

INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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

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1. Introduction

NDS welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Standing Committee on Social Issues' *Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families*.

Education is fundamental to the development of all children, providing an array of academic and social opportunities and experiences. Just as for all children, education is of critical importance in the lives of students with additional or complex needs. Transition points during a child's education are often challenging however these key points of growth and learning can be more so for students with additional or complex needs and their families

Evidence suggests that many children with disability are 'falling through the cracks' in the education system leading to poorer educational outcomes and opportunities for learning. Insufficient funding for support, ad hoc transition planning, a lack of teacher training opportunities and a lessened focus on the lifespan approach to education support are all causative factors. The impact of these systemic failures within the education system to support students with additional or complex needs is most evident in the secondary school setting where fewer students with disability are continuing with post-school education, training and employment.

NDS acknowledges that the NSW Government has expressed a strong commitment to the provision of quality education opportunities for students with disability or special. This commitment has been demonstrated by the significant increase in funding over the past 10 years to support the additional educational needs of students with disability. The announcement of an additional \$2 billion investment in disability services over the five years for the second phase of the *NSW Government's Stronger Together: A new direction for disability services in NSW 2006-2016* is further evidence of the Government's awareness of the growing demand and crucial role that specialist disability services play in supporting people with disability in all areas of their lives.

However, despite the significant investment of funding and expressed commitment, there remains a strong need for the NSW Government to better understand the supports and services that children with disability and their families require to succeed in educational settings. NDS acknowledges that there are widely differing views on how education should best be provided to students with additional or complex needs. This poses a challenge for Government however it need not become a barrier to progress if a strong commitment to person-centred planning and individualised support arrangements are endorsed and matched with appropriate levels of funding.

The principles upon which the second phase of *Stronger Together II* have been built provide a firm directive for how the education system needs to adapt to ensure it can be more responsive to the unique needs, opportunities and challenges of educating students with additional and complex needs. *Stronger Together II* signals the beginning of a significant paradigm shift in the way services and supports will be provided to people with disability and their families. Built around the principle of placing the person with disability and their families at the centre of the decision making process, *Stronger Together II* sets out the Government's

commitment to supporting people with a disability to be the key determiners of the services and supports they require. *Stronger Together II* also commits the Government to creating a service sector that provides for certainty of support across the lifespan, especially at key transition points and a commitment to portable, flexible, individualised packages for anyone receiving disability services by the end of 2013/14. A commitment to person-centred approaches and to enabling people with disability and their families to decide on the supports and services they require need should exist in all aspects of a person's life including their educational setting.

NDS believes it's imperative that the Inquiry consider the transformative implications of the *Productivity Commissions Final Report into Disability Care and Support* when considering the future funding of service and support needs for students with additional and complex needs. The Report recommendations clearly indicate that the NSW Government will continue to be responsible for the bulk of disability support provisions in schools. These supports might include structural modifications to buildings to ensure better access, aids and appliances to increase educational opportunities, teacher aids, development of new curriculum materials, and teacher training (for example, sign language). They would not be covered under a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) many of these expenditures are hard to attribute to a specific individual, since they often meet the needs of many students. It is therefore evident that the current difficulties experienced by people with disability and their families in accessing disability supports will only continue to amplify under a future NDIS if appropriate levels of recurrent are not identified and secured.

As the peak body for disability service providers, this submission will focus on the issues relayed to us by service providers who support students with disability who have additional and complex needs.

2. Obligations to provide quality educational outcomes for students with disability

Australian governments have expressed a commitment to education reform through the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. This document sets the direction for Australian schooling over a 10 year period and sets out two important goals:

1. Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and
2. All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed members.

More broadly, Australian Governments have an obligation to proactively seek ways to reduce the gap in educational outcomes for people with disability. In 2008, Australian became a signatory to the *United National Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*. Article 24 of the Convention specifically deals with Education and states that:

1. *States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal*

opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

- a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;*
 - b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;*
 - c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.*
- 2. In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that:*
- a) Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;*
 - b) Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;*
 - c) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;*
 - d) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;*
 - e) Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.*
- 3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:*
- a) Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;*
 - b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;*
 - c) Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.*
- 4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats*

of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

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

Inherent in Melbourne Declaration and Article 24 of the Convention is a commitment to ensuring that students with a disability can access quality education and are provided with effective individualised supports and environments that are consistent with their education goals.

Currently, however, around 63% of school aged children with disability and special needs experience some difficulty at school. Learning difficulties, fitting in socially and communication difficulties were reported to be the most common difficulties experienced¹. This suggests that the principles set out in the Declaration and the UN Convention are not easily translated from policy into practice. This significantly impacts on the quality of educational outcomes for students with additional and complex needs and the families who support them.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2006, *Bulletin 42: Disability updates: children with disabilities*, AIHW, Canberra.

3. Overarching issues key transition points

Transition points within the education journey can pose significant challenges for students with disabilities and their families. The following issues are of relevance to all students with disability especially at key transition points:

Adequate funding to support choice of educational setting and quality educational outcomes.

The adequacy of funding to support students with additional and complex needs remains a deeply vexed issue.

Inadequacy of funding is reported to impact over 30,000 students with disability and special needs throughout NSW. In 2009, 78% of public school principals in NSW rated funding levels as either poor or very poor. In some cases children with disability are reported to receive as little as \$605 per semester or only 12 minutes of aide time per day. Insufficient funding has a direct and tangible impact on the success of the transition pathway at all stages of a child's educational journey.

The deficits and inequities in the funding available to students with disability can result in significant variations in the levels and types of supports made available to them. Providers comment that there appears to be little transparency in how funding is distributed or in the way it is used to support an individual child's education program. Particularly in the early childhood area this can result in children with similar learning profiles receiving vastly different levels of support depending on the school they attend.

NDS has also received significant feedback from members on the inadequacy of funding to resource the enrolment of a child in an inclusive, mainstream school. Evidence suggests that funding is limited and does not match the full per capita infrastructure and staffing costs required to maintain a similar enrolment in a special school or support class. This can be a significant factor in family's choice of school particularly if their child has significant support needs.

The anomaly in Funding for Schools for Specific Purposes (SPPs) has also been raised extensively with NDS by members. Many SPPs are funded as primary schools despite accommodating significant numbers of high school aged enrolments. Primary schools generally receive less funding than high schools, therefore a high school student attending SPPs is staffed and funded at a lesser level. In order to adequately support these students many schools are required to use base funding which supports staffing, executive support and teacher preparation to provide adequate face-to-face teacher assistance to students.

The Final Report of the General Purpose Standing Committee No.2 on the *Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs* called for the NSW Government to substantially increase funding for students with disability, including Schools for Specific Purposes, to ensure all students have equitable access to education. NDS supports this recommendation and asks for the NSW Government to recognise the true cost of adequately supporting students with disability.

Recommendation:

- *The NSW Government consider substantially increasing funding for students with disabilities in recognition of the true cost and investment needed to ensure that students with a disability are afforded equitable choice and access to education.*

Investment in transition teams who are equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to support students with disability.

A successful transition between school settings and systems for students with disability is heavily reliant on the skills, knowledge and abilities of teachers and support staff to prepare the student and their families for change. Transition teachers can play a valuable role in facilitating this transition however NDS members report that these supports are often not made available.

Members report that the quality and effectiveness of school learning support teams is variable and in many schools these teams do not exist. These teams are designed to function as a whole school planning and support mechanism aimed at addressing the learning support needs of students through collaborative planning between educators, service professionals, students and their families. Whilst the role of these teams is to support a student with disability in their educational setting, an essential focus of these teams should be to ensure that key transition points for students and families are supported and managed.

The Final Report of the General Purpose Standing Committee No.2 on the *Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special* recommended that the Department of Education and Training (DET) require all mainstream schools establish or be resourced by a school learning support team. It further recommended that these teams be supported by at least one person with appropriate special education qualifications. NDS supports these recommendations and believes that they are essential to supporting successful transition for students with additional or complex needs.

Recommendation:

- *The Department of Education and Training adopt the recommendations pertaining to school learning support teams and the requirement for these teams to be supported by at least one person with appropriate special education qualifications.*

Commitment to enhancing the availability of training for teachers to ensure they can appropriately support students with disability.

Many teachers working in mainstream educational settings report that they do not feel equipped to cater for the learning and support needs of students with additional and complex needs. NDS members report that the current mandatory special education unit which forms part of the pre-service teacher education course does not adequately prepare teachers for educating students with disability.

NDS concurs with the views of its members that the current special education training is not adequate to prepare teachers to meet the diversity of learning and support needs of students with disability. The training covers generic information and has little focus on the role of teachers in preparing students for key transition points.

Article 24 of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities explicitly addresses the need for teacher training and resources, stating:

States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

There remains a strong impetus to ensure that teachers receive comprehensive training to ensure that students with disability are supported to reach their full potential.

NDS members also indicate that there is limited opportunity and incentive for teachers to partake in training and professional development opportunities to enhance and further develop their skills and knowledge in supporting students with disability.

Teachers have a significant, if not definitive, impact on the educational outcomes of students with disability. Just as for all students, the quality of the teacher, no matter what the needs of the students, will always determine the outcome. NDS argues that investing in the quality of teaching in schools is the most significant way in which governments can improve schools' participation, achievement and outcomes for students with disability.

Recommendations:

- *The NSW Government seek to review the content of pre-service teacher education courses to broaden the scope and practical learnings around the support needs of students with disability. The course review should include content around the roles of teachers in supporting the transition pathway for students with disability.*
- *DET actively work to create and maintain an active program of professional development opportunities to enhance the skills and knowledge base of teachers.*

Need for a greater focus based on the development of strength based Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to support access to the universal curriculum.

It is NDS firm position that students with disability should have genuine access to the universal curriculum. For many students with disability, the development of a comprehensive Individual Education Plan (IEP) is the most effective way to ensure that students with disability are able to access the curriculum in a meaningful way.

NDS members concur with many of the concerns in the Final Report of the General Purpose Standing Committee No.2 on the *Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs* around the variability in the conduct and quality of the IEPs. With the move towards placing people with disability at the centre of the decision making process initiated through *Stronger Together II*, there is a need to consider whether the current IEP process enables true choice and voice for people with disability and their families.

NDS wishes to stress that it should be the decision of the student with disability and their families whether an IEP is required. It should however be offered to all students with disability entering an educational setting.

NDS members comment that IEP's rarely consider the planning needs of a student with disability as they transition between educational settings. There is a genuine need for the

students with disability to have access to necessary life skills courses and skill development opportunity to support a more successful transition to occur. This is especially important for secondary students with disability when planning the transition to post-school opportunities.

Recommendations:

- *The NSW Government pursue the issue of an appropriate curriculum for students with disability through the current negotiations around a new national curriculum.*
- *DET to ensure that all students with disability entering educational settings are given the choice of having an IEP developed.*

4. Transitioning into early childhood education

Research indicates that a successful transition of a child with disability into an early childhood education setting is reliant on a number of factors for success. For many children with disability, early childhood education will be the first formal education structure they enter into access to and both the child and their family will face many challenges during this transition.

Support for early intervention services to support transition into early childhood education

All involved in supporting children with disability would acknowledge that early intervention services significantly improve the success of a child's transition into early childhood education. These supports and services are known as early childhood intervention and may include speech pathology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and specialist early education support.

In 2011, the Federal Government introduced the 'Better Start for Children with Disability' initiative which provides early intervention funding for children with disability under the age of 6 years. This funding can be used to assist with the transition to early childhood education however the funding is not available to all children with disability. As such, many children with disability are excluded from this funding opportunity limiting the types of early intervention support services they can access. Service providers have expressed their frustrations at this initiative not being available to all children with disability as targeted early intervention programs have been proven to increase a child's capacity to engage, learn and contribute to all aspects of their daily life.

Whilst NDS acknowledges that the 'Better Start for Children with Disability' initiative is Commonwealth funded and operated, we would encourage the NSW Government to consider ways to encourage the Federal Government to expand the coverage of the program to all children with disability.

In their submission to *Inquiry into the provision of education of students with disability or special needs*, Early Childhood Intervention Australia, called for a promising pilot programme, the ADHC-funded Therapy Transition Program, to be expanded and made available to all children with disability. This program offers targeted therapy support to children with disability during the 6 months prior to school and the first 6 months of their Kindergarten year. This State based program offers a viable alternative. NDS believes that this type of transition program should be supported and developed as a joint initiative between ADHC and DET as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation

- *The NSW Government consider investing in a state-wide 'Therapy Transition Program' to which would provide targeted early intervention services to support to transition to early childhood education settings.*

Shortage of allied health professionals and special educations to provide early intervention support.

NDS commends the NSW Government for recognising the value of early intervention services in improving outcomes for children with disability however evidence suggests that there remains a growing need for early intervention services. Under the first phase of *Stronger Together*, 8,000 therapy, early childhood intervention and family support service places were allocated to build children's skills and provide support for families. Many of these places were aimed at supporting children at this key transition into early childhood education. Under the second phase of *Stronger Together* additional places and funding will be allocated to children with disability and their families. This funding sits under the broader *Stronger Together* commitment to early intervention and a lifespan approach to supporting people with disability.

Whilst the commitment is both necessary and vital, NDS members report that the growing demand for early intervention services and support is placing additional pressure on the current shortage of allied health professionals and special educators in the early childhood intervention and early childhood education sectors. Members report that many children with disability who do receive early childhood intervention services often receive them too late as the delays for assessments are compounded by a shortage of trained professionals to develop plans and provide the support interventions. For these services to contribute to a successful transition into early childhood education, they need to begin as early as possible after diagnosis and assessment of needs.

Best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions

Members report that many parents when transitioning their child with disability into early childhood education find that the transfer of information about their child's needs is often limited. This clearly has implications for a child with disability as right from the start of their educational career, as teachers may not be aware of the child's strengths and support needs. To ensure a smooth and successful transition for a child with disability it is essential that schools actively identify and collaborate with the child's family and, where identified, the early intervention services and supports who have been working to support the child's early development. Service providers also report that the transfer of information within the school environment can be limited resulting in significantly poorer educational outcomes for students with disability.

Recommendations

- *The NSW Government commits additional resources to support the expansion of early childhood intervention services to aid the transition into a school setting for children with disability.*
- *The NSW Government consider industry development initiatives to reduce the impacts of workforce shortages and encourage allied health professionals to specialise in early intervention.*

5. From early childhood education to primary school

Typically when children with disability move from early childhood education to primary school, it is the first time they will be away from their families for five full days a week and it might be the first time they are placed in an educational facility with children without disability. This can bring many challenges for children with disability and their families.

The adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families

In 2010-11 the NSW Ombudsman undertook a thorough consultation process with families of children with disability around access to services and supports. Parents and carers consistently told the NSW Ombudsman that when their child transitioned from early childhood education to primary school, services and supports that they could previously access were suddenly no longer available to them. This is experienced most commonly with therapies, information and links to other services.

Parents also note that often when their child transitioned to primary school they can no longer access service coordinators. This results in minimal assistance when choosing appropriate schools and additional supports that their child might need. It can also have the adverse effect of prolonging the transition period which can be hugely unsettling for both the child with disability and their family².

An additional factor which can prolong the transition period is the lengthy delay that often occurs when educational authorities are making decisions about acceptance into nominated schools. This delay results in families not having suitable planning time and can cause the transition from early childhood education to primary school to be rushed and ineffective.

Best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions

When decisions are made early, children with disability experience more successful, quicker transitions from early childhood education to primary school. Service providers see a marked difference in children with disability who have planned transitions that have included a raft of stakeholders in that child's life. To assist with making these timely decisions, easily accessible information must be available for families. Resources should also be available to ensure families have people to talk to about their child's education needs and aspirations.

When education plans are implemented between the child, family and school, the most effective and efficient transitions are realised.

Therapy transition programs are available to children with disability who are moving to primary school the following year. Under the program, children with disability are supported for six months prior to commencing primary school and for six months after commencing primary school.

Children with disability receive a range of services, including:

² NSW Ombudsman, 'Consultations with families of children with disabilities on access to services and support', 2011

- speech therapy;
- occupational therapy; and
- access to special educators.

There needs to be a clear understanding that transitions for children with disability may require a longer period of service intervention the child and their family. Therapy transition programs have accomplished successful transitions for a large proportion of children with disability who have had access to the program.

Recommendations

- *DET to consider making school allocation decisions for children with disability at least 6 months prior to the child transitioning to school to provide sufficient time to consult with the family and service providers on an appropriate transition plan.*
- *The NSW Government review access requirements for therapy transition programs to ensure that all children with disability who require transition support have access to these services.*

6. From primary school to secondary school

Transitioning from primary school to secondary school brings with it a great number of changes and challenges, including; managing timetables, attending a number of different classes, each with a different teacher and often different peers, missing old friends from primary school and making new friends. Even the very positive changes like students with disability seeking greater independence can cause concerns for families.

The adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families

When students with disability transition into secondary school, transition teachers can be a great resource to assist a student to more easily adjust to a changed environment. However, transition teachers are often not available and this can cause an already difficult transition to seem overwhelming for students with disability and their families.

As highlighted in NDS' submission to the '*Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs*', an appropriate, individual curriculum for each child with disability is of great benefit to their education and can assist with fostering a smooth transition to secondary school.

The Disability Standards for Education stipulates clear rights and standards in relation to curriculum development, accreditation and delivery for students with disability, stating:

The effect of the following standards is to give students with disabilities the right to participate in educational courses or programs that are designed to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding, including relevant supplementary programs, on the same basis as students without disabilities.

Standards for curriculum development and accreditations and delivery:

1) The education provider must take reasonable steps to ensure that the course or program is designed in such a way that the student is, or any student with disability is, able to participate in the learning experiences (including the assessment and certification requirements) of the course or program, and any relevant supplementary course or program, on the same basis as a student without a disability, and without experiencing discrimination.

2) If a student is enrolled in the course or program, the provider must:

a) consult the student, or an associate of the student, about whether the disability affects the student's ability to participate in learning experiences of the course or program, or any relevant supplementary course or program; and

b) in light of the consultation, decide whether an adjustment is necessary to ensure that the student is able to participate in those learning experiences on the same basis as a student without disability who is enrolled in the course or program.

c) if:

*i) an adjustment is necessary to achieve the aim mentioned in paragraph (b);
and*

ii) a reasonable adjustment can be identified in relation to that aim; make reasonable adjustment for the student in accordance with Part 3 (Making Reasonable Adjustments)

3) The provider must repeat the process set out in subsection 2 as necessary to allow for the changing needs of the student over time.

In addition, the Disability Standards for Education set out measures for compliance:

a) the curriculum, teaching materials and the assessment and certification requirement for the course or program are appropriate to the needs of the student and accessible to him or her; and

b) the course or program delivery modes and learning activities take account of intended educational outcomes and the learning capacities and needs of the student; and

c) the course or program study materials are made available in a format that is appropriate for the student and, where conversion of materials into alternative accessible formats is required, the student is not disadvantaged by the time taken for conversion; and

d) the teaching and delivery strategies for the course or program are adjusted to meet the learning needs of the student and address any disadvantage in the student's learning resulting from his or her disability, including through the provision of additional support, such as bridging or enabling courses, or the development of disability-specific skills; and

e) any activities that are not conducted in a classroom, such as field trips, industry site visits and work placements, or activities that are part of the broader course or educational program of which the course or program is a part, are designed to include the student; and

f) the assessment procedures and methodologies for the course or program are adapted to enable the student to demonstrate the knowledge, skills or competencies being assessed³.

NDS supports the Standards and subsequent compliance measures as articulated in the Disability Standards for Education. However, feedback from members would suggest that too often inappropriate curriculums are set for students with disability. This results in students with disability being unable to complete their set work and can cause an obvious divide between them and their peers without disability which can undermine a successful transition.

In addition to unsuitable curriculums, travel can be a major hindrance to successful transitions. Students with disability may have gone to a primary school which was in their

³ Disability Standards for Education 2005

local town or suburb. However, that town or suburb might not have a suitable secondary education facility available. As a result they might have to travel some distance to a secondary school. This increased travel time can cause great stress on students with disability and their families and result in a less than successful transition. While the Student Special Transport Scheme is established, it can be difficult to access.

Best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions

An advocate or support person for students with disability can offer assistance with making important transition decisions to ensure that they are receiving the most appropriate education.

When students with disability have a choice about where they want to attend school, the best transitions are often realised. Their priority might be to attend the secondary school that their primary school friends will be attending and they should have the option to do so⁴. Inadequate funding or resources is not an acceptable reason for why a student with disability does not attend school with their friends.

Often secondary schools are far larger than primary schools. Transitioning to a school of such size can be overwhelming for students with disability. Allowing students with disability and their families additional opportunities to visit the school and meet the teachers prior to the school year starting can allow for a more successful transition⁵. It may also be beneficial for all teachers to be made aware of new students with disability who will be starting at their school and to understand any additional needs they may have. This will assist in ensuring appropriate support is afforded to students with disability, particularly in a school with a large number of students.

Recommendations

- *DET progress the development guidelines which support all students with disability in secondary school settings to have access to an Individual Education Plan to support their learning within a universal curriculum.*
- *NSW Government to review the barriers to accessing secondary school opportunities as a matter of urgency. Consideration should be given to reviewing the Special Transport Scheme eligibility requirements if students with a disability are not able to access a secondary school in their local area.*
- *DET consider establish a 'school visitation' program to enable prospective students with disability and their families to visit the school and meet teachers prior to the commencement of the school year.*

⁴ Ageing, Disability and Home Care, 'Making the Move', 2010

⁵ *ibid*

7. From secondary school to employment, further education, or other post-school options

Leaving secondary education and becoming an adult is a huge life change. For students with disability this a key transition point as they need to make important decisions about their future. These decisions could include whether they want to access further education, look for employment or begin a post-school program like Transition to Work or Community Participation⁶.

The adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families

Planning for life post-school for students with disability often only occurs when the student is in Year 12. NDS members have long been concerned that this is far too late to achieve a successful outcome and smooth transition. This process should be started in Year 10 at the very latest.

Concerns have also been raised about the assessment process for a student with disability to enter Transition to Work or Community Participation. Students are assessed by their year 12 teacher in a rather rigid and rapid manner. Whilst some additional sources of information are drawn on to inform this assessment process, this is not consistent practice and is cited as a significant risk given the weight such assessments carry in terms of determining the post school pathways of people with disability. It is not possible to understand the needs, interests and goals of the student in such a time limited and narrow process. Implications of these assessment and planning mechanisms are lifelong, and the length and frequency of such processes need to reflect this.

Following the initial assessment (which is centrally collated by the University of Wollongong), students receive confirmation about which post-school program they are eligible enter. Once funding streams have been confirmed for Transition to Work or Community Participation, students with disability and their families are required to select the service provider they want within three months of notification. The choices that students with disability and their families make are based on limited information (a service provider booklet that lists all providers in their region with a one page overview of the service) and minimal opportunity to get to know the service provider. This fragmented method hampers the transition process.

If families wish to appeal due to incorrect or inappropriate funding allocations, it is a time consuming and difficult process. This results in families not appealing decisions and poorer funding outcomes for students with disability transitioning out of secondary education. In addition, should a service provider deem the funding allocated to not be sufficient to supporting the person in the best possible way, they are unable to file an appeal. Appeals can only come from families and this can at times be too restrictive as they may not fully understand the true cost of delivering services and supports.

Service providers who operate Transition to Work or Community Participation programs receive limited information about the student with disability prior to them starting the

⁶ Ageing, Disability and Home Care, 'Stepping Out', 2010

program. Instead service providers have to spend valuable time conducting planning processes after the program has started. The transition process would be more successful if service providers had the opportunity to find out additional information about the student, like support needs and goals, before students commenced the program. This would enable them to design more person-centred services and supports prior to the person commencing with them. This would, however, require some degree of funding to support such activity.

Whilst in secondary education, students with disability often do not have opportunities to develop appropriate 'life skills'. When transitioning out of secondary education, they have difficulty meeting the demands of social settings and other expectations of adult life. Developing such skills whilst at secondary school would greatly benefit their transition to employment, further education, or other post-school options. To achieve this, greater collaboration is needed with specialist disability services who operated independent living skills and community access programs.

NDS NSW member organisations have reported high rates of absenteeism and disengagement from educational pursuits from students with disability. Schools will often recommend that these students be transitioned to a Disability Employment Service with the goal of having them achieve an employment outcome and be recognised as a valued contributor to society. However, many students with disability have not yet developed the necessary skills, abilities or coping mechanisms to succeed in the workforce. Often their employment lasts only a couple of months and they experience a loss of empowerment, low self esteem and have great difficulty trying to find suitable work in the future.

To avoid unsuccessful transitions, all stakeholders in the lives of young people with disability must actively be working toward the same goal. It is important to not let past experiences hamper future goals and aspirations a young person with disability might have. If their goal is open employment, those stakeholders in their life must utilise the available supports and technology for instructing and supporting young people with disability to achieve this goal. Having a job is considered to be a valued adult role providing income, dignity, social growth, and mental and physical health⁷ and young people with disability should have the opportunity to transition to this role.

If the open labour market is not an appropriate transition for a student with disability, they might find more success in supported employment working for an Australian Disability Enterprise which seek to create satisfying and meaningful employment for people with disability⁸. Transitions must not be looked at as a 'one size fits all' approach. Students with disability will have different needs and aspirations and should be able to transition in a way most appropriate to them.

While supported employment might be an appropriate employment option for people with disability leaving secondary education, there have long been fractures in service access pathways that prevent a smooth transition between school and supported employment programs, as well as between open employment and support employment. This promotes a

⁷ Wehman, 'Life Beyond the Classroom. Transition Strategies for Young People with Disabilities', 2006, p. 35

⁸ National Disability Services, 'Response to the Australian Government's Discussion Paper on Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable supported employment', 2010, p. 1

strong case for a vocational development program to be available to students about to transition out of secondary school⁹. This also highlights the fragmentation that occurs as a result of different government departments administering different programs, with the Federal Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations administering open employment, the Federal Government's Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs administering supported employment and the NSW Government's Ageing, Disability and Home Care agency administering Transition To Work, Community Participation, respite and day programs and the NSW Department of Education administering TAFE and other vocational courses, with the Federal Government administering tertiary university education. Within this complex mix of bureaucracies, people with disability often get lost and fall through the gaps.

There is a historical stigma surrounding supported employment which has marked it as a last resort for students transitioning out of secondary school. NDS has been a strong advocate in changing this misconception. In NDS' *'Response to the Australian Government's Discussion Paper on Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable supported employment'* a number of strategies to encourage students with disability to consider supported employment are explained, including:

- better advertising for Australian Disability Enterprises;
- providing further training options for supported employees; and
- community awareness to break the stigma surrounding supported employment¹⁰.

Flexibility is key to achieving successful transitions for school leavers with disability, particularly in relation to the Transition To Work program which is currently only available to school leavers for a period of up to two and a half years. Many people with disability may be suitable for the Transition To Work program once they have spent time developing social and independent living skills through the Community Participation program, a day program, or other means. NDS supports innovative approaches that aim to assist people with disability gain meaningful employment at any age.

Best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions

It is important to note there are many positive aspects that can occur during the transition from secondary school to employment, further education, or other post-school options. Young people with or without disability tend to adapt to new situations very quickly and as with their peers without disability, students with disability have a want and desire to experience new situations and enjoy what life has to offer.

NDS members are clear that positive and seamless transitions can occur when staff who are familiar with the general needs of students with disability who are transitioning from secondary school are available to support and respond to needs appropriately. This is most effective when positive relationships have developed over time between schools, agencies and service providers which support and foster positive outcomes for students with disability in transition. Sharing of holistic, strengths based information about the student with disability

⁹ National Disability Services, 'Response to the Australian Government's Discussion Paper on Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable supported employment', 2010, p. 6

¹⁰ National Disability Services, 'Response to the Australian Government's Discussion Paper on Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable supported employment', 2010, p. 17

matched with a 'one person, one plan' philosophy has proven to be highly successful. This can be further assisted by the availability and use of a range of planning tools to learn about the young person with disability and their goals for life.

Many Australian Disability Enterprises have proven adept at providing young people with valuable formal and on the job training opportunities and have been willing to offer work experience programs for students with disability who are set to transition out of secondary school¹¹. The Vocational Support Networks in NSW set up through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations National Disability Coordination Officer network are an interesting case study in how supported employment and ADEs can be positively marketed in schools and how awareness of their activities and services can be increased amongst teaching staff, parents, and students¹².

A core feature of successful school to work transitions for young people with disability is the practice of community based instruction¹³. Community based instruction provides instruction in natural settings, such as; restaurants, shopping complexes, recreation centres, work sites, and other age appropriate settings in the community¹⁴. It is not meant to replace inclusive education, but rather to expand and complement this with instruction in community areas outside the classroom.

Community based instruction exposes young people with disability to a variety of experiences while building their skills to participate in activities that are typical in their community. These experiences provide a rich environment in which to learn adaptive social and communication behaviour with members of the community, especially focused on job skills. Supplementing classroom education with community based instruction outside can greatly increase the chance of a successful transition out of secondary education¹⁵.

Recommendations

- *Planning for post-school options should commence in Year 10 at the very latest, utilising a strengths based approach;*
- *Assessment processes for ADHC post school programs, Transition to Work and Community Participation, should be longer in duration, more frequent and conducted by someone familiar to the student with disability;*
- *Students with disability and their families should have better access to relevant information and supports to assist them in making decisions about post school options, including ADHC funded programs, further education and employment;*
- *Funding appeals processes for post school options must be more timely and less onerous, with the capacity for service providers to seek funding appeals should they have the evidence for doing so;*

¹¹ Luecking, 'The Way to Work. How to Facilitate Work Experiences for Youth in Transition', 2009, p. 2-4

¹² National Disability Coordination Officer, accessed at <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Skills/Programs/Support/NDCO/Pages/default.aspx> on 11 August, 2011

¹³ Falvey, 1989 'Community-Based Curriculum. Instructional Strategies for Students with Severe Handicaps, 1989, p. 5-6

¹⁴ Wehman, 'Life Beyond the Classroom. Transition Strategies for Young People with Disabilities' 2006 p. 155-157

¹⁵ Brown et al, 'Work -wage relationships and individuals with disabilities', 1999, p. 5-13

- *Disability service providers operating Transition to Work and Community Participation should have more time to adequately plan with and for people with disability;*
- *Disability service providers operating open employment and supported employment services should have more time to adequately plan with and for people with disability;*
- *Greater work needs to be done with tertiary education providers (universities, community colleges, TAFE institutions and the like) to identify, strengthen and advertise option and pathways for people with disability;*
- *Life skills should be built into the curriculum for students with disability, either conducted in house through school or by partnering with disability service providers who offer independent living skills programs;*
- *Community education is needed to break down the stigma which surrounds supported and open employment options for people with disability, where people with disability are viewed as valuable citizens and contributors;*
- *Mentoring programs should be available to all students with disability to ensure successful post school transitions.*

8. Students with disability who live in regional, rural or remote areas

Support services for people with disability, families and carers in regional, rural or remote NSW are often inadequate and inaccessible and this can contribute to further pressures at transition points in the lives of students with disability.

Choice of schools in regional, rural or remote NSW is often limited and it can be a challenge for students with disability to receive adequate classroom supports¹⁶. This inadequacy can significantly hinder transitions to primary and secondary school. Families are often left with no other choice than to move to a metropolitan area to obtain appropriate schooling for their child. It is inequitable for students with disability and their families to have to move to have adequate education resources available.

Disability service providers regularly report instances of people with disability entering their post school options program with little or no relevant information regarding their support needs or medical issues. There is a high instance of people with disability being placed into wrong programs where their desired outcomes are not met. This is seen predominantly in regional, rural and remote areas because of lack of appropriate diagnostic services, insufficient medical specialists and large waiting lists to see a paediatrician.

People with disability and their families in regional, rural and remote NSW need to be provided with adequate, yet simplified materials to determine the best path for their life and achieve the best possible transitions. To further support this in regional and rural areas where choice of post school service provider may be limited, broader community and mainstream options should be considered and better able to support people with disability.

¹⁶ Ageing, Disability and Home Care, 'Stepping Out', 2010

9. Students with disability from Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Additional assistance may be required during all transitions points for students with disability from Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The experience of people from Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with disability is different to that of the Anglo-Australian peers, in that they face additional barriers: language and communication barriers; lack of understanding of the health, community, and disability systems; cultural incompetence within those systems; high levels of stigma surrounding disability; and fear of the lack of confidentiality, particularly among members of smaller communities¹⁷.

There needs to be much more available support like interpretation and translation services to assist these families to navigate through the education system and ensure successful transitions.

¹⁷ MDAA Submission to the National Disability Strategy Discussion Paper 2008, viewed at <http://www.mdaa.org.au/service/systemic/topics/other.html> 11 August, 2011

10. Summary of Recommendations

Overarching issues at key transition points

NDS recommends that:

- *The NSW Government consider substantially increasing funding for students with disabilities in recognition of the true cost and investment needed to ensure that students with a disability are afforded equitable choice and access to education;*
- *The Department of Education and Training adopt the recommendations pertaining to school learning support teams and the requirement for these teams to be supported by at least one person with appropriate special education qualification;*
- *The NSW Government seek to review the content of pre-service teacher education courses to broaden the scope and practical learnings around the support needs of students with disability. The course review should include content around the roles of teachers in supporting the transition pathway for students with disability;*
- *DET actively work to create and maintain an active program of professional development opportunities to enhance the skills and knowledge base of teachers;*
- *The NSW Government pursue the issue of an appropriate curriculum for students with disability through the current negotiations around a new national curriculum;*
- *DET to ensure that all students with disability entering educational settings are given the choice of having an IEP developed.*

Transitioning into early childhood education

NDS recommends that:

- *The NSW Government commits additional resources to support the expansion of early childhood intervention services to aid the transition into a school setting for children with disability;*
- *The NSW Government consider industry development initiatives to reduce the impacts of workforce shortages and encourage allied health professionals to specialise in early intervention.*

From early childhood education to primary school

NDS recommends that:

- *DET to consider making school allocation decisions for children with disability at least 6 months prior to the child transitioning to school to provide sufficient time to consult with the family and service providers on an appropriate transition plan;*
- *The NSW Government review access requirements for therapy transition programs to ensure that all children with disability who require transition support have access to these services.*

From primary school to secondary school

NDS recommends that:

- *DET progress the development guidelines which support all students with disability in secondary school settings to have access to an Individual Education Plan to support their learning within a universal curriculum;*
- *NSW Government to review the barriers to accessing secondary school opportunities as a matter of urgency. Consideration should be given to reviewing the Special Transport Scheme eligibility requirements if students with a disability are not able to access a secondary school in their local area;*
- *DET consider establish a 'school visitation' program to enable prospective students with disability and their families to visit the school and meet teachers prior to the commencement of the school year.*

From secondary school to employment, further education, or other post-school options

- *Planning for post-school options should commence in Year 10 at the very latest, utilising a strengths based approach;*
- *Assessment processes for ADHC post school programs, Transition to Work and Community Participation, should be longer in duration, more frequent and conducted by someone familiar to the student with disability;*
- *Students with disability and their families should have better access to relevant information and supports to assist them in making decisions about post school options, including ADHC funded programs, further education and employment;*
- *Funding appeals processes for post school options must be more timely and less onerous, with the capacity for service providers to seek funding appeals should they have the evidence for doing so;*
- *Disability service providers operating Transition to Work and Community Participation should have more time to adequately plan with and for people with disability;*
- *Disability service providers operating open employment and supported employment services should have more time to adequately plan with and for people with disability;*
- *Greater work needs to be done with tertiary education providers (universities, community colleges, TAFE institutions and the like) to identify, strengthen and advertise option and pathways for people with disability;*
- *Life skills should be built into the curriculum for students with disability, either conducted in house through school or by partnering with disability service providers who offer independent living skills programs;*
- *Community education is needed to break down the stigma which surrounds supported and open employment options for people with disability, where people with disability are viewed as valuable citizens and contributors;*
- *Mentoring programs should be available to all students with disability to ensure successful post school transitions.*

11. Glossary of terms

Australian Disability Enterprises - Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) are commercial businesses that provide employment opportunities for people with disability across Australia. ADEs operate across a wide range of industries and receive funding and support from the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to recognise their additional operating costs such as employing staff to support their employees with disability.

Community Participation - Community Participation is a program funded by ADHC to help young people with a disability in NSW, develop the skills they need to work towards their goals. The program is targeted at young people with a disability with moderate to high support needs who need an alternative to paid employment or further education in the medium or longer term.

Early Childhood Intervention - Early childhood intervention is the process of providing specialised support and services for infants and young children with developmental delays or disabilities, and their families in order to promote development, well-being and community participation.

Open Employment - Open employment is having a job in the general labour market.

Special Education - Special education refers to a range of educational and social services provided by the public school system and other educational institutions to individuals with disabilities who are between three and 21 years of age.

Transition to Work - Transition to Work is a two year program funded by Ageing Disability and Home Care (ADHC) that helps young people with a disability in NSW gain employment after leaving school. It is primarily targeted at young people with a disability with moderate to high needs.

Stronger Together II - Stronger Together: A new direction for disability services in NSW 2006-2016 (Stronger Together II) is a 10-year plan to provide greater assistance and long-term practical solutions for people with a disability and their families. It involves major reforms and service expansions.

About National Disability Services (NDS)

NDS is the national industry association for disability services, representing over 650 not-for-profit organisations. Collectively, our members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. NDS's members range in size from small support groups to large multi-service organisations, and are located in every State and Territory across Australia