



# Comments to the Senate Committee on the inquiry into the school system for students with disability

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## Overview

There have been improvements in education for children with disability over the last decade in Australia. However, some children still experience serious barriers<sup>1</sup> and some parents report that they are 'exhausted by the fight' for adequate disability education support for their children. This senate inquiry is a timely opportunity to comprehensively address this situation.

**NDS would like to see a commitment to fully accessible education by 2020.** This submission proposes a set of systematic ways to attain this goal. In particular, the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards) can play a key role in improving the school system for students with disability.

NDS recommends that governments should:

- make adherence with the Standards a mandatory part of school registration
- implement an increased and better targeted individualised disability loading which covers all students with disability based on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability - in time for the next school year
- provide non-individualised funding to schools that is dependent on progress made towards disability action plans to ensure children with disability are welcome and supported in schools
- educate entire school communities about disability inclusion and benchmark inclusive education with progress on disability action plans published on the 'my school' website
- strengthen training for all teachers on the skills required to teach and include children with disability, and promote related professional development
- ensure specialist advice is available, such as how to modify the curriculum for a particular child, promote positive behaviour for children with disability, and improve general understanding around why certain restrictive interventions must not be used
- develop joint planning between schools, families and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) including collaborative approaches to planning transition from school to work such as achieved by the 'Ticket to Work initiative (see Appendix A)
- report on the implementation of the Disability Standards for Education as part of a stronger reporting process for the National Disability Strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Children with Disability Australia, 2015. National Survey: The Direct Education Experiences of Students with Disability. (Online survey with 1025 responses)

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## Response to Terms of Reference

### Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support

The education system is still not meeting the needs of some children with disability. A recent online survey of parents found that one in four children with disability have been previously refused enrolment; 17% are only offered part-time enrolment; and 68% of the parents surveyed believe that their children are not receiving adequate support at school.<sup>2</sup> Some parents have reported that rather than 'fighting the system' they choose to send their children to special schools.

The proportion of full-time equivalent (FTE) students with disability in mainstream settings compared to special schools, and as a percentage of all enrolments, varies across states and territories. This is attributable partly to differing inclusion and counting definitions.<sup>3</sup> Data from administrative school enrolment collections in 2012 indicated that overall there were 139,300 FTE students with disability comprising 4% of the total enrolled FTE student population. The 2009 Survey of Disability Ageing and Carers estimated 82% (292,600) of children and young people with disability aged 5 to 20 were attending school. Of school students with disability, 65.9% attended regular classes in mainstreams schools, 24.3% attended special classes in mainstream schools and 9% attended special schools<sup>4</sup>.

The impact of inadequate access may be reflected in the following comparative data on attainment:

- 26% of people with a disability do not go beyond Year 10, compared to 18% of people without a disability.<sup>5</sup>
- 36% of people aged 15 -64 years with reported disability had completed year 12 compared to 60% of people without a disability.<sup>6</sup>
- 38% of young people aged 15–24 years with disability either work, study, or do a combination of both on a full time basis compared to 56% of young people without disability.<sup>7</sup>

The available data should be improved with the new 'Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability' that we understand will be available from August 2015. This more comprehensive data set is a prerequisite for better understanding and improving the performance of schools for students with disability.

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<sup>2</sup> Children with Disability Australia, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> AIHW. 2013. Australia's welfare 2013. Australia's welfare no. 11. Cat. no. AUS 174. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>4</sup> ABS. 2012. Children with Disability at School, Profiles of Disability 2009. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>5</sup> ABS. 2009. Persons Aged 15-64 years, selected characteristics – by level of highest educational attainment', Survey of education training and experience 2009: State and Territory Australian tables, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>6</sup> ABS. 2012. Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 'Disability - Education and Employment,' Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>7</sup> ABS. 2012. Australian Social Trends, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

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## **The social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment**

Better participation by people with disability in social and economic life is critical for the future economy. Increasing the number of people with disability who are working can reduce some of the pressures resulting from an ageing population and a growth in pensions. This case is clearly laid out in the National Disability Strategy, which was endorsed by all governments in 2010. Education is a fundamental building block for improving social and economic participation.

Many young people with disability, who could become active members of the Australian workforce, are put off from doing so by low employment expectations expressed in wider society. Furthermore, young people with disability often have limited or no exposure to genuine employment experience or career development during their schooling years.

Investment in ‘school-to-work’ transition for students with disability is critical. This is a period when young people build the necessary skills to become productive members of society. Young people with disability, in particular, benefit from structured support during this transition process and this must begin with schools and families working together. Lack of access to such support is failing Australian young people with disability and condemning them to a marginalised and dependent life with reduced opportunity for social and economic participation<sup>8</sup>.

NDS recommends ‘Ticket to Work’ (See Appendix A) as a program that can effectively coordinate across the NDIS, schools, employers and employment support to help students with disability transition to work. This program has shown results: 86 per cent of participants have continued in ongoing open employment, with the remaining 14 per cent currently in vocational education. This is an outstanding result in light of the data which shows that the vast majority of Australian young people with disability do not transition into ongoing open employment post-school. The successful pilot of this program is about to be extended to three NDIS trial sites.

## **The impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students**

NDS understands that an independent evaluation of the \$300 million spent in 2012-14 on improving support for students with disability has been completed but is not yet publicly available. We also understand that examples of best practice and lessons learnt in this program will be progressively published during the second part of 2015.

The Government should be commended for investing in this evaluation. The next steps of both using and releasing this information are critical to making the most of this investment. The evaluation information should inform government deliberations about how to provide non-individualised funding support for schools and other education or training organisations to develop staff, provide accessible infrastructure and raise disability awareness in the broader education community.

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<sup>8</sup> Wakeford, M. and Waugh, F. 2014. Transitions to Employment of Australian Young People with Disability and the Ticket to Work Initiative. National Ticket to Work Network.

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## **The future impact on students with disability as a result of the Government's decision to index funding for schools at the consumer price index after 2017**

The impact of indexing funding solely on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is likely to reduce the resources available to children with disability in future. It is a short sighted cost-containment strategy. There will be considerable pressure on wages for disability teacher aides and specialist disability therapists due to the increased demand for disability expertise and support workers throughout the implementation of the NDIS. This will likely result in wages increasing at a higher rate than the CPI.

## **The progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act**

### **The progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability and the findings, recommendations and outcomes from this process, and how this data will, or should, be used to develop a needs-based funding system for students with disability**

NDS is cautiously optimistic that needs-based funding will help create properly inclusive education services. The long-awaited data collection will be fully implemented in August 2015 and we understand it will contribute to the establishment of a schooling resource standard which includes an adequate loading for children with disability. The next step must be to secure needs-based and targeted funding for the 2016 school year.

### **How possible changes as a result of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability will be informed by evidence-based best practice of inclusion of students with disability**

The new national data collection will provide schools, parents and education authorities with reliable data on the number of students with disability in schools, where they are located and the adjustments they receive. This data will also help reinforce the obligations that schools have under the Disability Education Standards and can be used to improve support for students with disability and to identify gaps. It must be used, as intended, to increase and improve the targeting of funding for students with disability.

NDS would also like to see this data set also track student outcomes five years post school. This will give a better understanding of effective targeting of funding and educational interventions.

## **What should be done to better support students with disability in our schools**

**Accelerate compliance with the Disability Standards for Education:** The Standards provide a robust framework for ensuring equal access to education for people with disability. The challenge facing governments is to ensure and enable full compliance. NDS recognises the investment and progress in raising awareness of the Standards and improving attitudes and expectations. This investment is necessary but not sufficient. It must be complemented by more effective monitoring alongside increased and appropriately targeted funding.

All schools should demonstrate their readiness to accept students with disability and be required to develop disability action plans for improving access and education outcomes for students with disability. Where exemptions to the Standards are used on the basis of unjustified hardship, the action plan should show how the school will remove the related

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barriers where possible. For example, if there are barriers in the built infrastructure of a school, the long-term maintenance plan should include upgrades that remove these barriers.

It is not good enough for schools to use the 'unjustified burden' exemption over the long term and continue to turn away students with disability. All schools should be required to have plans to be fully inclusive before 2020. Progress on this goal should be monitored by governments with annual reporting requirements linked to funding.

Adherence with the Standards should also be a mandatory part of the school registration process.

Newly collected data and reporting information can help provide benchmarks on inclusive and accessible education provision. These should be used to further develop the evidence available on how to implement the Standards and create inclusive schools as well as to promote and publicise progress on the 'my school' website.

### **Build awareness and knowledge about disability and inclusive education:**

- Strengthen training for all teachers at undergraduate and postgraduate levels to cover skills in disability and inclusion.
- Professional development should be widely available for teachers and aides. This is important to overcome a culture of low expectations. Teachers should also be able to draw on specialist support and advice from multi-disciplinary teams.
- Investment is required to build the skills and knowledge of whole school communities to be more inclusive in their attitudes and to promote willingness to make adjustments so all children can achieve better outcomes on their school journey
- Schools should have access to specialist advice services in particular demand areas. For example, the positive partnerships program to assist school students with autism (part of the Helping Children with Autism package) has been very successful. Specialist advice can also be used to modify the curriculum to meet individual student needs.
- Improved understanding that certain restrictive interventions must not be used (for example, the use of cages). There needs to be access to specialist advice on how to promote positive management of challenging behavior for children with disability in education settings. The whole school community needs to learn about these positive approaches so that they can meaningfully include all children and their families.
- Engage with people with disability and disability service providers to improve disability awareness of the education sector. An NDS workforce initiative called [ProjectABLE](#) aims to recruit school students into the disability sector. It involves people with disability and disability service providers meeting with students and teachers. This has led to improvements in the understanding of disability and inclusive attitudes by the whole school community. It is important to recognise the core role that the disability sector can and should play in raising disability awareness.

### **The early education of children with disability**

The Productivity Commission provided well thought-out and detailed proposals to address long-standing issues for children with disability in early childhood education. It is timely and necessary to make these improvements. As indicated by the Commission, while most



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government assistance for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services has increased with demand, the amount of block funding that assisted children with additional needs has been stagnant. If the resulting gap is not addressed, it will limit access to services for some children.

There is good evidence that ECEC services have a particular benefit for the development of children with disability in preparing them for school and reaching their full potential. They help with early identification of children with learning and developmental delay, and with early intervention. This not only improves outcomes but can reduce support requirements over the long-term.

For some young children with disability, the type of support required is not easily identified. The benefits from ensuring access to appropriately skilled early childhood workers several years before school can be significant and lifelong. Often the most effective approach is for specialist early childhood intervention services to work with ECEC staff and families rather than only with the child. They can strengthen staff knowledge and skills as well help to analyse the environment to identify useful adaptations and learning opportunities that will enable full engagement.

### **Any other related matters**

**Complement the NDIS:** It is important to recognise that the NDIS does not provide individualised funding for all people with disability and is not responsible for providing universal education services. Indeed the sustainability and effectiveness of the NDIS relies on education services to do their part to achieve improved life outcomes.

The NDIS will create new opportunities for the education sector. For the first time, many children with disability will have access to much-needed individual and early intervention support, including access to aids and equipment. With their core support needs met, families and students will likely have higher expectations of the education system. NDIS is confident that most of the education system will welcome this challenge as they will no longer be overwhelmed by the support needs of students and can instead focus on education outcomes.

To make the most of the investment in the NDIS we recommend that governments should:

- ensure joint planning approaches between schools and the NDIS, taking advantage of expertise from a range of disciplines, early intervention opportunities and help develop natural and sustainable ongoing support networks
- improve planning for transition from school to work through effective collaborations such as provided by the 'Ticket to Work' initiative (see Appendix A).

**Link to monitoring of the National Disability Strategy:** Comprehensive improvement of education for children with disability in schools is required to realise the National Disability Strategy which is the responsibility of all governments. Progress on the National Disability Strategy and the Standards should be assisted with a requirement for annual progress reports to parliaments that promote accountability across government.

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**National Disability Services** is the peak industry body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote and advance services for people with disability. Its Australia-wide membership includes 1000 non-government organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. Its members collectively provide the full range of disability services—from accommodation support, respite and therapy to community access and employment. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.

## Appendix A

## Ticket to Work



## A national approach to increasing employment opportunities for students with disability

### What is Ticket to Work?

[Ticket to Work](#) supports young people with disability to successfully transition from school to work.

Ticket to Work takes a partnership approach to improving the employment and education outcomes of young people with disability. Ticket to Work brings together disability- specific and mainstream representatives from a variety of sectors to work strategically together to improve the transition and employment needs of young people with disability.

Ticket to Work is preparing students with disability for the workplace and giving them an employment pathway that will help to ensure they move into a successful life beyond school.

### Why is Ticket to Work important?

Evidence shows that Australian young people with disability are not successfully transitioning from school into further training or employment; a factor that is an indicator of long-term, and often life-long, disadvantage.

In Australia, young people with disability are more likely to drop out of school early, be excluded from the labour force, have fewer educational qualifications, experience poverty and be socially isolated.

Ticket to Work grew out of research that showed participation in career development, work experience and employment during secondary school are among the most significant indicators of post-school success for young people with disability. Yet poor labour-market statistics for young Australians with disability suggest a critical need for more work-based learning opportunities.

### Does Ticket to Work indeed work?

Ticket to Work nationally has been in operation since the end on 2013; in 2014 we had the following results:

Target Group	January – December 2014 Outcomes
Young people with disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 456x young people commenced in work experience and work preparation activities.</li><li>• 248x young people have started an Australian School-based Apprenticeship or Traineeship.</li><li>• 86 per cent of the trainees are still in paid employment since completing their secondary schooling and their Australian School-based Apprenticeship or Traineeship.</li></ul>
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 362x employers across a diverse range of sectors have supported young people in their workplaces (work preparation, work experience and/or employed a school-based trainee).</li></ul>
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 109x schools are offering Ticket to Work activities to their students with disability.</li></ul>
Local Ticket to Work Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 25x Local Networks are operational and offering Ticket to Work activities to students, schools and employers.</li><li>• 214x organisations and agencies are now part of a Local Ticket to Work Network.</li></ul>

This exponential growth in just a year attests to the need for this initiative and the need for further expansion. In a short period, Ticket to Work has made a difference in the life connections on-the-ground to good practice and a community momentum has been developed.

The [Ticket to Work evaluation](#) and [testimonials](#) show that Ticket to Work does deliver results for young people with disability and their families, employers and schools.

Ticket to Work has proven to be a successful model that is leading genuine employment outcomes for young people with disabilities in Australia in their transition from school.

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