



Better and Fairer Schools Funding Reform Bill

Submission on behalf of the Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA)

Introduction:

The Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA) represents leaders in special education who work to support students with disabilities and additional needs. Our schools serve some of the most vulnerable students in Australia, and our members are committed to ensuring that these students have access to high-quality, equitable education. This submission highlights key issues related to funding transparency and the need for targeted support initiatives for students with disabilities.

Position:

ASEPA advocates for:

1. Increasing the Commonwealth's funding share towards the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) to the full 25%.
2. Reinstating a targeted funding initiative, similar to the previous More Support for Students with Disability (MSSD) program, to provide resources that directly benefit students with disabilities.
3. Ensuring transparency in the allocation of NCCD-identified funding, guaranteeing that this funding is used exclusively for supporting students with disabilities and not redirected for other purposes by state or territory governments.

Key Concerns:

1. Transparency in NCCD-Identified Funding:

ASEPA is deeply concerned about the lack of transparency in how funding identified through the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) is used once it reaches state and territory governments. While the NCCD helps identify the needs of students with disabilities, there is little accountability to ensure that this funding directly benefits those students.

ASEPA calls for a clear and transparent process, where funding allocated based on NCCD data is directed towards specialised services, staffing, and resources for the students identified. This funding should not be absorbed into general school budgets or diverted for purposes like infrastructure upgrades or broad staffing unrelated to the specific needs of students with disabilities.

2. Reinstating the More Support for Students with Disability Initiative:

ASEPA advocates for the revival of a targeted funding initiative similar to the More Support for Students with Disability program, which provided schools with essential resources to support students with disabilities. The previous initiative allowed schools to:

- Hire additional specialist staff, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, and mental health professionals.
- Develop and implement personalised learning programs tailored to the individual needs of students.

- Invest in staff training to ensure that educators are equipped to support students with complex needs.

Reinstating this program would provide the much-needed flexibility and targeted funding to ensure that all students with disabilities have access to the resources they need to succeed.

3. Workforce Shortages and Support Gaps:

Special schools are facing significant shortages of specialist staff, including educational support workers, therapists, and psychologists. These shortages are particularly acute in regional and remote areas, where attracting and retaining qualified staff is even more difficult. Without sufficient funding, schools cannot meet the increasing demand for individualised support services, which are critical for the development and success of students with disabilities.

Additionally, larger class sizes in special schools reduce the effectiveness of personalised instruction, further disadvantaging students with high support needs. ASEPA believes that increased funding would help alleviate these pressures by allowing schools to reduce class sizes and hire more specialist staff.

4. Impact of Full SRS Funding and Targeted Disability Support:

Fully committing to the 25% SRS share, alongside the reintroduction of a targeted disability support initiative, would lead to substantial improvements in special education. It would:

- Provide schools with the necessary resources to hire and retain specialist staff.

- Improve the quality of education and support for students with disabilities by enabling schools to implement evidence-based practices and programs.
- Ensure that students with disabilities receive direct, tangible benefits from the NCCD-identified funding, improving both academic and social outcomes.

5. Equitable and consistent funding

To ensure equitable and consistent funding across all Australian schools, it is critical that any future national school funding agreements are designed as truly national frameworks. This means moving away from the current approach where state and territory bilateral agreements can override or diminish the intent of national agreements with the Commonwealth.

ASEPA recommends that:

National agreements must ensure uniformity:

No individual state or territory should be able to negotiate separate bilateral agreements that take precedence over the overall national framework. Doing so often leads to discrepancies in the funding levels or support provided to students across Australia, particularly disadvantaging students with disabilities or those in rural and remote areas.

Equitable funding must be at the forefront:

All students, regardless of their geographic location or the state/territory in which they live, must benefit from equitable funding. A truly national funding agreement should ensure that the allocation of resources is based on need, and that funding intended for specific purposes, such as disability support, is used as intended, rather than being absorbed into broader state budgets.

Accountability and transparency are key:

National funding agreements should include clear, transparent mechanisms to ensure that funding provided for students with specific needs is not redirected for other purposes. This will ensure that all funding is used efficiently and effectively to support the educational outcomes of students across the nation.

This approach would lead to a fairer and more consistent application of school funding, addressing long-standing inequalities in education support, particularly for vulnerable students.

Conclusion:

ASEPA strongly urges the Commonwealth Government to:

1. Commit to increasing its funding share to the full 25% of the SRS.
2. Reintroduce a targeted funding initiative similar to the More Support for Students with Disability program to directly address the needs of students with disabilities.
3. Mandate transparency in the allocation and use of NCCD-identified funding to ensure that it directly supports students with disabilities.
4. Ensure that any national funding agreement is a truly national agreement without bilateral state and territory deals.

These steps are essential to creating an equitable education system that meets the needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities.

Adequate funding and transparency will ensure that every student with a disability receives the tailored support they need to thrive in their educational journey.

Submitted by:

Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA)

Matthew Johnson – President and CEO

This submission aligns with the guidelines provided by the Commonwealth Government and reflects ASEPA's commitment to advocating for the best outcomes for students with disabilities across Australia.

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