 100 most disadvantaged schools nationally, 54 are in the NT.

We would expect the question of reasonableness to determine appropriate adjustments to incorporate the students views of what is appropriate; the effect of any adjustments on the student and ultimately, their ability to achieve learning outcomes and participate fully.

Nationally there have been legal cases of discrimination which considered in relation to adjustments 'what was reasonable and appropriate having regard to that location'. Determining the expectation of an adjustment as not reasonable due to remote locations and applying this in an NT context is not appropriate.

An unreasonable adjustment, would be an adjustment which isolates the child or an adjustment that interferes with the ability of others to access learning.



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- 9. How well does the current distribution of students in Special schools, Special settings and mainstream schools meet the needs of Students with Additional Needs?**
- **How could the enrolment system be enhanced to ensure Students with Additional Needs learn in the setting most suitable to them?**

The DoE Guidelines reference the choice available between Specialist Schools and Mainstream schools for SWAN. There is no parity in the funding and quality of education between the Specialist Schools and Mainstream settings with the former eclipsing the latter.

Students living outside the catchment area of the Specialist Schools and Specialist settings are being geographically discriminated against in terms of the funding and quality of education available to them.

- 10. How widespread is the use of the Department's guides and resources to determine the needs of students and provide suitable adjustments?**

Informal feedback from parents suggests that the SNPI and EAP process are not routinely employed for students who do not have a diagnosis and therefore do not attract SESP funding from the Department of Education. For various reasons (reference discussion regarding barriers to diagnosis above), this leaves students who have a disability, but not a diagnosis, vulnerable and at an increasing disadvantage to their peers. It also means that students requiring educational adjustment in the NT are higher than 6,300.

- 11. How engaged are families and Carers in the process of determining needs, suitable adjustments and best enrolment options for Students with Additional Needs?**

Parents/Carers are the informal case managers for SWAN and this is especially so when that student is accessing therapeutic support outside of the school setting. Schools should prioritise engagement and communication with Parents/Carers and other major elements of support in the student's life.

Another very important element of support in a SWAN student's life can be Outside Hours School Care. Formalising a consistent approach to communication, inclusion and necessary supports with OSCH (as well as Family/Carers) will be advantageous to any SWAN who participates in OSCH. This is worth including as a discussion item in the Policy and Practice review for SWAN.

Those students who become participants in the NDIS have the opportunity to access supports which will likely enhance their educational and developmental outcomes (noting that the NDIS will not perform the mainstream supports, which are the responsibility of the Department of Education).

Alternately, there will be students who do not qualify for an NDIS package, however, their Family/Carers will continue to use other means to coordinate additional therapeutic supports for the SWAN. Some of these supports will be best suited to the school setting, i.e. provide the most advantageous result for the student when undertaken at school.

The Department may wish to consider incorporating in its Policy and Procedures, schools to be a partner in facilitating such supports wherever possible for the best outcome of the SWAN (provided there is no negative to the school functioning otherwise).



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12. What impacts – positive or negative – is the roll out of the NDIS in the Northern Territory having upon the schooling of Students with Additional Needs?

- **How can the department develop strong collaboration with the NDIS to deliver services for Students with Additional Needs?**

NDIS will not fund Mainstream Supports, which are the responsibility of the Department of Education.

Without offering students in remote and very remote areas (i.e. outside of the catchment for Specialist Schools and Specialist Settings) the same standard of specialist education that is available in urban areas, our Education system will exacerbate the divide between urban and remote/very remote.

13. How effective have the Departments' professional development activities and initiatives been in enhancing the skills of teachers and other staff to meet the needs of Students with Additional Needs?

Restrictive practices that are exclusionary (such as sending students to the office or to time out) are not exclusively used within the framework of a behavior support plan, with appropriate consent provided by a guardian. As a single example, the extent of this practice suggests professional development activities (and accountability) are inadequate.

Several schools have reported the OLT courses have been worthwhile.

14. Which approaches in other Australian and international jurisdictions are most relevant to the Northern territory context?

The density of the population in Victoria and its geographical distribution of SWAN students with reference to the available supports seems unlikely to provide a useful correlation to the Northern Territory.

The unique circumstance of the NT with regard to the distribution of SWAN requires innovative thinking.

To build a picture and promote insightful and potentially innovative feedback from the stakeholders in this review, it would be useful to map;

- The number of SWAN compared with overall student populations at the various very remote, remote, regional, rural and urban school locations in the NT
- The proximity of available supports to each school (within the Department of Education and other departments who collaborate or could collaborate with education).
- Estimates for mild to moderate hearing loss at each school location (assuming not every student with mild to moderate hearing loss has an EAP).



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15. What key insights do you take from the approaches to supporting Students with Additional Needs in other jurisdictions regarding:

- **The service delivery model, including the use by schools of government and non-government service providers?**
- **The place and role of Special education settings?**
- **Professional development and school workforce training?**
- **Performance measurement and monitoring?**

The concept of having a single point of contact per SWAN (i.e. Lead Practitioner in NZ) is a good concept and seems to offer the following immediately identified advantages

- Consistency from year to year and potentially through the whole school journey, navigating transitions that are often neglected (from preschool to primary, primary to middle school, middle to high school or even a change in school etc.).
- Coordination of the Department of Education responsibilities and interfacing with external stakeholders such as the Family, NDIS and Department of Health.

The school staff member who represents the Department of Education's role supporting the SWANs should consider gaining consent from the SWAN parent or carer to communicate with other services such as Health, NDIS Service Coordinators.

16. Are there other jurisdictions the review should examine to find models of best practice in the schooling of Students with Additional Needs?

NT COGSO is currently reviewing the policy and practices of other jurisdictions.

Other Comments

The importance of ensuring data held by the department on SWAN is accurate, robust and transparent is critical. In the past the quality of the data was not able to be relied upon and work must continue until we have reliable, quality data.

We consider it is also imperative for students with high needs as evident through their Student Profile also be assigned a Disability Advisor and all plans entered on to the DoE special needs data base. This would enable the department to track all students of need and their progression. This will ensure data is more robust and reliable.

We couldn't agree more with Michelle Pearce, Edith Cowan University (below), however, the strength of a fully inclusive education system is not only in the provision of policies, funding, resources, expertise and professional development; it is in ensuring their provision is of the highest quantity and quality required for high student outcomes for all.

"It is very difficult for teachers to be inclusive if their schools and the education system are not also inclusive. Inclusion must be a systematic priority or policies will be tokenistic and funding will not be forthcoming. Education systems must offer inclusive policies, funding, resources, expertise, professional development and a curriculum which promote and facilitate inclusion".

Pearce, M (2009)