

## **Plain English Summary\***

# **Service to Students with Disabilities in ACT Public Schools: A Discussion Paper about Issues and Options**

## **1. Introduction**

The Discussion Paper is part of a process that commenced with visits and community consultation in March 2009 and will lead to a report and set of recommendations to the ACT Department of Education and Training in late July 2009.

The Discussion Paper is organised around three broad, interrelated issues. Section One examines *Contextual issues*. Section Two discusses *Curriculum and Pedagogical Issues*. Section Three examines *Organisational Issues*.

## **2. Contextual issues**

### ***2.1 The legal bases***

Future options for students with a disability in ACT Public Schools must be based on a clear understanding of legal rights and obligations. ACT legal foundations are provided through the *Education Act 2004*, the *Discrimination Act 1991*, and the *Human Rights Act 2004*. Legal obligations are also imposed and elaborated by the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, and the Commonwealth *Disability Standards for Education 2005*.

There is a strong *legal* basis for education of students with a disability.

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. What lessons might be learned from other jurisdictions that are either more or less prescriptive of education services for students with disabilities?
2. What *could* the provision of educational services to students with disabilities with ACT public schools look like in the future if the ACT rigorously adopted the ‘on the same basis’ orientation of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*?

### ***2.2 Education, Special Education and the ACT***

International practices, priorities and trends influence Australian education policy. For example, the ‘school reform’ literature recommends that schools should endeavour to provide learning environments that assist *every* student to learn and to prepare for adult life.

The two main goals of Australian education are that “**Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence**”; and that

“**All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens**”.

The ACT Social Plan has expressed a priority for the ACT to “**Lead Australia in education, training and life-long learning**” and aims for *all* young people to complete

13 years of schooling and achieve a Year 12 certificate or equivalent vocational qualification.

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. How effective is the policy framework around the provision of educational service to students with a disability in ACT public schools? What, if any, are the implications, e.g. for policy development/refinement?
2. What other policy-practice issues are relevant?

### ***2.3 Students with a disability in a diverse society***

Australian schools are becoming more diverse and not just because of disability. Governments are placing increasing emphasis on improving the performance of all students and particularly those who are underachieving in literacy and numeracy. Today's schools are complex and demanding.

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. How might decision-making about the most appropriate programs for individual students in schools be improved?
2. What opportunities are provided by current circumstances and this Review for the ACT to improve education services for all students while improving education services for students with a disability?

## **3 Curriculum and Pedagogical Issues**

### ***3.1 Curriculum***

Curriculum is all learning planned, guided and implemented by a school or college.

The ACT Curriculum Framework is *Every Chance to Learn*. Teachers are given the responsibility “to make adjustments to meet the particular needs of their students”.

Examples of particular curriculum issues include:

- Successful differentiation of the curriculum is demanding, particularly at the high school and college level. The relevance of the curriculum for some students has been questioned, e.g. for those students who struggle to appreciate the relevance of the curriculum to their lives and aspirations;
- The ACT's school-based curriculum policy results in considerable variation in curriculum across the system.

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. Would a more detailed differentiation of *Every Chance to Learn*, with the needs of all learners in mind, be desirable? The process of further articulating the curriculum, and linking it to the functional outcomes that many students must achieve, may be educative for teachers and parents, ultimately efficient of teacher time and effort, and benefit a wide range of students.

2. How can a better integration of the *class* curriculum and the *student's ILP* (Individual Learning Plan) be achieved in effective, efficient and feasible ways?

### ***3.2 Individual Learning Plans***

Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) in the ACT Department of Education and Training schools are an adaptation of the general model of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) that have been a part of special education for over 30 years.

The ILP process helps teachers to share and act on the knowledge of various participants including family and multidisciplinary colleagues. The ILP appears to be *the* key process for planning and delivering an agreed educational program for students with a disability.

Difficulties are perceived in the operation of ILPs including the following:

- Some ILP's do not sufficiently focus on the life skills that students need;
- More accountability for ILP quality and outcomes is needed.

The literature suggests that individual planning is most effective when it is genuinely student-centered, strengths-oriented and focused on carefully chosen learning outcomes. Having a 'case manager' or similar to coordinate the ILP is important.

#### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. The development and implementation of ILPs is time-consuming, resource intensive, and time-demanding. What could be done to make the ILP a more effective, efficient, accountable, and feasible support for student learning?
2. Might there be advantages in aligning general policies and procedures for all ILP processes in ACT public schools, e.g. for Indigenous students, gifted and talented students and for students with a disability?

### ***3.3 Transition***

Commencing pre-school or school, and making the transition from primary to high school, high school to college, and college to adult life are crucial events in each student's life. Transitions can be very stressful for students and parents and carers. The child's transition from school to adult life is a major source of concern for most parents and carers of children with a disability.

Leading practice suggests that senior students with a disability need systematic career guidance and support. Students with a disability benefit from 'experience of work' initiatives (in contrast to 'work experience') that get them into meaningful employment and help them to make friendships outside of school.

#### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. Transition to school is very important and it builds upon the work done in early intervention services. How might students with a disability and their families be supported in making this transition?

2. A key transition for students with a disability is the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Options are available in ACT Department of Education schools targeting this period. How might services be better deployed to improve transition outcomes?

### ***3.4 Pedagogy***

Pedagogy is the term used to describe the art and science of teaching.

The ACT Department of Education and Training puts great effort and many resources into improving teaching and learning. Currently, the Department is implementing the Quality Teaching Model through post-graduate training, provision of teaching and resource materials and the establishment of intensive support and networking opportunities for teachers. There is a growing body of research on effective strategies for special and inclusive education (e.g., Mitchell, 2008).

Research on teaching also emphasises the social aspects of learning, e.g., the importance of a good ‘class climate’. Good teaching is not just about techniques; it involves establishing good relationships with students and families, consulting students about their learning and organising schools and delivering educational services in student-friendly ways.

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. Do some students require particular pedagogy? What are the implications?
2. Is there a balance to be achieved between mainstream and specialised pedagogies? Does the Quality Teaching Model provide a language and unifying conceptual framework?

### ***3.5 Providing support for classroom-based personnel***

Depending on their individual needs, some students will require very specialised services, e.g., from school counsellors, Speech and Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists, and/or the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

There were some issues with these services such as

- The services appear to be somewhat compartmentalised; some thought they were not sufficiently integrated and coordinated;
- The ways in which support personnel attempted to ‘build capacity’ in schools was unclear.

In relation to support services provided by other agencies it was observed, generally, that there are issues around:

- Referrals and the waiting time for necessary services;
- Coordination and communication between schools and these agencies;
- Absence of service agreements about levels of service to be provided; and
- Particular difficulties around providing therapy for students with a disability in mainstream schools.

Research and contemporary leading practice highlight the importance of:

- A clear philosophical underpinning and vision for the operation of support services in schools with a focus on student learning outcomes;
- The integration of curriculum, pedagogical and support perspectives and goals;

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. What options might be considered to improve students' access to specialist services provided by outside agencies (such as Speech Pathology, Mental Health Services)?
2. What might be done to ensure the integration of support and therapy services with students' educational programs?

## **4. Organisational Issues**

### ***4.1 General models of service delivery***

The ACT Department of Education and Training provides a wide range of options for students with a disability and there is a wide range of services.

In general, public education in the ACT is characterised by the following:

- A tradition of good classroom practice with regard to students with disabilities;
- Many initiatives in early intervention and early childhood education;

Despite these positive features, a number of service delivery issues deserve mention.

These include:

- The 'Learning Centre' model may be inappropriate for many students and may have marginalising effects. (Students attending a Learning Support Centre do not necessarily have a disability under Australian Capital Territory Education and Training policy);
- There is huge diversity of program delivery approaches in Units and Centres but little data about overall outcomes;
- There is insufficient role clarity, training and professional development opportunities for Learning Support Assistants (LSAs); and

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of:

- A school focus on learning outcomes – academic, personal, social and vocational;
- Challenging and supportive school ethos – a 'community of learners' approach;
- Professional learning that is focused on improving student outcomes;
- Flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs;
- Whole-school, as opposed to withdrawal or separate programs (generally, but not universally);
- Intervening early – early and proactive interventions;
- Having a specifically identified person in the school with the required training, skills and knowledge to coordinate 'special education delivery';

- The commitment of school leadership to, and support for, the planning, organisation and resourcing of supports for students with a disability at the school.

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. Is there any problem/advantage in having multiple service delivery models? What are the implications?
2. Increased accountability for the learning outcomes of all students is mentioned frequently in the literature. Is it desirable? For students? For teachers? What would need to happen to ensure that the task was fair and feasible for schools and teachers and that it benefitted students?

## ***4.2 Resourcing student learning***

Schools receive significant resources that are provided for every student. Resources are not just points/money. Examples of resources include:

- Organisational - stakeholder involvement, planning, timetable, school organisation;
- Personal and personnel – leadership, the skills of school-based personnel, school climate & culture, engagement with school community, communication; and
- Technical – curriculum, instruction, assessment, use of technology;

The ACT uses a Student Centred Appraisal of Need (SCAN) process for making decisions about the allocation of supplementary resources to support the learning of students with a disability in schools across the system.

Many participants agreed that the SCAN process is a definite improvement on the previous ascertainment process and it leads to more consistency and system-wide understanding of resourcing.

Special Education budgets in educational jurisdictions throughout the world are experiencing pressure and many potential solutions are being trialed.

### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. The SCAN process is a resource intensive procedure that focuses mainly on student variables. However, theories of learning, and practical experience in classrooms, indicate that learning is dependent not just on student characteristics but on a range of contextual variables. How might the SCAN take these into account and, for instance, become a LOCAN (*Learning Outcomes Centred Assessment of Need*)?
2. If *schools* were allocated resources and supported to use them flexibly to meet the needs of *each student*, what might need to happen to ensure appropriate allocation of resources and accountability for the learning outcomes of students with a disability? Could a future be envisaged in which SCAN-like processes were no longer necessary?

### ***4.3 Staffing***

Issues relating to supply, demand, deployment, utilisation and workforce planning impact on curriculum and pedagogy for students with a disability.

#### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. What actions need to be taken to ensure the supply of appropriately skilled staff – teachers, Learning Support Assistants, visiting ‘specialist’ teachers, counsellors and others?
2. What other staffing issues should be considered in the Review of Special Education?

### ***4.4 Special schools***

ACT special schools deliver positive outcomes for many students and their families and their contribution to public education in the ACT is greatly appreciated and acknowledged in the community.

The literature reports that some special schools have ‘reinvented’ themselves as hubs of best practice (Farrell, 2008). Their focus has switched from one of relative isolation to ‘what special schools can offer the entire educational community?’

#### ***Continuing the conversation***

1. How might the level of integration of special schools into educational planning and provision in the ACT Department of Education and Training be further developed?
2. What might be some of the elements in a desirable vision for special schools in the ACT? How might special schools be best configured to be coherent with the primary – high school – college structure?

### ***4.5 Planning***

Special Education services in the ACT need to be resourceful and efficient, as well as effective.

Better outcomes for students are likely to be achieved when Special Education, the ACT Department of Education and Training, other services for children and young people, and school communities share a vision for a desirable service for students with a disability.

A feature of leading practice in education is the use of data. Good policies already exist but good data is required for planning the type and location of needed services, for monitoring policy implementation, and for quality monitoring at system, program, and school and student level. It would be appropriate to consider how data collection and data management might be given increased priority in ACT Special Education, and, consistent with a refined vision for Special Education, it would be appropriate to consider desirable targets and key performance indicators.

## ***Continuing the conversation***

1. What information needs to be collected to ensure that ACT schools are able to provide programs to meet the needs of all students with disabilities in the next planning cycle?
2. Would more regionally-based planning improve collaboration, networking, and the provision of complementary services?

## **5 Conclusion**

This brief paper has aimed to identify issues of fundamental importance to the future of Special Education in ACT public schools. We are most grateful for the contribution of so many individuals and groups to its development.

The paper did not try and cover every issue. So if readers believe we have missed the significance of particular matters that were mentioned to us, they are urged to raise them again in the conversations that will follow.

Education and teaching are relational activities. They work best when there is cooperation and collaboration that are motivated by a common purpose. That does not of course imply ‘group think’. We appreciate that the quality of the educational opportunities provided to students with a disability is such a crucial matter that there will be strongly held differences of opinion among the various stakeholders. However, if the focus remains on what’s best for the students, if we are respectful of the views of others, and if we attempt to be as evidence-based as possible, the process will produce good results. As in education itself, the success of the Review process is dependent on healthy relationships and good communication.

Although there is a rich and expanding literature about the delivery of special education, as far as we know, no ‘off the shelf’ solutions are available to many of the issues we must address. Throughout the world, various jurisdictions are trying a range of different strategies to provide an excellent service and to do so without expanding costs.

Very often, as noted by Norwich (2008), stakeholders find themselves debating and making choices about recurring dilemmas: whether to *identify* – the identification dilemma; what to *teach* – the curriculum dilemma; *whose views* should be heard – the parent-professional dilemma; and *where* to learn – the integration dilemma.

One of the major advantages that the ACT has over just about any other state or territory anywhere in the world is the extent and depth of the talent in its educational settings and in the community more generally. The ACT community is well-educated, knowledgeable and multi-skilled.

These advantages provide the opportunity, challenge and invitation to chart a way forward together in solutions-focused, data-based and defensible ways – to become creators of leading practice in special education.

Service development is *a journey* and we need to chart a course – one that values, but is not constrained by, where we have been. We look forward to the conversations about the desirable destinations and routes for Special Education within ACT public schools.

\*The complete version of the Discussion Paper, the References, and the Bibliography are available at

<http://sites.google.com/a/actspecialreview.com/www/discussion-paper>

Tony Shaddock, Michael Arthur-Kelly, Loretta Giorcelli, Julie Hook & Nancy MacDonald