



Inclusive Education

Family Advocacy Position Statement

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Executive summary

This document sets out Family Advocacy's vision and goals for inclusive education in Australia. Unfortunately, students with disabilities are often shut off in a parallel system of education - special schools or support units. We call this segregation or congregation of children with disabilities.

In contrast to this situation, our vision is of an education system with a commitment to creating environments in which all students feel welcomed, accepted and honoured for who they are. Inclusive education means the system is designed with a belief that everyone benefits from knowing, interacting with and learning from a wide range of other individuals, and an understanding that we are ALL different - and ALL the same. It means recognising that if we want to make a better world for everyone we all need to learn to be comfortable, skilled and enthusiastic interacting with a wide range of people.

Inclusive education is what Family Advocacy wants, and what children with disabilities need in order to have a foundation for a good life in the community. This goal is supported by many organisations of people with disabilities and their families, human rights organisations, and the United Nations.

Schools and education systems can make inclusive education a reality through the following means, all of which are expanded upon in our full position statement below:

- Students with disability are welcomed in the regular school and classroom
- Policies support inclusion
- Attitude to parents of students with disability is positive
- Classroom teachers supportive of inclusion, and supported to include students with disability
- Principals are leaders in creating inclusive schools
- Assessments are functional and can be adjusted
- The mainstream curriculum is adjusted as appropriate to include all students
- Student Learning Support Officers are trained on how to facilitate independence, positive interaction with peers and high expectations
- Funding is distributed equitably and is available to support students with disability
- Support is provided that promotes inclusion and strengthens natural supports
- Approaches to achieve appropriate behaviour are adapted depending on the needs and capacities of the student.
- Built environment is accessible.

Political change is needed to move from the parallel systems we have now to an education system that is more inclusive, and to make the above features possible. Australian governments could take the following actions to ensure inclusive education for students with disabilities:

- Transfer of resources from segregated schools to regular class
- Ensuring inclusion in the regular class is the expected option for all students
- Strategies to increase the number of children with disabilities in regular classes
- Adequate enforcement of the rights of children with disabilities
- Access to university and TAFE for adults with disabilities in Australia.

Introduction: What is inclusive education?

Family Advocacy knows all children belong together in the classroom with their peers. However, in Australia, children with disability are often placed in special schools or support units.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability declares that:

States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning...

2. In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that:

Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;

Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;

Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;

Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;

Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion...

5. States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.

In addition the General Comment on the Right to Inclusive Education defines segregation as against inclusion, stating:

Segregation occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed [or used] to respond to a particular or various impairments, in isolation from students without disabilities. **Inclusion** involves a process embodying changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies in education, with a common vision that serves to include all students of the relevant age range.

The Committee emphasizes that placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without appropriate support does not constitute inclusion. Similarly, creating discrete and isolated units for students with particular disabilities within a mainstream school environment remains a form of segregation, and cannot be defined as inclusive education.

Inclusion is not a place, a service, or letting children with disabilities join typical children for particular activities.

In contrast to segregation or congregation, Family Advocacy defines inclusion as:

- a commitment to creating environments in which all students feel welcomed, accepted and honoured for who they are,
- the belief that everyone benefits from knowing, interacting with and learning from a wide range of other individuals,
- the understanding that we are ALL different - and ALL the same. We are all human beings seeking connections, affection, and opportunities to learn, grow and belong. We all have different strengths, challenges, and needs for support.
- Inclusion is also the recognition that if we want to make a better world for everyone we all need to learn to be comfortable, skilled and enthusiastic interacting with a wide range of people.

In school, inclusion has three main domains:

- **Physical**, where students with disability are present in the same environments as all other students for the same amounts of time
- **Social**, where all students are welcomed and seen to belong. Students with disabilities are not separated in the classroom or playground, including through being with the support staff during times when their peers are together
- **Curricular**, where all students are included in the same lesson material, with appropriate adaptations.

Many people argue against inclusive education on the basis that parents should have a choice to send their child with disability to whatever setting they see fit. However, while parallel systems exist, families are often pushed toward the exclusionary setting through an informal process known as 'gatekeeping' by school principals or staff. In addition, for parent choice to be real and substantive, it must not only be free of such coercion but also based on full information. Australian and international research shows that children with disability do better on all measures in inclusive settings (Cologon 2013, Jackson 2008).

Lyn, mother of Hannah, says:

For me inclusion is about Hannah fully participating – not doing something else. Last term the school musical took place. This followed 3 terms of rehearsals and preparation. The kids involved would stay back every Monday until 7 and order pizza. It was wonderful for Hannah to have the opportunity to be part of that – to meet kids from other grades with the same interest and to share in the experience. There was a real bond between the kids by the time the musical took place. Kids still stop and talk to Hannah.

She did not have a stand out part but she was part of it. There was no expectation that the family would stay. She was just allowed to be part of the group. It was inclusion at its best – a real opportunity to be part of the gang. Other parents also saw her there as just one of the kids. Often, parents are the ones you need to win over as parents' attitudes rub off on kids.

- Lyn

What does an inclusive education system look like?

For the right to inclusive education to be realised, governments must transfer resources from special schools and units to integration into the regular class. This makes doing the work of inclusion, such as planning, adjusting and supporting children with disability, much more possible. However, not all aspects of inclusive education require extra resources.

Despite the current barriers, families do achieve inclusive education for their children with disabilities, in partnership with schools. An inclusive school can be identified by its approach to a number of key variables, which are listed below. These are features for schools to strive toward, as well as for parents to look for in a school.

A welcoming attitude

In an inclusive school, all children and young people from the local community are welcomed to participate in the full curricular and co-curricular life of the school. Everyone who is engaged with students – teachers, school leaders, parents – have high expectations for all learners.

The school's welcoming attitude is underpinned by a system that believes all children and young people belong and should be welcomed and educated in the regular class of their local neighbourhood school. The system recognises and promotes the benefits of inclusion to schools, school boards, parents and the general community.

Policies

In an inclusive school, whole school policies create a culture that welcomes all students and celebrates diversity. All students feel culturally safe and are valued members of the school community.

School policies are underpinned by systemic policies that promote and assist schools to achieve full school participation, cultural safety and celebrate diversity.

Attitude to parents

In an inclusive school, parents are partners in their child's learning and the school facilitates and invites parental participation through regular meetings to plan and monitor their child's participation and progress at school. Where inclusion is successful, teachers rate partnership with families as the most important input (Jackson and Wills 2014). The system supports this by demonstrating the critical value of parental involvement in all material.

Classroom teachers

In an inclusive school, classroom teachers have core competencies to teach mixed ability classes. The core competencies are achieved through teacher training that adequately prepares teachers for the mixed ability classes they will teach and ongoing professional development opportunities to build greater competence.

In an inclusive school, classroom teachers are supported by trained staff with the expertise to plan and adjust curriculum and teaching strategies. The system ensures the availability of such staff in a timely fashion. Classroom teachers have resources at their

disposal to facilitate inclusive practice. The system provides training and materials to assist schools to welcome and educate all students.

Classroom teachers draw on curricula frameworks that address the learning needs of all students. Systemically, State and National Curriculum bodies develop inclusive curricula and material to support their implementation.

Principals

In an inclusive school, principals are school leaders who promote and support inclusion, and have expectations that staff will also be supportive of inclusion. They are trained and supported systemically in this endeavour, and they in turn support and share resources with their staff.

Assessment

In an inclusive school, functional, non-categorical assessments identify strengths and areas for attention in students. The system analyses student need to arrive at both funding and appropriate approaches to enable students to learn.

Curricula

In an inclusive school, the teacher and school use inclusive curricula that enable students to meet their real learning goals in the context of the regular curriculum. This is underpinned by State and National curricular frameworks that address the learning needs of all students.

Funding

In an inclusive school the budget is distributed equitably and targeted towards meeting the student's additional learning needs. The system allocates funding equitably in ways that promote inclusion.

Support

In an inclusive school, support for students is provided in seamless ways that promote participation and inclusion and strengthen natural support. The system guides schools in their use of support resources.

In an inclusive school, Student Learning Support Officers are trained on how to facilitate independence, positive interaction with peers and high expectations

Behaviour

In an inclusive school, all students are expected to learn to conform to social norms and appropriate behaviour, but approaches to achieve this are adapted depending on the needs and capacities of the student. The approach is positive rather than punitive.

Built environment

In an inclusive school, the built environment enables students with challenges in mobility to remain with their cohort. Simultaneously, the system removes barriers in the built environment.

Children belong together: what families require for inclusive education to become a reality in Australia

Family Advocacy recommend that all future policy approaches in Australia and NSW pursue full inclusion and move toward ending segregation of children with disability as part of a progressive realisation of the right to inclusive education in line with the UNCRC and General Comment on the right to Inclusive Education. This means policy makers must recognise the evidence that shows full inclusion is producing better social and academic outcomes for students with disability, and implement evidence-based programs and provide funding accordingly.

In contrast to the myth that students with disabilities learn better in disability-specific settings, in a literature review of 170 Australian and international studies, Cologon (2013) found that “children who experience disability who are included into mainstream educational settings demonstrate better academic and vocational outcomes when compared to children who are educated in segregated settings.” In addition, “children who do not experience disability have also been found to benefit academically from inclusive education with equal or better academic outcomes compared to children participating in non-inclusive settings” (Cologon 2013).

While the education policy environment changes frequently in Australia, we recommend that Australian governments work toward the following outcomes:

Transfer of resources from segregated schools and support units to regular class

- The NSW Department of Education should transfer human resources from the enrolment of children in special schools and support units to supporting them to transition successfully into mainstream schooling.
- The NSW Department of Education should train all regular classroom teachers in strategies for adjusting curriculum and assessment and managing and interpreting challenging behaviour.
- Funding for education must take into account the need for adequate release time and support for students with disability and their educators. This is crucial to inclusion.
- The NSW Department of Education should provide ongoing, mandatory training for staff regarding the human rights and dignity of all children, including people with disability.

Strategies to increase the number of children with disabilities in regular classes

- The federal government, with the Coalition of Australian Governments, should commit to targets for reducing the number of children in special schools and support units, with a view to phasing out the use of these congregate environments that cut children with disability off from every day experiences.
- Schools must be required to enrol all local children in the regular class where families seek enrolment and the NSW Department of Education should direct all principals and staff that enrolment in regular class is best practice for students

with disability, and develop support roles to transition special education staff into regular schools.

- Upon approaching a school to inquire about enrolment, all parents should be given information about the rights of all children to enrol in their local school.
- Information about the Disability Standards should be included in all enrolment kits across Australia, and on the enrolment pages of the DEC website.
- Parents of children with disability should be given a fact sheet on the Disability Standards for Education, whenever the child's disability is identified. This may happen at various points in the process, including but not limited to enrolment, when adjustments are made by a class room teacher, at an Individual Learning Plan meeting or follow up.
- The NSW Department of Education should engage in a targeted advertising campaign to alert parents of children with disability to the fact that their child has a right to be included on the same basis as other children, including in the regular classroom.
- Completion of training on the Disability Standards for Education should be mandatory for new staff, and that update training also be mandated. In addition:
 - training on the Standards should be mandatory for all teaching and support staff, and training resources should be updated to show positive stories of substantive inclusion in regular settings,
 - and the Standards website should be updated to include positive stories of substantive inclusion in regular classroom settings.
- Any policy approach to early education should ensure that early intervention supports are available in a mainstream setting such as a mainstream pre-school, to avoid starting on a segregated path.

Adequate enforcement of the rights of children with disabilities

Family Advocacy notes that while children with disability have rights under the Disability Discrimination Act and these are articulated in the Disability Standards in Education. However reporting, enforcement and consequences of a breach remain minimal. With this in mind, Family Advocacy makes a number of recommendations regarding enforcement.

- Explanation of complaints processes, including internal and external with contact information, should be included in all enrolment kits across Australia.
- The Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the NSW Ombudsman should be resourced to take on a more active role in complaints about the NSW Department of Education.
- Expansion of the role of the NSW Ombudsman could help track and provide a fuller picture of breaches of the Disability Standards in Education in NSW, to provide a fuller picture of breaches to government.

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A D V O C A C Y

Access to university and TAFE for adults with disabilities in Australia

Family Advocacy recommends that training be provided on adjusting for and supporting adults and young people with disabilities for all staff involved in delivering regular transition programs, whether this is facilitating university or TAFE open days, work experience, or practicum units of vocationally focused subjects.