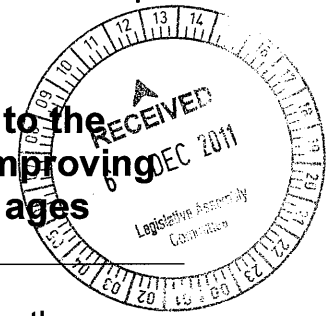


Submission from the Disability Services Commission to the Education and Health Standing Committee inquiry into Improving Educational Outcomes for Western Australians of all ages



The Disability Services Commission, established in December 1993 under the Disability Services Act 1993 (WA), is the State Government agency responsible for advancing opportunities, community participation and quality of life for people with disability. The Commission provides a range of services and also funds non-government agencies to provide services to people with disability, their families and carers.

In response to this enquiry, the Commission is focused on ensuring that people with disability have pathways to life-long learning in inclusive settings. This is a key strategy contained in Count Me In: Disability Future Directions, which is the State Government's vision for the future for people with disability, their families and carers www.disability.wa.gov.au/countmein. It identifies 13 priority areas, of which life-long learning in inclusive settings is one.

The Commission recognises that 'education plays a key role in creating an inclusive society. Schools, universities, community courses and other learning environments provide people with skills, knowledge and qualifications. They also foster personal confidence and opportunities to build new relationships and interests. In turn, personal and social confidence helps in other areas such as getting and keeping a job.

However, barriers for people with disability persist. There are administrative hurdles, shortfalls in staff with specialist training and a lack of sustained support, particularly at tertiary level. Given the key role of education in building citizenship, it is vital these are overcome. Particular attention also needs to be given to those who face the double challenge of disability and other forms of minority status, in particularly people from Aboriginal and culturally diverse backgrounds⁶. In brief, education is a priority area that must be championed over the long term regardless of economic, social and resource pressures to provide non-inclusive education.'

See Appendix 1 for further background information regarding:

- the disability/education interface of responsibilities and resources
- national and state disability agendas and
- relevant services provided and/or funded by the Commission.

1. Current and future resourcing of new methods and activities to improve educational outcomes such as e-learning and school partnerships

In the last two decades, rapid progress in technology has opened up a range of educational opportunities for people with disability. This includes the application of universal design in mainstream technologies such as computer hardware and software and the connection to formal and informal learning afforded by access to high speed internet. This also includes developments made in specialised assistive technology such as classroom audio-loops, specialised computer hardware, software, electronic Braille note takers, scanning and magnifying equipment.

¹ Page 16, Count Me In: Disability Future Directions 2009.

In the context of people with disability, resourcing of new methods and activities to improve educational outcomes should:

- Focus on educational outcomes by identifying an individual's educational goals and then engaging assistive technologies that will reduce barriers to achieving the goals, rather than a more simplistic match of equipment to individuals.
- Invest in, and build upon, existing services and infrastructure available to support the application of assistive technology in an educational context².
- Ensure that, regardless of the environment in which the learning will occur³, resourcing is available for the initial purchase of assistive technology as well as the cost of the following services: professional assessment and prescription of assistive equipment/software, initial setup of the system, training and ongoing technical support for the individual, family, carers and educational staff.
- Enable primary, secondary and tertiary educational staff to have adequate non-teaching time available for professional development that will support the integration of new methods, activities and technologies in the educational environment.
- Acknowledge principals, teachers, lecturers, educational assistants, allied health professionals and other leaders who embrace inclusive and contemporary approaches to education and life-long learning.
- Given that the successful integration of any new method or activity within an educational context is underpinned by strong partnerships, recognition is needed at the executive level that collaboration is a core activity taking time and commitment to develop and maintain. Staff involved may need direction, mentoring and professional development if the partnership is to achieve the shared objective of advancing the life chances of their students with disability.

2. Factors Influencing positive or negative childhood development from birth to Year 12

Children with disability and their families have the same needs as other children and families. This includes:

- being cared for and nurtured as a member of a family and a community within a network of strong and enduring relationships
- optimal health, growth and development
- recognition of their gifts, abilities and achievements and opportunities to contribute these to the community and
- respect for their rights and opportunities to express their views and have them considered.

Families of children with disability have particular challenges that place them at risk of poorer outcomes.

² Examples include Department of Education and Training's Centre for Inclusive Schooling, the Independent Living Centre's State-wide Technology Service and Technology Assisting Disability WA's (TADWA) Computer Service.

³ Adults with disability often require extra support to achieve educational goals, such as assistive computer equipment or funding for a disability support worker to attend campus. Funding is currently tied to the setting in which the learning will occur and there are significant gaps and deficiencies with this arrangement. For example, an individual attending a State Government funded Alternative to Employment program does not have access to a funding source for assistive technology to support their learning. Linking funding to the educational goal, regardless of the environment in which the learning will occur, is a more equitable and transparent arrangement.

Government, industry and community can have a positive impact on child development by targeting the following factors which enable families to meet these challenges:

- emotional support from family, friends and professionals to nurture a secure relationship with their child
- empowerment strategies develop the capacity of families to meet their child's needs
- timely, comprehensive and ongoing information about their child, their child's condition, access to, and options for, services and supports, developmental opportunities and resources
- early streamlined access to positive and welcoming universal programs with specialised and practical support as required
- an integrated service system for children coordinating education, care, health, community and disability services and
- timely planned transitions to enable positive progress through life stages.

Childhood experiences set the pattern for the subsequent life trajectory. Properly supported inclusion of children with disability in mainstream early childhood services⁴ sets the path for inclusion in community life, attainment of educational goals and development of supportive social networks.

The Commission recognises that a partnership approach between government, industry and community is needed to complete the significant work on the path towards true inclusion, service integration, simplified access to services and well supported transition.

3. Facilitating greater opportunities to engage students in Years 11 and 12

Most students with disability continue school enrolment until 18 years, for some until 19 years. The Commission works in partnership with education systems and community organisations to provide pathways, Post School Options and Transition to Work programs for students while in their last two years of schooling to plan their transition to employment, further education and community participation or a mix of opportunities.

The Commission promotes and supports the following significant factors that facilitate engagement of students with disability in Years 11 and 12:

Appropriate Curriculum

Access to an appropriate curriculum is a key to equip young people for a fulfilled adult life, whether the goal is further education, employment or independence within the community.

A successful strategy has been the implementation of Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) led by the Department of Education, partnered by the Disability Services Commission, educational providers (both school and post-school) and Commission funded disability organisations providing Alternatives to Employment programs.

⁴ This includes but is not limited to education, childcare, health, mental health and community services.

ASDAN offers a wide range of modules and qualifications for all abilities. It has filled a major gap for students with high support needs. Staff in schools, TAFE and Alternative to Employment programs in metropolitan and county areas have received ASDAN training. The challenge is the need for post training support and mentoring, particularly in rural areas.

Supportive Environments

Not all schools have a culture that is welcoming and accepting of difference and students with disability are particularly vulnerable to bullying and abuse. Some schools also struggle to meet the needs of students who exhibit challenging behaviour. In extreme circumstances, this can result in student exclusion or the introduction of restrictive practices. Contemporary practise is for a coordinated holistic approach across the student's environments of school and home. The Commission's Positive Behaviour Support Team has successfully collaborated with many families and schools. The need for further resourcing for prevention, early intervention and crisis response in this complex area remains high.

High Expectations

Having high expectations increases the possibility of high achievement for all students. Students with a disability and learning difficulty may take longer to develop literacy and numeracy skills. However, young adult students with disability have become literate after attending technical colleges in WA. If the educational focus shifts too early to life skills it may preclude students from acquiring the entry skills for access to e-learning and other formal education. Continued promotion and awareness of this issue must underpin education in WA.

Planning for Life-Stage Transition

Early coordinated transition planning is essential to support school leavers to take full advantage of opportunities available to them on leaving school. This may involve selection of appropriate curriculum, workforce preparation and training for participation in community or further educational activities. The challenge lies in effective collaboration and coordination across the various stakeholders.

4. Improving access and opportunities for adult learning in regional and remote WA

Access and opportunities for students with disability

There are many areas that can be improved to support learning opportunities for adults with disability in regional and remote areas of WA. This includes ensuring students with disability in regional and remotes areas:

- have access to a high speed internet connection at a reasonable cost
- are connected to existing programs that make computer ownership achievable for individuals on low incomes, such as Technology Assisting Disability WA's (TADWA) Refurbished Computer Service
- have access to more funding than currently available for assistive equipment, technical support and on-campus assistance from disability support workers
- are provided with better planning around life-stage transition points (eg. leaving school) to address the emotional and practical challenges that arise at these times
- have access to curriculum and other educational supports are responsive to the diverse needs of regional and remote communities, particularly Aboriginal and culturally diverse background groups and
- are better supported with funding for education related travel.

Access and opportunities for disability support workers

The strong trend in supporting people with disability is toward individualised and person-centred and self-directed approaches. One outcome will be the increased need for skilled workers able to provide support that meet people with disability's different individual needs, choices and aspirations.

Training for disability support workers in regional and remote WA is available but inconsistently. Some tertiary colleges in regional areas are able to offer courses to Certificates III and IV in Disability Studies.

Training modules for disability support workers have been developed and delivered within community service organisations in regional areas. The focus is professional development rather than skills prior to employment and does not lead to accredited qualifications. However, flexibility in course access and completion, and consistent approaches to recognising prior learning need further consideration.

5. Foetal Alcohol Syndrome: prevalence, prevention, identification, funding and treatment to improve education, social and economic outcomes

In 2010 the Disability Services Commission endorsed the Department of Health's Model of Care for Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder as a positive response to demonstrable gaps in knowledge and services from prevention to intervention. Systems proposed for data linkage, sharing confidential information and further research are welcomed.

With regard to the Commission's current response to children with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, once identified, a child may be referred directly to the Commission or to a Commission funded disability service organisation. The child would need to meet certain eligibility criteria according to the Commission's policy on eligibility. In a broad sense, this would include children who have an intellectual disability or a profound and severe disability which impacts on function.

These services are staffed by a multidisciplinary team of allied health professionals, which makes them well placed to meet some of the diverse needs of children with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, their families and carers.

However, the Commission recognises that many children with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome come from families and communities with ongoing complex social, health and economic issues. The Team Around the Child approach of the Commission is well placed to meet the needs of these children. There is a strong ongoing commitment to collaborate with other government agencies to develop an effective service response for these children.

END OF SUBMISSION

Background Information from the Disability Services Commission

1.0 Responsibilities and Resources

Specialist disability services for people with disability in Western Australia are funded by both the Western Australian Government and the Australian Government under the National Disability Agreement.

Australian and State/Territory Governments share responsibility for provision of education services across the life span. Under the National Disability Agreement, support for people with disability in employment, or undertaking education at university, or with a Western Australian State Training Provider (TAFE), is the responsibility of the Australian Government.

Not all services for people with disability in Western Australia are within the jurisdiction of the Disability Services Commission. People with disability access a wide range of government and community programs.

In supporting educational opportunities for people with disability in Western Australia, the Commission recognises the roles of the Western Australian Departments of Education; Educational Services; Training and Workforce Development; Communities; Culture and the Arts and the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, Indigenous Affairs.

2.0 National and State Disability Agendas

In planning for the future well being of people with disability, their families and carers, the Commission is guided by key national and state agendas. Access to good education across the life span is widely recognised as a key strategy for better outcomes.

These major national agendas reinforce the trend away from traditional program driven models of services towards individualised, person-centred and self-directed approaches.

2.1 Count Me In: Disability Future Directions

Count Me In: Disability Future Directions is whole of Western Australian Government policy, launched in 2009. It is a long term plan for disability for the next 15 to 20 years and identifies 13 priorities to shape a good future for people with disability, families and carers. Life-long learning in inclusive settings is a key strategy.

The pathway to life-long learning commences in early childhood; overcomes real and perceived barriers; raises aspirations of individuals, families and educators, promotes inclusive schooling to foster positive life-long relationships, recognises leaders in education that embrace inclusive and contemporary approaches, plans transition at significant stages, ensures needs of people from aboriginal, culturally diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds are addressed and uses assistive technology, distance and e-learning when essential and useful.

2.2 The National Disability Strategy 2010-2020

The National Disability Strategy is a commitment by the Australian, State and Territory Governments to a national approach to improving the lives of people with disability through greater collaboration by governments, industry and the community.

Strategy 5 relates to learning and skills. It states that 'people with disability achieve their full potential through their participation in an inclusive high quality education system that is responsive to their needs. People with disability have opportunities to continue learning throughout their lives'.

The Strategy sets four policy directions to achieve this outcome:

1. Strengthen the capability of all education providers to deliver inclusive high quality educational programs for people with all abilities from early childhood through adulthood.
2. Focus on reducing the disparity in educational outcomes for people with disability and others.
3. Ensure that government reforms and initiatives for early childhood, education, training and skill development are responsive to the needs of people with disability.
4. Improve pathways for students with disability from school to further education, employment and life-long learning.

The policy directions for Strategy 5 Learning and Skills are supported by the Department for Education.

Western Australia is a member of the national working party planning further implementation of the National Disability Strategy.

2.3 National Disability Agreement

The National Disability Agreement outlines areas of reform for the provision of government support services for people with disability. Priorities include person-centred approaches to service planning and delivery, early intervention and prevention, increased workforce capacity and increasing independent and social inclusion strategies.

Strategic Direction 1 *Children with Disabilities have the Best Start in Life* identifies educational opportunities, health care, social development and support for families to fulfil their caring role.

Principles to ensure that children with disability and their families have opportunity to develop and learn along side their peers were endorsed by Council Of Australian Governments' (COAG) Standing Councils for School Education and Early Childhood, Health and Community Services, Disability and Housing in 2011.

2.4 National Agenda for the Early Years

"All children should have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and the nation".

In 2009, COAG endorsed *Investing in the Early Years: A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. The agreed outcomes address: health, safety, learning, social inclusion, **educational opportunities**, family capacity, and quality early childhood services.

From 2012, an Early Years Learning Framework designed to enhance children's learning from birth to five years will apply to most long day care, family day care, preschool (or kindergarten).

National Quality Standards have been established to raise quality and drive continuous improvement and consistency in education and care. Guiding principles make a commitment to full participation of children with additional needs and their families.

2.5 Disability Education Standards

Disability Standards for Education 2005 is a national commitment to overcoming discrimination against people with disability.

The Standards apply to all educational providers and were designed to clarify the rights of students with disability to access and participate in education and training, give education providers more guidance on how they can meet their obligations under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and raise public awareness of the barriers frequently encountered by people with disability in the area of education.

In 2011 the Standards were reviewed. A report has not yet been released.

The Disability Services Commission's submission called for:

- increased awareness of the Standards by people with disability, families, carers and educational providers
- recognition of the pivotal role of parents for children and young people under 18 years
- recognition of partnerships in achieving positive educational outcomes
- access to disability support workers for tertiary education
- availability of appropriate educational and training programs particularly in regional areas
- substantive equity for people with disability
- monitoring of compliance with standards

3.0 Disability Services Commission Programs which contribute to positive educational outcomes for people with disability in Western Australia

The Commission provides and funds supports, services and programs to maximise opportunities for children, young people and adults with disability to develop to their full potential. Commission programs contribute to positive learning outcomes across the life span. Some relevant programs are outlined below.

3.1 Local Area Coordination

Local Area Coordinators assist people with disability, their families, carers and communities to plan, organise and access supports and services to enhance participation in education from the early years to formal and informal learning as adults. Local Area Coordinators are located across the metropolitan area and throughout Western Australia.

3.2 Disability Professional Services

Disability Professional Services provide people with disability and their families access to expertise and evidenced based interventions to promote wellbeing, independence, positive relationships, development of abilities, skills and competencies and participation in community life.

Disability Professional Services are culturally sensitive, use a person and family centred approach, are planned and provided in partnership with other services and delivered in relevant environments. Collaboration with universal and other specialist services is recognised as essential to achieving positive outcomes.

In Western Australia, Disability Professional Services are generally provided by allied health professionals with a wide range of expertise including clinical psychology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech pathology, social work. Disability professional services are provided across childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

3.3 Early Childhood Intervention

Early childhood intervention provides specialised support and services for infants and young children with developmental delays or disabilities and their families in order to promote development, early learning, well-being and community participation.

A positive experience in the early years, good ongoing relationships, a coherent service system and early planning provide a basis for successful transition to school and a positive start to life long learning. Skilled inclusion support is increasingly recognised as a key to successful participation in educational programs.

Early childhood intervention is provided by inter-disciplinary teams in collaboration with early years' special and universal services. It is delivered in a range of environments, home, child-care, kindergarten, pre-primary and the community.

In the metropolitan area, the Commission provides disability specialist early childhood intervention through its Statewide Specialist Service and 11 disability sector organisations. In regional and remote areas, early childhood intervention is provided by WA Country Health Service, with consultancy support from the Commission and funded disability organisations.

Current challenges for ensuring good outcomes for young children with disability include complex pathways to services and the number of jurisdictions and services involved.

Some children vulnerable to disability miss out on services in their early years. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that up to four per cent of children in this age cohort have a severe and profound core skill limitation. Approximately one per cent of children 0 to four years are known to be in receipt of disability specialist services in Western Australia.

3.4 School Age Therapy

School age therapy services work with children and young people, their families, educational systems and communities to maximise individual independence and participation in education. Collaboration and good relationships with school systems are fundamental to positive outcomes.

A Memorandum of Understanding (2010) outlines the shared and separate roles of the Disability Services Commission and the Department of Education.

In the metropolitan area, six organisations provide therapy services to children and young people at school. In rural areas therapy for children of school age is provided by WA Country Health Service with consultancy support from the Commission and funded disability organisations.

3.5 Positive Behaviour Strategy

The purpose of the Positive Behaviour Strategy is to lead the development of increased capacity within the disability sector to meet the needs of people with disability who exhibit challenging behaviour. The strategy has a focus on partnerships, agency connections and involves universal, primary and tertiary services.

Behaviour Support teams bring a range of expertise to assist individuals and families, primary service providers and paid carers to plan and implement a comprehensive and consistent approach to achieving behavioural goals.

If necessary, Positive Behaviour Teams work with individual schools and educational personnel to achieve better outcomes for students whose behaviour threatens their participation in educational programs. Both families and schools report positive outcomes from this collaboration.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Commission and Department of Education recognises the need for partnership in developing of environments which foster positive behaviour but also acknowledges that more work is needed to raise awareness of the negativity of restrictive practises and availability of alternatives for improving conduct and relationships.

3.6 Equipment and Assistive Technology

The Commission manages the Western Australian Community Aids and Equipment Program (CAEP) to provide aids and equipment for people with long term disability. The objective of the program is to provide basic and essential equipment to eligible people in order to support them to manage at home. Devices such as communication aids are the basis for access to language and literacy and are used across environments. Disability sector organisations and the Department of Health administer the program. Equipment for use in educational settings is not eligible.

The Commission also funds disability specialist organisations which have expertise with assistive technology to provide information, advice, support and prescribe equipment and software.

Over the last four years, the Commission has funded a Disability Equipment Grants program, which is administered by the Independent Living Centre to provide equipment not funded through CAEP. It includes assistive technology for people with vision impairment and communication. Grants applications are considered for voice output devices, personal safety and specialised computer hardware or software. Equipment for use in educational settings is not eligible.

3.7 Post School Options is a collaborative initiative of the Commission and educational systems. It is the pathway for school leavers who will not be pursuing full time study or paid work to enable seamless transition to programs which support ongoing development, learning and participation in the community.

3.8 Transition to Work

The Commission has developed a two year Transition to Work Pilot Program to commence in 2012 for 40 young people with disability. Each individual will work with a team to develop a comprehensive transition plan and has access to capacity building services and disability employment services, with the aim of improving opportunities to transition to work.

3.9 Alternatives to Employment

Alternatives to Employment is a community focused program enabling people with disability and high support needs, who require an alternative to paid employment or full time education, to access opportunities to develop skills for everyday life including competencies which may lead to employment. Across Western Australia over 70 programs provide Alternatives to Employment options in both metropolitan and regional areas. A development over recent years is that program outcomes can now include employment-related skills.