

NSW DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families

ANSWERS TO SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS

1. ***The Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care emphasises the importance of person-centred approaches to providing services to people with disabilities. How does person-centred service provision work in the context of school-based education?***

Person-centred approaches to providing services to people with disability is an important underpinning concept of a practical framework for planning and delivering services to support the personal goals and needs of individuals.

Education is one of many possible elements that may be considered in the context of person-centred approaches to providing services to support an individual child and their family. Other elements may include, for example, support for parents and carers, housing and/or accommodation support, respite, health and other therapy needs, transport, and support for recreational and social participation.

Under the Commonwealth *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (subordinate legislation to the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*) all education providers are required to ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as students without disability. This includes obligations to make or provide 'reasonable adjustments' to support students with a disability according to their individual educational needs and in consultation with the student and/or their parent/carer.

The Department of Education and Communities has in place a wide range of policies, programs and services that support students with disability according to their individual needs. This support may include:

- changes that teachers make in the classroom to their teaching and learning programs every day
- access to a wide range of personnel with specialist expertise who support students and their classroom teachers
- additional assistance in the classroom from support staff
- the provision of specialist materials and equipment
- access to specialist training for teachers and support staff.

A personalised approach to meeting the learning and support needs of students with disability is undertaken in collaboration with parents/carers and is informed by students' individual educational needs.

Under the new NSW Government state plan, *NSW 2021*, the Department is developing a standards framework and best practice guide to support the

development of personalised learning and support planning for students with a disability.

2. ***The NSW Schools for Specific Purposes Principals' Network believes that red tape is a factor that impinges on the adequacy and accessibility of support in transitions. What is your view on this?***

The NSW Schools for Specific Purposes Principals' Network makes particular reference in its submission and evidence to the process for enrolment in a special school.

Under the *Education Act 1990* (NSW), every child is entitled to enrol in the government school that is designated for the area where their home is situated and that they are eligible to attend. Every public school is required to set an enrolment number to cater for anticipated local demand and to ensure that every eligible local child can enrol.

Classes in special schools, and special 'support' classes in regular schools, are part of the Department's full range of provisions that provide additional specialist support for eligible students with disability. These classes and schools are established according to local regional demand and are not available in every school community or geographical location across the state. For this reason, access to placement in special schools or support classes must be managed equitably and fairly for those students and their families seeking access.

The Department's regional placement panels manage access to these services for eligible students with disability. Regional panels operate an open and transparent process to match specialist services to parent preferences for students with a confirmed disability and to allocate specialist services taking into account availability and suitability of specialist service options. More information about the regional placement process and relevant actions to improve this process is provided in response to question 6.

3. **The NSW Government submission mentions (p.9) that the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education aims to provide universal access to early childhood education for at least 15 hours a week by 2013. What does universal access mean? What progress has been made to date in achieving this goal, particularly for low-income families?**

"Universal access" refers to the objective of the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, which is to ensure that all children in the year prior to school by 2013 have access to early childhood programs, delivered by trained early childhood teachers for 15 hours per week, 40 weeks per year.

A NSW-Commonwealth Bilateral Agreement on Achieving Universal Access to Early Childhood Education specifies that the performance benchmark, against which this goal is to be measured, is 95 per cent of all four year olds

enrolled in (and attending, where possible to measure) an early childhood education program by 2013. The Bilateral Agreement specifies a baseline position for NSW of 81.9 per cent as at September 2008.

The most recent data available indicate that this rate has risen to 86.2 per cent in 2010, and that there has been good progress in increasing the numbers of children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are attending a preschool program in the year before school. In 2010, an additional 3,350 children from low income families were participating in a preschool program compared to 2009.

4. How do parents find out about assistance that is available to them and their children in starting school or early childhood education?

Early childhood education services generally provide parents with information about assistance that is available to them and their children. This refers to assistance in early education and assistance in the process of transition to school. In addition, information for parents about the NSW Government's Supporting Children with Additional Needs (SCAN) program is available through the Department of Education and Communities website.

Primary schools design and implement transition to school programs for students entering kindergarten. As part of the transition to school process, schools use a range of strategies to inform their communities about assistance available.

All primary schools have a planned process around the orientation to Kindergarten for incoming students. Each school's process is designed to fit its local community but generally the process will include written information to the parents of current students and efforts to communicate with the local community through other avenues such as local newspapers or prominent signage on school grounds which encourage contact with the school as early as possible.

Schools generally make personal contact with the parents of prospective students through events such as meetings and information sessions at the school. Schools use these strategies and events to seek information about prospective students who may have special needs, in order to offer and provide the assistance required to support a successful transition to school.

Some students' complex needs are known to schools very early through contact with specialist consultants. In the Department of Education and Communities, regions and schools have Support Teachers Early Intervention, Disability Programs Consultants and school Counsellors, part of whose roles are to ensure that young children with special needs and their families are supported appropriately through the process of transition to Kindergarten.

It is often the case that these officers have contact with early education providers and so are able to provide information and assistance to parents and caregivers early enough in the process that planning can occur in a timely fashion.

5. **The Government's submission (p.13) says that secondary schools implement a variety of strategies at the local level to support students with additional or complex needs and their families. Can you provide some examples of the strategies that schools use?**

Local strategies that secondary schools put in place to support transition are determined by a range of contextual factors related to individual students and their needs and the circumstances of schools. Some examples are outlined below.

Collaborative planning

- Focused meetings are arranged so that teachers from the student's primary school, along with the student and their parents can meet teachers from the secondary school to provide information and share ideas about the student's achievements and strengths, their aspirations, their learning needs, and how the student may best be supported during transition. These meetings provide valuable information to secondary schools and form the basis of an individual or personalised learning plan as people work together to start to identify how the new school will meet the needs of the student and the student's teachers.
- For students with complex needs, more time is allowed for this planning and may commence up to two years before the student starts secondary school. The length of time for this process is flexible and will depend on the nature of the student's needs and the adjustments that may be needed to facilitate their transition and access to their new school.
- For example, transition planning for a student who uses a wheelchair will consider the student's individual mobility and access needs within the specific context of their secondary school. This may include access to classrooms and spaces in the school that will require the purchase and installation of ramps, lifts, specialist seating and other mobility equipment. A hearing loop or sound field amplification may need to be installed in the school hall and learning spaces so that a student with a hearing impairment can participate in weekly school assemblies.

School visits

- School visits are arranged so that primary school students can attend the high school on a regular basis to undertake "high school" classes and experience a high school timetable. The length of time for this will vary according to the local needs and priorities of students and schools.
- More frequent visits may be arranged for students with additional needs who may benefit from more time to become familiar with the routine of high school. For some students who find transitions particularly difficult, including students with autism spectrum disorders, school visits, together with the development of materials to support the student to become familiar with the new school environment and routine, are a vital part of transition planning.

Mentoring

- Some schools identify older high school students to assist students transitioning to their first year at secondary school. These high school students act as mentors for these new secondary school students.
- High school student mentors spend additional time with students with complex needs when they visit the secondary school for orientation lessons during the terms before they commence in the secondary school. The mentors use this extra time to get to know the student and identify how they can better assist the young person.

Moving to a life out of school

- Some schools establish working relationships with local businesses and industries to develop opportunities for students to engage with potential employees and to prepare students for employment. Specialist school staff liaise with students, their parents and employers to identify suitable workplace opportunities.
- For example a small group of secondary students with a disability spent time visiting and working in a supermarket to learn specific skills and competencies on-the-job, allowing them to explore the relationship between studies at school and their future employment and training options.

6. ***Some parents have told the Committee that decisions made by Regional Placement Panels about the placement of students with disabilities is frequently provided very late, which makes planning for transition difficult. What is the process Regional Placement Panels use? How are their decisions communicated to parents?***

The regional placement panel is the Department of Education and Communities' process to facilitate access for students with disability or additional learning needs to its specialist, targeted support provisions. This includes enrolment to specialist or 'support' classes in regular and special schools; and access to specialist support provisions including itinerant teachers and additional funding support for students with disability enrolled in regular classes through the Integration, Funding Support program. Placement panels meet in regions at least once each term to consider students' applications for support in conjunction with the available support provisions.

The frequency and type of panel meetings differ between regions due to demographic and geographic factors. In smaller regions one placement panel may consider all applications; while in larger regions, panels may be based on disability type or location.

Where parent/carer preference is for a particular support provision and placement or access is not immediately available, the student's application remains active and is considered at subsequent panel meetings. If the parent/carer has indicated a second or third preference this will be considered and offered.

Because of the essential ongoing nature of the process, in some circumstances an offer of placement may not be made until term four. Regions provide advice to parents/carers as soon as possible after placement panel meetings. However, the nature of this advice varies between regions. In all regions, where an offer of placement is to be made, a letter is forwarded to parents/carers through the home school or directly to the parent/carers where there is no home school.

Where the application has been unsuccessful at a particular panel meeting, in some regions, a letter advising of the outcome is forwarded to parents/carers; in other regions advice may be provided by the appropriate regional student services consultant, or in other cases, communicated through the student's home school.

The Department, after extensive consultation with parent groups, schools and regions, is currently finalising Placement Panel Guidelines which will provide a consistent approach to regional placement procedures across all regions. The guidelines detail timelines for actions to be taken following placement panel meetings including letters to parents/carers and schools advising of an offer of placement or provision, or that the application has been unsuccessful. The guidelines will be placed on the Department's website to be accessible to parents/carers, schools and regions.

7. *Research in the area of education transitions mentions that the transition to high school can be particularly difficult for Aboriginal students. Can you outline the measures that DEC takes to assist Aboriginal students to make a successful transition to high school?*

The Department of Education and Communities is committed to providing a better future for all our young people and to providing the best possible learning opportunities for students. The *Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2009-2012* states that the department is to develop effective programs to assist key transition points: home to school; early years to middle years; middle years to later years; later years to further education, training or workforce participation.

In addition, the department's Middle Years Strategy 2010-2012 outlines a number of key actions focusing on supporting Aboriginal students in the middle years including strengthening connections to enhance transition from primary to secondary schooling.

The department is committed to promoting genuine parental participation in their child's learning and continues to encourage schools to work through collaborative partnerships with their Aboriginal community. An example of this is the partnership agreement between the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. and the Department of Education and Communities.

Many primary and secondary schools have a number of successful transition initiatives implemented to specifically support Aboriginal students at a regional and school level. Examples of these are outlined below:

School visits/Parent information

- Information-sharing concerning Aboriginal students between, parents, care-givers and key high school personnel and their feeder primary school colleagues.
- Primary school Aboriginal students attending the high school on a regular basis to undertake 'high school' classes and experience a high school timetable so familiarity is gained by the student. In some cases this can run over three terms or the entire year for a set block each week. This also allows secondary staff the opportunity to meet the students and parents so as to provide a smoother 'transition' for students.
- Parent, family and community information days/nights on the changes, demands and opportunities for students transitioning from primary to secondary
- Schools may also participate in joint projects, such as NAIDOC Day, special events, curriculum events so that Aboriginal students are aware their culture is recognised and valued in the high school.

Personalised Learning Plans

- In addition to the standard transition programs that operate between some primary and high schools, a number of schools will have meetings where the Aboriginal student's Personalised Learning Plan is discussed. This may involve a discussion of what the student has done, their areas of strengths, areas of improvement, what their aspirations are, how they learn, any issues that the secondary schools needs to be made aware of, etc. This can then form the basis for the Personalised Learning Plan at the high school.
- Some schools are developing a digital Personalised Learning Plan process which will follow students from Kindergarten through to Year 12. This is aimed at providing clearer information about students for their start at high school.
- Some primary and high schools hold their Personalised Learning Plan development meetings together (at the same offsite venue). This allows high school staff to meet parents prior to their students starting high school.

Student support

- School transition teams / student welfare team / Aboriginal education team may meet and discuss the needs of the Aboriginal students to develop strategies or plans to support particular students.
- Some schools have employed a transition officer who supports students and families with the transition from Year 6 to Year 7. Other schools have a mentor system operating to support primary students entering into secondary.
- The Aboriginal Education Officers or the Aboriginal Education Workers from the primary school regularly meet to share information and ideas with the Aboriginal Education Officers or the Aboriginal Education Workers at the high school when planning high school orientation days, and participate in program activities.
- Year 7 advisors visit feeder primary schools to meet students and share with them background to attending the high school.

- Peer support for Year 7 with Year 9 or 10 mentors and buddy programs.
- Additional programs implemented for students identified as vulnerable on a number of indicators - not necessarily behaviour.
- Identification and support for Gifted and Talented Aboriginal students.

8. The NSW Government submission mentions (p.15) that the Department provides funding to non-government organisations through the Intervention Support Program to assist students with disabilities. How much funding is provided through this program in total? How many non-government organisations receive funding? What sort of programs do they provide?

In 2011, the Intervention Support Program provides approximately \$12.4 million to not-for-profit, non-government organisations.

The program funds 474 services, managed by 391 organisations.

Services including specialist disability programs, residential care facilities, early childhood intervention programs, preschools, child care centres, occasional care centres and family day care programs, support access to educational programs for children with disabilities from birth to 18 years.

9. *In its submission the Department notes that there are currently 46 Support Teachers Transition across the state (p.16). How do these teachers work with students with disabilities and their families?*

Support Teachers Transition are specialist teachers located within regions who can assist students with disability, their parents/carers and schools through a process of student centred transition planning .

This planning process involves close collaboration between students, families, schools, regional teams and a wide range of community based education, training and specialist service providers. It is a constantly evolving process in response to the needs of students and their communities.

Support Teachers Transition may undertake a range of activities. This includes:

- providing advice on curriculum options and adjustments
- providing advice on vocational preparation and entry to HSC Vocational Education and Training (VET).
- assisting with exit planning to post school destinations which may include employment and further education, transportation and mobility issues, recreation and leisure pursuits. This may involve liaison with a range of government and non government providers.
- completing referral, registration and assessment of students for entry to specialist disability programs funded by the Department of Family and Community Services' Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC).

The specific activities of Support Teachers Transition are determined by local priorities and are supported through professional learning. This includes annual state-wide training for Support Teachers Transition to support the school leaver process for year 12 students with disability who wish to access an ADHC-funded post school program.

- 10. *In its submission the Department notes that it is developing a functional assessment tool to improve information for teachers about the impact of a student's disability (p.5). What progress has been made in the development of this assessment tool?***

The functional assessment tool was trialled in 2009, revised and has been used on a large sample of students with disabilities in 2010/2011. It is anticipated that the remaining work in "testing" the instrument will be finalised early 2012.

- 11. *How does the Department assist students with additional or complex needs who are making a 'horizontal' transition between schools?***

Since the enhanced enrolment procedures implemented from 2 August 2006 there has been considerable work around transfer of information across schools when students with complex needs move from one school to another.

This has included:

- tracking of every student moving from primary Year 6 to high school Year 7 that flags student special needs
- students enrolling in Year 7 to 12 outside of normal enrolment periods
- students in out-of-home care
- working with families and children in the mental health sector.

Each of these has facilitated information-gathering from previous school student records and/or student counselling files. The student's welfare needs are identified and considered by the learning support or student welfare team at the new school. Subsequently strategies that support and assist the student can be determined by the team. For example: peer support, mentoring or an introductory meeting with the school counsellor. Other strategies include additional welfare programs in the school, contact with the department's Child Wellbeing Unit or referral to an external service.

New schools typically arrange an interview and an orientation to the school ahead of students starting at the school. A formal individual transition plan may be developed on a case by case assessment of the needs of individual students.

- 12. *Some jurisdictions legislate to mandate transition planning for students with additional or complex needs. Would such legislation be likely to improve educational outcomes for students in NSW?***

Evidence about the impact of legislative mandates on transition planning within its specific jurisdictional context would need to be carefully analysed to

identify the nature of relationships between legislation for transition planning and outcomes for students.

All students have transition needs in education. There are practical considerations associated with a mandated approach to provisions for certain students and not others. These include the way that students and their needs are defined for the purposes of legislation and resourcing implications for supporting their implementation in the context of all other legislative obligations relating to the provision of education.

The Department notes that current disability discrimination legislation through the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* mandates the provision of reasonable adjustments to accommodate the educational needs of students with disability, including transitions. However, as noted in the NSW Government submission to this inquiry, not all education providers fully understand their obligations in this area and not all parents fully understand their children's rights under the legislation.

Outcomes of the review of this legislation, currently underway, may provide opportunities for improving the understanding of parents and educators of their respective legal rights and obligations to accommodate the needs of many students with additional or complex needs. They may also shape and/or influence changes to policies and procedures.