

**INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR
SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS**

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Submission - Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales*. I am commenting on (b) the impact of the Government's 'Every Student Every School' policy on the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in New South Wales public schools.

I have worked in public schools for almost 40 years. Most of this time has involved working in positions providing support to students with learning difficulties in regular classes and their teachers. I have a Masters Special Education from Macquarie University.

The Every Student Every School (ESES) initiative was introduced at a time of change in NSW Government schools and presented an opportunity to strengthen existing support for students with disability and special needs. It is difficult to determine the impact of the ESES initiative because there has been no comprehensive evaluation. Nevertheless, I would like to make comments on the following aspects:

- the need for change
- implementation of the ESES initiative
- professional learning to support ESES
- provisions for students with learning difficulties
- evaluation of the ESES initiative.

The need for change

A good case was made through ESES for the need for change in catering for students with disability and special needs. Programs such as Funding Support, Behaviour Support and the Learning Assistance Program (LAP) had been operating in schools for a number of years and it was time to review and reinvigorate these support provisions. It was a time of change in schools with the introduction of *Local Schools Local Decisions* providing schools with more autonomy in how they catered for the needs of their students. There was also the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* with a number of new syllabuses developed for government and non-government schools. ESES offered an ideal opportunity to provide government schools with the resources, knowledge and skills to cater effectively for students with confirmed disability, students with behaviour difficulties, and students with learning difficulties and/or language difficulties. As stated in the ESES initiative document 'this initiative provides an important opportunity for public schools in New South Wales to build their capabilities to meet the additional learning and support needs of students with disability' (ESES, p. 3). In this context, ESES provided a much-needed focus on the learning needs of students with a disability and the obligation of schools and teachers to 'make sure that every student with disability is able to access and participate in education on the same basis as students without disability' (ESES, p. 5).

Implementation of the ESES initiative

It is important in any new initiative that schools and teachers are provided with information and professional support in a timely manner. There were several issues with the initial induction of the ESES. There were eight induction modules planned to support the implementation of ESES but only two were delivered. The course notes for induction module 1 Making a Difference stated:

During Terms 3 and 4, 2012, additional learning modules will be provided to assist teachers as they increase their professional knowledge and understanding in a broad range of areas that impact on learning for students with additional education needs and disability.

This includes modules on the following:

- *Legislation and policy*
- *Learning and support teams*
- *Personalised learning and support*
- *Assessment to programming*
- *Learning and behaviour*
- *Evidence based practice and*
- *Assistive technology*

Only Module 1 Making a Difference and Module 2 Learning and Support Teams has been developed. Some of the information was provided later in the 2015 online Personalised Learning and Support course and the Commonwealth's Disability Standards course. This information could have had more impact if it had been delivered as part of the initiative induction and would have provided clarity regarding legal obligations for students with disability, and a better understanding of the concept of learning and support for all students.

There are also several areas, if provided with targeted professional learning that would have strengthened the implementation of the ESES. One such area was whole school planning for school executive to meet the needs of students with disability and special needs. Professional learning for school executive in the whole school implementation of the framework of learning and support, a clear definition of learning and support, models of service delivery such as Response to Intervention¹ and the importance of evidence-based practice would have provided much needed support for schools in meeting their legal obligations to students with disability. Also, targeted initial and ongoing professional learning for the learning and support teacher and the assistant principal learning and support regarding their new roles would have enhanced the effective use of this very important provision in schools.

Professional learning to support ESES

ESES has made some important contributions to teacher professional learning. There has been the further development of existing tutor-supported online courses in areas of disability and special needs such as autism; behaviour; dyslexia and significant reading difficulties; speech, language and communication; motor coordination and; personalised learning and support. It should be noted that the purpose of these courses is awareness raising, and additional support is required to transfer this awareness into

¹ For information about the response to intervention model see Learning Difficulties Australia, Response to Intervention, <https://www.ldaustralia.org/response-to-intervention.html>

classroom practice. Additional scholarships for teachers to undertake retraining to gain post-graduate special education qualifications made a significant contribution to special education retraining. The modules provided by the Australian Government to assist teachers in understanding the Disability Standards for Education 2005 were also an important contribution to professional learning.

But there are a number of concerns regarding the professional learning and training provided under ESES. The use of scholarships for special education is an important component in teacher retraining, however; this training was not targeted for teachers occupying the 'specialist' learning and support teacher positions. Also, this mode of training may not be appropriate for the circumstances of all teachers requiring retraining in special education. Other options for training need to be provided to cater for the range of needs and circumstances of support teachers. For example, the Department has previously developed and implemented its own training courses for special education and learning difficulties. The modules aimed at understanding the Disability Standards for Education 2005 are very important in helping teachers understand their obligation to provide adjustments for students with disability but they would have had greater effect if followed up with specific practical support in how to plan, implement and evaluate these adjustments. ESES promised 'an extensive range of training, resources and professional learning accredited by NSW Institute of Teachers that support our teachers and school leaders' (ESES, p. 13). Although some professional learning and training has been provided, it would certainly not be described as 'extensive'.

Provisions for students with learning difficulties

Despite a lack of evaluation data it is clear that in practical terms the ESES initiative has resulted in a significant reduction in provisions for students with learning difficulties. Although it is difficult to obtain accurate figures about the number of students with learning difficulties, the 2000 Mapping the Territory report indicates that 10-16% of students are perceived by their teachers to have learning difficulties that require additional support, while 4% of these students have persistent and long last impairments.² The ESES initiative document provides prevalence figures that are inconsistent with this report. The ESES initiative document states that '7.3% of all students have additional needs relating to disability or difficulties in learning or behaviour, including dyslexia, reading and/or communication delay and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)' (ESES, p. 5). The source of this figure is not identified. Regardless of this inconsistency in prevalence figures, students with learning difficulties represent the largest group of students with special education needs. Under previous provisions there was dedicated support for students with learning difficulties under the Learning Assistance Program (LAP). This non-categorical program had a focus on early intervention and ongoing support for any student in a mainstream class with literacy, language and/or numeracy difficulties. A basic principle of this program was the importance of developing essential basic skills and successful curriculum access as a means of promoting student engagement and

² Louden, W., Chan, L., Elkins, J., Greaves, D., House, H., Milton, M., Nichols, S., Rivalland, J., Rohl, M. & van Kraayenoord, C. (2000). Mapping the territory, primary students with learning difficulties: Literacy and numeracy, Vol. 1, 2 & 3. Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, ACT.

preventing the development of other difficulties such as behaviour and/or literacy and numeracy difficulties. Under ESES existing resources from the LAP program, the behaviour program and the support teacher integration program were 're-organised' to 'establish a specialist teacher presence in every mainstream school to support students with additional learning and support needs and their classroom teachers' (ESES, p. 14). While this sounds very good in theory, what has happened in practice is a significant reduction in provisions for students with learning difficulties and a reduced focus of the learning and support teacher in supporting students with literacy, language and/or numeracy difficulties. This is of significant concern because, as Stanovich (1986) recognised when describing the 'Matthew Effect', the differences between good and poor readers are exacerbated over time.³

There has also been a significant loss of expertise in the area of support for students with literacy and numeracy difficulties. The majority of the new assistant principals learning and support came to the role with a behavior rather than a curriculum background. Many of the new learning and support teachers also had a behavior background. This has had implications for the focus of the role in schools. The term learning difficulties is no longer used and has been subsumed under the umbrella terms 'special needs' or 'additional learning and support needs', which are used for any student with additional needs who does not have a confirmed disability. The only targeted program for students with learning difficulties is the *NSW Centre for Effective Reading*, which provides support for a small number of referred students with complex reading difficulties in rural and remote schools. Other literacy and numeracy programs provided by the Department under *Early Action for Success* do not incorporate evidence-based principles for students with learning difficulties and were developed without input from specialists in learning difficulties.

Evaluation of the ESES initiative

It is difficult to make any objective conclusions about the impact of ESES on schools and students because there has not been a comprehensive evaluation of the initiative. Because ESES was the NSW government school's strategy under the National Partnership Agreement *More Support for Students with Disability* the Commonwealth collected evaluation data as part of the National Partnership evaluation. This data involved a small number of school case studies. Although this may have met the goal of the Commonwealth's evaluation strategy it is not comprehensive enough to obtain a true picture of the impact of the ESES initiative across all NSW government schools. A comprehensive evaluation of ESES would provide information about the impact of the initiative and future directions.

³ Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21(4), p. 389.

I suggest that a comprehensive evaluation of the ESES initiative be conducted to:

- establish the impact on students with disability and special needs, including those with learning difficulties
- identify the professional learning and training needs of school executive, classroom teachers, learning and support teachers, and assistant principals learning and support
- establish future directions in supporting students with disability and special education needs, including a model of service delivery and identification of evidence-based practices.