



**SAME
CLASSROOM
SAME
OPPORTUNITY**

family

A D V O C A C Y

STRENGTHENING AUTHENTIC INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NSW

BRIEFING PAPER

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WHO WE ARE

Family Advocacy is an independent and impartial organisation that works with families across NSW to promote and defend the rights and interests of people who have developmental disability¹.

OUR VISION

Our vision for inclusive education is that children learn and belong with their peers, in the same classroom, with the supports they need to access the same curriculum as well as extra-curricular activities. Inclusive education is where there is only one option for learning and that is all children together in the same classroom. Just being in the same place isn't enough. Our teachers need to be able to educate and support the needs of each and every student.

An inclusive education means having practices within a school where every child feels respected, confident and safe so he or she can learn and develop his or her full learning potential. It is based on a system of values and beliefs centred on the best interests of the student, which promotes social cohesion, belonging, active participation in learning, a complete school experience, and positive interactions with peers and others in the community. Not only does this benefit all children but it lays the foundation for strong communities that value diversity and can interact and prosper with a wide range of people.

We can make NSW a place where disability doesn't mean exclusion and segregation. We can create a NSW where each and every child and young person are educated together, as equals, in their local community. A society where every child knows that they belong to their local neighbourhood school, they deserve to be there, and have a right to be there alongside their peers.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Despite a view that is in favour of inclusion, the NSW Government's approach to education for children and young people with disability is often preventing them from attending their local school in a regular classroom and steering them to a special school or support unit. This segregation sends a very clear message to that child that they are different, to be placed "over there" and of lesser value than a child without a disability. In addition, this exclusion from the local school for children with disability is in conflict with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD).

Many parents have little choice but to enrol their children in a segregated setting and the current parallel system of education for students with disability strongly reinforces segregation. The 2016 Auditor General's report found that 25% of parents had been told by school staff that there was no place for their child at their local school.

Some of the most common reasons given to families when being rejected from their local school are that their child would have inadequate support, that they would be excluded from broader activities, and that the special school would be better for them. Many families have also been told that an inclusive education will be a detriment to both their child and other learners in the classroom. There is no research to prove this and, in fact, the evidence indicates the opposite.

Our analysis of NSW Department of Education (DoE) enrolment statistics indicates that special schools in NSW have had a 19.4% increase in enrolment (1609 students) between 2010 and 2016 whilst regular school enrolments only increased by 4.6% over that time period. Further, the four-year period from 2012 to 2016 saw a 21% increase in the number of support units.

¹ Developmental disability is a disability that occurs in the developmental period of a person's life (in the period from conception to adulthood) and includes but is not limited to: autism, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and any combination of physical, intellectual or sensory disability.

This contradicts all of the evidence from across Australia and internationally for over four decades, which shows that, children with a disability do better on all measures in inclusive settings rather than disability-specific settings (Hehir 2016, Cologon 2013, Jackson 2008). In addition, outcomes for all children are the same or better in settings inclusive of children with a disability. More importantly, for the typical students in the classroom, inclusion teaches acceptance, compassion and empathy. It teaches all of our children to look beyond difference and learn that we all have diverse abilities, we all have value and we all belong here.

NSW is lagging behind other jurisdictions around the world in their education and treatment of students with disability. For example, Italy and New Brunswick, Canada, are two such jurisdictions that have created educational reform to ensure that no child is in a segregated setting and that all children are given the best opportunity to learn and develop normatively in these formative years, together.

SOLUTIONS

Removing our current parallel system to create a singular system for all students will involve extensive reform. Ensuring inclusion in the local school will require multi-layered strategies such as ensuring an attitude within a school that is welcoming to a child with a disability and their family, increasing the inclusive practice capacity of teachers, and providing adequate systems and resources to implement quality inclusive education. To do this, NSW can move teaching expertise from segregated settings to the local school, to work together with the local teacher to educate every child. There are schemes that already exist that build a whole system—state, district, school, and community – with capacity to provide academic and behaviour support to improve outcomes for all students. In many cases, the wheel does not need to be recreated but modified to our NSW system.

The starting point for this reform will be a commitment from NSW government to put an end to segregation and exclusionary practices and to undertake development of a comprehensive plan to revolutionise our system.

WHAT CAN THE NSW GOVERNMENT DO?

Family Advocacy recommends political leadership from the NSW Government:

1. **Create an Inclusive Education Policy** that establishes the requirements to ensure New South Wales public schools are inclusive. We must ensure clarity as to the definition of inclusion, affirming the human rights of each student to an inclusive education in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), General Comment No 4 (2016) on Article 24: Right to Inclusive Education (Para 9).
2. **Commit to a transformation of the education system** to enable genuine inclusion for all students by 2030. This means **merging our parallel system of mainstream and special schools into one holistic system** of education so all students are placed in regular classrooms with reasonable adjustments and supports so they can access the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. NSW will be upholding Australia's commitment towards the 2030: Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 to "Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all".
3. **Commence a pilot project (in rural and city areas) in 2019** to explore how to provide schools with the inclusive capacity to equip academic and behaviour support to improves outcomes for all students.
4. By 2019, **establish a Reference Group** to advise the Department of Education.