

## Promoting Inclusion with People with Disability

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this submission, which focuses on actively promoting inclusive practice and ensuring a more inclusive society can support the independence of people with disability. The practical and sustainable steps government, non-government and private sector organisations can take to promote a more inclusive society is discussed.

The submission is based on input from disability and inclusions teams in state and territory Catholic Education Commissions.

The NCEC is the national representative body of Australia's Catholic schools. Working closely with the state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, the NCEC advocates for and develops policy at the national level for Australia's Catholic schools.

Australia's Catholic schools are diverse and universal in their reach, offering an education to all. There are increasing numbers of students who identify as a student with disability in Catholic schools across Australia. In 2020, there were 148,388 students with disability, representing 19.1% per cent of all students in Catholic schools.

## Submission Questions

### 1. What does inclusion mean to you?

Inclusion is a basic human right for individuals to fair and equal access to opportunities and resources. NCEC acknowledges the Conventions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which is to "promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity."

An inclusive society enables individuals to fully contribute to an organisation and society at large. The process of inclusion engages each individual and makes all people feel valued as being essential to the success of the organisation. Evidence shows that when people feel valued, they function at full capacity and feel part of the organisation's mission.

In a school setting inclusion specifically refers to:

- all children in educational settings have equitable access to age-appropriate learning and access to extra-curricular programs offered by the school
- students are provided with environmental, instructional and curriculum adjustments to ensure that all students can access age-appropriate curriculum
- all students access and participate in school programs that promote social, emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual development, as part of the schooling experience.
- teaching incorporates evidenced-based practices inclusive of student diversity.
- the values, attitudes, actions and policies and personalised plans acknowledge the human rights of everyone to access school on the same basis as their peers

- opportunities that accommodate specific needs, are always offered and should be rigorous and prepare students with a skill set that allows fair and equitable employment
- opportunities prepare students with a skill set that allows them to be active and engaged citizens.

## **2A What are the characteristics of an inclusive society?**

Inclusion is about belonging to and participating in a diverse society by creating an environment in which all individuals can participate and succeed. Linda Graham (2020 p11) notes that “inclusive education is more than a set of practices. It is also a philosophy: a way of thinking about people, diversity, learning and teaching.” The acceptance of diversity is fundamental to effective inclusive practice. According to the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen 1995) “an inclusive society must be based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law”.

Pope Francis in his address, *Fullness of Humanity*, to the Association of Catholic School Parents said, “an inclusive education finds a place for all” (7 December 2015).

Thus, an inclusive society is one which:

- removes barriers and provides equal access for all
- understands and acknowledges inclusion as a continuing and evolving process
- provides universal access to public infrastructure and facilities
- ensures individuals are treated fairly and feel empowered and have a voice
- celebrates diversity and ensures people with disability are represented in the workforce, community organisations and other civil activities.
- respects and values people for who they are as an individual or group and has an ongoing commitment to the National Disability Strategy
- understands and accepts that some people require additional resources
- ensures the availability of fully transparent and accessible information on inclusive policies and practices within organisations
- maintains adequate funding and provision of support services that enable choice and control for the person with disability
- uses monitoring and evaluation tools to assess inclusive practices to ensure there is a cycle of ongoing improvement.

## **2C What is the role of governments through legislation, policy making, funding and operation of public systems and services, in achieving an inclusive society?**

Inclusive government processes allow the public to be involved in policy making, regulation and service delivery. By gathering more input from citizens about their needs and the impact of policies on them, open government makes public policies more effective and public services more user friendly and user-driven. It is important that any policies, practices and decision making represents all people, including those with a disability and removes barriers by making services accessible.

Services and resources should be made widely available to support people with disabilities including access to independent advocacy services regardless of their postcode. The geographic challenges and impacts associated with living in rural and remote regions of Australia must be considered and barriers need to be minimised.

The Government needs to provide better guidance and resources to people with disabilities, parents and carers and school education systems on navigating the complex decision making that needs to take place to meet legislated obligations. For example, case study exemplars across various education settings would be of benefit to highlight the ways in which all legislative requirements need to be considered by schools regarding meeting the obligations of the Disability Standards for Education (DSE) and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). It is also important for people with disabilities that the Government has clear and transparent complaints handling processes in place to deal with grievances and service providers that are non-compliant with legislation.

Any consultation undertaken by the Commonwealth must include the voice of people with disability, their parents and carers, disability advocacy groups education providers and government and non-government organisations.

#### **4. How can an inclusive society support the independence and choice and control of people with disability?**

In supporting the independence and greater agency for people with disability, there needs to be consideration to the complex nature of this arena given the vast differences of the impact of disability for individuals. Once the needs of the individual are known and fully understood then a reasonable response to address any barriers can be made.

It is important that people with disability, their families and carers receive support through advocacy, information, focussed on enabling independence and control. Government support for inclusion must incorporate sufficient resources to ensure that inclusive practices are able to meet the extent and diversity of need and any known barriers to access and participation which may be posed by cultural diversity, geo-location, etc.

Increased independence often comes with improved opportunities to develop a new skill set. The key components required to help people improve their skills are access and support. People with a disability must have access to learning opportunities. These opportunities are tailored to the interests and abilities and support from highly skilled education workforce such as teachers, teacher assistants, allied health professionals as well as a network of friends, family and mentors. There has also been increasing interest among parents of children with disabilities to exercise their right to select a school that provides intensive and extensive services and support which assist the specific needs of their child. Furthermore, families need access to resources, technologies and facilities that are inclusive and empower the voice of the individual (especially people with complex communication needs) through assistive and augmentative communication.

Individuals must have the economic means through adequate funding to make decisions about their life. Through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) support package, approximately 10% of people with a disability in Australia now have a choice on where and how to access their support network and care. This is a significant step towards increased independence and control. However, more work is needed to ensure the disability services can provide a range of services that are tailored solutions to enable people with disability to fully exercise choice and control over their services and supports.

Maintaining quality support pathways for employment to build capacity and self-esteem (e.g., School Leaver Employment Support and Customised Employment through NDIS) as well as wrap-around services is essential in supporting independence and choice. Some people with disability require additional services outside of the typical disability provision, for example, some people with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds require interpreter services. These services need to have the capacity to be easily activated to support people with disability, and providers also need to be skilled to work with people with disability.

## **6. What practical and sustainable steps can governments take to promote a more inclusive society for people with disability? What needs to change:**

**A. in laws, policies and standards?**

**B. in implementation, monitoring, and accountability measures?**

**C. in service provision?**

**D. to ensure people with disability are closely consulted and actively included in all steps to promote a more inclusive society?**

### **Laws policies and standards and implementing, monitoring and accountability measures**

All education jurisdictions in Australia have inclusive policies and firmly established structures for supporting students with disability, with detailed procedures for identifying the specific needs of students and the provision of the tailored support required. Jurisdictions use a need-based approach and offer support at different levels through articulated frameworks. The variations of the curriculum and the reporting of educational outcomes is inconsistent across jurisdictions and does not necessarily reflect the 'learning progress' that students with disability may have gained from their schooling. Many students with disability are under-represented in national and state testing, and hence the standard of accountability for students with disability may be substantially less than for other students.

State and Commonwealth governments must gather data and monitor improvement in the quality of inclusive practices and improvements for vulnerable groups of children such as those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, rural and remote students English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and low SES backgrounds. States and territories need to develop nationally consistent data sets on school students with disability to assess the extent to which they are accessing and participating in education on the same basis as their peers without disability.

People with disabilities and their families, friends and carers have often expressed frustration that they do not understand how funding is allocated. The lack of portability of funding when students with disability move across jurisdictions has also been reported to be problematic for families trying to navigate the education systems. Further consultation with people with disability and their parents and carers needs to occur, on how funds are used to meet the additional learning needs of the student with disability.

## **Service Provision**

Service and funding systems need to be accessible for families and service providers to navigate. Many services are excruciatingly slow and unresponsive. The creation of a 'one-stop shop' disability service system providing information, advice and referrals would improve accessibility and reduce red tape. Regular monitoring of service standards such as accreditation audits every two years would also help to improve the quality of services and support.

Many families in regional and remote areas have said there is little or no choice in disability services provided. Those services are often available for a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in which there is very little choice of flexibility. The one-size-fits-all approach fails to meet the specific needs of individuals. Lack of availability of trained staff, and retention of trained staff, in disability services, is a problem Australia-wide but even more so in regional and remote areas of Australia.

In the school education environment, external service providers often experience challenges with understanding the school context. Dedicated support materials should be developed to increase the understanding of how allied health provision can be best used within a school context. For example, alignment between specific advice to support a student with disability and the provision of educational adjustments needs to be focussed on access and participation. Many parents report that in raising their concerns about school support they may jeopardise support provisions for their child. Collaborative processes are necessary to ensure parent/carer/guardians are authentic partners and are seen as being valuable members of the student's school team. How this is realised can be challenging for school communities and advocates for the student. Resources that support clear processes to establish and maintain productive team meetings would be beneficial.

## **Consultation with people with disability**

Inclusion requires meaningful participation, active agency and a strong student voice. In Australia, all students with disability must be consulted about the reasonable adjustments that are to be implemented to enable them to access and participate in education. Despite the Disability Standards being in place for over fifteen years, perceived barriers result in a lack of sufficient opportunities for students to participate in decisions about reasonable adjustments. Partially, this could be due to the limited practical guidance available to help teachers, enact their obligations to consult. This is particularly the case if a child has communication difficulties such as those with autism, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, students who speak English as an additional language or dialect and students with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). This means for a significant group of students, the consultative process itself will need to be adjusted so they can participate in the consultation.

The experiences of students with disability and their families were mixed during the COVID pandemic. Overall, many students with disability reported a loss of support and connection which adversely impacted their educational progress and their connection with their educational providers. The apparent lack of acknowledgement by some education providers of the unique and diverse needs of students with disability only served to increase the anxiety of those students and their families. However, in many schools the COVID-19 pandemic improved educators' awareness of barriers to remote learning and drove them to consider the needs of students with disability more seriously, including the application of reasonable adjustments. To

improve communication with students learning from home, all schools should make information publicly available on their school website about the processes and structures that are in place to support educational planning for students with disability.

Additionally, more consultation needs to occur in the transition from school to post-school employment or training as there often is a gap between school experience and post-school life for people with disability. Teachers have spent years getting to know students so there needs to be some way of harnessing teachers' knowledge of students in to post-school planning by providing an in-depth analysis of student needs.

## **7. What practical and sustainable steps can non-government institutions, the private sector and communities take to promote a more inclusive society for people with disabilities?**

**What needs to change:**

- A. in attitudes, behaviours, relationships and values?**
- B. in organisations, culture and workforces?**
- C. in service provision?**
- D. in implementation, monitoring, and accountability measures?**
- E. to ensure people with disability are closely consulted with and actively included in all steps to promote a more inclusive society?**

Meaningful employment is essential not only to an individual's economic security but also their physical and mental health, personal wellbeing and sense of identity. Unfortunately, many people with disability often find it challenging to access meaningful employment that is ongoing and secure.

Difficulties with employment can range from active and open employer discrimination and prejudice to misconceptions and misunderstandings about the needs of people with disability. Barriers include employer attitudes and managing unexpected issues arising from the disability which can impact work attendance and flexibility in the workplace. These can range from entrenched discrimination to misconceptions about the adjustments required for some people with disabilities.

According to Deloitte research 'workplaces that are diverse and inclusive are twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets and eight times more likely to achieve better business outcomes' and the 'organisation's leadership plays a pivotal role in supporting an inclusive culture and thus unleashing productivity benefits. Cultural generational change and explicit education is a way to create a positive systemic culture at all levels in society. The language we use and the behaviours we demonstrate is a way to stop the negative contagion toward disability and will assist to shape the landscape of equality moving forward.

Workplace diversity can be achieved by setting recruitment targets, providing more opportunities for people with disability in leadership roles, flexible working arrangements, providing accessible spaces and environments and redesigning processes and services to support and retain staff with disabilities. Proactive inclusive practices need to be made visible in recruitment processes and the organisation's policies.

There are several other practical steps that the private sector can deploy to promote a more inclusive society for people with disability. These include:

- implementing a range of leadership initiatives for people with disability including scholarships, mentoring, role shadowing and business networking opportunities. Role models with disability need to be ambassadors for the silent majority. For example, Dylan Alcott, Stella Young - see the person and not the disability
- service delivery organisations collaborating with the private sector to explore and invest in innovation, technologies, infrastructure, and services that can reduce the reliance of people with disability on attendant care and increase their independence where possible
- dedicating a few activities and Small Business to raise awareness about inclusion, showcase the contribution people with disability make as small business owners and employees and encourage more people with disability to establish businesses
- strengthening support for school-based apprenticeships or traineeships (SBATs) for students with disability, including through professional development for school-based staff and others involved in SBATs delivery
- provide financial incentives or support for small business to undertake disability awareness training.

## **8. What are the barriers and challenges to inclusion for people with disability?**

### **A. First Nations people with disability**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability are often challenged by complex cultural and social issues. For example, those living in rural and remote communities can experience intergenerational poverty and greater inequity than other students due to geographical impediments, language and culture barriers, and social-economic disadvantage. Targeted support to assist schools to build cultural competence to improve the connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and schools may be necessary. This may also address other issues relating to educational access and participation, which considers school attendance, student retention and learning outcomes.

The importance of ongoing consultation with the family and community and about how best to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability, particularly in the early school years needs to be emphasised with rural and remote schools. The impact of remote schooling on students with disability, particularly those students who have not returned to school, needs to be documented. Access to disability services, the cost to travel to necessary services or services just not available, has been a critical issue for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. The chronic lack of services in regional and remote areas not only restricts choice but sometimes means families are forced to leave their communities to access services and support.

It is difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Indigenous people with disability to participate fully in important cultural activities and as a result often find themselves isolated and excluded. State and territory governments must improve the access to and cultural appropriateness of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability. Despite obvious expertise and experience, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rarely

have the opportunity to have meaningful strategic input into the design and management of services and support. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disability networks in regional centres should provide support, education and training for mainstream services to better address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## **B. People with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse communities**

A predominant challenge to the inclusion for people with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities is limited access to services resulting in decreased participation. Lack of culturally appropriate and accessible information reduces knowledge and understanding of how services operate and are accessed and can significantly impact participation rates for culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The language and culture of these communities can impact their perception of disability resulting in reluctance to acknowledge disability and subsequently to seek access to support services or to fully participate in community activities. Accessibility factors such as language and culture further impact any opportunities to understand the different types of services available. This can, in turn, create barriers to the way's services are accessed and delivered, including school services

### **Linguistic Diversity**

Services that are delivered only in English limit participation for CALD communities. In the case of disability services, the language used can be complex further limiting understanding and reinforcing the barrier where the language used may be inaccessible to the communities. Unclear communication and a lack of understanding can also contribute to fear in a population that is likely to have experienced trauma and distrust government services. Language barriers could impact informed consent when accessing services possibly leading to greater mistrust. Options for service providers to address these barriers through the use of plain English should be implemented. Using bi or multi-cultural models, whereby multiple cultural understandings and practices can be integrated into access and delivery of services is one way to increase cultural safety.

### **Cultural Diversity**

Inclusion, for CALD communities, extends beyond linguistic inclusion and requires cultural understanding of the many community groups and modification of practice to promote cultural safety.

Recruitment of personnel in the disability sector from a range of diverse backgrounds would provide an opportunity to directly create opportunities for understanding attitudes towards disability and stigmas in different CALD communities, noting variance from community to community, even if in nuanced ways. The cultural competencies of staff working within the sector including access to bilingual and bicultural support workers can impact on access to services and cultural safety. Opportunities to understand different cultural beliefs, inter-group/clan relationships and impact on how disability is viewed and discussed or shunned in family and community groups needs to be fully understood in the many and varied contexts if service providers are to promote equity or opportunity and access to government funding and services, education, employment, etc.



**Delivery format**

CALD communities can face challenges in understanding service systems and accessing services. An evaluation of service delivery models and inter-agency referrals needs to consider supporting accessibility for CALD communities.

Being able to access services in multiple languages, and in a manner, which offers cultural sensitivity and safety, would support the reduction of barriers of entry and support access of CALD communities to disability services available.

**F. People with disability living in rural and remote communities**

People living in rural and remote Australia do not have the same opportunities to access services as people living in metropolitan cities and their communities experience a range of challenges including:

- poor access to specialist services
- lack of support services and consistent supports
- lack of choice of therapy providers and
- the ability to access online mental health services due to connectivity issues
- cost of service provision

Physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, and early intervention services are examples of services that can play an integral part in supporting families and assisting in the development of kids with disabilities. To overcome these issues, we need to develop service-delivery models that give families in rural and remote areas access to disability services without forcing those people to compromise or to forego assistance. This might include utilising telepractice therapy via remote telecommunication, having access to allied health assistants and accessing fly-in-fly-out allied health practitioners.

Consultation needs to be ongoing with people with disability from rural and remote locations, their families, service providers and allied health professionals. An evidence base of the type of support that is effective in these regions needs to be widely accessible to provide better choice and control for families living in rural and remote communities.

**References**

Graham, Linda. J (Ed.)(2020), **Inclusive Education for the 21st Century**: Theory, Policy and Practice, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, Australia pg 11

United Nations, (1995) **Report of the World Summit for Social Development**, Copenhagen, 6-12 March, Chapter IV pg 68