
CATHOLIC EDUCATION WELCOMES EMPHASIS ON STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

The National Catholic Education Commission says the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on students with disability is helping educators better understand the learning needs of all students, but acknowledges that the current assessment method should be further improved in the coming years.

Education Council chair and Northern Territory Education Minister Eva Lawler yesterday released emergent data on students with disability in Australian schools based on information collected under the new model. NCEC acting executive director Danielle Cronin said the new approach to assessing students to determine how they can best be supported in their education provides a framework for a more coordinated approach to learning.

"Schools, in conjunction with parents and students, are best able to provide great learning opportunities when they understand and can make appropriate adjustments for each student's needs," Ms Cronin said.

"While the framework developed through the NCCD is still new and education ministers have expressed reservations about its broad application, schools that have collected this data are better able to build their capacity for delivering the right educational programs for even greater numbers of students."

Ms Cronin said 2015 marked the first year in which there was a near-universal use of the data collection method. Just two years earlier, only 20 per cent of schools were participating.

That reality means that it is too soon to interpret and draw conclusions about the data. It's definitely too early to use the data to make funding decisions, she said.

"In Catholic education, we have seen the number of students with disability double over the past decade, and the proportion of students in Catholic schools who have a disability has also risen significantly," she said.

"Using existing definitions, our statistics show about 5 per cent of students in Catholic schools have a disability. Under the NCCD, the proportion is much higher, at around 16 per cent, and that trend is observed in other sectors."

Ms Cronin said Catholic education shares the view of the Education Council that there needs to be additional analysis of the data collection process and that the reasons for the anomalies and unexplained variability in the NCCD need to be understood.

Minister for Education and Training Senator Simon Birmingham has said the emergent data released this week "fails a basic credibility test".

Ms Cronin said: "Schools and educators have been able to better understand their responsibilities and their obligations in supporting students with disability through this process, but education ministers have prudently warned against making assumptions based on the data collected to this point.

"Like all data collection tools, the NCCD is sure to be improved over time and several years of broad-based data collection will help ensure that schools and school systems are producing reliable and consistent information to support the education of all students in their care.

"With such a large number of students across all sectors being determined as needing additional support for their learning, it is paramount that there is a very high level of confidence that the data being collected is valid and robust.

"There is consensus that such confidence does not yet exist, but Catholic education is committed to being part of a national effort to provide the best possible education for all students, including students with disability."