



Progress Report: Improving outcomes for students with disability 2021



Minister's Foreword

I am pleased to release this third annual progress report outlining how we continue to improve the education and wellbeing of students with disability across NSW.

We remain strongly committed to improving educational experiences and outcomes for all students in NSW, including the **1 in 5 students** with disability.

We continue to work to ensure every student can achieve the best education possible, and realise their fullest potential, whether that is in a mainstream school, support class, or school for specific purposes.

The [Disability Strategy](#) (2019) commits the department to an agenda of reforms to achieve strong educational and wellbeing outcomes for students with disability in NSW public schools.

In 2021 we launched our [Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2021-2025](#) (DIAP), a five-year roadmap to ensuring that our schools and workplaces are accessible and enable participation and growth for all.

There is no one-size-fits-all model and no quick fix for improving education for students with disability. We will continue to ask students what they need; to talk to their parents and carers; and to engage with their support network, teachers and schools.

In 2021, we listened to students, their families and our educators as we provided strong support and opportunities for all students learning from home.

This year we have particularly focused on **building the evidence, professional learning for school staff**, and practice **resources for schools**, to ensure our future efforts are as effective as possible. We want to learn from expertise, experiences and best practice across NSW, Australia and the world. We are engaging in national conversations to build a strong evidence base to inform the effective allocation of funding and resources to support students with disability.

We recognise that more work is needed to ensure a consistent, positive educational experience for all students with disability and their families. But I am heartened by feedback from schools and families that we're on the right track.

Some projects are now part of "business as usual" across the department. These include revised induction processes and other mandatory training for school leaders, to improve their capacity to support students with disability. However, we recognise there is still a way to go to embed inclusive practice in all that we do.

We have continued to improve information and resources in our Inclusive Learning Support **hub for parents and carers**, which was launched in October 2020.

Students are at the centre of everything we do, and we have incorporated diverse student voices even further in our work this year. I have been meeting regularly with the first elected **Minister's Student Council, DOVES**, since it formed in May, and have received with great interest its proposals on a number of issues, including mental health, vaccinations, HSC students and gender equality in sporting events.

COVID-19 has again required us to rethink the way we deliver education to all students. We know that this has been an extremely difficult time for many, including students with disability and their families.

Collaboration, communication, innovation and technology have been vital in keeping students connected and engaged with their schools. Many of the usual supports and structures have had to be delivered differently due to physical distancing and learning from home.

I would like to take this opportunity to particularly thank our school-based staff who have continued to work tirelessly to support our students with disability, whether they were learning from home or at school.

There is great work already happening in many of our schools, and this has only been highlighted throughout the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report reflects some of the successes that are possible when schools and families work together, with the support of well-designed resources and well-trained people.

In 2022, we will continue to build the evidence base and strengthen the skills and confidence of our educators to support the diversity of learners in our classrooms. This will support our education system to continue to embed the inclusion of students with disability in every NSW public school.



The Hon. Sarah Mitchell, MLC
Minister for Education and
Early Childhood Learning



Resources to support students with disability in mainstream schools

In 2021, NSW mainstream public schools received the following funding resources to support students with disability, in addition to base funding for all schools:

\$300.6 million

for specialist learning and support teachers and flexible funding in every mainstream school

\$270 million

in Integration Funding Support for more than 12,800 students enrolled in mainstream classes who have a confirmed disability and moderate-to-high support needs.

Our schools in 2021

We remain committed to ensuring students with disability can equitably access and participate in the highest quality education.



172,000

(approximately 1 in 5)
NSW public school
students have a disability.



1,890

learning and support staff
across every mainstream
public primary, secondary
and central school in NSW,
supporting students with
additional learning and
support needs.



85%

of NSW public school
students with disability
learn in mainstream classes
in mainstream schools, 12%
learn in support classes in
mainstream schools and
3% in schools for specific
purposes (SSP).



79

scholarship recipients
who have commenced
a master's degree in
inclusive/special education
to grow the number of our
teachers with expertise in
inclusive practice.



**More than
135,000**

students receive
adjustments to their
learning, in addition to the
strategies and resources
available to all students.



450

specialist itinerant teachers
and assistant principals
supporting students
with hearing or vision
impairment.

Our vision remains strong

In our schools across NSW and in all our work across the department, we want every student to be **engaged, challenged, included and supported to reach their fullest potential** throughout their schooling and beyond.

We aspire to be an education system in which children with disability:

- thrive academically
- develop good physical, mental and emotional health
- gain the skills to live a fulfilling, independent life and
- access opportunities for further education and rewarding employment.

We want to ensure all children and young people:

- are welcomed and included in their local school community
- enjoy a wide range of experiences
- learn to their fullest capability, achieving demonstrable learning, wellbeing and independence outcomes, in a safe, supportive and healthy environment
- receive an excellent education, with expertise available to support access to the curriculum build friendships, interact with other students, and feel a sense of belonging.

We strive for an inclusive education system where:

- students with disability are learning to their fullest capability
- parents and carers are treated as partners in their child's education
- teachers possess the necessary skills to effectively educate children with disability, and feel confident doing so
- school leaders wholeheartedly support and enable inclusive education practices
- specialists work with teachers, providing support and guidance.



Supporting all students during COVID-19

Continuing safe, effective education for all

Our most urgent priority for much of 2021 was keeping our schools operating as safely and effectively as possible throughout the evolving COVID-19 situation.

To this end, the department worked closely with the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), NSW Health and other agencies. Our COVID-19 Taskforce ensured schools, students and families received up-to-date information and advice through our [COVID-19 web pages](#) and other communications.

We continued to improve our [Learning from Home Hub](#), created in 2020. The hub offers a range of resources and activities that teachers can use to support students while learning from home, including students of all abilities, and across all stages of learning.

The hub includes practical information about [supporting students with disability](#), and online resources to help teachers to adjust their activities and materials to meet the needs of students with disability.

Online professional learning was available to teachers to help support students with disability learn from home, including strategies for using technology to deliver learning and to support students to use assistive technology effectively.

Learning from home supports for students with disability

We recognise that shifting to learning from home was hard for many students and their families, as well as for our school staff. We acknowledge the concern that students with disability were particularly at risk of being left behind during remote learning.

We saw many positive examples of schools working on their learning from home processes in partnership with students and families. Through conversations between parents/carers and schools, a range of options were able to be used to change the delivery to suit the needs of our students learning with a disability.

Curriculum experts and learning designers developed guided learning from home packs for preschool and primary students and lesson sequences for secondary students including those with disability. The learning from home packs included age-appropriate daily wellbeing activities for primary and secondary students to increase students' sense of wellbeing and resilience.

Our live online webinars for parents and carers included those with students with disability sharing ideas and experiences about learning from home.

Local learning and wellbeing teams, itinerant teachers and school counselling services

continued to be available to provide advice and support to schools and students including students with disability in preparation for a return to face-to-face learning. Schools continued to review personalised plans for students with disability and high support and/or significant medical needs.

School learning support officers remained available to help students with disability, under the instruction of classroom teachers. This included making adjustments to learning activities, offering support to parents and carers by phone or email and supporting teachers using online platforms, or joining in lessons with a teacher.

We took a range of steps to make sure all students, including those with disability, remained connected to their school and as engaged in their learning as possible whether learning from home or the classroom. One small but important example was the use of clear masks in schools with students or staff who lip read, so they could continue to engage where masks were required to be worn.

Students with disability were identified as a **priority group for the allocation of technology supports** as students transitioned to learning from home. We sought to ensure that students with disability who use specialised technology at school could still access this equipment while learning from home.

We **provided assistive technology**, where possible, to students requiring it. Learning materials were also provided in alternate formats where required, including braille, e-text audio and large print resources.

Our Disability Learning and Support virtual staffroom for teachers and support staff across the state provides a forum for discussions, sharing resources and participating in professional learning. Its membership continued to grow steadily, from 2,550 members in November 2020 to 3,230 by September 2021.

We developed Boccia Blast, a **virtual boccia sports competition** which engaged students from 131 schools to compete remotely against one another during this year's lockdown.

We held a virtual Wellbeing Week in October 2021 to promote mental health and self-care awareness in the lead-up to returning to face-to-face learning. We partnered with mental health organisations in recognition of Mental Health Week and gave practical advice and resources to students, parents and carers, and school staff. Teacher materials included advice on identifying signs where mental health may have changed and resources to support whole-school wellbeing.

“With the right adaptations, everyone can achieve and everyone can learn to the best of their ability.”

Krista Forsstrom, Teacher and Assistant Principal, Fernhill School

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education

Our commitment to strengthening inclusive education sits across everything we do. In 2021, we have continued to focus on making inclusive education a reality for all our students with disability.

We have made progress in ensuring that inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices.

We have continued to deliver on our commitments under the [Disability Strategy](#), which include our responses to several recommendations from the [Parliamentary Inquiry into Students with a disability or special needs in NSW schools](#).

We have worked on initiatives in our [Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2021-2025](#) (DIAP), and a range of other initiatives across the department to improve outcomes for students with disability since the release of the Disability Strategy.

Our progress across these this year is included below, to reflect how they support the Disability Strategy's commitment to **inclusive education** and **four focus areas**:

- 1. Strengthen support** – investing in teachers and other support staff
- 2. Increase resources and flexibility for schools**
- 3. Improve the family experience** – streamlining processes and improving communication and information
- 4. Track outcomes** – building an evidence base to measure progress.



Inclusive education – policy, practice and culture

Inclusive education means that all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs.

Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices. (**Disability Strategy**)



Delivered in 2021

This year we continued to consult and work with parents and carers, students, as well as our schools and leaders to put the [Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability](#) (August 2020) into action. Their feedback has shaped the information and support that will be provided to schools to strengthen inclusive practice and improve the experience of students and families.

We delivered a range of engagement sessions for school staff to build on their understanding of inclusive practice and explore their role in ensuring an inclusive school culture. Information was presented at induction conferences, school development days and professional learning events.

Our **Inclusive Education Champions network**, established in late 2020, is helping staff share experiences and expertise across schools, including local successes and examples of effective practice.



Underway

We will launch an **Inclusive Education Policy for students with disability** to outline the roles and responsibilities of staff to provide an inclusive education for students with disability.

New practice resources and professional learning for schools will accompany the release of the policy.

School staff have told us they want easily accessible, evidence-based resources. We partnered with Deakin University's AllPlay Learn program to develop an **Inclusive Practice Hub**. This will include more than 140 practical resources for teachers and school staff to support the learning and wellbeing of students with disability.

School staff were involved in user testing to ensure the hub is easy to use and supports them in their role. Resources for students were also tested with students with disability.

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education



Future Priority

The **Inclusive Practice Hub** will be released and we will continue to enable access to evidence-based practice resources, informed by feedback from staff and students.

Inclusive learning and play spaces

We remain committed to developing **more inclusive approaches to school infrastructure** by improving physical environments for students with disability.



Underway

We are working on an agreed, consistent asset approach to ensuring inclusive design for our learning and play spaces. This will support School Infrastructure NSW (SINSW) to ensure our current and future school assets and physical environments are accessible and functional for all students.

The Disability Standards team in SINSW continues to provide advice on creating educational environments that maximise the participation of students with disability and ensure that spaces allow for dignified access and participation for all students.

This team now has two full-time staff placed within the department's Design and Technical Standards team. Ongoing work includes reviews of school designs to ensure they are accessible and inclusive, and development of improved design standards for inclusion in the Education Facilities Standards and Guidelines (EFSG).



Delivered in 2021

This year, we delivered

\$61.8m in projects to improve access to school facilities,

including installing lifts, ramps, accessible toilets, high-visibility markings and bollards.

An **audit tool** has been developed and trialled to assess the physical and design features of NSW public schools and the degree to which these support the learning and wellbeing of students with disability. This involved extensive consultation with school staff, parents and students through surveys and workshops. The tool will allow schools to identify improvements needed in their environment to meet the needs of all students.

Inclusive learning



Delivered in 2021

We developed a [universal design for learning \(UDL\) planning tool](#) to help teachers ensure their teaching and learning support all students to succeed. UDL helps teachers create and adjust resources to be inclusive and meet our obligations under the Disability Standards for Education (2005).



Underway

We are working closely with the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) to **deliver a new curriculum** within an ambitious timeline and inclusion is one of its design principles.

Public consultation showed that...

“ the clear preference was for a **single curriculum that recognised students’ differing levels of attainment and learning needs and that enabled ‘appropriate adjustments to be made to teaching and learning’** to ensure that every student was engaged, challenged at an appropriate level and made excellent progress towards high achievement. ”

Inclusive school sports

Spotlight on Come and Try Athletics Days

Seven **Come and Try Athletics days were held this year**, attended by more than 2,000 students and 420 staff.

These inclusive events were an opportunity for students to learn new skills in a fun, non-competitive environment. Staff learned how to modify and adapt events to include all students.

“ The experience was well worth it. Students and teachers both received a lot of valuable input and more schools should be involved to encourage their students’ participation. ”

Teacher, Bomaderry Public School.



Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education



Delivered in 2021

In 2021, our School Sport Unit again hosted a range of events across NSW, for students with disability to develop their skills in various sports adapted to meet individual needs.

“ I really liked the race runner... it makes me happy and excited when I can have a go with the other kids. ”

Beau from Bradfordville Public School took part in a Multi Sport event in Goulburn in Term 4, 2020



More than 130 schools participated in the inaugural **Ten Pin Bowling competition** for students with disability. School registrations for our Boccia Knockout competition increased by 370% compared to 2020.

More than 500 teachers received training in how to adapt sport to cater for the diversity of needs of their students and how to identify students with disability who demonstrate high potential in sport.

We supported more than 100 schools to embed inclusive sport and physical activity into their Strategic Improvement Plans, taking a whole school approach to the health and wellbeing of all students.

We trialled an information webinar to connect with families and school communities about physical activity and sporting opportunities for students with disability.



Underway

We continue to build the evidence base for inclusive school sports through research on school-based provision of physical activity for students with disability. Following a comprehensive review of national and international best practice in the delivery of adaptive physical activity in physical education and sport, we are investigating school-based physical activity for students in mainstream secondary school settings through teacher focus groups and stakeholder interviews.

We will develop and evaluate a school-based exercise program for adolescents with disability, aiming to increase student enjoyment, fitness levels, functional capacity and self-confidence.

Inclusive creative and performing arts

We continued to develop online resources and workshops on inclusive creative and performing arts for teachers, parents and carers, and students with disability.

The [Arts Unit website](#) offers **more than 330 resources** including Art Bites (short videos), Creative Classes (interactive lessons) and Creative Teacher resources (for professional development).

We provide a range of inclusive learning and performance opportunities in dance, visual arts, music and drama through the Arts Unit's **Connections Program**.

“I think it’s really important to make adjustments for the students because every student in our class, in our school is an individual. And I think that for them... to be at their full potential of learning, they need to be given every opportunity to learn.”

Donna Dunn, School Learning Support Officer, Fernhill School

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education



Delivered in 2021

Nova Employment became initiatives supporter – disability programs for The Arts Unit and will support inclusive practice and broader extracurricular opportunities in the area of creative and performing arts. These additional resources will support the involvement of students with disability in high-profile state-wide events and smaller local programs.

In Term 4, 2021 we launched a Drama Inclusion Creative Teacher digital resource.

In June 2021 we held a series of disability-inclusive dance workshops to build the skills and confidence of staff who engage students through movement, music and performance. We plan to develop these programs further in 2022.

Spotlight on 2021 Connections Showcase

We held our inaugural Connections Showcase, an online exhibition of creative works by students with disability.

Applicants were invited to submit a creative artwork, performance, spoken word, multimedia or digital piece with the theme Found Objects.

The works of 336 students (Kindergarten to Year 12) from across 22 schools (6 primary, 7 secondary schools and 9 SSPs) were showcased on the [Connections Program website](#) during Term 4, 2021.

“ Taylor loves the art work. He could not stop talking about it. It is magic to see the hard work he put into it ”

**Cindy, Year 3 parent,
Greenwich Public School**

“ I feel very special and proud to see my artwork, my smile said it all! I thank my teachers and school learning support officers for their continuous support ”

**Ricky, Year 10, Georges River College
Peakhurst Campus**

“ Edie loved every minute of being part of this performance. She takes great joy in watching herself and her fellow students in the film ”

**Lisa, Year 12 parent, Callaghan College
Jesmond Senior Campus**



Inclusive early childhood education

We continue to improve inclusion in early childhood education and care for young children with disability.



Underway

The Disability and Inclusion Program provides funding and support to enable children with disability and additional needs in community preschools to participate in a quality early childhood education program on the same basis as their peers. An external review of the **Disability and Inclusion Program** is underway.

Through the **Start Strong Funding** model, we continue to support preschool affordability for children aged 3 to 5, with a particular focus on vulnerable cohorts such as children with disability and additional needs.

NSW is engaging with the Commonwealth Government and other jurisdictions to implement the recommendations of the **Disability Standards for Education Review**. This will see improved resources for early childhood education services, and user-friendly resources for parents and carers of children with disability to help them better understand their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act. In the longer term, consultation will occur with the sector on extending the Disability Standards for Education to cover the full spectrum of the early childhood service types.



Disability Strategy focus 1: Strengthening support

In 2021 we focussed on building the skills, confidence and capacity of our school staff and leaders. We also progressed our work to build safer, more supportive and more inclusive school communities.

This includes developing policies and resources to support schools to:

- build inclusive practices
- provide a more holistic approach to encouraging positive student behaviour
- reduce the use of restrictive practices.



Building staff skills and confidence

We have continued investing in our leaders, teachers and support staff to equip them with the tools, techniques and confidence they need to embed inclusive practice and high-quality education for students with diverse needs in all our schools.

We continue to **partner with the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) and universities** to ensure all undergraduate teaching degrees and postgraduate degrees cover relevant contemporary skills and knowledge.



Delivered in 2021

In 2021 we expanded on our suite of evidence-based professional learning courses to build the capability of schools to support students with disability, with new topics including ADHD and behaviour support and management.

Courses continued to be available during COVID-19 to help staff understand the needs and strengths of students with particular disability types, such as autism, and common mental health issues. We offered scenario-based training for non-teaching staff on welcoming and guiding families of students with disability, including an overview of the department's responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Standards for Education.

Enrolments in our personalised learning with technology course continued to be high, with almost 1,100 completions this year. This course helps **teachers and non-teaching school staff to incorporate appropriate assistive technology into their practice**, and effectively support students using it in their learning and assessment.

In 2021 we developed accredited online professional learning for **career and transition advisers** to improve the advice and support they provide to students with disability preparing to move from school to work or further study.



Delivered in 2021

In February 2021, we released a [disability discrimination legal issues bulletin](#) to help staff understand their legal obligations. The resource gives staff information on preventing and addressing disability discrimination, making reasonable adjustments, and supporting students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students.



Underway

We are working to improve the training we provide to help teachers meet the diverse needs of students with disability. This will ensure our professional learning includes relevant content and perspectives, and that there is access to further specialist courses to meet identified need.

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 1:
Strengthening support

Training for school leaders

We want to ensure all our leaders are equipped with the tools and techniques they need to build and maintain inclusive learning environments and school communities.

Our **professional learning, induction programs and conferences** include content to ensure new and developing leaders fully understand their roles and responsibilities, including inclusive practice.

The [Disability Standards for Education: Education Leaders training](#) has been mandatory for directors educational leadership, principals, deputy principals, assistant principals and head teachers since July 2020, and is a priority for all new school leaders. More than **95% of school leaders have completed the training** and we are working to ensure the remainder (which includes some people on long term leave) complete the training as soon as possible.

Scholarships

We continue to expand our scholarships to boost the number of:

- teachers accredited to teach students with disability
- school staff with expertise in inclusive practice across all settings
- school counsellors and school psychologists.



Delivered in 2021

In 2021 there were 79 new scholars in our [Inclusive Practice in Education Scholarship program](#), which will produce an **additional 350 teachers qualified** in inclusive or special education by 2025-2026.

We expanded our school psychologist scholarships, with 32 psychology graduates taking up scholarships in 2021 to train as **school psychologists**. A new rural training program at Charles Sturt University started this year, in addition to the existing Master of Professional Psychology program at the University of Wollongong. We are currently recruiting for the 2022 scholarships.

We continue to offer scholarships for teachers and psychology graduates to become **school counsellors**. This year, 49 teachers commenced school counsellor training and 20 teachers were sponsored to complete their undergraduate psychology studies.

Understanding the impact of trauma

In 2021, we have focused on improving how teachers, school-based staff and leaders understand and support students who have experienced trauma.

The impact of trauma can affect the ability of children and young people to learn, form relationships and regulate their behaviour.



Delivered in 2021

Our **Trauma-informed practice for improved learning and wellbeing course** was refined, based on participant feedback from the pilot phase in 2020, and made available to staff from April 2021. More than 220 people have been trained as trauma-informed practice facilitators, and have started delivering the four 90-minute modules to school-based staff and those who support schools in rural and remote, regional and metropolitan areas of NSW. So far, 4,138 people have completed at least one module, and many schools are booking the training for early 2022. A student-centric evaluation is being developed to help assess the impact of the course on student learning and wellbeing.

Advanced Leadership and **Advanced Specialist courses** have also been successfully piloted and are being finalised for release.

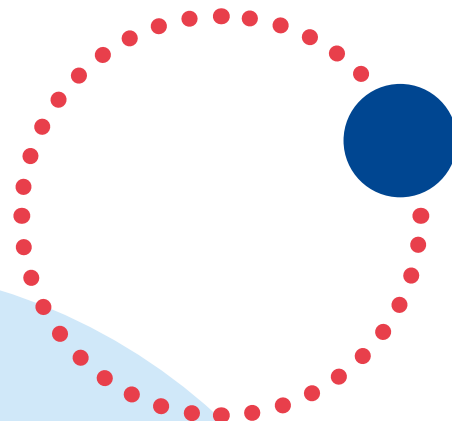
Encouraging positive student behaviour

We recognise that suspension rates for vulnerable students in NSW are too high, and disproportionately so for students with disability, Aboriginal students, students in rural and remote areas, students in out of home care and students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. We are working to change this.



Delivered in 2021

In 2021, we released the [Student Behaviour Strategy](#) which focuses on practices, support and ongoing reforms to ensure every student is safe, engaged and learning. The first phase of supports rolled out in Term 1, 2021 included a **new state-wide team of 36 behaviour specialists** to provide advice and coordination of complex cases, a [behaviour support toolkit](#) and 7 new professional learning courses.



Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 1:
Strengthening support



Underway

We are building our approach based on international evidence of best practice, including a greater emphasis on prevention, early intervention and explicitly teaching students about social and emotional skills and behaviour expectations. We will continue to provide additional resources to support positive student behaviour including additional professional learning courses.

The new Student Behaviour policy and procedures will be released to support this evidence-based approach to supporting positive student behaviour.

Additional resources and specialist allied health and behaviour support providers will support children and adolescents with behaviour challenges, which may be associated with disability.



Future Priority

The Behaviour Strategy will continue to evolve in line with best practice, emerging evidence and the experiences of our students and staff.

We will work with other NSW Government agencies, including the Department of Communities and Justice, to help ensure continuity of support for vulnerable students, inside and out of school settings.

We will develop an evaluation and monitoring plan and build on the evidence base so we can continue to improve in this area.

Reducing the use of restrictive practices

Restrictive practices refer to a range of activities that impact on the freedom of movement of a person with the primary purpose of protecting the person and others from harm.

In our 2020 Progress Report, we committed to reducing the use of restrictive practices in all NSW public schools through a restrictive practices framework to provide clear guidance to staff on the use of restrictive practices.



Delivered in 2021

In 2021, we finalised this framework and a related policy that set out a clear decision-making process to be followed in schools when using restrictive practices, to help protect students and staff from harm.

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 1:
Strengthening support



Underway

We have developed supporting documents to help students, parents/carers and our schools understand our commitment to reducing and eliminating restrictive practices. Aligned to the Behaviour Strategy, this guidance includes a greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

We will release the restrictive practices framework, policy and supporting resources.



Future Priority

In 2022, we will work closely with students, parents and carers and our schools to ensure everyone has the support they need to use restrictive practices safely, and to reduce and eliminate their use wherever possible.

A team of behaviour specialists will also be available to help schools understand the changes.

Disability Strategy focus 2: Increasing resources and flexibility

We continue to look for opportunities across our education system to enable schools to be more responsive and innovative, to better support students with disability. We know we need to improve how we identify priority areas.



Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 2:
Increasing resources and flexibility

We are testing and evaluating new resourcing models to give schools more resources and flexibility to tailor education to students' needs.

We are working to ensure our systems and processes reflect contemporary understandings of disability and align to needs-based assessment approaches (Recommendation 7 of the [Parliamentary Inquiry into Students with a disability or special needs in NSW schools](#)).

Identifying student needs



Delivered in 2021

In February 2021 we completed a **review of the criteria we use to determine whether students with disability can access additional targeted support**. The review recommended moving away from criteria based on medical diagnosis towards a focus on functional ability and need. The findings will allow us to develop a new model to ensure targeted supports are responsive to and distributed in accordance with student need.



Underway

We are now reviewing the department's functional assessment tools and processes for determining these supports so resource decisions more closely align to the strengths and needs of students with disability.

Find out more about our [Needs based assessment for targeted disability supports](#).

In 2021, we worked with school principals and other stakeholders to inform the development of an allocation methodology that uses a range of measures of student need and school context to **allocate the Low Level Adjustment for Disability loading to schools**. We will continue to work with schools on this during 2022.

“We understand that there are 30 different learners in front of us... 850 different learners across the school. And we need to cater for individual needs and value each of them in their learning journey.”

**Andrew Backhouse, Principal,
Henry Kendall High School**

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 2:
Increasing resources and flexibility

Encouraging innovation

Between May 2020 and March 2021, we trialled 17 **Innovation Program** projects across 30 public schools, two government preschools and two early childhood centres. The goal was to build the evidence base for approaches schools can use to support learning outcomes for students with disability and additional learning and support needs. Evaluation and assessment of these projects is currently underway.

Spotlight on telepresence robots

The Ponds School trialled telepresence robots to see whether they could increase the attendance, engagement and academic performance of students with long term absences.

The robots were used by students at home who are unable to attend school due to chronic illness or mental health issues. Staff were trained on how to engage students using the robots during lessons, and students and parents learned how to control the robots and access lessons remotely.



Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 2:
Increasing resources and flexibility

“ This doesn’t just benefit the student who isn’t physically there, it benefits those at school that they can see their classmates and have that connection. Students at home can move the robot around to see the classroom. If another student is communicating with them they can move to see that student.

The robot will enable virtual attendance for students in the classroom and students’ participation in daily activities – library, incursions, daily assembly, music therapy. ”

**Leonie Donaldson, Principal,
The Ponds School**

The **Children’s Hospital School at Westmead** partnered with MissingSchool to design a model to connect students with serious illness to their schools remotely during absence using telepresence robots.

This builds on the use of telepresence robots in some NSW public schools that enable students who can’t attend school to dial into their classrooms, be seen and heard and maintain their learning and social connections. This helps parents and carers work with teachers on supporting their child’s learning from hospital and home. The project considered how this could be expanded to students across NSW.

“ It is about enabling these students to be included in their learning, access their classrooms, and move around and participate on the same basis as their peers. This is a way for schools to extend the disability standards provisions to this cohort. ”

**Mercedes Wilkinson, Principal, The
Children’s Hospital School at Westmead**

“ Chronic illness affects up to one in three students, with more than 15,000 of these students in NSW public schools facing absence from school spanning months to years. To address their education isolation we considered the governance, policy and robot technology needed to scale support across the state. ”

**Megan Gilmour, Co-founder and CEO,
MissingSchool**

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 2:
Increasing resources and flexibility

Raising awareness

We continued to raise awareness of inclusion and the Disability Strategy through our Disability Strategy newsletter and website. Our Disability Strategy newsletter highlights research and good practice across our education system, with more than 2,350 subscribers.

We developed videos to give voice to the experience of students with disability and their families about what works for them, and to keep their perspective at the centre of what we do.

Access to health and behaviour specialists

The **Specialist Allied Health and Behaviour Support Provider Scheme**, launched in June 2020, enables schools to quickly engage pre-qualified allied health and specialist behaviour support providers through a streamlined administrative process.

The web resources we developed with Speech Pathology Australia last year to **better support students with communication difficulties and disorders** recorded around 7,000 page views by September 2021. These allow strong collaboration between school staff, parents and carers, teachers, students, and speech pathologists to help improve literacy and other educational outcomes.



Delivered in 2021

In June 2021, we completed a second round of procurement to add providers to the Specialist Allied Health and Behaviour Support Provider Scheme. Schools now have approximately 100 providers to choose from, including 32 behaviour support providers. Other allied health services schools can access under the scheme include exercise physiology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech pathology.



Disability Strategy focus 3: Improving the family experience

This year, we continued to improve the experience of families of children and young people with disability as they journey through our education system.



Personalised learning and support for a student should involve the school, family and student collaborating to identify the adjustments required to meet the student's learning and wellbeing needs.

In 2021 we have particularly focussed on:

- improving the **information available online**, making it easier for families to understand what to expect, how to access the support they need, and where to find useful resources
- ensuring schools and families are promptly advised of the outcome of an access request application for a student's placement in a support class
- providing a consistent, transparent approach to access requests across all NSW public schools.

Streamlining the access request process



Delivered in 2021

From the start of Term 1, 2021 we introduced **standardised procedures** for the placement of students in support classes across all our schools.

These changes address Recommendations 22 and 24 in the 2017 [Parliamentary Inquiry into Students with a disability or special needs in NSW schools](#) by making this process more efficient, consistent and transparent for families and schools.

We established **placement panels** with more consistent processes and membership. Placement panel members were required to complete professional learning on their roles and responsibilities to support strong, consistent decision making. Placement panels are now generally held in Week 3 and 7 each term and outcomes are communicated to the family by the referring school, with support from learning and wellbeing teams as required.

Access request applications for immediate and next term support in most circumstances will have a panel decision communicated to families on average within 28 days of panels (excluding school holidays and public holidays).

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 3:
Improving the family experience

Improving the Integration Funding Support process

Integration Funding Support helps schools to provide adjustments for students with disability in mainstream classes who have moderate to high learning and support needs.

“Supporting students with disability has always been something really important to us here. And it’s been always really important to us to make sure that they’re included in everything that we do here at Barmedman Public School.”

Christina Haisell,
Principal, Barmedman
Public School



Delivered in 2021

In March 2021 our new **central Integration Funding Support team** came into operation, providing a single point of contact for the additional funding that supports eligible students in mainstream schools. The team works to communicate a decision on support to families and schools on average within 28 days (excluding school holidays and public holidays).



Underway

From 2022, we will expand the eligibility for Integration Funding Support to include children with disability requiring substantial and extensive adjustments in NSW public preschools. This will help with their transition into primary school. Preschool children will not require a confirmed disability diagnosis to access this funding.

Better communication and information

This year we continued to improve our [Inclusive Learning Support hub](#) for parents and carers of students with disability or additional learning and support needs, based on user feedback.

The hub, co-designed and tested with parents, offers a central source for up-to date information, interactive tools and downloadable resources on topics related to their child's education. Since its launch in October 2020, it has had more than **40,000 unique visitors**, with 67% of users visiting more than once.

The [personalised enrolment timeline tool](#) has had 1,280 visits. It provides an overview of the steps involved in enrolling and the timeline for when each step will occur, and an opt-in text or email reminder for parents. It helps parents and schools to start making plans together early so that supports can be in place from day one of their child starting school.



Delivered in 2021

We have developed conversation aids that are ready to pilot in schools. These will help ensure early conversations between schools and families are productive and positive.

Better response to concerns and complaints

We want our **complaints processes** to be easy and accessible so that any issues can be raised, resolved or referred quickly.



Delivered in 2021

This year we improved the department's ability to **report on complaints** that relate to students who may be vulnerable, including students with disability.

We developed resources, including an e-learning module for school-based staff, and have continued to provide professional learning on effective complaint management. This material includes information about managing complaints from, or relating to the experience of, students with disability.



Underway

We are reviewing our complaint policy and procedure, to identify ways we can improve how complaints from parents, carers and students are managed.

We are also improving our website, to make it easier for people to find the information they need when they have a concern. This will include specific content for students about making a complaint about our schools or services.

We remain committed to **protecting the safety and wellbeing of our students** and have robust systems for responding to allegations of staff misconduct. We have continued to improve the way we **respond to concerns, complaints and allegations of staff misconduct**.

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 3:
Improving the family experience

Support to access the NDIS

We continued to support students, families and schools to understand and navigate the **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)** and resolve issues relating to NDIS services provided to students.

We established 270 Connection Desks in NSW public schools to facilitate access for families and school staff to NDIS Local Area Coordinators, leading to more students accessing the NDIS and more effectively using their NDIS-funded supports.



Delivered in 2021

In Terms 2 and 3, 2021, we jointly hosted information sessions with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) for school staff on key aspects of the NDIS, including pathways to post-school life, early childhood, early intervention and the provision of NDIS-funded therapies in schools.



Future Priority

Over the coming year, we will:

- finalise a joint statement with the NDIA to clarify expectations around the delivery of NDIS-funded therapies in schools
- develop a joint product with the NDIA to clarify roles and responsibilities in relation to student work experience for NDIS participants.

We will continue to identify opportunities to expand our support to schools on the NDIS, including resources to support Aboriginal families to engage with the NDIS.

Access to before and after school care

This year, we continued to deliver on the NSW Government's 2019 election commitment (investment of \$120 million over four years) to expand access to before and after school care (BASC) for all parents with children at NSW public primary schools who need it.

This includes working to identify gaps and issues in accessing this care for students with disability.



Delivered in 2021

Our [Before and After School Care Program](#) team regularly surveys parents and carers to understand their needs and expectations for care.

In Term 4, 2021 we expanded the survey to parents and carers with children at SSPs.



Future Priority

Survey results will help us to integrate demand from SSPs for BASC services into our BASC School Action Plan, and to advocate for children with disability and additional needs with school communities, peak bodies and providers.

We will continue to pro-actively seek information on BASC demand for children with a disability or additional needs in future surveys and consultations.

High potential and gifted students with disability

There is very limited Australian research available about the prevalence and support of high potential and gifted students with disability. International research suggests that these students remain under-identified and may significantly underachieve.



Delivered in 2021

Our [High Potential and Gifted Education Policy](#), which took effect from January 2021, makes specific reference to the unique needs of high potential and gifted students with disability.



Delivered in 2021

We delivered the final report on research into high potential and gifted students with disability, conducted in partnership with the University of Wollongong. The research aimed to understand the prevalence of high potential and gifted students with disability across NSW, and factors influencing assessment and identification.

Findings from a survey of 110 NSW public schools (K-12), including an SSP, included:

- 10% of formally and informally identified high potential and gifted students also had one or more disabilities, including attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), behavioural/emotional disorder (BED) and specific learning disability (SLD)

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education

Disability Strategy focus 3: Improving the family experience

- School leaders indicated a significant lack of understanding of processes and methods to reliably assess the needs of high potential students, as well as high potential students with disability.



Future Priority

We will use the findings to inform professional learning and online resources for school leaders, school psychologists and teachers. This will improve how the complex needs of high potential students with disability are recognised and understood, and then appropriately supported with evidence-based teaching practices.

“I think it all comes back to high expectations. I think it’s about believing that everybody can succeed and everybody can make progress. It doesn’t matter what standard you’re working at. It’s about getting better from where you are.”

Jenni McKeon, Teaching Principal, Tumbulgum Public School

Disability Strategy focus 4: Tracking outcomes

We are committed to improving the reliability and validity of our data, and how we use it to inform decision-making, track outcomes for students, and develop our evidence base about effective practices.

This requires ongoing improvements that we are committed to building into our systems and practices.



Student voices

A **Minister's Student council**, known as DOVES (Department of Student Voices in Education and Schools), has met 5 times (once face-to-face) since its formation in May 2021.

The council consists of 27 students ranging from Year 6 to Year 11. The council aims to have representation from as many student groups as possible and includes students with disability.

The council has met with the Minister on 3 occasions and has made proposals on a number of issues including mental health, vaccinations, HSC students, and gender equality in sporting events.

The department and other stakeholders have also presented information to the council to gather student feedback on projects and initiatives including sustainability, skills and Statements of Consent.

The council will prepare an annual report on its activities at the end of this year.

Our online **[Student Voices hub](#)**, visited by more than **47,000 people** since its launch in August 2020, is a multimedia channel for all NSW students to share their stories, ideas and opinions.

National Disability Data Asset

The Commonwealth is working together with states and territories to develop a national disability data set, to give a more complete picture of the life experiences of people with disability.

This [National Disability Data Asset \(NDDA\)](#) project aims to provide insights to governments, service providers and researchers to improve the effectiveness of services and supports for people with disability.



Underway

Our department is leading the **early childhood education test case**, one of five NDDA test cases being carried out across Australia.

We want to improve the effectiveness of early intervention for children who need it by understanding the relationships between the supports and services provided, participation in early childhood education, and developmental and educational outcomes for those children. We're particularly focussed on children in their year before school.

This work has the potential to enable better connections between families, early intervention supports and early childhood services, and to ensure appropriate supports are effectively embedded within our preschools.

In 2021 we collaborated with a wide range of stakeholders to:

- test the feasibility of the NDDA concept
- analyse and identify gaps across more than 25 different Commonwealth and NSW data sets on health, social and educational supports and outcomes for children with disability and developmental delay
- determine whether the available data can provide useful insights
- start developing a digital tool and analytical reports that will allow the data to be seen and used.

Examinations and assessments

Schools are required to provide reasonable adjustments for students with disability to allow them to access assessment tasks and exams on the same basis as all other students. We continue to improve schools' understanding and awareness in this area.



Delivered in 2021

We provided expert advice to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to improve the accessibility of [NAPLAN Online in 2021](#). This included additional design features and functionality to improve the accessibility of the assessments.

Adjustments included the availability of extra time and rest breaks; assistive technology; NAPLAN support people; oral/sign support; scribes and alternative formats (audio and visual).

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education
Disability Strategy focus 4:
Tracking outcomes

Assessing learning progress



Delivered in 2021

We completed the first phase of the [Assessment for Complex Learners trial](#). Three assessment tools for literacy, numeracy, and learning and engagement were developed, improved and piloted with approximately 90 schools between March and December 2020. We also conducted qualitative research with schools into the Students with Additional Needs (SWANs) tool.

Research findings completed in June 2021 add to the limited evidence-base available on effective ways to measure learning progress for students with complex needs. Schools gave strong positive feedback for all four assessment tools, finding them to be useful, practical, valid and reliable.



Future Priority

We will:

- improve and finalise the assessment tools
- develop online assessment platforms, where appropriate
- design professional learning for schools to use the assessment tools
- run larger-scale trials of the tools
- conduct research to ensure the final versions of the tools are valid and reliable.

Measuring outcomes

We need to identify a suite of system-level measures and indicators to allow us to **track and report meaningfully on how we are improving learning, wellbeing and independence outcomes for students.**



Delivered in 2021

We finalised a detailed stocktake and analysis of our existing data, and extensive research, including a review of international best practice. This work has highlighted the complexities involved in developing an Outcomes Framework for students with disability, which we are working to better understand and address.



Underway

We have started to engage with our communities to ask what outcomes they want and expect from the education system. The voices of students with disability, their parents and carers and educators are contributing to the design and development of this framework. We look forward to continuing this engagement in 2022.

Nationally Consistent Collection of Data



Underway

We continued to work with school support staff and the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) to improve the collection process and the quality and use of the **Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability** (NCCD) as a record of the adjustments delivered by schools to support students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers.

We are undertaking a project to better understand the decisions being made across our schools about adjustments for students with disability. We will use the findings from this project to inform how we support schools to engage with the NCCD and put in place adjustments for students with disability.

Tell Them From Me survey

Each year, we seek **feedback from students, parents and carers, and teachers** about student engagement, wellbeing and experiences at school through the department's [Tell Them From Me survey](#).

In early 2021, almost 400,000 students across more than 1,800 schools undertook the Tell Them From Me student survey – a participation record for the state.

“I think that education’s for everyone. I think we all have a right to be included in public education and I also think it’s our responsibility as public educators to include all students in our schools.”

**Rebecca Simm, Head Teacher
Wellbeing, Blacktown Girls
High School**

Meeting our commitments: Inclusive education

Disability Strategy focus 4:

Tracking outcomes

Spotlight on accessible survey tools

We partnered with the **University of NSW** to develop and trial an accessible survey method for students with high support needs, including those who are currently unable to access the department's Tell Them From Me student survey.

Both internationally and in Australia, research shows that students with moderate and high support needs have limited opportunities to share their views about their education.

This year, we completed the trial and delivered accessible tools including surveys to suit students with varying support needs and two arts based methods (photovoice and body mapping).

The trial involved students from schools for specific purposes (SSP) and support classes in mainstream schools. Teachers were involved in the design, testing and evaluation of the method. We also co-designed resources with teachers and produced practice videos to support schools to use the methods as a more general student voice tool.

This trial provided unprecedented insight into the educational experiences of students with moderate and high support needs. The findings also provide useful data insights into what works to improve the engagement of students with high support needs.

We are now scoping next steps to ensure the voices of students with high support needs are consistently heard.



Looking ahead

The release of the Disability Strategy in 2019 marked an important shift within the NSW education system. It publicly recognised the need to focus our efforts on improving outcomes for students with disability across all government schools in NSW.

Delivering the initial focus areas of reform that we committed to in the Disability Strategy were the first important steps to improving outcomes and experiences for students with disability in NSW, and increasing support for our teachers and school staff.

As this progress report demonstrates, there is much more happening across the department to support students with disability than the specific activities identified in the Disability Strategy.

Over the coming year, we will work to deliver the initiatives identified as 'underway' in this report.

We will continue to **build on a whole-system approach** to improve the experiences and inclusion of students with disability.

We will continue to **improve the way we collect, connect and share our data**, and how we use it to inform practices and decisions.

We will continue to keep students at the centre of what we do, and seek to **enhance student participation and voice** in our reforms.



“Students with disability have rights to have an education in our schools. I feel that disability, students with disability, brings so much to our school. It encourages understanding, awareness, acceptance, compassion, empathy, and we love the fact that at our school we do support a wide range of students with varying levels of need.”

**Susan Oliveri, Principal,
Caringbah Public School**

We acknowledge the homelands of all Aboriginal people and pay our respect to Country.

For more Information

If you have any questions about this progress report,
or to request a text-only version,
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