

**Portfolio Committee No. 3 - Education**  
**Online questionnaire summary report**  
**Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales**  
**educational settings**

**The purpose of the questionnaire**

As part of its inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings, Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education provided an online questionnaire to encourage public participation in the inquiry in an efficient and accessible way.

The questionnaire was not intended as a statistically valid, random survey. Respondents self-selected in choosing to participate. This means that respondents are unlikely to be a representative sample of the New South Wales population. Instead, the responses represent a sample of interested members of the public who volunteered their time to have a say.

The questionnaire was complementary to and did not replace the usual submission process. The submissions process was available to individuals and organisations who wished to provide a more detailed response to the inquiry's terms of reference. In this regard, some respondents may have completed the questionnaire and also made a submission.

The online questionnaire was open from 22 December 2023 to 14 March 2024. The committee received 190 responses.

This report summarises the responses received by participants to both the quantitative and qualitative questions posed. These responses will inform the committee's views throughout the inquiry.

**Questions asked**

In this questionnaire, participants were asked 21 questions about their views and experiences with inclusive education. The questions were divided across three sections.

- Section 1 (questions 1 to 4) contained mandatory administrative questions collating participant's contact details and age range.
- Section 2 (questions 5 to 7) covered participants' education backgrounds.
- Section 3 (questions 8 to 21) focused on participants' experiences with education for children and young people with special needs.

The full list of questions is at Appendix 1.

Questions 1 to 5 of the questionnaire were mandatory administrative questions to collect basic details. The remaining questions could be skipped if the participants wished to do so. The questionnaire included a combination of multiple-choice questions (controlled input) and open answer questions (free text).

A summary of responses and a sample of the answers are provided below which represent the variety of views expressed by the participants.

## Responses to questions

*Please provide your contact details and age range*

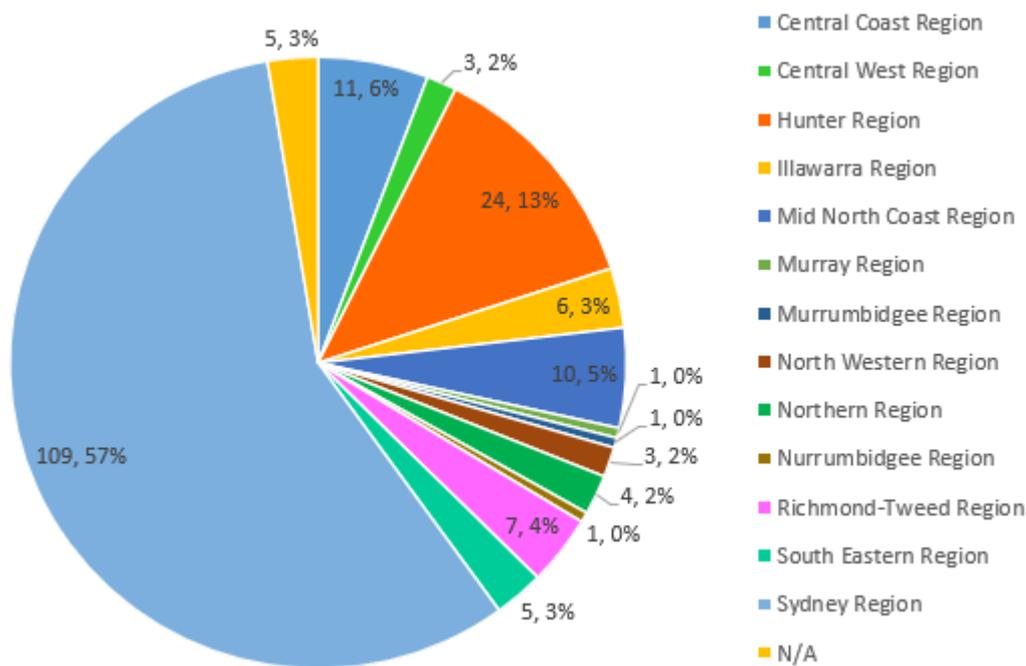
**Question 3. What is the name of the town or suburb where you live?**

**Question 4. What is your age?**

Of the 190 respondents, 109 or 57 per cent of participants indicated they were from metropolitan areas, while 81 participants or 43 per cent were from regional areas.

The graph below provides a comprehensive visual representation of the geographical spread of participants in New South Wales.

Note that the 'N/A' category included five respondents who resided outside of New South Wales.



Of all the participants, all but one indicated that they are 18 years or older.

*Tell us about yourself and where you go to school or where you study.*

**Question 5. Tell us a little bit about yourself (you may choose more than one answer).**

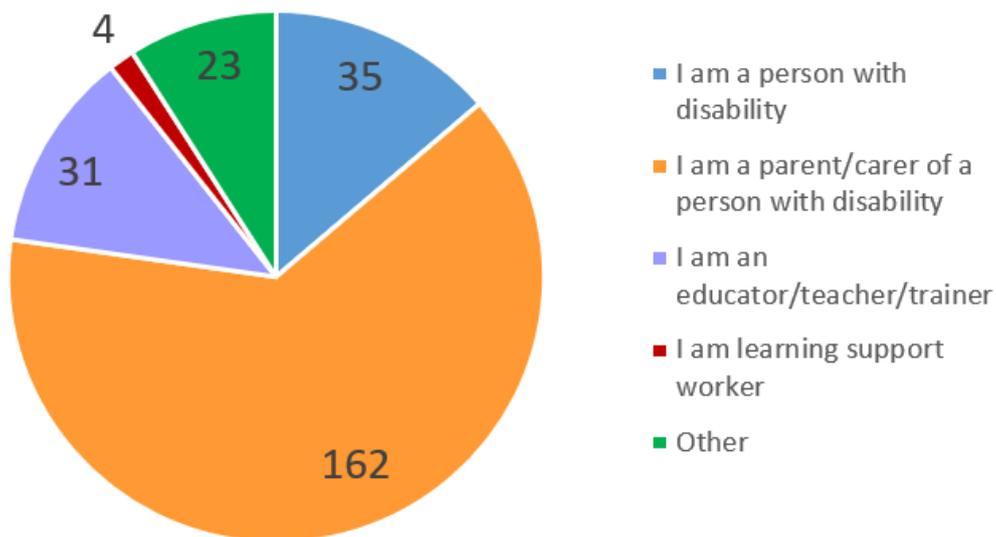
Question 5 was represented in multiple choice format, with 190 responses received. Participants were able to select from the options of 'I am a person with disability', 'I am a parent/carer of a person with disability', 'I am an educator/teacher/trainer', 'I am learning support worker', and/or elaborate through the 'Other' text box. Participants who selected 'Other' provided answers including:

- principal of a K-12 independent school
- member of the community
- student support officer
- speech pathologist
- retired teacher
- disability researcher

- speech pathologist & consultant
- worked with children with disabilities
- research officer in Autism field
- and OT who supports many disabled children within educational facilities.

Since the question allowed for multiple options to be selected, participants may have chosen, for example, both 'I am a person with disability' and 'I am a learning support worker', in which case they would be counted in both categories. There were multiple different combinations of responses.

The graph below provides a visual representation of the responses received for this question.



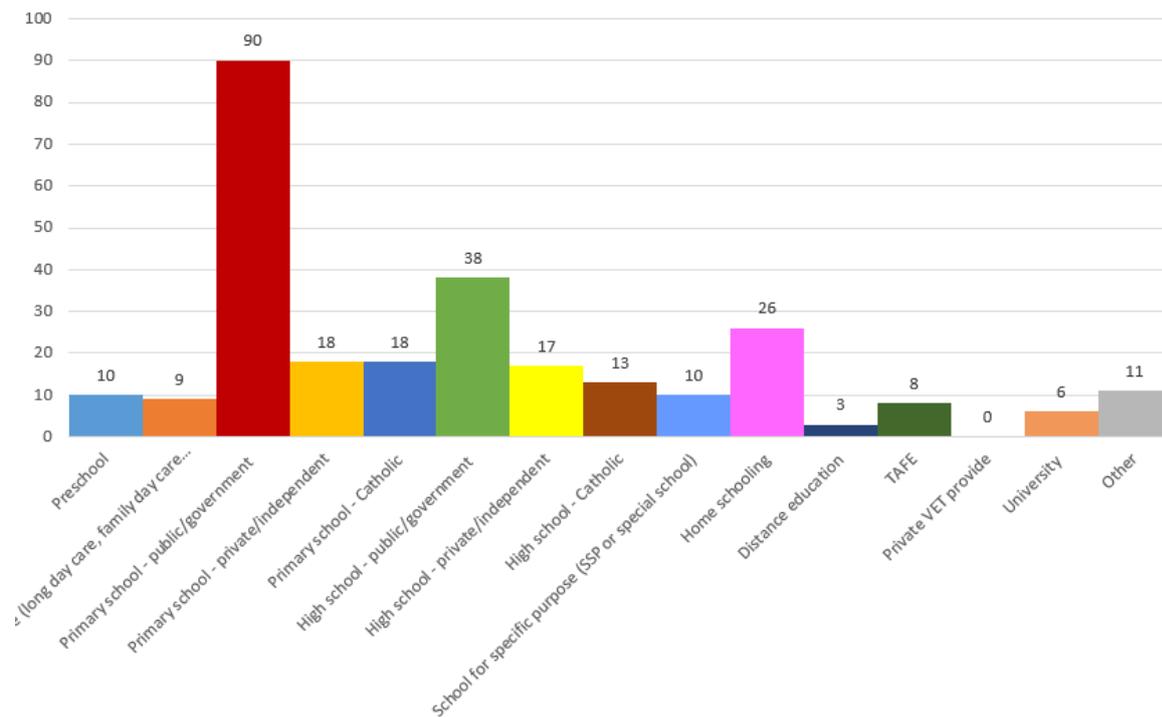
**Question 6. Are you or someone you care for going to school (you may choose more than one answer)?**

Question 6 was also represented in multiple choice format, with 182 responses received. Participants selected from a list of different types of education (see Appendix 1 for the full list).

Notably, the most common answer was public/government primary schools, with 90 responses, followed by public/government high school with 38 responses, and home schooling with 26 responses. Eleven respondents chose to elaborate through the 'Other' text box and provided answers such as they have finished school, or they were unable to attend.

Note again that the question allowed for multiple options to be selected, for example, participants may have chosen both 'Homeschooling' and 'University', in which case they would be counted in both categories. There were multiple different combinations of responses.

The following graph presents a detailed visual representation of the answers received.



### Question 7. When did you/your child attend the educational setting?

Question 7 received 184 responses. This was a free text question. The vast majority of respondents provided brief responses indicating the years during which they or their children attended the educational setting. The answers spanned from 1980 to 2024, with more aligning closer with the past five years and many indicating the period from 2020 onwards.

*We want to hear about your experience.*

### Question 8. Do you think there is enough support for children with disability at school to get a good education? Tell us more why you think this way.

184 of 190 respondents answered this question. The answers could be divided into three broad groups. Below is a sample of comments for each group.

#### Inadequate support

The vast majority of respondents felt that there was inadequate support for children with disability to get a good education. Respondents highlighted various issues including instances of bullying, insufficient funding, staff shortages, limited resources, inadequate support and training for teachers, underdiagnosis of disabilities leading to low awareness, lack of accommodation for diverse needs, lack of collaboration between schools and health professionals, negative school attitudes, and challenges in navigating support systems.

#### *Comments from people with disability*

- From a person who was home schooled - 'No, teachers and the school support network just aren't educated enough to know how to help, they just treat us like children or assume we all have the same needs when we very much don't.'
- From a person who went to Tafe - 'No. What little support exists is generally only available for children with a diagnosis of disability. Many children go undiagnosed for various reasons ... and when they display disabled characteristics they are labelled as "troublemakers" or "lazy"

because teachers lack the support and training to identify the possibility that the child might be disabled.'

*Comments from parents/ carers relating to:*

*Public/government schools*

- 'No ... You also need to be aware of what supports are available and what your child needs and this is never straight forward...'
- 'No, the attitude and ignorance of some teachers and principals make it impossible for children with disability to receive reasonable adjustment to feel safe and heard at school. Small adjustments are frequently refused or disregarded, and therapists are often blocked from attending or have evidence based recommendations ignored ...'
- 'Funding appears to be limited; our school has repeatedly informed us that our child is using "more than his allowance" of funding in order to keep him functioning at school.'
- 'Absolutely not. Physical and more "obvious" disabilities seem to be well supported, however those with social emotional disabilities are not. They are expected to "suck it up" and get on with things in spite of bullying by students and teachers and learning differences that don't fit in the mainstream. Parents who try to advocate are treated as pariahs.'

*Catholic high school*

- 'No. Social problems, bullying - the person with the disability is labelled as the problem, bullying does not get addressed.'

*Comment from a speech pathologist with disability who regularly visits NSW public schools, Catholic schools, SSPs (school for specific purpose) and private schools*

- 'NOT AT ALL. When I went through school, I was taught to mask my Autistic, ADHD and other ND traits. Now working in schools, I have noticed that teachers, SLSOs, and principals are extremely overloaded and most do not have the capacity to learn, reflect and change. So many disabled children and teenagers are not receiving the support they deserve in schools... Many highly masked children slip through the cracks, do not get access to ANY services, and given extremely harmful labels from as young as 5. It is so unfair and heartbreaking to watch.'

*Comment from a teacher/ speech pathologist*

- 'No ... there is not enough capacity/ resources/ time to adequately support all children in the classroom, let alone meet the specific and complex needs of children with disabilities ... There is also a significant under diagnosis of children with DLD [Developmental Language Disorder], and inadequate awareness amongst teachers about DLD ... with the pressures and expectations of classroom teacher workloads, a crowded curriculum, and lack of resources, there was still no possible way I could adequately meet the needs of all my students to support them to successfully engage with the curriculum.'

*Comment from a child behaviour specialist who works with children across a range of settings*

- 'Lack of specialist support ... Counsellors, school psychologists, allied health professionals in schools. Barriers in schools who do not collaborate and do not allow NDIS specialists to work with children in schools.'

*Comment from an occupational therapist whose children attended an independent Catholic school*

- 'There are several ways the current system is lacking for children with a disability. First the system is too structured and rigid, and does not provide enough accommodation for meeting children's learning disability. Secondly, teacher capacity to implement individual strategies for each child is limited. Some educators also lack skill and knowledge on how to support students with disabilities. Thirdly, there is lack of attention on the impact of the environment for

learning. Classrooms are often very busy spaces, in terms of visual, auditory distractions. Noisy, busy classroom can be a real impediment to learning for many students... support for students with ADHD requires particular attention.'

### Adequate Support

A select few of respondents felt that there was enough support. Though, two respondents acknowledged that this is not the general experience for most.

*Comment from a person with disability (under 18 years old) who went to a Catholic high school*

- 'Personally for me, yes. I was supported as much as possible in my educational endeavours and was provided with the necessary resources and support to reach my academic potential. For others, I would say majority not. It truly depends on the opinions, opportunities and culture of the school you attend. It also depends on the academic capabilities of each student.'

*Comments from parents/carers relating to*

*Public/government schools*

- 'Yes, she attended half day preschool programs then 2 special schools- the best placements for her.'
- 'Yes, my son at a Support Unit of a mainstream school gets good support. Small classes allow him to receive the attention he needs to learn, and teachers have time to set personalised learning goals for him. In-school therapist can quickly address any issues that arise, without delay and prolong the issues ... He also gets the opportunities of mainstream classes by being part of the same school. Previously in a mainstream school without support unit, there was very much a lack of support ...'

*Private/independent school*

- 'Yes. My son attends ... school in Dural. The school has excellent teachers and support staff. He is in the best place for him.'

### Neutral responses

Another small subset of respondents provided relatively neutral responses. These respondents recognised that support is a complex topic and highlighted the inconsistency of support across different schools for children with varying needs.

*Comments from parents/carers relating to*

*Catholic schools*

- 'Yes and no, I like that they are putting her in programs and trying to provide early intervention and I like the idea of a support teacher being in the classroom, but I also don't believe it is completely personalised to my daughters' direct needs and delay and instead the school only has funding to provide a blanket program and minimal support from staff to assist children who are behind ...'
- 'For some kids yes, but others, no. Mainstream will only put individual support in if the child falls into a specified 'box' eg- ASD [autism spectrum disorder] 3 will get individual aide funding. ASD 2 children don't get individual support ...'

*Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer*

- 'In some cases, yes there is, and in some cases, no there is not ... In my experience, schools have oftentimes put in place multitudes of adjustments and supports for students and this has resulted in great success in children with a disability accessing education and reaching their full potential. In other cases, supports are unsuccessful and new approaches are not devised, students' needs are too high for mainstream environment but alternatives are unavailable or

refused by children and families, or staff are unable to implement the plans and strategies due to lack of expertise or time ...'

### **Question 9. Did your school make changes to make it easier to learn? What was it like asking for changes?**

A total of 182 responses were received for this question. A sample of comments are set out below, according to theme.

#### No

The majority of respondents provided a negative comment. They attributed the lack of change to the following common factors:

- resistance to change within the school
- red tape and bureaucratic obstacles
- challenges in communication with the school
- failure to follow through on promised actions by the school
- schools' disregard for parental concerns
- lack of collaboration among stakeholders
- limited capacity within the school to implement effective change.

Some responses acknowledged that while there was change, the process was challenging and slow, and required persistent advocacy from parents.

The following is a sample of responses that reflect these sentiments.

*Comment from a person with disability who went to a public government school*

- 'No, keeping up appearances only but no meaningful change ...'

*Comments from parents/carers relating to public/government schools*

- 'No – every request for reasonable adjustments were met with lengthy arguments for why it wasn't possible including the principal sending out a parental survey to all the parents voting yes or no for adjustments for my child. It was a shocking experience.'
- 'They were resistant to change and believed that their methods were superior to that of other experts in child development ...'

*Comments from educators/teachers/trainers relating to*

*Public/government schools*

- 'As a staff member, I feel like I do not have access to the supports I need ... change involves human resource and funding, it is hard to navigate from a staff perspective. I always want the best possible outcomes and opportunities, but I feel I do not have the human resource and funding capabilities to action most request for change.'
- 'The bureaucracy and lack of support (from "school counsellors" who have to apparently "sign off" on the majority of paperwork) means that hardly any changes can occur...'

*Catholic school*

- 'Yes ... but it took over a year of constant advocating and bring support letters in from paedcs, psychiatrists and OT's to support what I was asking for my daughter (which was an individual aide). There are so many students who have parents who either just don't have the capacity to fight or just believe the mainstream school will magically just support their child. Appropriate support won't be given unless a parent is constantly advocating.'

*Comment from a research officer in the Autism field relating to both public/government and private/independent schools*

- 'It was difficult to communicate with the school staff without feeling like we were judged as "those parents". Even with respectful dialogue we never felt heard, or satisfied with next steps etc ...'

*Comment from a speech pathologist/consultant who works across a diverse range of educational settings*

- 'Schools are hard to contact and are often slow to respond to emails. In my experience, I have needed to make repeated attempts to contact them via email and phone even when the school were the ones to initiate the request for information ... Instead, schools initiate contact by sending therapists long and bureaucratic forms to complete, with a number of additional requirements for documentation and training - then they don't reply to complete the external provider agreement that they asked us to write using their form. Lack of time and the way allied health providers being external providers to the Department of Education makes it difficult to work collaboratively ...'

Yes

Despite numerous respondents expressing challenges with the process, a small subset also reported observing positive changes. One respondent with disability noted that while there were no arrangements for change during their experience in secondary education, they observed positive changes in tertiary education. Common themes among this group of responses centred around good communication and attending to the children's needs.

*Comments from people with disability*

- 'My school did the best they could, and I had some brilliant, very understanding teachers that did their best to listen to my needs and do what they could to accommodate them but it could still be very daunting to ask for a change when I didn't know how someone was going to react.'
- From a person who went to a Catholic school - 'Absolutely they did. My school provided all the accommodations that I needed within their legal capabilities. For example, extra time in tests, ability to use a keyboard instead of handwriting, testing in a quiet environment etc.'
- From someone who went to TAFE - 'In primary and high school, I was undiagnosed and thus unable to ask for changes. Now, in TAFE, I feel accepted and empowered to ask for any changes.'

*Comment from a parent/carer relating to public/government school*

- 'Yes. Very easy. Our school is very open to communicating. We've never had any issues. They take everything onboard to assist us with our child's education.'

*Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer*

- 'We constantly make changes for the students that attend our school.'

### **Question 10. What could happen to your family if you or your child cannot get the support they need at school?**

180 of 190 respondents answered this question. Responses to this question can be grouped into effects on children and effects on family/parents/carers. The following summarises the responses in relation to these two categories, though it acknowledges their interconnectedness. Many responses cited both aspects.

Effects on children

Responses that cited effects on children mentioned reduced access to education, poor educational outcomes, behaviour changes, mental distress, societal implications, and other long-term consequences.

*Comment from a person with disability*

- 'In primary and high school, being undiagnosed, I became more anxious and depressed because I thought there was something fundamentally wrong with me as a human being.'

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'They will fall through the cracks and become a burden on society. Unable to read or do simple maths. No future prospects.'
- 'My daughter ended up with severe depression and anxiety as a result of this pressure, at its worse she was unable to self care.'
- 'They retain a reputation of the "naughty kid", "disruptive kid", "dumb kid" the list goes on. They lose the ability to maintain social and emotional relationships with their peers. The child then can't understand the work so they refuse to do it (because they can't and the teacher has no time to help because there are 29 other kids in the class) so the child then hates themselves because they think they're dumb and stupid and they question themselves as to "why am I like this".'

*Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer*

- 'Disrupted schooling through things such as changing schools, school refusal, poor engagement, low attainment, social difficulties absenteeism.'

*Comment from a psychologist*

- 'The child would not maintain access to education which is a fundamental right of all children.'

*Comment from an occupational therapist*

- From an occupational therapist with disability - 'Trauma, poor academic outcomes, negative future relationships ... reduced wellbeing/confidence/self-esteem, poor mental health outcomes (1 in 5 autistic adults have contemplated suicide in the last 2 weeks), poor social outcomes, isolation, reliance on support services and welfare, abuse, homelessness, the list goes on.'

Effects on families

Many parents/carers described the impact that a lack of support for their children would have on themselves and their families. This included the need to find alternative education means, such as resorting to homeschooling, or quitting their jobs to care for their children, which often led to financial distress and increased mental burden on the family.

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'We had to move two children to the private system as the public school was unable to offer the support they needed as the built environment couldn't be adapted ...'
- 'As a single mum I will have to fund more private speech sessions than I already am and pay out of pocket for an OT ...'
- 'I now have to home school my child, at the same time that I have to care for my terminally ill mother and my mentally ill daughter.'
- 'My son experiences social isolation and battles with low self-esteem while struggling academically. This situation brings significant stress and emotional strain to both him and our family. Balancing his needs with other responsibilities strains our family dynamics, adding to

the challenge. Moreover, the emotional toll of witnessing his struggles without sufficient support has affected our whole family.'

*Comments from parents/carers with disability*

- 'It's happening. We must sell our house and I am financially planning to quit my job so I can homeschool, we have no other choice ...'
- 'I am currently moving my youngest to another school. If this doesn't work she will have to homeschool. I know this is more than I can cope with and will be a massive mental strain on me. I will have to stop working. Our children are our lives and I advocate for them at every turn. They have every therapy and specialist I can provide but I shouldn't have to sacrifice my life, my sanity, my mental & emotional health because school will not or cannot support them.'

### **Question 11. How can teachers get better support at school?**

The prevailing sentiment of the 181 responses to this question was that an all-inclusive approach, focusing on various aspects of support, is needed to ensure teachers receive better support at school.

Participants identified several ways in which teachers could receive better support, with a common response being more training, as outlined below:

- support teachers to participate in evidence-based training to improve understanding and awareness of bullying, various disabilities, neurodivergence, inclusion, and Individualised Education Programs (IEPs)
- ensure teachers engage in continuing professional development (CPD) to stay up-to-date with the latest skills and knowledge
- establish collaboration between teachers, health professionals, and parents to enhance support and education for teachers
- increase the number of staff, including school staff, specialist teachers, and additional health professionals to support teachers and alleviate the burden of administrative tasks
- reduce class sizes to enable teachers to better address diverse needs
- provide mental health services to teachers
- allocate greater funding to facilitate the initiatives above.

A sample of comments from respondents is provided below:

*Comment from a person with disability*

- 'Teachers need to have smaller class sizes, have access to more disability and neurodiversity affirming training, and be supported by their principals, head teachers, and admin staff. Currently, teachers are overworked and have to deal with too much staffroom politics to properly support disabled students... disability is a natural part of human biodiversity. If a teacher said that they didn't want to teach students of a certain race, that would be unacceptable. It should be the same for disability. If extra support or training is needed, that should be provided at no extra cost to the teacher. If we want to create an inclusive Australia, the teachers of our future generations must model inclusion and acceptance. The low number of new teachers is also an issue... the government should offer more scholarships/reduced fees for university teaching qualifications and other incentives.'

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'Building an understanding of what inclusion is and the purpose of it, and the rich role they can play in enacting it.'

- 'Teachers need better training in understanding neurodivergence and supporting children with special needs (particularly invisible disabilities) ...'
- 'Remove the burdensome tasks like playground duty. Employ additional staff to complete these jobs so they can eat, rest, plan ... in peace like departments corporate staff enjoy ... One per class would be amazing ...'
- 'Better training across whole teaching staff about IEPs. For learning support staff on how to create effective ones, and for general teaching staff, how to understand them and manage a classroom with multiple children with IEPs (we find they often get ignored by class teachers).'
- From a parent/carer with disability - 'Listen to parents, as they are the experts when it comes to their child ...'
- From a parent/carer who homeschools - 'Teachers and staff who are burnt out with stress are not the safest people for kids to go to when they need help. Be honest about this. Teachers know it too. They probably need better mental health support for their work stress. I would never want my kid being taught by someone who is being pushed past their limits. It's incredibly unfair on everyone.'

*Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer*

- 'More funding for professional development and time for resource making ...'

*Comment from a child behaviour specialist*

- 'Reduce class sizes. Reduce administration tasks. Increase time off class for planning, professional development, collaboration. Provide allied health specialists in schools. Welcome allied health and ndis providers as part of a collaborative team ... Allow teachers Time to be creative and develop strong relationships with children and families.'

*Comment from an occupational therapist*

- 'The Department needs to completely overhaul their understanding of disability, adopt a social-model approach to education, eliminate the power struggle/reliance on control and domination of children, etc., listen to disabled communities, receive adequate funding and relief time to adequately plan and support kids' needs, proactive relationship building with parents and families, design inclusive environments and curricula, and provide teachers access to evidence based, up to date and relevant training/professional development.'

**Question 12. Have you or your children been refused to be enrolled at a school? Tell us more about this.**

171 participants responded to this question. The majority of respondents, including those who indicated they have a disability, suggested 'no'. However, within these responses, some cited known instances of families who have been denied enrolment or cited other forms of indirect discrimination. Examples included:

*Comment from a person with disability*

- 'I have not.'

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'No, but most definitely made to feel that the school couldn't cater for our children (across public, private and catholic sector).'
- 'By the time we started, a new [principal] was in place who encouraged us to leave from day one. When we left, four other families with kids with disabilities also left the school.'
- 'Not refused enrolment but expelled in catholic system/discriminated against for disability.'

- 'No thankfully but I know children who have been expelled because of their disability (autism).'

*Comment from an educator/ teacher/ trainer*

- 'No, but as a family advocate I have heard several stories of this happening. Even if not outright refused, the practice of gatekeeping is rife.'

*Comment from a principal*

- 'As a principal, I have never refused to enrol a student at school.'

Some participants noted experiences of refusal to enrol. Many of the refusals were made on the basis that the school lacked the capacity to cater for students with special needs, while others simply did not provide a clear reason for refusal. For example:

*Comments from parents/ carers*

- 'Yes my son was rejected from a support unit at local school due to not enough full time teachers aides.'
- 'Yes it was at a Christian school and the words that were used: "your child is very severely disabled so I am sorry we cannot have him at our school."
- 'Yes!!! The local public school really pushed us not to enrol. Approaching schools was awful. We were not made to feel welcome.'
- 'Yes, we had a "trial" at an independent Christian school for specific purposes ... who were unable to support our son not long after his trauma in the public system. We were contacted by the then principal who said "not yet" the school had untrained staff and a large cohort of older children that left within months of our trial. In my experience over the years, some public schools tell parents they don't have enough resources, ring parents regularly to collect a child with no justifiable reason, or just advise parents its best they don't attend as it will be a "busy/chaotic" day.'

*Comment from a principal of a K-12 independent school*

- 'I have had to explain to some parents that we are unable to meet the needs of their child as compared to the support they could receive at the local public school that has a special needs unit.'

### **Question 13. Does your school have good resources for children with disability? What kind of resources does your school have?**

A total of 182 participants answered this question, providing a mix of both positive and negative responses.

#### Positive responses

Respondents who provided positive feedback outlined a wide range of resources available for children with disability, such as learning hubs and learning support personnel. However, a few responses indicated that while resources appeared to be available, they were ineffective in practice or could be improved.

*Comment from a person with disability who went to a Catholic school*

- 'My school personally did have good resources for students with a disability. They provided a special facility within the school called the LEC (learning enhancement centre) which provided educational support for disabled and non-disabled students.'

*Comments from parents/carers relating to*

*Public/government schools*

- 'Yes, there is a learning support person who is very approachable and helpful, but it took for us to ask what support was available and to financially cover the additional support she required such as psychologists and tutors.'
- 'They could be better but are better than others. Our class in particular has a calm zone with appropriate tools for avoiding meltdowns. They offer alternative seating like wobble chairs and sensory tools to improve focus. They have bought timers to establish visual timing of tasks. They support use of ear defenders and chew toys (we supply). They are open to suggestions too.'

*Catholic school*

- 'Yes, the school does have a support unit, which means it has a variety of resources available. However, there's still room for improvement. Increasing the availability of space and rooms, hiring more staff, and improving access to school psychology services would significantly enhance the support system and ultimately benefit all students, including those with disabilities.'

*SSP or special school*

- 'In theory yes, as there is a support unit; however practically no, as students are excluded, are not believed and only taken out if they fit a purpose, like show and tell for autism day and teachers do not have the capabilities to meet the students' needs.'

*Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer*

- 'My school has a learning hub where students with disability can access one-to-one intervention and support. We have rigorous systems in place for identifying and supporting disability in students and communicate reasonably well with families. Training is frequently offered to teachers and there are specialist staff who can support teachers to differentiate for students with a disability.'

Negative comments

Negative comments centred around the lack of resources to adequately cater to the diverse range of needs children have, as well as disparities in resource allocation between special and mainstream schools.

*Comments from parents/carers relating to public/government schools*

- 'Zero that I have seen – and their language is so dated or just plain inappropriate.'
- 'Not really. The school utilises a speech therapist and OT [occupational therapist] that work in the school once a week but depending on the targets, students may not 'qualify' for intervention.'
- 'There was an LSU [Learning Support Unit] and I would assume there were disability supports within that class, but as far as the mainstream classes were concerned, there was nothing ...'

*Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer relating to public/government school*

- 'No. Poor learning support programs that lack evidence, fidelity and trained professionals in the area. Weak learning support teams.'

*Comment from an occupational therapist with disability who works across public, private and Catholic settings*

- 'Non[e] that are reflective of their needs, properly support them or reduce dysregulation within school system.'

*Comment from a speech pathologist/consultant who works across a diverse range of educational settings*

- 'No. Schools often do not have the resources they need related to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). For instance, they need access to software such as Boardmaker, to create visual supports for students. They require access to AAC resources ... They need access to various electronic resources that can be used to help support communication and related software. Most importantly, they need access to professionals (speech pathologists, special educators) who have the knowledge and experience in how to use and apply these resources in the school setting. For a child I know who is blind, the school the child attended struggled to provide all the resources required and were slow to allow the parents to come and provide training related to using some of the equipment they had. It was more difficult for the school to acquire some specific new resources ... for teaching literacy and numeracy to people who are blind than it should have been.'

**Question 14. Does your school have things to make it easy for you to get around the school? This could be things like ramps or lifts. Tell us more about this.**

This question garnered 169 responses which can be divided into two main categories: those that noted effective facilitation of student mobility, and those that highlighted inadequacies and suggested improvements.

Although some exemplary practices were noted, there was a consensus among the responses that more can be done, as many current arrangements failed to adequately address the diverse mobility needs of students.

A sample of comments is presented below according to the two categories.

Effective facilitation of student mobility

Responses noting effective facilitation of student mobility mentioned access to basic facilities such as ramps, lifts, additional safety measures like fences, and other accommodations for various needs.

*Comment from a student with disability*

- 'Yes. My school had ramps and lifts provided. My school also made special accommodations such as lowering the office window for me personally and creating a personal study schedule to allow me to leave class early in order to ensure my safety.'

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'Neither of my children have physical disability, however, all classrooms and facilities are easily accessed and accessible with ramps for those that do.'
- From a parent/carer with disability - 'Yes. They have lifts and painted areas for vision impaired. We have a lot of stairs ...'

*Comments from educators/teachers/trainers*

- 'Yes. We have accessible classroom and are well equipped for physical disability.'
- From a principal – 'We are a fully accessible school'.

*Comment from a therapist*

- 'Yes. Also fences to support safety for children and young people who need to run but have limited understanding of boundaries and safety.'

Unsatisfactory facilitation of student mobility

Responses that expressed dissatisfaction with the level of facilitation regarding student mobility attributed it to lack of access to lifts or ramps, insufficient consideration for neurodivergent

students, and inaccessible paths and classrooms. Many responses also mentioned that school facilities are outdated and in need of refurbishment.

*Comment from a person with disability*

- 'Many schools have demountable classrooms, which are inaccessible by design. Older schools also tend to have older buildings, which are not accessible. I have heard teachers complain about having to move their classes from their usual classroom to an accessible one, because a new student has a physical disability or a current student has been injured in a way that affects their mobility.'

*Comments from parents/carers*

- From a parent/carer with disability -'There are ramps but no lifts ...'
- 'Ramps in most places, but generally not a good place for anyone on wheels as there are narrow paths and dirt paths throughout the school.'
- 'For neurodivergent/sensory overload kid – long noisy corridors and hot assembly halls where they sit on the floor are a major problem that is often overlooked.'

*Comments from educators/teachers/trainers*

- 'Our school is old, and although it has ramps and lifts, the classrooms are inaccessible, small and crowded.'
- 'Local school – no. To the point that a kindergarten peer of my younger child who broke their leg was unable to access school for the 6 weeks he was on crutches because he couldn't safely navigate the stairs to his classroom.'

**Question 15. Do you think the people who work at schools have enough training to work with people with disability? Tell us more about this.**

Question 15 received 185 responses. The prevailing sentiment within the feedback indicated that staff members were insufficiently trained to work with people with disabilities.

Numerous participants noted concerns regarding the lack of knowledge and understanding among educators in relation to various disabilities, such as autism and neurodiversity. These participants further noted that the lack of awareness often resulted in a uniform teaching approach that failed to address unique support needs of students.

Many participants also pointed out that the current training curriculum is out-of-date, with many staff members having an outdated understanding of diversity and still used outdated behaviour models of discipline.

Additionally, several responses suggested that training is not the only problem; systemic problems such as poor culture, lack of accountability, and teacher burnout were also significant factors.

The broader theme of the responses revealed a greater need for school staff to collaborate with allied health professionals and participate in up-to-date training to effectively deliver inclusive education.

A sample of responses representative of these themes is presented below.

*Comment from a person with disability*

- 'No. Teachers are too overworked and underpaid to care about the outcomes of disabled students, and working with a counsellor or going to a "special" classroom results in stigma and bullying from other students.'

*Comments from parents/carers*

- From a parent/carer with disability - 'No. They are taught from outdated resources and models of practice.'
- From a parent/carer with disability - 'No. They need training in trauma informed practice, UDL [Universal Design for Learning], CPS [Creative problem solving] and neuro affirming training.'
- 'Absolutely not. I don't believe that it is purely training alone. Prejudice, "old ideas", poor culture, lack of leadership, and real accountability impact on the ability to deliver disability inclusive education.'
- 'There are members of staff who seem to be well trained, informed and switched on. But it is inconsistent and seems to be self-driven knowledge and understanding. Older staff members are often the biggest problem, with little to no understanding of behaviours that relate to autism and a tendency to judge autistic kids based on neurotypical assumptions, using words like "lazy" and "manipulative".'
- 'No, definitely not. They do not understand the basics of Autism or an intellectual disability, students are not in an environment which is conducive to extend their learning, they are only there to fit into a particular box and do not have opportunities to explore other subjects. These options are only made available if they have a parent or guardian who is willing to CONTINUOUSLY advocate for them. These options should be provided as a given to all students.'
- 'No. The teachers we have worked with were very well meaning but clearly had only a vague idea about neurodivergence, and little understanding of how it varies from individual to individual. There was often a one-size-fits-all approach, as though an adjustment that worked for one student in the past should be expected to work for all autistic students – and if it didn't, it must be the student's fault for being too demanding or not trying hard enough. Language used is often out-of-date and quite offensive, not reflecting best practice.'

*Comments from educators/teachers/trainers*

- 'No. Teachers do not receive adequate training in inclusion, or disability. They need to work in a team with other disability experts, such as occupational therapists.'
- 'No. There is no special training for staff, other than basic literacy and numeracy training. There is training on catering for diverse needs and specific training may be given on areas such as working with children with ASD, blindness and deafness. There is no intensive training for teachers who need to address significant emotional trauma, ODD [oppositional defiant disorder], moderate to severe intellectual disabilities etc ... or how to actually teach children within a whole cohort of other children while giving the attention needed to kids with special needs.'

Few respondents highlighted satisfactory experiences regarding the level of training that staff members received. Corresponding with the lack of awareness about disabilities as identified by those who expressed dissatisfaction, these individuals noted that a thorough understanding of different disabilities was a key factor in delivering inclusive education.

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'Yes, most of the teachers at the school whether they are in the 'Support Unit', or mainstream classes all seem to interact and are capable of interacting with my son.'
- 'Yes, our school is mostly neuro-affirming, so they are generally understanding in the challenges that Autistic kids face.'
- 'My daughter always went to Special need schools as the classes were smaller and all staff purpose trained.'

### *Comments from a principal*

- 'At our school, we focus on high-quality professional learning, delivered by experts in their field. We have a strong focus on understanding a variety of disabilities and strategies to best support students. Our teachers and support staff work and train together as we are highly inclusive in our approach to all staff in relation to their learning.'

### **Question 16. Do you use the Assisted School Travel Program (ASTP) to get to school? Does this make it easier for you to get to your school? Do you want to tell us anything about this?**

The Assisted School Transport Program (ASTP) is a program that provides free specialised transport for children with disability from their home to their school. When asked about their usage of and experience with the ASTP program, 173 participants responded to this open-ended question.

Many respondents indicated that they did not use the program, citing several reasons for non-usage.

Among the smaller subset of participants who confirmed usage or had experience with it, both positive and negative comments were expressed. Negative comments highlighted various issues with the program while positive comments focused on the value and usefulness of it.

A sample of comments by participants is included below.

#### Non-usage

Commonly cited reasons for non-usage included lack of awareness about the program's existence, inaccessibility of the program, exclusive eligibility criteria limited to those attending mainstream settings, and safety concerns for students.

#### *Comments from parents/carers*

- 'I didn't know this existed. Is this available in Dubbo NSW to children who aren't on the NDIS?'
- 'No I have been denied this service in the past.'
- 'No. I'm not comfortable having other people drive my child.'
- 'It would make it easier but we are not eligible as my son doesn't fit the criteria ie he is in mainstream class and is mobile. This is really frustrating as he cannot get a bus as it is too sensory overwhelming for him. He would also need to cross busy roads and gets too distracted to do so safely, I don't drive so need to limit my working hours and either get an uber to school, or use an independent transport service.'
- From a parent/carer with disability - 'Do not currently use. Whilst there are benefits to the program, I'm aware of instances where the ASTP provider has left children unsupervised after dropping them off without signing them into the care of the OSHC provider. There are also issues if the student with disability struggles with anxiety around unknown people and how the ASTP can be used to support them.'

#### *Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer with disability*

- 'It has never once been offered to me, despite all the school staff knowing I have a physical disability and am neurodivergent, and I have two disabled children.'

#### Negative comments

Respondents who expressed negative feedback about the program highlighted concerns such as safety worries echoed by non-users, unfriendly drivers, logistical challenges, difficulty communicating with the ASTP team, and a shortage of drivers.

*Comments from parents/carers*

- From a parent/carer with disability - 'We have tried to use this. The taxi driver was driving over the speed limit and erratically with my son in the taxi. He is no[w] too scared to use the service.'
- 'Utilising ATSP initially seemed like a solution, but it presented challenges for my son. He expressed dissatisfaction with the number of children on the run with him and the extended time it took to get home ... It not only impacts their sense of belonging and community but also introduces logistical challenges that can affect their overall well-being and comfort. I also have taken issue with the fact there are no cameras inside these vehicles, there are more regulations surrounding taxis than there are for drivers of these vehicles servicing this particularly vulnerable demographic.'
- 'We tried the transport at first for 18 months my son didn't like it he started throwing horrible angry tantrums which quickly ceased when I cancelled the transport. Later I found out it was rumoured the bus driver was shouting at the kids.'

*Comments from educators/teachers/trainers*

- 'ASTP is used by >40% of our students. The program does not have enough drivers and ATSOs and sometimes our students are unable to get to school because of the shortage of staff. This is an essential service in the country and we have put in place a back up bus to pick up students short term when this occurs.'
- 'Liaising with the ASPT team is always tedious and hard. Recently a family was displaced from their home due to flooding, it took 2 weeks to address the variation to their routine and the process is sooo inflexible and tedious, even in extreme excruciating circumstances. The result was that 2 students missed weeks of school at a time of significant loss and trauma!!!!'

Positive comments

Several responses provided positive feedback about the program, highlighting the program as a helpful and essential service that offered convenience for those in need.

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'Yes been amazing due to 3 children in 2 different schools 30 mins apart.'
- 'Yes we used this program all through school years which was incredibly helpful for our daughter and us as a family.'
- 'Yes. My children would be profoundly disadvantaged without this service. I currently have 2 children accessing support units (and a 3<sup>rd</sup> with an access request under way). Both current supports are in different locations 20km apart. I can't be at two school gates at 3pm to collect children. Without ASTP one of them would be unable to attend a support unit ...'

**Question 17. Do you think it is harder for people with disability living outside of Sydney to get a good education? Why do you think this?**

The 177 responses to this question fell into three groups: those who provided an affirmative answer, those who indicated a contrary opinion, and those who expressed uncertainty, thereby choosing not to comment. An analysis of those who voiced their opinions on this matter is presented below.

Yes

Respondents who provided an affirmative answer felt strongly that it was harder for people with disabilities living outside of Sydney to get a good education. A number of factors were identified by respondents who shared this view, including:

- limited educational choices
- limited funding, resources and facilities
- lack of specialist training for teachers
- lack of support services
- teacher and staff shortages
- difficulties in obtaining diagnosis.

A common sentiment among these responses was that accessing good education in areas outside Sydney was difficult.

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'Massively! Being in Dubbo NSW has shown me how hard it is to get support. Teachers aren't as aware, and the funding is so limited as well as the services.'
- 'Yes ... it seems people like us who live in regional areas are forgotten this is especially true for those in regional towns and cities in border areas like the ACT/NSW.'
- 'Absolutely yes ... We live in a rural town and there is nothing other than online learning or homeschooling available here for special needs children.'
- 'Of course it is - less resources outside of Sydney, more distance to travel, less infrastructure and funding. Plus, often communities in remote areas know less, so they advocate less and hence there's less understanding and support.'

*Comments from educators/teachers/trainers*

- 'Yes. Lack of choice about schools. Less external resources. Less teachers want to move outside of metropolitan areas.'
- From an educator/teacher/trainer with disability – 'Yes. Lack of resources, teachers with specialist training, access to supports ... the Sydney schools struggle to get these, how on earth can we expect that more rural locations, let alone remote schools, are going to have them?'

*Comment from a speech pathologist*

- 'Yes – I work in the regional town of Nowra and I strongly believe that it is harder for people with disability living outside of Sydney to get a good education. There is a significant lack of service providers in the community, limited access to specific training and development for teachers and staff, and inadequate resources such as casual teachers) for teachers to attend training.'

*Comment from a therapist*

- 'YES ... Getting a diagnosis is the first challenge - Lack of child development units west of mountains. Few if any clinicians offer developmental assessments (eg Griffith) for under 6 years – ADHC [Ageing, Disability and Home Care] used to do these. Huge wait lists for paediatricians or they've closed books. Childcare limited and often limited Uni qualified educators to notice delays & do screening assessments. Some schools have school counsellor just 1 day per term - limits capacity for assessments. Royal Far West research shows higher developmental vulnerability in western NSW with greater difficulties accessing services. Harder to access services with communication delays and other undiagnosed and/or unsupported developmental delay Higher rates of early career educators in regional rural and remote areas. Higher rates of teacher vacancies in rural regional and remote areas. Also teachers working outside their areas of expertise.'

## No

A few respondents indicated 'no' and offered a different perspective. Their responses highlighted several key points, such as the role of family and school, and the broader issue of students' needs not being met. The most commonly raised point was that access to quality education is challenging in Sydney as well, and that this is a systemic issue unrelated to location.

### *Comments from parents/carers*

- 'Not necessarily. Everywhere in Sydney is difficult.'
- 'I think this is a systemic issue regardless of location.'
- From a parent/carer who homeschool –'No, I think it depends on the home environment and school.'

### *Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer*

- 'No, however with continuing diagnosis and an increased percentage of students who need to access supports, services are finite and often do not meet the need.'

## **Question 18. Are there enough other services that can support children and teenagers with disability? Tell us more about why you think this way.**

A total of 167 respondents answered this question. Whilst a number of respondents suggested there are enough other services, the majority of respondents disagreed. Many responses stressed the need for more support services. Some of the support services that respondents called for, include:

- more mental health services
- more programs for autistic teens, and
- more alternative services than just occupational therapy and psychotherapy.

Many participants suggested that numerous services exist, but they were not very effective. A range of issues pertaining to the effectiveness of these services was identified and is presented below.

### Difficulty navigating support services

Responses also referred to difficulty navigating these support services. These respondents stated:

- From a parent/carer - 'There are many services. The problem is finding the most suitable for the person.'
- From an educator/teacher/trainer - 'Yes, but teachers do not always have the knowledge or skills to link families to these services.'

### Inadequate capacity

A number of participants pointed to the issue of wait lists to access support services, highlighting the problem of inadequate facilities and staffing.

- From a parent/carer – 'No, waiting lists are quite large for all therapies and schools that have special needs departments. There is not enough staff and therapists. My child's school support coordinator has been asked to return to Sydney this year as there is a shortage of support workers there not taking into account that the school she was taken from already has a shortage of staff. This leads into the previous question, if we aren't in Sydney and are regional we are forgotten or treated like we are out of site out of mind.'
- From an educator/teacher/trainer – 'Waiting lists for allied health services are extreme in our area.'

### Lack of coordination between services

Another issue identified by respondents related to the lack of coordination between services.

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'No, my child and others I am aware of have not been supported sufficiently with regard to disability. There is a distinct gap between NDIS, health services and education. Our therapy team are great however this has required a considerable amount of effort from my husband and I as parents. None of the systems mentioned are easy to navigate and definitely do not "talk" to one another. Young people and teens have very limited options for a specialist crisis support.'
- 'Yes there are, but these should be more integrated into the school environment especially speech therapy and OT [occupational therapist] which would benefit more struggling students.'

### Expensive and inaccessible

Some respondents pointed to the expensive nature of available services:

- From a parent/carer - 'No. Very limited supply and expensive ... sessions are \$200+ for 45 minutes.'
- From an educator/teacher/trainer with disability - 'Not really. The few that there are, are too expensive to access if you do not have NDIS funding ...'

### Lack of services in rural/regional area

Another set of respondents indicated that there were not enough services in regional and remote areas:

- From a person with disability - 'Personally where I live in the central west, no. As I said, resources are extremely limited outside of Sydney. Support workers are few and far between and services are very limited.'
- From a parent/carer - 'No my daughters OT lives in Sydney and travels to Griffith once every few months I am studying psychology myself to try to help people in GRIFFITH when I qualify hoping to specialise in Autism and autism as we have no one here.'
- From a teacher/speech pathologist – 'No, and this is particularly evident in regional, rural and remote areas. There are many barriers to accessing adequate support for children and teenagers with disability. There is a significant lack of services in the community, and extensive waitlists ... Many people and families living in these areas face further barriers including, socioeconomic disadvantages, financial barriers, language and cultural barriers, complex family dynamics, trauma and so on.'

### Limited support services under National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

A number of respondents also noted that many services were only provided under NDIS, and these NDIS provided services also had their own shortcomings:

- From a parent/carer – 'No there are limited quality services available and it all seems very geared towards accessing NDIS funding rather than supporting children.'
- From an educator/teacher/trainer – 'Many refuse to provide service unless have NDIS funding.'
- From a speech pathologist/consultant - 'Thanks to the NDIS, there are more services than there used to be. However, the quality of these services varies. There is still a lack of sufficient expertise.'

**Question 19. Are you worried about how students with disability are expelled or suspended from school? Tell us more about why you think this way.**

A total of 178 respondents answered this question. The question defined 'expelled' as being unable to come back to school anymore, and 'suspended' as not being able to return until the school allows it. The vast majority of responses expressed concerns around the use of expulsion or suspension.

A range of themes emerged from this question and are summarised below.

Not meeting student needs

Many participants viewed these two practices as indicative of a failure to understand student behaviour. They felt that the use of expulsion and suspension hinted at the broader problem that students were not supported, understood, or listened to in classrooms. One comment from a person with disability stressed the importance of using these practices in a forward-looking manner. This suggested that such approaches should focus on preventing future occurrences by understanding the underlying reasons for the child's behaviour and providing individualised support, rather than solely punishing them for their past actions.

*Comments from people with disability*

- From a person who attended a Catholic school - 'Absolutely. I think there is a level of understanding of the struggles of disabled students that 'abled' people or the wider population don't understand.'
- From a person who attended Tafe - 'Any child, regardless of disability, should be provided with a plan for support and daily activities that will occur during a suspension, or recommendations for support and education options after an expulsion. There are situations where home might be unsafe for a child and a suspension might only make their behaviour at school worse. If a child has been involved in something bad enough to warrant a suspension or expulsion, child protection services and specialist therapists should be involved in order to learn more about the child's situation and work towards the best outcome possible for everyone.'

*Comments from parents/carers*

- 'YES! When my son was still at school, he was threatened with suspension many times, which I refused each time as the problem was that it was the teachers failure to know how to help/deal with him, that caused him to at times have aggressive behaviour. It was not his fault, they just didn't understand him.'
- 'Yes. Many of the expulsions/suspensions are because students are not supported/understood/listened to well enough. They are then punished rather than the situation analysed and strategies put in place. Many times suspension and expulsion is to wear parents down to accept a segregated setting such a special unit or SSP [School for Specific Purposes].'

*Comment from a retired teacher*

- 'Yes. Alternative less detrimental options need to be explored and implemented. Expulsion and/or suspension does not fix the root cause and in some cases has the opposite effect ... rewards the behaviour. Need Special interventions/resources/support ... planned and implemented by Specialist Qualified Teacher/Support staff in consultation and in conjunction with classroom teachers and School Managers.'

A form of discrimination

Another common concern related to discrimination.

### *Comments from parents/carers*

- From a parent/carer who homeschooled - 'Disabilities are often used as an excuse, as cover, when the real problem is ableist discrimination.'
- Comment relating to SSP or special school - 'Yes, absolutely. Children are suspended/expelled (ie. punished) for behavioural reasons which are symptomatic of their disability. It's actually discrimination. If schools had more support and better training, there would be more positive pathways to deal with behavioural issues that wouldn't have to be dealt with by the blunt instrument of disciplinary action.'
- Comment relating to public/government school - 'Yes ... 2 autistic children were suspended from my son's class on the first day of school this year for behaving autistically. It is utter discrimination.'

### *Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer relating to public/government school*

- 'Yes. The current system punishes students for their disability, e.g. the rates of suspension or expulsion for students with ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] are higher than average. You only have to talk to a few parents of students with disability to understand how they are discriminated against, particularly when it comes to behaviour.'

### Impact on children and families

Some responses outlined the negative effects expulsion and suspension have on children and families.

### *Comments from parents/carers with disability relating to public/government schools*

- 'It affects how their educators and their peers perceive them, and ultimately it affects how the student sees themselves and label themselves, and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Managing kids at home who have been suspended or expelled negatively impacts their parents – including their employment. It's like the COVID school lockdowns but frequent and unpredictable.'
- From a parent/carer who homeschooled - 'Yes this is a massive concern. Students with psycho social disabilities are labelled as behavioural problems rather than children needing support, they quickly fall afoul of behaviour management policies which are old fashioned and harmful.'

### *Comment from an educator/teacher/trainer relating to public/government and early childhood educational settings*

- 'Yes these methods are only effective if the student understands or if the school is actually using the time to put in place new strategies. Often removing students from school just puts undue stress on the families and makes it harder upon their return.'

### *Comment from a child behaviour specialist who works with children across a range of settings*

- 'Extremely concerned. The PBS [Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme] system is exclusionary and most of my clients experience school exclusion ... Some on multiple occasions and in multiple schools. It calls parents away from their workplace, jeopardises their employment, causes high levels of anxiety and stress in a family, leads to family breakdown, single parenting, loss of income and poor mental health for the child.'

### Perspective from educational institutions

Several responses were made by educational staff members. They provided further insight into why expulsion and suspension are sometimes used in schools. The most frequently mentioned reason is for safety purposes.

### *Comments from educators/teachers/trainers*

- From a person who has experience in both the public and private setting - 'Usually children who have been suspended have been so because they have caused significant harm to other children and staff. A child was suspended from a school I was working in for stabbing another child with scissors and hit a teacher in the head with a chair. Repeated offences over several weeks. In my opinion this was due to myriad factors. Staff were not trained in how to teach a child with the particular needs they had, parents did not have adequate support at home and there was no specialist support at the school.'
- 'No. In my school a suspension reflects the time needed for staff to review plans and often other students need the respite. I have never observed an expulsion, however suspension is appropriate for persistent and or conscious violence. I do not think it is fair to expect teachers to be physically assaulted and abused in the workplace, regardless.'
- 'I support inclusive education and the right to education for all students, but that just cannot and should not come at the expense of others as I have witnessed it in schools. I am describing everyday lived reality for hundreds of teachers and students in schools around the state. We have to accept students into mainstream who we really cannot cater for, regardless of training or resourcing or staffing, and sometimes this results in quite extreme situations that pose a genuine risk to many others in a school environment ... We would love for every child to be able to access every classroom, but the reality is that if that's the goal, wholesale structural change would be required.'
- From a principal of a SSP or special school - 'I have never expelled a student from our school, however students who physically assault students are suspended per the NSW DOE [Department of Education] policy. This short period of time away from school, allows us to successfully put in place supports for the child, teacher and family.'

#### Not worried about the use of expulsion and suspension

Some respondents indicated they were not concerned about the use of expulsion and suspension practices.

- Comment from a parent/carer with disability whose child attended a Catholic school - 'No – physical violence is never okay regardless of disability. Too many children and staff being seriously injured.'
- From an educator/teacher/trainer who worked at a Catholic school - 'We have practices in place to support the student so that they are treated on the same basis as any other student. I do not worry about suspension or expulsion but advocate for the student if it is a possibility.'

#### **Question 20. Are you worried about restrictive practices being used a school for children with disability? Tell us more about why you think this way.**

The question defined 'restrictive practice' as an act of depriving someone of their right to move freely. A diverse range of responses was received from the 171 participants who answered this question.

Many of these responses expressed concerns regarding the use of restrictive practices. While some offered specific examples to illustrate their concerns, others echoed the sentiment of the previous question, viewing it as a form of abuse with negative effects on children and families.

A separate, contrasting perspective indicated that there are instances where the use of restrictive practices is appropriate, such as when it is for safety reasons or when used by qualified professionals.

Additionally, some respondents either did not observe restrictive practices being used or were not concerned about their use.

A sample of comments is presented below, grouped according to the nature of the response.

### Examples of restrictive practices being used

#### *Comments from parents/carers*

- 'Yes I have heard and witnessed this taking place with a variety of disabilities. Locking children in seclusion rooms, telling parents a child requires more medication to make them more subdued, introducing a cot or wheelchair for a child with full mobility who they wished to contain, force feeding and not letting a child access movement breaks are some examples of these.'
- 'Restrictive practice is a concern. My son in primary school was locked in a room while I was actually at the school attending an assembly day. Seeing his face and tears in his eyes looking out at the other parents through the window broke my heart.'

### Misunderstood/miscommunication

#### *Comments from parents/carers*

- 'The case in the news about the ASD child who was restrained certainly made me scared for children who are misunderstood.'
- From a parent/carer with disability – 'Children with disability often have a lot of difficulty with communication. Restrictive practices are extremely traumatic, especially for those who already have trouble being heard and understood. It's INHUMANE.'

### Impact on children and family

#### *Comment from a parent/carer*

- 'Yes, and this happened frequently in my sons previous school where he was a mainstream student. The impact to his mental health was utterly devastating and resulted in actual trauma to both him and to the family. Totally unacceptable practice that needs to be abolished.'

#### *Comments from parents/carers with disability*

- 'Absolutely. My son "paces", this is his normal autistic/anxiety tic. If he couldn't freely do this he would become incredibly overwhelmed and would abscond from school.'
- 'Happens to my eldest all too often ... It's a cop out, fixes nothing and only creates more problems for our family and my son's sense of belonging and identity.'

### Appropriate under certain instances

- From a person with disability - 'Restrictive practice should only be used by trained, qualified professionals with disabled people who have restrictive practices in their behaviour plans. Otherwise, restrictive practice should not be used.'
- From an educator/teacher/trainer -'No. sometimes it is needed, but needs to be documented and approve by an appropriate professional. As well common sense and links to duty of care. Staff should feel that the safety of a student and others must be prioritized. For example, today a student absconded and was running in the path of a reversing garbage truck. If in isolation the event I witnessed was filmed in isolation, it would make a current affair with outrage, but in context, that staff member actually saved his life. Common sense in transparency.'
- From a parent/carer – 'Yes. A restrictive practice requires a behaviour therapist to explore and advise and registered trained providers to implement however teachers and support staff who lack this qualification are all able to do as they please.'

**Question 21. Do you have anything else you want to tell us?**

133 participants answered this question which provided a final opportunity for participants to make general comments. It is noted that the general themes of these comments have been captured in the sections above.

**Conclusion**

The online questionnaire process was a valuable tool to seek the views of interested stakeholders on the significant issues raised in the terms of reference.

The material gathered will inform committee members' views as the inquiry progresses and will be considered in the inquiry's final report.

The committee again notes that questionnaire participants cannot be considered to represent a statistically valid, random sample of views on the topic. The participants were self-selected in choosing to respond (in the same way that submission authors are self-selected) and should not be considered to be a representative sample of the population.

Nevertheless, the questionnaire provided an important opportunity for people to participate in the inquiry and will greatly assist the committee in formulating its findings.

## Appendix 1 – List of questions

Please provide your contact details and age range.

1. What is your first and last name?
2. What is your email address?
3. What is the name of the town or suburb where you live?
4. What is your age?
  - a. I am under 18 years old
  - b. I am 18 years or older than 18 years

Tell us about yourself and where you go to school or where you study.

5. Tell us a little bit about yourself (you may choose more than one answer):
  - a. I am a person with disability
  - b. I am a parent/carer of a person with disability
  - c. I am an educator/teacher/trainer
  - d. I am a learning support worker
  - e. Other.
6. Are you or someone you care for going to school (you may choose more than one answer):
  - a. Preschool
  - b. Other early childhood education and care (long day care, family day care etc)
  - c. Primary school – public/government
  - d. Primary school – private/independent
  - e. Primary school – Catholic
  - f. High school – public/government
  - g. High school – private/independent
  - h. High school – Catholic
  - i. School for specific purpose (SSP or special school)
  - j. Home schooling
  - k. Distance education
  - l. TAFE
  - m. Private VET provider
  - n. University
  - o. Other.

7. When did you/your child attend the educational setting? (eg from 2018 to 2021, or enrolled since 2019)

We want to hear about your experience.

*You can answer as many of these questions as you like.*

8. Do you think there is enough support for children with disability at school to get a good education? Tell us more why you think this way.
9. Did your school make changes to make it easier to learn? What was it like asking for changes?

10. What could happen to your family if you or your child cannot get the support they need at school?
11. How can teachers get better support at school?
12. Have you or your child been refused to be enrolled at a school? Tell us more about this.
13. Does your school have good resources for children with disability? What kind of resources does your school have?
14. Does your school have things to make it easy for you to get around the school? This could be things like ramps or lifts. Tell us more about this.
15. Do you think the people who work at schools have enough training to work with people with disability? Tell us more about this.
16. The Assisted School Transport Program (ASTP) provides free specialised transport for children with disability from their home to their school. Do you use the Assisted School Travel Program (ASTP) to get to school? Does this make it easier for you to get to your school? Do you want to tell us anything about this?
17. Do you think it is harder for people with disability living outside of Sydney to get a good education? Why do you think this?
18. Are there enough other services that can support children and teenagers with disability? Tell us more about why you think this way.
19. Are you worried about how students with disability are expelled or suspended from school? Expelled means they cannot come back to the school anymore. Suspended means they cannot come back until the school says they can. Tell us more about why you think this way.
20. Are you worried about restrictive practices being used at school for children with disability? A restrictive practice is when someone takes away your right to move freely. Tell us more about why you think this way.
21. Do you have anything else you want to tell us?