

**Submission
No 61**

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL
SETTINGS**

Organisation: Youth Action

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“Disability is a spectrum and everyone with disability is going to look different” | March 2024

Youth Action Submission to the Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings

Acknowledgment of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We understand that sovereignty was never ceded and recognise their continuing connection to lands, languages, waters, and cultures.

Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people. We recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We work towards a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and have their rights realised. We represent over 150 Member organisations and regularly engage with young people and youth workers from all over the state, as we have for over 30 years.

We give a particular focus to young people who are regional, First Nations, LGBTIQ+, with disability, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees, and doing it tough. We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches, and are informed by data and evidence. We are an ally to the self-determination of First Nations communities, are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector, and work to be a trust-worthy partner and collaborator.

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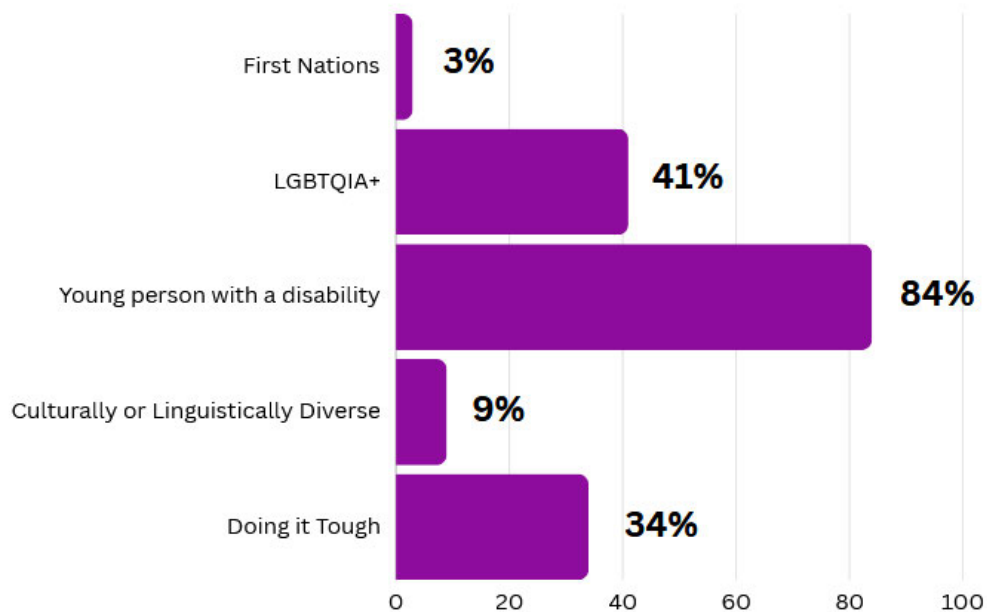
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Introduction

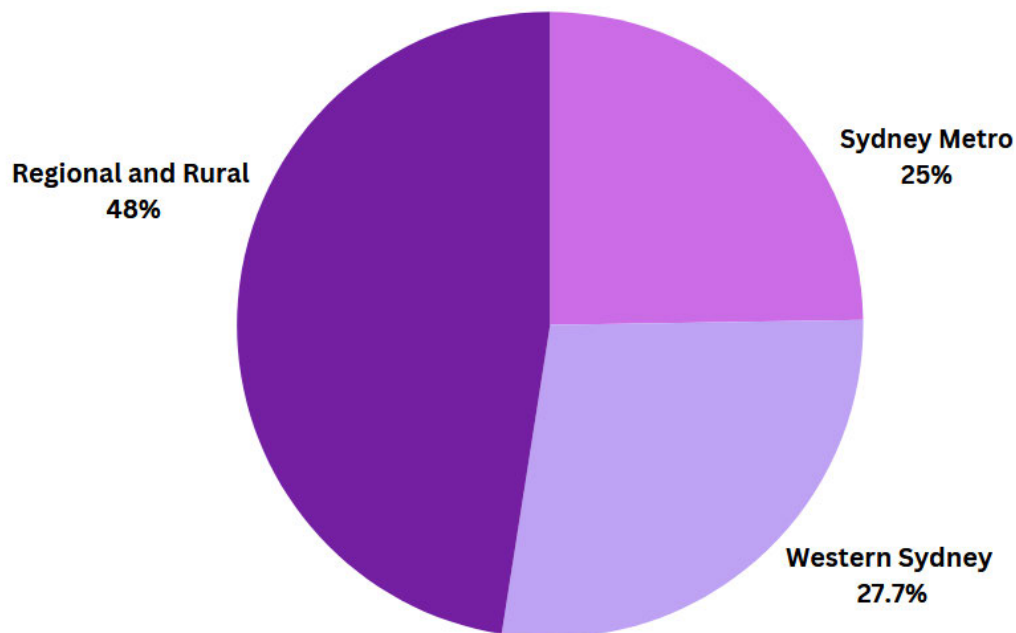
Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Portfolio Committee on Education’s Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings. This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of young people with disability across New South Wales who we have heard from through our consultations.

In preparation for this submission, we opened an online survey and conducted two face-to-face consultations with students with disabilities at Five Islands Secondary College in Port Kembla and Verona School in Fairfield, in addition to an online consultation. In total we heard from 57 young people, each with lived experience of disability. Demographic data for these young people can be seen in the charts below:

Identified groups



Location



In addition, from our regular consultations with 4921 young people over the past 3 years, we have heard a great deal about the experiences of young people with disability in education. We recognise that young people's experiences of disability are diverse. The recommendations in this submission are drawn from the experiences of the young people we heard from through our member and youth sector connections, however there are many other young people's whose experiences need to be considered. We urge the committee to ensure they consider the experiences of all young people with disability. Disability-led and disability specific organisations are best placed to assist the Committee to ensure that the voices of these young people are heard.

This submission responds to the following terms of reference:

- The experiences of children and young people within educational

- settings and measures to better support students with disability;
- The barriers to safe, quality and inclusive education for children with disability in schools, early childhood education services and other educational settings; and
 - The impact on children and young people with disability and their families associated with inadequate levels of support.

It is important for future solutions to consider the lived experiences of young people with disability and that these solutions are co-designed with these young people. The young people we heard from have identified solutions ranging from increased support for teaching staff to understand disability, responses that address the unique needs of students with disability and increased wellbeing supports in mainstream schools to ensure that the accommodations of young people with disability are always met.

Summary of Recommendations

Inclusive Educational Practices

1. The NSW Department of Education review the experiences of students with disability at both mainstream and at alternative schooling models to determine how inclusive education practices can be improved. This review should be undertaken in partnership with students with disability and should address how current policies for students with disability may negatively impact these students.

Wellbeing Supports at School

2. The NSW Department of Education review how educational settings can standardise and increase wellbeing supports available to all students including those with disability in NSW schools. This should include implementing staffed wellbeing hubs at all schools that are available to students during school hours and exploring how to provide more support staff (such as counsellors, student support officers and school wellbeing nurses) at schools with higher levels of student enrolment.

Bullying

3. The NSW Department of Education review its existing anti-bullying prevention and response frameworks. This should include consideration of how anonymous reporting systems could benefit students with disabilities, how students can report teachers for bullying, support for teachers and school staff to address their own personal bias and training for schools to embed a school environment that is not tolerant of bullying.

Impact of Teacher Shortage

4. The NSW Department of Education ensure any strategies developed to address the teacher shortage include the voices of young people with disability on the impacts to their inclusion, quality of participation and impacts on learning outcomes.

Building teacher capacity to support students with disability

5. The NSW Department of Education ensures that all teachers receive training about how to facilitate the participation of students with disability within their classes, in particular the importance of development and implementation of learning plans in improving outcomes for students with disability.
6. The NSW Department of Education ensures that all NSW students with approved learning plans are made aware and supported regarding policies about what action they can take if they feel their approved learning plans are not being followed.

Impacts of Remote learning during COVID-19

7. The NSW Department of Education ensures that any NSW Education strategies developed to address reduced learning outcomes for current students as a result of online learning during COVID and the subsequent transition back to the classroom have specific actions relating to the unique experiences of students with disability.

Diagnosis and access to accommodations

8. The NSW Department of Education review current policies requiring young people to have a diagnosis before they can access the accommodations needed to support their learning and full participation at school. Explore how accommodations can be made available to students who do not yet have formal diagnoses.

Inclusive Educational Practices

The young people we spoke to described mixed experiences in relation to mainstream schooling and alternate learning settings.

Mainstream Schooling Experiences

The young people with disability we heard from felt mainstream school environments often struggled to ensure that social and learning environments at school were inclusive for students like them. Many students felt they were constantly having to advocate for themselves and their needs as students with disabilities.

“Schools need to understand our struggles ... We can't always speak for ourselves, and we need that support of being able to have someone uplift our voices without the fear of being rejected or trying to seek special treatment. In reality, we are trying to seek the same advantages as our peers however our conditions and disability cause us to not [be on the same] level as our peers.” - Young person with disability from Western Sydney in Youth Action online survey for this submission, 2024

They felt like the responsibility was placed on them to try to keep up in an environment that does not accommodate their needs. They told us that this lack of appropriate support structures impacted their academic achievement and accentuated their feelings of difference from their non-disabled peers. This is at odds with the view of a social model of disability which sees schools as bearing the responsibility to ensure that the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environment is suitably adapted to allow students

with disability to participate and thrive alongside their non-disabled peers.

Young people felt that the key to achieving long term meaningful change in educational settings is addressing this situation where students with disability feel they are struggling to keep up in learning environments not designed for them.

“Teachers can be really inconsiderate at mainstream schools, I’ve had my fair share of that.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Integrating students with disabilities into mainstream learning environments in a move towards inclusive education policies should be supported by a strong evidence-base that establishes the benefit to students with and without disability to thrive in all areas, including academically, in communication, and in social and emotional development. Inclusive education in mainstream schools is underpinned by accommodations and adjustments made for the students that need them, such as through student-tailored Individual Education Plans (‘IEPs’). Young people’s experiences with IEPs are detailed later in this submission.

Alternative Learning Settings

In our face-to-face consultations we heard from students about two alternative learning models: Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) at Verona School in Fairfield and the Big Picture Program at Five Islands Secondary College in the Illawarra. We have also previously heard from young people in other consultations about their experiences in other alternate learning programs provided by non-government organisations.

SSPs are schools that support eligible students with a diagnosed intellectual or physical disability, autism, mental health considerations, sensory processing disorders or behaviour disorders. Big Picture Schools refer to schools that operate in partnership with Big Picture Australia, a not-for-profit organisation, and predominantly public schools that implement an innovative design for learning. There are currently 18 Big Picture Schools in NSW.

Some students felt inclusive education at mainstream schools was better for all students if done well. They believed there were negative impacts on both students and school communities when students with disability are segregated.

"I think we have to make integrated environments; a mainstream school should be accessible for everyone regardless of their ability and disability."

- Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

"It would also benefit people in mainstream environments who don't have disabilities to see people with disabilities, to learn to integrate and try to be kinder and more understanding of the fact that disability is a spectrum and that everyone with a disability is going to look different. People with disabilities shouldn't be invisible. Often in mainstream environments they are." - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

"I think that having people with disabilities at regular public schools helps normalise disability. Kids can actually grow up alongside people that have different needs and society will function better." - Young person with

disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

However, other students we heard from at SSPs or Big Picture schools talked to us about how the environment at alternate schools suited them much better than mainstream schools. They attributed this to reduced rates of bullying, teachers who had a much better understanding of disability and how to ensure accommodations are met, smaller class sizes and environments designed for them (more physically accessible, access to more quiet and sensory spaces, better wellbeing support). The students we heard from at SSPs spoke to us about how they much preferred being in a school environment that was tailor made for their needs.

“For me it’s better to have a smaller, more compact school like this where the teachers are supportive of everyone. Everyone just seems to get on, there are so many good qualities, it’s inclusive and flexible. It’s a very friendly environment on the teacher’s side, they’re always there for students when they need it.” - Young person with disability at Verona School, Youth Action consultations for this submission, 2024

“We can take breaks when we need to, we have a corner in a room when we want to be involved but we want a bit of mild separation. Other schools need this too, some schools are scared to make changes for specific students.” - Young person with disability at Verona School, Youth Action consultations for this submission, 2024

“I really like how the school is a big advocate for inclusivity. We have so many different kinds of kids here, schools like this are accepting of everyone

and like to have everyone involved and don't leave anyone out. That can be an issue at mainstream schools." - Young person with disability at Verona School, Youth Action consultations for this submission, 2024

It was clear from the young people who spoke to us that they could see benefits and challenges from both mainstream and alternate learning options. The most important thing for these young people is that the common elements of successful educational experiences they described are replicated in all learning environments.

Recommendation

The NSW Department of Education review the experiences of students with disability at both mainstream and at alternative schooling models to determine how inclusive education practices can be improved. This review should be undertaken in partnership with students with disability and should address how current policies for students with disability may negatively impact these students.

Wellbeing supports at school

Young people with disabilities spoke about the importance of access to wellbeing supports such as school counsellors, Student Support Officers (SSOs) and safe spaces that they could access to decompress.

Students that had these supports at their schools spoke very highly of how useful they were, they spoke about the positive impact of being able to access support staff. We heard that students with disabilities could find it hard to open up to teachers and often preferred to access student support

officers or school counsellors. They identified that it was particularly important to have staff in the school whose role was not academic or disciplinary.

“Our Student Support Officer is always good to talk to. We need more people like [her] as I can feel uncomfortable opening up with my teachers. [It is important] having someone who specialises in student wellbeing who is not a teacher.” - Young person with disability at Five Islands Secondary College, Youth Action consultations for this submission, 2024

In lieu of adequate identified support staff, some students with disabilities spoke about having a particular teacher who provided both wellbeing support and advocacy to ensure that their accommodations were met by their classroom teachers. These students highlighted how “lucky” they felt to have a teacher looking out for them. Those who moved to another school, described the difference when these supports were not present. The young people we have heard from have consistently emphasised the need for more wellbeing staff and support available at schools.

“For me, it’s about [having someone] who will advocate for you. I had an amazing Deputy Principal who advocated for me ... [but] there was no one like this for me at my senior school and I noticed the difference.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

We also heard from students across several schools that while wellbeing staff are helpful, they can be overstretched and often inaccessible, especially in

larger schools. Students told us about schools with over 1200 students who only have one Student Support Officer. One student told us that the Student Support Officer was so busy that they had taken to leaving their office unlocked for students who needed them to at least have a quiet space to sit in. Other students told us about how their Student Support Officer was great when available but was so busy that they often could not speak to her when they needed to.

Some students spoke about the importance of having dedicated and staffed wellbeing spaces at their schools. Students at schools with a 'Wellbeing Hub' talked to us about how it was a safe and accessible environment that they could access when they needed to have some time out and talk to a counsellor or SSO if necessary.

"If every school had a wellbeing hub, [it would make a big difference] for students with their mental health." - Young person with disability at Five Islands Secondary College, Youth Action consultations for this submission, 2024

"There needs to be more people who could make spaces for the young people that need it. It is so hard to function in a large area. If there was that safe space for people who actually need it for 5-10 minutes to think and get everything together to get through the rest of the day." - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

They explained to us that access to wellbeing support staff and a quiet space in which to self-regulate both improved mental health and allowed them to

return to their learning quicker.

Recommendation

The NSW Department of Education review how educational settings can standardise and increase wellbeing supports available to all students including those with disability in NSW schools. This should include implementing staffed wellbeing hubs at all schools that are available to students during school hours and exploring how to provide more support staff (such as counsellors, student support officers and school wellbeing nurses) at schools with higher levels of student enrolment.

Bullying

The young people we heard from in our consultations felt that students with disability were frequently subject to bullying and discrimination from their peers, both at school and online. This was particularly the case for students with disability attending mainstream schools. Several young people noted that incidences of bullying against students with disability were very common but were not addressed by their schools. They attributed this to factors such as teachers not being equipped to address bullying and that due to the shortages of teaching staff, that many incidents were not seen or reported to teachers.

"I don't always feel safe at school, I can never express myself because I know I will be bullied." - Young person with disability in Western Sydney, Youth Action ongoing consultations, 2023.

Other young people felt that as students with disabilities, they were often

separated or treated differently within the mainstream school environment which invited other students to single them out.

“Accommodations aren’t discreet so you can often feel singled out, mocked or bullied because you are doing something differently.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

“I think the fact that you can be singled out for being different can make bullying such a real issue.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

A number of young people also described incidents of bullying from teachers and school staff. Several students reported teachers speaking to them aggressively or confronting them about being unable to participate due to the circumstances of their disability. This was particularly the case for the young people we heard from who live with “invisible” disabilities, who reported many instances of derogatory comments dismissing their disability from teachers. Some young people spoke about the use of discriminatory slurs against people with disabilities by both teachers and students. In addition, one young person recounted a story of being told that they “were not special needs enough” to access the support they were asking for. These students identified a culture of ableism that perpetuated instances of discrimination and abuse.

Other young people spoke positively about anonymous reporting systems used by their schools, such as Stymie. Schools that use the program give young people an online tool that they can use to report things like suicide

ideation, discrimination, anxiety, depression, bullying, self-harm, physical fights, sexual assault, family violence and illegal activity. Young people that had access to this system spoke positively about how it made reporting instances of bullying more accessible.

The introduction of safe and accessible reporting systems such as Stymie across all schools in NSW is an important start. Young people with disability said they want to feel confident that bullying will be taken seriously by schools and that appropriate action will be taken when it is reported. They were clear that training and resourcing for school staff to better understand the unique needs and experiences of students with disability it crucial in creating a safe learning environment.

Recommendation

The NSW Department of Education review its existing anti-bullying prevention and response frameworks. This should include consideration of how anonymous reporting systems could benefit students with disabilities, how students can report teachers for bullying, support for teachers and school staff to address their own personal bias and training for schools to embed a school environment that is not tolerant of bullying.

Impact of teacher shortages

Youth Action has heard extensively from young people throughout 2023 and into 2024 about the wide-reaching impacts of the national teacher shortage. Students have told us about uncovered classes, disrupted learning, impacts on their senior years and HSC results and increased disengagement from

learning. On top of this, students with disability reported that they have felt a particular impact on their learning as overstretched teachers are further unable to make learning plans accessible with the necessary accommodations.

“One of the difficulties of my condition is that senior classes don’t get substitutes during the teacher shortage – we just had a teacherless room. I was in a wheelchair at the time, and no one would communicate if there were going to be teachers or not.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Students with disability felt the issue to be particularly impactful during their senior years and in the completion of their HSC, as the lack of teachers meant that they had substitute teachers who had not read a student’s Individual Learning Plan (IEP) and did not adapt lesson plans to accommodate these student’s needs. This made the class inaccessible for those students and they were left unable to participate.

In other cases, students we heard from had no teacher and were left to complete learning at a self-directed pace. The young people told us that completely self-directed learning could be extremely difficult for them as a student with a learning disability. While all students are impacted by the teacher shortage and ongoing uncovered classes, students with disability felt they were left at a particular disadvantage. Student Learning Support Officers are able to provide some assistance, but students say they are also overwhelmed by demand. Students felt that addressing how the teacher shortage will contribute to existing gaps in the education system that disadvantage students with disabilities is critical to improving outcomes for

these students.

Recommendation

The NSW Department of Education ensure any strategies developed to address the teacher shortage include the voices of young people with disability on the impacts to their inclusion, quality of participation and impacts on learning outcomes.

Building teacher capacity to support students with disability

We heard from young people with disability that they wanted their teachers to have a better understanding about how to support students with disability and to enable them to provide the necessary support required. Students with disabilities said they frequently felt the pressure within mainstream school environments to keep up with their non-disabled peers but did not always have access to the appropriate assistance to be able to do this.

They explained that teachers need to have a better understanding about the kinds of disabilities experienced by students, how these disabilities impact learning, and what teachers can do to adapt their learning plans to ensure that classes are inclusive and facilitate the participation of all students.

“Teachers need better education. Ongoing education. They need to understand that some disabilities affect every part of their student’s life and that by trivialising the disability you are rejecting that student.”- Young person with disability from Sydney Metro in Youth Action online survey

for this submission, 2024

“I was in a learning support unit and some of my teachers didn’t even know where it was which says a lot about the separation and isolation.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Young people with disabilities spoke to us about the positive benefits of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) which were approved by the student and the school and contained a list of accommodations that teachers can provide to make learning accessible.

The students we heard from highlighted that when their IEPs were developed and implemented successfully, they were critical in enhancing positive learning experiences. Students at schools where IEPs were respected explained that they felt they could better participate in class. Some students even told us that teachers at their school were bound to follow IEPs and would face consequences for not upholding approved accommodations.

“[The] accommodations [at my school] are good, learning plans provide for permission to wear headphones, even permission to fidget and my exit pass. The teachers face consequences for breaching learning plans.” - Young person with disability in Western Sydney, Youth Action ongoing consultations, 2023

They said that the learning plans were useful, that their teachers were familiar with them and that it meant their needed accommodations were always provided. They spoke highly of the IEPs as a tool to guarantee that their needs were met by different classroom teachers, including casual or

substitute teachers.

Students that had teachers who were able to work with them to make learning accessible to them, reported stronger feelings of participation and engagement, as well as improved learning outcomes. Young people with disabilities told us that these teachers took the time to understand what their needs were in the classroom and made space to ensure that their accommodations were met. This included provisions like permitting students with neurodiverse conditions the use of personal headphones and music to block out distractions when focusing on a task, allowing walking breaks to alleviate chronic pain, reprinting materials on coloured paper for a student with dyslexia and allowing the use of a time out card for the student to take a break. Young people said teachers who were able to facilitate the provision of accommodations and to implement feedback from their students about their needs in the classroom created a learning environment that was safe and inclusive for all students.

Unfortunately, in many cases, young people described experiences where teachers did not implement learning accommodations approved in their IEPs. This made them feel that that the impacts of their disability were not recognised by the school.

“So many times, I had to explain to the teacher what I was doing but it was already approved by the principal. It made me feel like I’m not justified in having those accommodations.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

“My condition causes me not to be able to take in hot temperatures and I

have to stay inside. Teachers don't know and I get told to leave or shouted at. When I show them my time out card that shows I'm allowed to stay indoors, they say it's not allowed. Just because you have the card doesn't mean you should be blamed for it." - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Other young people we heard from spoke about how tiring it was to constantly be required to advocate for themselves to teachers and that they often felt no one was listening. Young people that did not have “visible” or “obvious” disabilities said it could hard to get schools to acknowledge the full impact of their disability.

Students told us the effect on their learning was cumulative and could have significant consequences. These students highlighted the fact that their learning was constantly interrupted when they had to advocate for themselves to people who they felt should already be aware of their learning plans and approved accommodations. These students were left feeling like they were not treated in the same way as the other students who did not have disabilities.

"I was sent out of the class for refusing to take my headphones off. I was forced to sit out of my class even though I wanted to do my work." - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Students we heard from believed more could be done to better equip teachers to support them in the classroom through training that would teach them about the nature of the disabilities experienced by young people in the

school, how these disabilities affect learning, and how classes in mainstream environments can be adapted to suit all students and encourage their active and equal participation.

Recommendations

The NSW Department of Education ensures that all teachers receive training about how to facilitate the participation of students with disability within their classes, in particular the importance of development and implementation of learning plans in improving outcomes for students with disability.

The NSW Department of Education ensures that all NSW students with approved learning plans are made aware and supported in regard to policies about what action they can take if they feel their approved learning plans are not being followed.

COVID case study

When discussing the extent to which their schools have been able to provide learning accommodations, many of the students we heard from spoke about their experiences in online learning during the successive lockdowns and in the return to in-person learning.

Students at schools where online learning was self-directed said they did not feel there was extra consideration given to making the online learning environment accessible to those students requiring additional support. They felt responsible for trying to make online learning work for them and were not able to access individualised support, as they normally would in the classroom.

“The onus was really placed on the young person with a disability to find out how to make online learning accessible. I found it so hard when, for me I have a specific learnings style but being given a bunch of worksheets with no directional guidance was so difficult.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

These students felt the lack of structure in self-directed learning, combined with the requirement to complete work autonomously had a significant impact on their educational outcomes as it did not consider their learning needs. They were disappointed that their schools did not try to make online learning more accessible to them.

“There was the expectation for students to be checking emails multiple times per day but it was not structured and it was hard to do school online. People’s accessibility requirements were not being met.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

“I found I ended up doing more hours in online schooling to do satisfactory work and would find out days later I had done everything wrong because I had no direct guidance. It wasn’t accessible to me.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

This example highlights how students with disabilities are frequently required to adapt to environments designed for their non-disabled peers.

“You couldn’t see teachers and stay back as usual. There was no support for the kids that needed it during that time and they were just told to use Google.” - Young person with disability in Youth Action online

consultation for this submission, 2024

"It was complete chaos readjusting, there was no support being delivered under these circumstances." - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

Other students highlighted some positive examples of being supported during online learning, such as homework hub drop-in meetings that were facilitated by Student Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) over Zoom during the week. Students told us that they could access this resource and even go into a break-out room on Zoom for individualised assistance. This is a good example of how a small accommodation can be made to increase learning outcomes and provide needed individual support to students with disabilities.

Recommendation

The NSW Department of Education ensures that any NSW Education strategies developed to address reduced learning outcomes for current students as a result of online learning during COVID and the subsequent transition back to the classroom have specific actions relating to the unique experiences of students with disability.

Diagnosis and access to accommodations: HSC and acquired disability case study

Young people spoke to us about how the difficulty in obtaining a diagnosis for certain disabilities and chronic conditions can limit their access to the accommodations they need. Young people gave examples of knowing that they needed extra support at school for an undiagnosed condition, but that they were unable to get it due to not having a formal diagnosis yet.

These young people spoke about issues such as wait times for specialist appointments, the length of time it can take to get complex conditions diagnosed and the fact that factors such as gender can play a role in receiving an accurate diagnosis.

"It took a long time to get my ADHD diagnosis as a woman. I got my ADHD diagnosis by saving up to see a professional and I had to save my money while on Youth Allowance. I got my diagnosis the week before HSC, they said to me they couldn't implement any NESA accommodations. Education is not willing to look at your concerns and is dismissive if you don't have a formal diagnosis. It makes education ten times harder." - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this submission, 2024

"It took me two years and that only progressed until I was in hospital for all of year 11. People forget how long it actually takes to get a diagnosis." - Young person with disability in Youth Action online consultation for this

The impacts of not getting a diagnosis early can have long term implications on educational outcomes. One young person spoke about how she had been sick for years with an undiagnosed chronic illness, but only received a formal diagnosis when she had entered year 12. She was not able to get NESA accommodations for her HSC exams approved in time and eventually chose not to finish year 12. Despite having the same symptoms and impact on her learning before her formal diagnosis, it was only after she had the documentation that she was permitted to apply for the necessary accommodations.

Students with disability explained how difficult it could be to try and communicate their needs to school staff and that they struggled to keep up at school before their diagnosis. They said that schools needed to be better equipped to accommodate to students with different learning styles and needs regardless of whether they had a diagnosis.

“They thought I was being rude and slacking off, I was unfocused and unmedicated and unable to work like my peers, they just didn’t understand why I couldn’t do that, they were trying to make me like everyone else.” -

Young person with disability at Five Islands Secondary College, Youth Action consultations for this submission, 2024

Recommendation

The NSW Department of Education review current policies requiring young people to have a diagnosis before they can access the accommodations needed to support their learning and full participation at school. Explore how

accommodations can be made available to students who do not yet have formal diagnoses.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities who engaged with us were clear that they need access to appropriate support to ensure that they can fully participate, learn, and thrive in mainstream class environments.

Effective improvements to the NSW Education system designed for students with disability will involve listening to the expertise of those young people with this lived experience, incorporating their insights, and inviting them to actively participate in the design, development and implementation of solutions that are pragmatic and effective.

We urge the Portfolio Committee on Education to ensure that any response to their inquiry is grounded in the diverse and varied experiences of young people with disability. Youth Action would be happy to support the Committee's connection to young people with this lived expertise through further engagement or presentation to the Committee at any Inquiry hearings.

