



**Submission by the Northern Territory Department of
Employment, Education and Training to the
Inquiry into the education of students with
disabilities, including learning disabilities,
throughout all levels and sectors of education
by the Australian Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee**

This submission has been prepared by the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training in response to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee's inquiry into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education.

The submission does not directly address each of the Inquiry's terms of reference. Rather, it offers a statement of the current situation in the Northern Territory and explains some of the specific challenges faced here in the provision of special education services for students in government schools.

Major issues addressed in this submission are relevant to the following terms of reference

- (a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to
 - (iii) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas
 - (iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs
 - (v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors
 - (vii) teacher training and professional development.

Summary of Submission

The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) is striving to provide a comprehensive and inclusive system of service delivery for students with disabilities, within current budgetary constraints. Despite the added challenges of remoteness and cultural complexities, DEET continues to use the resources available to respond to the needs of these students.

The creation of innovative approaches and new strategies assists in stretching our services within tight budget limitations to meet increasing demand, but it is evident that more needs to be done.

That is why the Northern Territory Government has made a commitment to the appointment of 100 additional teachers over the next 4 years, and has determined that the first 20 of these will be employed in the special education field. In addition to this DEET is currently exploring possibilities for funding a number of permanent positions for Inclusion Support Assistants who can work directly with high needs students. The creation of this larger pool of teaching, special needs and support staff will strengthen our services, as will the development of a more coordinated approach to service provision across agencies providing support.

Nevertheless, if we are ever to address the diversity of needs of students with disabilities in the Northern Territory at an optimum level, future funding allocations from the Commonwealth need to be increased in recognition of the context of delivery in the Northern Territory.

A more appropriate level of funding will enable more comprehensive servicing of remote areas. Due to issues of culture and remoteness some students with disabilities are not being reached and their needs are not being met. There is reason to believe that there are many who have not even come to DEET's attention.

Remote schools need to offer students with disabilities better and more suitable environments to learn in. Issues of poor nutrition and health, and low literacy and numeracy levels present enormous educational challenges. Couple these with a disability and the situation is exacerbated even further. Staff who are required to tackle these challenges are often in need of professional development, and incentives are required to attract and retain quality staff in remote schools.

If we want everyone to be in a position to contribute to the Territory's social and economic future, it is essential that the Territory offers all of its citizens an accessible, high quality and relevant education. The Territory is working hard to address unique and challenging issues in order to ensure that quality education is available to every Territorian regardless of disability, language, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic background or geographic location. Additional funding support from the Commonwealth would increase our capacity to deliver high quality education services to all of our students with special needs.

1. The Northern Territory Education Context (Government Schools)

The Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) caters for a diverse student population with a broad range of needs. There are 181 government and non-government schools operating throughout the Territory, and DEET is directly responsible for 149 of these.

The Territory's small population is widely dispersed, resulting in a number of particular challenges for the delivery of educational services. In response to these challenges the Department offers a number of activities aimed at providing services to optimise educational outcomes for the diverse range of students in our schools, including those with special needs.

1.1 Current provision for students with special needs in the Government schooling sector

DEET's Student Services Branch coordinates a range of services for students with disabilities and impairments, that is those students who have been identified as having an intellectual, sensory, physical, social/emotional, language/ communication disability; a specific learning disability; or multiple disabilities – keeping in mind that the term 'disability' has different meanings across contexts and cultures and impacts on design and effectiveness of programs for children with disabilities, including learning disabilities.

Close to 20% of the 32,000 students in the Territory's government schools access special education programs. Special education teachers and assistants are located in 57 government schools in the NT. To date provision of these specialist positions has been mostly in urban areas, but Government has embarked on a program to expand the provision of Special Education teachers to remote communities (see 2.1.3 'Resourcing').

There are currently four types of educational options available to students with special needs

- mainstream setting with consultative and inservice support
- mainstream setting with additional support
- mainstream with withdrawal support and
- special school setting.

Students with high support needs are assisted by approximately 450 Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs) employed directly by schools on a part-time basis (paid on an hourly rate). Funding for these positions is

provided by the Northern Territory Government (68%) and the Commonwealth (32%). ISAs work one-on-one with students with disabilities and impairments to assist with inclusion in mainstream classroom learning. The role of the ISA is determined at the local level and responsibilities may include assisting with mobility and movement from class to class, student well being and care, assisting students to access the classroom curriculum and other duties designated at the discretion of the class teacher.

The DEET approach to inclusion support aligns with the requirements of key legislation including the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992), the Northern Territory Disability Services Act (1993) and the Northern Territory Anti Discrimination Act (1994).

In 2002 there are five Special Schools located in major centres for primary and secondary levels, catering for 165 students with severe or multiple disabilities. Additional provision in urban settings is available through annexes and units attached to regular school settings. Attached to three mainstream schools are Hearing Impaired Units, staffed with Special Education teachers and assistants.

The NT Educational Resource Centre for the Vision Impaired provides Braille and educational support services direct to individual students throughout the Northern Territory.

Teaching staff are also based in hospitals in Darwin and Alice Springs and there is provision of educational programs for young people in the juvenile detention centre in Darwin.

Student Services Branch runs a Secondary School to Work Transition program that assists some 250 students with disabilities to develop skills that will assist them to gain independent or supported employment. Transition Support Officers work closely with Special Education teachers in Territory high schools to provide school based training programs, and Work Trainers provide 'on the job' training for these students at local work sites.

A major review of Student Services was undertaken in May 2000 by external consultants who were commissioned to make recommendations and develop a blueprint for service provision that would maximise access to the curriculum and optimise the achievement of learning outcomes by students with special needs. The overarching recommendation of the review was to shift from a focus on systems and processes to one on service delivery.

Implementation of the recommendations from the review have commenced through a suite of projects being led by Student Services Branch. Supporting strategies have been developed and improved resource management implementation is being finalised.

1.2 Current provision for students with special needs in the Employment and Training Sector

The Employment and Training Division of the DEET is the Northern Territory Government's lead agency for employment and training. The Division is responsible for providing leadership and strategic direction to the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in the Northern Territory.

DEET Employment and Training Division represents the interests of the Territory at the national level, and works to balance the priorities of the national VET agenda against the Territory's own particular VET needs.

The Division is managing the Pathways to Employment program which aims to meet two objectives from the Bridging Pathways Strategy: improving learning experiences; and achieving employment and lifelong learning outcomes. Bridging Pathways is a national strategy for increasing opportunities for people in VET with a disability.

The Pathways to Employment program has been developed as the Northern Territory's strategic response to Bridging Pathways, and is being delivered by the Northern Territory University.

There are close to 600 students with a disability enrolled in VET courses, which represents 3% of total VET enrolment in the NT. The highest percentage is enrolled in Community Services, Health and Education industry groups. Visual/sight, physical and hearing disabilities are the most common disability type among these students. Indigenous students make up 38% of VET students with disabilities.

There is also a Post School Options Program being developed by the Department of Health and Community Services for young people with high support needs leaving school in the Darwin region. DEET, consumers, services providers, schools and peak bodies are represented on the steering committee for the program.

2. Major Issues for the Northern Territory

Term of reference (a) (iii): *the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas*

2.1 NT issue: meeting the educational needs of Indigenous students with disabilities living in remote areas

The Northern Territory is unique in regards to geography and the diverse nature of its population, and in particular its Indigenous population. Of the total NT population 29% is Indigenous.

In 2002 Indigenous enrolments account for 36.6% of the Territory's student population. A significant number of Indigenous students in the Territory have an English as a Second Language (ESL) background, and Indigenous students comprise 60% of all enrolments in ESL programs.

'*Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*' by the Hon Bob Collins (NT Department of Education, 1999) recognised that

The single greatest challenge for the Northern Territory Department of Education is to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

More specifically, in relation to the delivery of services to special needs Indigenous students, *Learning Lessons* raised the need for

- teacher professional development in appropriate teaching practices for students with hearing impairments
- establishment of benchmark classroom acoustics (for students with hearing disabilities and ESL students), and
- equity of service provision for students with special needs.

The most obvious challenges for education provision in the Northern Territory originate from the level of Indigenous enrolment in our schools and the high number of schools located in remote areas. There are 118 remote schools, and 40.5% of the total student population is enrolled in these. Both as separate matters and in combination, these two issues present complex challenges for the successful and inclusive delivery of education services to all students, with particular additional complexities associated with delivery to students with disabilities.

Further, there is evidence to suggest significant under-enrolment of Indigenous students, particularly in remote areas. Estimates indicate that in the non-urban Indigenous population over 3,500 school aged students (4-18 year olds) may not be enrolled in a school, with the non-enrolled figure for urban centres being estimated at over 1,400 – a total of over 5,000 Indigenous students. Assuming the percentage of these students who require special needs support reflects that of the current student population (i.e. 20%), it would be reasonable to anticipate that there are at least 1,000 more students who would require assistance.

It is also highly likely that there is significant under-reporting of Indigenous children and young people with disabilities, as the capacity to recognise and report disability in some of our remote areas is often clouded by social, economic and health issues. In health and economic environments where very low bases are the norm, a child's degree of disability may often be far more severe before a request for services is made, compared with what might be reported in an urban setting.

2.1.1 Current service delivery to special needs students in remote schools

Delivery of services for students with special needs in remote schools – most of which are in Aboriginal communities – is achieved in a number of ways.

Student Services have staff based in Darwin, Katherine, East Arnhem, Tennant Creek (Barkly Region) and Alice Springs. These regional support staff visit remote schools and provide a range of support services. Specialists from Territory Health Services and the DEET sponsored Aboriginal Hearing Program also visit the communities.

Communities have telephone and e-mail access to specialists based in Alice Springs or Darwin who provide advice when they are available. Individual schools and staff, by necessity, develop extensive resource gathering networks and when necessary access services by informal means.

Support services include Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Vision and Hearing, Special Education, Early Childhood Intervention, Behaviour Management and Psychological services and programs. Specialists coordinate their visits as much as possible. This assists in the completion of assessments and development of collaborative programs, in particular for students with multiple disabilities.

One of the projects that DEET has established as a result of the Student Services Review mentioned above, is a project to develop an integrated service delivery model to address challenges that

exist in the coordination of inter-departmental resources and services, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Currently visits to remote communities require an average of 1.5 days, depending on the distances that need to be travelled. Generally travel is by 4WD from regional centres. Visits may be requested by the school or, if the need exists, more regular visits are scheduled where possible.

In addition to the difficulties of effectively coordinating services across agencies, other challenges faced in the delivery of these support services include those associated with culture, resourcing, and geographical location.

2.1.2 Culture

The issue of cultural appropriateness presents challenges in both one-to-one support for students and the use of needs assessment tools. The availability of personnel in remote areas who are seen as culturally appropriate is minimal.

There are difficulties in convincing parents of children with disabilities to send their children to school and to consent to needs assessment processes. Attitudes preventing inclusion of children with disabilities include the family's sense of shame, and reluctance to send the child to an environment where they may be teased or ridiculed. The processes of assessment and consultation can be bewildering and overwhelming for cautious or fearful parents who are often frustrated by three-way communication through the use of an interpreter and may feel threatened by the requirement for consent when asked to sign forms they do not fully understand.

Irregular attendance at school, often due to lifestyle issues associated with levels of family mobility, alcohol and drug abuse, or domestic violence also impact heavily on service delivery. Many students suffer from extensive health issues. Significant numbers of students have multiple disabilities.

2.1.3 Resourcing

Remote schools face significant resource challenges. The expense of providing support services and the irregular provision are two challenging issues, while schools may also experience the absence of immediate and 'practical' requirements for special needs students.

Also significant is the issue of school and classroom environment. Remote schools are not always able to provide for both the physical and educational needs of students with disabilities.

For example, remote schools do not always cater for the needs of students with physical disabilities. Resources such as ramps, wheelchair friendly pathways, lifts or ground level buildings are often non-existent.

Other resources that aid the learning of special needs students and need to be addressed include classroom acoustics for hearing impaired students. Remote schools also report experiencing significant increases in behaviour management issues that they have insufficient resources to address.

The availability, recruitment and retention of suitably trained and culturally appropriate staff is a major issue. Maintaining the continuity of staff in remote schools who have the knowledge and experience to support the special needs of students has presented a challenge. It is also difficult for staff from remote schools to access professional development in the areas of special education and related disciplines.

Addressing the issues

- The Northern Territory Government has made a commitment to appoint 100 additional teachers across the Territory over the next four years. The first 20 of these appointments will be special education teacher positions. Three have been allocated to urban schools, six to the Group Schools (clusters of very small schools grouped together under one Group School Principal), and eleven to non-urban schools that have been identified from a priority list of 40 schools without special education support.
- A Parity in School Infrastructure Strategy is being developed in response to the recommendations made in *Learning Lessons* about the need for appropriate infrastructure incorporating acoustic and disability requirements, information technology and telecommunications, and sufficient staff housing to be available in all communities, so that Indigenous students will have access to a range of appropriate education options.
- Indigenous Education Pilots are being implemented in 4 remote schools in collaboration with the Department of Health and Community Services (DHACS). In these communities, Local Education Advisory Boards are being established to enable community control over education decision-making processes. Principals will be given all the support that DEET

and DHACS can provide to turn around poor health and education outcomes.

- The Territory is providing professional development opportunities for employees through Commonwealth allocation such as the Quality Teacher Program (QTP). School clusters are responsible for identifying the specific needs of employees in their schools and organising the delivery of relevant QTP programs.
- Identified system wide needs for professional development are similarly provided for and coordinated through DEET's Strategic and Leadership Development Branch. The Branch is provided with Northern Territory Government funding that is allocated to school clusters for provision of professional development opportunities based on the specific needs of the Territory.
- A Recruitment and Retention Strategy has also been developed by DEET for Cabinet's consideration. The Strategy aims to improve incentives and conditions for remote teachers, and present remote teaching as a challenging and 'different' career opportunity. The strategy includes targeted recruitment and marketing of teaching opportunities.

A comprehensive induction and orientation program for teachers features in the strategy framework along with professional development opportunities, performance management and increased support and recognition systems.

2.1.4 Geographical Location

Costs associated with servicing remote schools are significantly higher than those associated with 'regular' delivery. This affects the frequency of visitation by Student Services and Health Department staff. Often visits are arranged around requests from schools and logistical and budget needs in order to balance service delivery standards and financial limitations.

As mentioned previously, teams of support staff often visit remote schools together to save costs and address numerous issues in the one visit. This presents some efficiencies but can be disruptive to schools, especially schools with low staff numbers, and can become confusing and overpowering for students and their families.

Financial expenditure is not the only challenge for remote schools. Distance and time needed to travel also affect the frequency of service provision. Support staff often travel over 900 km by 4WD

vehicle, in some cases taking a full day to travel to and from the location. Not all communities can be reached all year, with frequent flooding preventing access by 4WD to many areas. Air travel within the Territory is by commercial or charter plane, and the expense of such travel is considerable.

Another geographical challenge for remote teachers and staff is the expense and disruption incurred to travel to a regional urban centre for the purpose of professional development. Relief staff are rare in remote locations and professional development excursions can be disruptive to the delivery of school programs.

Term of reference (a) (iv): *the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs*

2.2 NT issue: achieving a seamless transition into school for children identified at an early age as requiring inclusion support

There is overwhelming evidence of early childhood development as critical in influencing a student's capacity to learn, and therefore investing in early childhood interventions is cost-effective.

The *Learning Lessons* report raised the need for early intervention and systems that make the transition to school more continuous and ultimately more successful. The level of support and intervention for young children identified with developmental delay and/or disability before entry to school contributes to children's preparedness for school and effective learning.

Student Services Branch employs a small number of Early Childhood Intervention teachers who provide a range of support services to families of children with special needs aged 0 to 6. In 2000 there were 349 students referred to this service, and ongoing contact was maintained with 231 children under 6 years of age. Services were provided in a setting of the parent or guardian's choice, such as home, playgroup, day care centres and preschools.

The Student Services review identified the need to develop comprehensive forecasting strategies to adequately predict the levels of support required, to identify and support students with high needs prior to entry to the school system, and to liaise more closely with agencies such as Health so that students who will require inclusion support at school are able to be identified at an early age and tracked.

Both the Student Services review and the *Learning Lessons* report identified the need to improve service delivery to children with special needs in remote areas.

Addressing the issues

- DEET and the Department of Health and Community Services (DHACS) are working together on the development of a Policy Framework for Children's Care, Development and Learning. The purpose of this Framework is to provide an overarching set of understandings, principles and broad strategic directions for the collaborative promotion of children's care, development and learning from conception to twelve years of age.
- DEET has participated on the steering committee of the DHACS review of Early Childhood Intervention Services in the Northern Territory. While this report is not yet publicly available, broad directions are focussed on prevention, early identification and targeting of those considered 'at risk', the importance of children's early years for learning and development, and family support.
- The Student Services Early Childhood Services team has adjusted its service delivery model to enable it to include an increased focus on the provision of services to children in remote areas. The team's program will target children with special needs or those at educational risk from 0-6 years of age. Within this group, the priorities are intended to be (i) 3-6+ year olds; and (ii) 0-2 year olds with significant disability, special needs or significantly at risk, or with limited access to appropriate services.

Term of Reference (a) (v): *Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors*

2.3 NT issue: Insufficient recognition of NT context in funding allocation model

Obtaining adequate funding to address the needs of students with disabilities is a significant challenge for the Northern Territory.

The location of significant numbers of students in remote communities results in a substantial cost to Government – the cost of educating a student in a remote location is 63% higher than that of a student located in an urban setting.

The majority of funding allocated to the provision of services to students with disabilities is provided by the Northern Territory Government.

Currently Commonwealth funding is allocated on the basis of census figures forwarded to the Commonwealth in August of each calendar year.

No consideration is given to the Northern Territory context and the challenges faced geographically and culturally in the delivery of educational services.

Term of Reference (a) (vii): *Teacher training and professional development*

2.4 NT issue: Recruitment and retention of appropriately trained teaching and support staff

In the Northern Territory, issues of teacher shortages and recruitment and retention concerns extend to specialists and special education support staff such as Inclusion Support Assistants.

Employment of ISAs on a part-time casual basis means there are no leave entitlements or sick pay and no security of tenure. ISAs provide specialised support in a demanding role, but schools are not provided with funds to supply training, although some training is offered to ISAs through Student Services Branch. Due to these conditions ISAs often move on to positions that are better paid and offer better conditions, and so continuity and recruitment of quality ISAs is an issue. It is estimated that 30% of ISAs leave their positions each year. On current figures this would be approximately 135 staff per annum.

In addition to these challenges, there are other hurdles to overcome in relation to employment of ISAs in rural/remote areas:

- It is often difficult to locate suitable people willing or able to undertake the role.
- Providing the level of training, support and resources required presents challenges when a 'school culture' does not exist in the community and therefore the potentially available local workforce.
- Some communities have a visiting trained teacher, and therefore an ISA can only support a child with a disability on the days when the trained teacher is present at the school.

Currently teacher pre-service training through the Northern Territory University does not include compulsory units dedicated to the range of special education issues or social and emotional issues related to behaviour management. Newly qualified teachers have participated in little relevant study to support classroom practice in the management of students with disabilities or impairments, or those students who demonstrate challenging behaviours.

Addressing the Issues

- Through the proposed Recruitment and Retention Strategy the Territory aims to work closely with pre-service training providers to negotiate more relevant teacher training that will directly meet the Territory's education needs. A specific Indigenous employment strategy is also highlighted in the framework, to work towards increasing, developing and retaining our Indigenous workforce, and in time this may go some way towards alleviating the staffing situations in remote communities.
- Currently teachers and support staff have the opportunity to access professional development through workshops and activities presented by appropriate Student Services personnel. A calendar of professional development activities is offered to schools and sessions are held in regional centres. Examples of activities offered are
 - Special Education Network
 - Behaviour Management and Special Education
 - Catering for Diversity
 - Learning Through the Senses
 - Vision and Vision Impairment, Classroom Implications and Strategies
 - Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy: ideas for developing skills in schools.
- Student Services Branch is also developing a Behaviour Management Strategy as one of the projects emanating from the Student Services Review.
- A DEET Enrolment, Attendance and Retention Strategy has also been developed, and includes an initiative on Addressing Extreme Behaviours, which will include the trialling of a range of programs and approaches leading to safer learning and working environments in schools, and appropriate opportunities for students with behaviour issues to complete their schooling.

3. Conclusion

The Northern Territory Government and DEET will continue to target available resources to achieve the best outcomes possible for our students with special needs. Nevertheless, there is a huge unmet need, and we urge the Senate Committee to acknowledge that the NT context presents unique and significant challenges that warrant especial consideration by the Commonwealth in its allocation of funding for the education of students with disabilities.