Review of Policy and Practice for Students with Additional Needs

Prepared for the
Northern Territory Department of Education

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Executive summary

Context

In the Northern Territory, students with additional needs represent approximately one quarter of the general student population\(^1\). Meeting the specific and individual educational needs of all members of this cohort of students is a commitment central to the Department’s strategic direction and is supported by the Northern Territory Government through an annual commitment of funding to support students with challenging behaviours and those students with a disability or mental illness.

Delivering an inclusive system of education, which includes adjusting curriculum, assessment practices, teaching styles and the physical environment to provide for the needs of all students, has presented challenges for schooling systems worldwide\(^2\).

The benefits of building supportive and engaging schools are many, including improved academic and social development for all students\(^3\). The specific elements that must be in place to achieve this differ between jurisdictions, with variables related to demographic profile, geolocation and resource availability shaping the approaches used to ensure schools meet the needs of all learners. In the context of such variability, the evidence base on successful approaches to inclusion continues to develop\(^4\). The Northern Territory Department of Education (the Department) has set a direction that encompasses an inclusive approach to providing education services to students with additional needs, aiming to ensure that learning pathways for all students enable them to progress through their education to become members of a community where their contribution is both valued and welcomed.

The Department’s new Education NT Strategic Framework 2018-2022 commits the agency to a strong public education system that ensures equity and gives every child the

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\(^1\) 2017 NCCD collection and 2017 AgeGrade Census.


\(^3\) Cologon, 2016, p. 24; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015, p. 80; Hehir et al., 2016, p. 2.

\(^4\) Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013 p. 12.
opportunity to engage, grow and achieve. The Strategic Framework is clear that this must be achieved within an inclusive environment, and that all students will benefit from individually relevant learning pathways.

This review is important in developing a Framework for students with additional needs that will strengthen the current strategic direction of the Department. To help position its resources to align with this strategic direction required a review of the Department’s current policies and practices to ensure consistency with other key aspects of reform underway across the agency and to capture an authentic representation of the views of critical stakeholders. Similar processes of reviewing and strengthening approaches for students with additional needs are occurring nationally and internationally.

**Definition and scope**

The term ‘students with additional needs’ can be taken to mean any student that may have additional needs in accessing the curriculum and achieving success in learning at school.

The definition of ‘students with additional needs’ for the purposes of this Review is aligned with the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) and is established as *students receiving educational adjustments in NT government schools*. The scope of this research and consultation was limited to school aged students with additional needs in NT government schools.

**Action**

Within this context, the Department commissioned a review in September 2017 of the policies and practices for school aged students with additional needs attending government schools. Researchers from the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University were engaged to undertake this comprehensive review and to develop an evidence base and recommendations that would be used to inform a framework for progressing the Department’s commitment of delivering education services to all students including students with additional needs. The framework will assist families and carers, teachers, schools and the Department to plan, measure and improve how students with additional needs are supported. The evidence
base that this review establishes will highlight the good practice underway in many schools and will act as a guide for other schools which seek to improve practice.

Important in developing this work was consideration of the NT’s unique context, with features including disparate and widely dispersed populations in regional, remote and very remote communities, students with complex life circumstances with varied and often compounding social determinants and the need to coordinate efforts of various national and local initiatives.

**Emerging elements**

From the review and analysis of research and jurisdictional approaches, from the consultations and review of existing policy and practice, three critical elements emerged as the basis for a framework that will guide the development and implementation of appropriate educational supports for students with additional needs.

*Element One: Strengthening shared decision making*

Education services provided to students with additional needs must be supported by research on best practice. They must bring together students and their families, involving them in collaborations with school and system staff, other agencies and support networks to share decision making around what works best for the students. This means having a foundation of early and ongoing engagement with families and carers to promote continuity in educational journeys and to support active partnerships in the education of children. Informed and strengthened decisions about teaching and learning will facilitate personalised options to meet students’ specific needs and the involvement of experts and specialist services to support student learning.

*Element Two: Improving professional practice*

A whole of system approach is vital to ensuring strong professional practice in the area of inclusive education and working with children and young people who have additional needs. Effective and robust staff recruitment and induction processes, retention initiatives, and opportunities for staff to develop skills and capabilities all assist in improving professional practice. Within and across schools, opportunities for professional learning and collaboration should be accessible and available in a variety of modes to
build capacity and create responsive learning environments that support engagement, growth and achievement.

**Element Three: Enhancing an evidence-led system**

A system that effectively supports students with additional needs has in place policies that reflect best practice and transparent processes. It enables schools to use data to inform and improve practice in assessing student need, in making educational adjustments and in monitoring learning outcomes for students. Data used in this way can inform future planning, including the equitable allocation of resources. Such a system helps form a culture of evidence-based practice and continuous improvement to support the growth of all learners.

**Summary**

The findings of this review and accompanying recommendations present a range of reflections and options for the Department and the NT Government more broadly to consider as they work to improve education services made available to students with additional needs.

The evidence presented within the review shows a clear drive to empower and strengthen the decision-making related to students with additional needs by involving students and their families in collaborations with school and system staff as well as other agencies. A strong system of learning and development for staff, and strategies to promote staff recruitment and retention, will work to improve the professional practice of officers across the agency. Finally, the Department has the potential to build on its current capacity to collect and use accurate and reliable data to ensure students and young people within the system receive appropriate support and adjustments to maximise access to learning.
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Section One: Introduction

The NT Department of Education (the Department) commissioned in September 2017 a comprehensive review of the policies and practices for students with additional needs attending government schools. Researchers from the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University were engaged to undertake the review, conducted between November 2017 and May 2018.

One of the main purposes of the review was to develop an evidence base and recommendations to help guide the Department in establishing a framework for students with additional needs. This framework is to be used by the Department to assist schools to plan, measure and improve how students with additional needs are supported. To help in this, the work identifies good practices operating in a number of NT schools which provide a guide for other schools to improve on current practice. The review also draws on lessons learned from other jurisdictions, and from broader research, while giving consideration to the unique context of the NT.

Methodology

An evidence base is required to systematically analyse provisions for students with additional needs as they currently exist. This review aims to address the successes and challenges of the current policy and practices in NT government schools and identify realistic and feasible approaches to improve outcomes for students with additional needs. To address these objectives researchers have drawn on a range of sources, including:

- a review of the NT’s current policy documents and practices
- research on policies and practices that might better support students with additional needs to engage, grow and achieve
- approaches in other jurisdictions, nationally and internationally
- two discussion papers produced in collaboration with the Department, and informed by targeted consultations
- extensive consultations, including face-to-face stakeholder sessions, online surveys and a second round of face to face and phone consultations (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: Consultations undertaken to inform the Review

The face-to-face consultations were open-ended to elicit free-ranging and detailed responses that would allow participants to share their experiences and ideas.

Two discussion papers were produced in collaboration with the Department, one for each consultation round. The second was informed by the first round of consultations.

The data analysis followed a two-stage process. Firstly, data gathered from each consultation round and method (i.e. surveys or group and individual interviews) were analysed independently of one another in order to capture prevailing views in each
stakeholder group. Separate analyses of the three online surveys deployed in the second round of consultation allowed for the collection of views held in common by the school leaders, other school staff, and families and carers who participated. In the second analysis phase, results and findings from different categories of stakeholders were compared to identify common and divergent views among stakeholders. Detailed analysis of consultations can be found in Section Three: Consultation, with raw data available at Appendices 7a-c.

Information gathered from the consultations, and from the jurisdical and literature reviews, are used in the report and its recommendations to help guide development of a Framework that builds on current best practice while addressing gaps in practice and policy in order to improve the educational outcomes of students with additional needs.

**Northern Territory context**

The Department of Education provides a wide range of education and training options for children and young people in the NT. The Department partners with a variety of government and non-government agencies to ensure this is undertaken with quality resourcing and practices. Specifically, the Department is responsible for:

- ensuring quality early learning and development programs from birth
- delivering high quality education and training services to government schools to maximise student learning
- providing pathways for students aligned with further education or with careers
- providing a regulatory function in relation to the operation of early childhood services and non-government schools
- supporting NT institutions delivering tertiary education
- overseeing and supporting the implementation of policy and the professional growth of staff.
**OUR SCHOOLS**

*Education services*

Delivered to more than 33,000 students across the Northern Territory’s 152 government schools

**Darwin:** 28 schools, 11,443 students

**Palmerston and Rural:** 32 schools, 8,886 students

**Arnhem:** 16 schools, 3,771 students

**Katherine:** 27 schools, 3,853 students

**Barkly:** 17 schools, 1,590 students

**Alice Springs:** 32 schools, 4,388 students

*68% of NT government schools are located in remote and very remote areas.*

*46% of students enrolled at remote and very remote schools.*

The NT reports the highest proportion nationally of students with disabilities who receive education adjustments, with 26.8% or 8,749 students.

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**OUR STUDENTS**

*Student population*

14,900 Aboriginal students

83% of non-Aboriginal students and 33% of Aboriginal students attend school four days or more per week

49.5% of all our students have a language background other than English

1,457 students eligible for Special Education Support Program (SESP)

8,749 students identified through the National Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) (cognitive 3,712, physical 953, sensory 765, social-emotional 3,319).

522 students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

90 students with formal diagnosis of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) either supported in special education schools, special settings or mainstream schools.

760 students diagnosed as being on the Autism Spectrum.

80-90% of Aboriginal children in remote schools experience Otitis Media (Middle Ear infection) which causes fluctuating Conductive Hearing Loss, as do 50% of Aboriginal children in urban schools.

120 children have a permanent Sensory Neural Hearing Loss (SNHL).

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Source: AgeGrade - V2

NOTE: Please note that the data has been provided for the requested purpose only. This data cannot be used for commercial purposes and the source of this data should be acknowledged in any publication using or referring to this data. Data provided in this report has been sourced from the department’s 2017 Age Grade Census dataset.
Critical to meeting the educational needs of students with additional needs is the success of wider efforts to create safe and supportive environments, which allow all children to develop and grow. Against this backdrop, the Department has partnerships with other agencies to support service delivery to students with additional needs, with current partners including:

- the Department of Health’s Office of Disability, which provides assessment and support to children with a developmental delay/disability and their families in clinics, schools, homes or the community
- the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics, which provides transport options for 300 eligible students to special school settings
- various non-government organisations granted funding to deliver government services such as the provision of assistive technology for students with vision impairments, orientation and mobility training and computer aided learning.

Facts and figures

The Department allocates significant levels of resources to support students with additional needs through:

- direct funding to schools, and
- additional programs and interventions delivered by support staff or specialist and expert advisors.

Special schools and centres receive targeted funding, and additional specific funding is provided to mainstream schools to support students with diagnosed disabilities (see Figure 3). Funding is also provided across all mainstream schools to support the broader cohort of students requiring some level of educational adjustments.
The funding is distributed through the Department’s needs based funding model which currently incorporates an interim allocation. At the time of writing, this model is being independently reviewed to identify adjustments that could improve the Department’s current needs based allocation methodology.

Figure 3  Funding provided to schools for students with additional needs (2017)

In addition to improving the allocation of additional funding on a needs basis, the Department of Education is also increasing its funding for students with additional needs. Between 2016 and 2017, total funding for the Special Education Support Program (SESP), special schools, special centres and autism units increased from $33.7 to $38.4 million. Improvements in total funding and its distribution are expected to better meet the needs of all students with additional needs in NT government schools.

Educational settings

The Department encourages families and carers to choose the school setting that best suits the needs of their children. Options for students with additional needs are provided through a range of settings, including opportunities for:

- learning in mainstream classes
- accessing special programs
- engaging with special centres and
- learning in special schools.
Mainstream classes
Students with additional needs who attend mainstream classes are provided with adjustments and accommodations based on their individual need through quality differentiated teaching practices in accordance with the Disability Standards for Education 2005. The diverse learning needs of students are met through the development and delivery of personalised learning plans underpinned by an understanding of the needs, strengths and interests of individual students. Differentiation provided to students with additional needs enables them to participate in education on the same basis as their peers.

Special programs
Where there are specifically identified needs that must be met for a student to adequately access the curriculum and be successful in their learning, the Department offers special programs as a support mechanism.

Autism spectrum programs provide an alternative educational program for students in a mainstream primary school setting who have a diagnosed autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The programs provide explicit interventions and strategies for students to develop social understandings and contextually appropriate skills and behaviours to achieve educational potential. These programs are designed as proactive short-term and intensive, utilising evidenced based pedagogies to support students in the domains of Communication, Social Interaction, Restrictive Interests and Repetitive Behaviours, Sensory Processing and Learning Styles.

Positive Learning Services (PLS) are provided to schools to support primary school students who display extreme, challenging behaviours, but who do not have an identified disability. To be eligible, students must be nominated by their school and assessed by Department staff as likely to benefit from intensive positive behavioural interventions. PLS include:

• in-school support to assist with case managing students to develop positive behaviour plans and interventions and to maximise engagement in school

• offsite programs involving an individually assessed and regularly reviewed plan that targets the development of positive behaviours. The programs include designated time at home schools with PLS support.

Programs are based on modules that promote specific positive behaviours such as resolving conflicts, being a leader and taking risks. The proposed learning outcomes and programs are aligned with the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum and are assessed accordingly.

Special centres
Nine special centres are located within mainstream schools (see Table 1). The physical space, organisation, staffing and services offered in these units varies from school to school, based on students’ educational needs. Education special centres are specifically for eligible students with an intellectual disability or who meet functional placement criteria.

Table 1: Special centres in government schools in the NT, 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year-level band</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Middle School</td>
<td>Alice Springs</td>
<td>Year 7 to Year 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralian Senior College</td>
<td>Alice Springs</td>
<td>Year 10 to Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy High School</td>
<td>Nhulunbuy</td>
<td>Year 7 to Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunbuy Primary School</td>
<td>Nhulunbuy</td>
<td>Preschool to Year 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humpty Doo Primary School</td>
<td>Humpty Doo</td>
<td>Preschool to Year 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taminmin College</td>
<td>Humpty Doo</td>
<td>Year 7 to Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodroffe Primary School</td>
<td>Palmerston</td>
<td>Preschool to Year 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennant Creek Primary</td>
<td>Tennant Creek</td>
<td>Preschool to Year 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmerston College</td>
<td>Palmerston</td>
<td>Year 7 to Year 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Special schools

There are five special government schools in the NT. As shown in Table 2, in 2017 these schools catered for 456 students and employed 231 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff (107 teaching and 124 non-teaching). Student enrolment is subject to eligibility and enrolment capacity.

Table 2: Government special schools in the NT, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year levels</th>
<th>Enrolments</th>
<th>Indigenous students</th>
<th>Teaching staff (FTE)</th>
<th>Non-teaching staff (FTE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acacia Hill School</td>
<td>Alice Springs</td>
<td>Preschool-Year 12</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forrest Parade School</td>
<td>Palmerston</td>
<td>Preschool–Year 6</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henbury School</td>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>Year 7–Year 12</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kintore Street School</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Preschool–Year 12</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemarluk School</td>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>Preschool–Year 6</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Students with additional needs enrolled in special schools can alternatively learn in satellite classes that are physically located in mainstream schools but still operated by special schools.

Accessing appropriate educational settings

Student Support Service Model

The Department provides support for students with additional needs based on the Student Support Service Model (SSSM) (see Figure 4), which captures the key services personnel provide across the areas of disability, behaviour and mental health.
This service delivery model is consistent with the *Response to Intervention* approach⁶. It integrates assessment and learning processes into a multi-level system to maximise student achievement and minimise the occurrence of challenging behaviours.

The approach uses data to:

- support students to achieve learning outcomes
- monitor student progress
- provide evidence based supports
- adjust the intensity and nature of the supports
- identify and support students with disabilities.

**Figure 4: Student Support Service Model**

In the Response to Intervention model, the primary intervention type is whole-school or whole-class programs and initiatives, supplemented with specific support and intensive support programs. Students who struggle to learn initially receive school-initiated

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⁶ National Centre on Response to Intervention, 2010.
interventions and adjustments. No further adjustments are made if these adjustments overcome learning difficulties. Otherwise, students are progressively provided support, including from non-school staff. For students needing intense support, the Department provides services via its Northern Territory-wide and regional teams.

Under the Student Support Service Model (SSSM), schools are encouraged to use the Whole of School Inclusion Matrix (WSIM)\(^7\) tool to assess their progression toward creating fully inclusive environments for students with additional needs.

Relevant aspects of both the SSSM and WSIM include the following:

- an emphasis on student support being relationship-centred and culturally responsive, as well as the aims of the wellbeing framework and the performance standards for schools to facilitate strong communication
- a focus on curriculum integration and inclusive approaches to learning
- reliance on data-informed approaches to manage support across the three tiers of the model
- the articulation of performance standards on policy, practice, evidence, procedures, planning, and measures
- a focus on community engagement to enhance support for all students, including students with additional needs.

Determine the needs of students

The Student Needs Profile (SNP) is an instrument developed by the Department to assist all schools, families and carers to identify the educational needs of students and inform Education Adjustment Plans (EAPs) and a range of other related student plans.

Student needs are identified across four domains:

(1) participation (engagement in school activities),

\(^7\) Department of Education, 2016e, p. 8.
(2) communication (comprehension and expression),
(3) personal care (managing personal health and care needs), and
(4) movement (physical capacity to access learning environments and programs)\(^8\).

Each domain includes a number of focus areas with descriptors or indicators that include observable behaviours, competencies or adjustments which are scored as part of the profile process. The indicators or descriptors are aligned with the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data for Students with Disability Levels of Adjustment.

Identifying student needs is designed as a collaborative process that includes Department staff, families and carers and other professionals such as medical practitioners or therapists (as appropriate).

**Eligibility for enrolment in special schools**

Enrolment in special schools and centres, as well as eligibility for services, takes place at the request of parents or carers and the discretion of schools. Eligibility for special educational settings requires a diagnosis consistent with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V)\(^9\). Enrolment requires a preliminary meeting between the parents or carers and the principal. The relevant Departmental staff then review and verify the application.

There are two types of enrolments in special schools and centres:

1. *placement* for students with an intellectual disability who meet the eligibility criteria
2. *functional placement* for students with ‘complex needs [and] with an identified disability’\(^10\) without an intellectual disability who meet the eligibility criteria.

All placements are periodically reviewed through consultation between the school principal, families and carers, the relevant Department staff and relevant professionals. For functional placements, the review process helps determine whether enrolment in a special setting remains the best option for the student.

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\(^8\) Department of Education, 2016d, p. 3; Department of Education, 2016e, p. 5.


\(^10\) Department of Education, 2016a, p. 2.
Providing adjustments to students with additional needs

The *Students with Disability* policy states that all schools and teachers are to provide adjustments to meet the schooling needs of students. In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable, school staff are to take into account the nature of the student’s needs, existing adjustments, preferred adjustment and recommended or alternative adjustments.

**Definitions and Scope**

The term ‘students with additional needs’ can be taken to mean any student that may have additional needs to access the curriculum and achieve success in their learning at school.

For the purposes of this review, however, students with additional needs refers to those students with a disability. More specifically, the definition of students with additional needs includes those captured under the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability (NCCD) database. This database records students with a disability receiving adjustments in Australian schools, where the disability impacts upon the student’s education.

For students to be identified as having additional needs in the NT, they must:

- have a disability as defined by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*
- be impacted by their disability in their schooling
- be or have been provided an educational adjustment due to their disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students.

The scope of this review excludes services provided to the non-government schooling sector, provision of early childhood development programs and services and post-school options and destinations.
Context of the review

The Department is committed to meeting its obligations set by the *Anti-Discrimination Act (NT)* and the *Education Act (NT)* as well as addressing responsibilities under Commonwealth legislation and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Legislation mandates that students with additional needs must have access to a full and inclusive curriculum meeting individual needs, which provides fair opportunities for learning. The educational experience of students with additional needs must be free from discriminations and their needs accommodated in educational settings. The research review section of this report addresses these legislative requirements in detail.

The Department also acknowledges the findings of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the NT\(^{11}\) and the potential links with delivering education to students with additional needs.

Structure of the report

This report is divided into three sections. This section, the introduction, outlines the review methodology, NT context, definition, scope and context of the review.

Section two, the jurisdictional and research review, presents information from a review of relevant research, a review of approaches in other jurisdictions, and a review of NT policies and practices. The materials informed the structure of consultations and the drafting of two discussion papers presented during feedback sessions held from January to April 2018.

Section three, titled the Consultation, provides an outline of the feedback from the various workshops and interviews held as part of the review. The information elicited during this phase of the work tended to relate to three key elements into which this section is grouped:

1. Strengthening shared decision making
2. Improving professional practice
3. Enhancing an evidence-led system.

\(^{11}\) Commonwealth of Australia, 2017a; 2017b.
Included following the Consultation are the findings and recommendations arising from the review as a whole including the lessons learned from the research, from current policy and practice, and from the comprehensive consultations.
Section Two: Jurisdictional and research and policy review

Research review

Inclusion and inclusive education

Most education systems around the world pursue the objective of inclusive education. In 1994, representatives of 92 governments came together and recognised the importance of inclusion for students with additional needs. At a general level, UNESCO identifies inclusion as a process concerned with the identification and removal of barriers to participation and achievement for all students, with a specific focus on groups of learners who are at risk of exclusion or under-achievement (e.g. students with additional needs).

Providing inclusive education for all learners remains a challenge in virtually every country. However, successful progress toward inclusive education can take many forms, and different jurisdictions have adopted different approaches to achieving inclusion. The goal of inclusion has implications at various levels (e.g. system level, school level, classroom level etc.), and researchers have suggested several ways of fostering inclusive education in practice.

A recent summary of evidence on inclusive education issued seven recommendations to promote inclusion at a system level:

1. establishing an expectation for inclusion in public policy
2. creating a public campaign to promote inclusive education
3. building systems of data collection

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14 UNESCO, 2017, p. 3.
16 Hehir et al., 2016, pp. 22-25.
4. providing educators with a robust program of pre-service and in-service preparation on inclusive education
5. creating model universally designed inclusive schools
6. promoting inclusive opportunities in both post-secondary school and the labour market
7. providing support and training to parents seeking inclusive education for their children.

Other factors identified in the literature as key to fostering inclusive practices at different levels include: positive and inclusive teacher attitudes, an inclusive school culture and a school leadership team dedicated to improving inclusive practices, specific teacher training, specialist support within mainstream settings to ensure equitable access to education, using principles of universal design for learning, ensuring paraprofessional support (e.g. teacher aides, learning support assistants etc.) is used in a supporting as oppose to substituting role, sufficient levels of funding and resourcing for schools, and funding models based on needs as opposed to processes of labelling and categorisation of disability.\textsuperscript{17}

One of the more comprehensive reviews of literature on principles and practices relating to inclusive education highlighted several other successful strategies for promoting inclusion:

- focusing on meeting students’ individual needs,
- involving students, parents and the broad school community in decision-making and related processes,
- addressing issues of attitudes, ethos and curricula, and
- monitoring and evaluating progress on an ongoing basis.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Cologon, 2016, pp. 29-43.

\textsuperscript{18} Winter & O’Raw, 2010, pp. 28-33.
Approaches to identifying need and eligibility

Identifying additional needs to help support students and promote participation and success in school is an important component of inclusive education. It generally serves two main purposes.

The first purpose is administrative and relates to resourcing. Most systems allocate specific resources to schools to provide the support required by students with additional needs. In this process, profiling students, including disabilities and impairments, enables systems to allocate funding, facilities and people on a needs basis and target resources where they can make the largest difference to student learning.

The second purpose is pedagogical and concerns learning adjustments. Personalising teaching and learning based on each student’s learning needs is recognised as an effective strategy to improve achievement and outcomes for every student, including students with additional needs.\textsuperscript{19} To do this, there needs to be a process of profiling and needs identification to enable teachers and schools to determine what adjustments are required to maximise access to the curriculum.

The coexistence of these two purposes in the profiling of students with additional needs is important, but they are not necessarily equivalent. Not all students with disabilities require additional funding\textsuperscript{20}, but all students who need additional resourcing require some form of adjustment in their school to meet their learning needs. In other words, the need for adjustments is broader than the need for additional resourcing.

Historically, in most jurisdictions, the identification of disabilities has formed the basis of targeted funding for students with additional needs.\textsuperscript{21} Under this approach, for resourcing purposes, diagnosis by health professionals has tended to underpin access to specialised support services.

The attempt to identify student needs in a systematic fashion for determining suitable teaching and learning adjustments is more recent. For differentiation purposes, teachers

\textsuperscript{19} Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, p. x.

\textsuperscript{20} Graham, 2017.

\textsuperscript{21} Mitchell, 2015, p. 124.
and school staff sometimes rely on profiling tools to identify strengths and needs relevant to students’ schooling. This is one of the main purposes served by the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on school students with disability in Australia.\(^\text{22}\) Other tools and approaches have been developed for the same purpose, such as the Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool (PLASST) in New South Wales.\(^\text{23}\) PLASST is a tool developed to assist teachers and learning and support teams in profiling the educational needs of students who may need personalised learning and support associated with disability and additional needs.

Needs assessment for pedagogical purposes is often based on profiling tools that cover several domains. In the NCCD, the four domains of disability and related needs are: physical, cognitive, sensory and social/emotional.\(^\text{24}\) In New South Wales, the Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool covers student needs and strengths under six domains: cognitive, attentiveness to learning, communication, social skills, social adjustment and personal independence.\(^\text{25}\) In the Northern Territory, the Student Needs Profile considers four domains of student needs (participation, communication, personal care and movement) and an extended list of focus areas.\(^\text{26}\)

Irrespective of differences in categories used to identify student strengths and needs, an important factor for successful inclusion is early profiling.\(^\text{27}\) Meanwhile, while adequate levels and allocations of resources underpin successful inclusion\(^\text{28}\), in some jurisdictions, funding mechanisms have been found to make progress towards achieving inclusive education more challenging.\(^\text{29}\)


\(^{23}\) New South Wales Department of Education and Communities, 2017.

\(^{24}\) Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2014, p. 27.


\(^{26}\) Department of Education, 2016d, p. 3.

\(^{27}\) Shakespeare, 2018, p. 114.

\(^{28}\) Cologon, 2016, pp. 42-43.

\(^{29}\) Ebersold, 2017, p. 11.
Enhancing access and the benefits of inclusive schooling

International research on inclusive schooling has repeatedly found that, at a general level, learning in inclusive systems and settings is associated with desirable outcomes such as enhanced academic outcomes and social skill development among students with additional needs. Further, a report reviewing findings on inclusive education from 89 studies around the world found consistent evidence that inclusive settings are associated with shorter- and longer-term benefits for both students with and students without additional needs.

For students with additional needs, shorter-term benefits of inclusive schooling have been identified as things such as the development of greater literacy and numeracy skills, higher school attendance rates, lower rates of behavioural problems and higher completion rates. Longer-term benefits include increased participation in postsecondary education, employment and independent living. Meanwhile, a recent meta-analysis of 47 studies found that inclusive schooling is also associated with superior academic achievement for students without additional needs.

There is agreement that, at a general level, inclusive education is beneficial to all students, for those with as well as those without additional needs. All Australian jurisdictions have some version of a needs-based approach in place, offering different levels of support. Australian schools typically also provide some combination of extra staff and specialised staff, multidisciplinary teams and tailored programs.

Yet, achieving inclusion remains a challenge. In Australia, a 2017 study by Poed, Cologon and Jackson found significant levels of exclusion through gatekeeping practices across Australian mainstream schools. The researchers surveyed 745 Australian families, advocates and students with disability and found that over 70 per cent of families had experienced practices that reduce the opportunities for enrolment and participation of

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31 Hehir et al., 2016, p. 2.
32 Hehir et al., 2016, p. 2.
33 Szumski, Smogorzewska, & Karwowski, 2017, p. 33.
students with additional needs in mainstream schooling. More generally, different barriers make access and attainment uneven across Australia\textsuperscript{35}, and the need to ensure adequate learning progress for students with additional needs was reiterated in the latest Australian government report on educational excellence in Australian schools.\textsuperscript{36} The variations in supports and adjustments that exist across jurisdictions is one contributor to the lack of an evidence led approach. It is difficult to connect outcomes to actions, given this inconsistency.\textsuperscript{37}

**Jurisdictional review of practice**

Approaches to supporting students with additional needs in other jurisdictions provide insights which are valuable when considering future directions in the NT. This section presents relevant information on the approaches taken to supporting students with additional needs in Australian jurisdictions and internationally. All jurisdictions in Australia, and all nations in the OECD, provide substantial additional support for students with additional needs and do so with a variety of approaches.\textsuperscript{38} Some of the main types of approaches derived from national reviews of documented practice are presented here. All states and territories provide similar models as the national reviews reveal. Internationally, examples of strong practice include New Zealand, the Canadian Northwest Territories and several European countries, and are briefly described below.

**Australian states and territories**

Several reviews on the education of students with additional needs in Australia have produced relevant insights for the current review of policy and practice for students with additional needs in the Northern Territory.

\textsuperscript{35} The Senate, 2016, pp. 9-22.
\textsuperscript{36} Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, p. x.
\textsuperscript{37} Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013, pp. 22-28.
\textsuperscript{38} See, for example, OECD, 2003, p. 14.
In 2016, the Australian Senate released a report on its analysis of policy, funding and culture on students with additional needs in Australia. The report outlined a number of recommendations\(^\text{39}\) that identify the need to:

1. develop a national strategy to address the bullying of students with additional needs
2. equip all teachers with skills in inclusive practices through their initial teacher education
3. generalise the ability of school staff to adopt universal design approaches to learning, engage in differentiated teaching and cooperative learning
4. build a nationally consistent approach to adapting the curriculum to student needs
5. improve support to schools, principals and teachers to maximise the effectiveness of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on students with additional needs.

In proposing the development of a joint national strategy to improve the education of students with additional needs, the Senate inquiry pointed to the importance of:

- access to adjustments and interdisciplinary support,
- evidence-based practice to improve access and attainment,
- system- and student-level accountability for the learning outcomes of students with additional needs,
- greater involvement from students and their families in the establishment of educational plans, and
- a trusted system of independent review and complaints for parents, teachers and students\(^\text{40}\).

Another key report on evidence and practice\(^\text{41}\) found that schools across states and territories in Australia typically seek to foster inclusion at two levels—a whole of school level and a classroom level using classroom supports for students and teachers. Examples

\(^{39}\) The Senate, 2016, pp. vii-viii.

\(^{40}\) The Senate, 2016, p. ix.

\(^{41}\) Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2016, p. 30.
of good school-level practice include adjustments to school cultures, policies and practices, the development of support structures for staff and students, and tailored regimes of funding support. At the classroom level, needs-based differentiation of teaching, the introduction of adapted programs and curricula, the application of universal design, individual planning and the use of relevant technology are examples of successful practice.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth report also provides insight into the strengths of different Australian jurisdictions in promoting inclusive education:

- In South Australia, the range of needs-based settings for students with additional needs is comprehensive, including (as of 2013) 15 special schools, 35 special units and 85 schools with special classes.
- In Western Australia, three Schools of Special Educational Needs (for disability, sensory needs and medical and mental health) operate with teams of teachers to provide schools with support in meeting the needs of their students with additional needs.
- In the Northern Territory, the organisation of transition between middle and senior school and from senior to school to the workplace and/or the community include examples of good practice in fostering social inclusion through education planning and support for students with additional needs.
- In Tasmania, the assessment of needs for students with additional needs takes students’ environment into consideration and assesses their functional and academic skills in context.
- In Victoria, the Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) tool is described as an important resource for teacher to prepare relevant programs for students with additional needs.
- In Queensland, planning for post-school options for students with additional needs can provide them with a variety of pathways through their Senior Education and Training plan.

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• In the Australian Capital Territory, needs assessment is comparatively comprehensive, addresses both access and participation, and the appraisal process often brings families and school staff together.

As the list of examples of good practice shows, Australian jurisdictions display some similarities (e.g. in the focus on needs identification, provision of support and consideration of transition) and some differences in their approaches to providing inclusive education to students with additional needs.

As with most other reviews and reports, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth report notes that progress has been made in meeting the needs of students with additional needs but recognises that additional effort needs to occur to ensure inclusive education becomes a reality for all students with additional needs.\(^{43}\)

**Approaches internationally**

*Inclusion and special settings*

Approaches taken to providing inclusive education vary between and within countries. Some systems have focused on developing facilities and placements in mainstream settings, some offer a mixture of mainstream and special schools and settings, while others focus more strongly on special schools and settings. In Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Norway and Portugal, more than 80 percent of students with additional needs are in mainstream settings, whereas most of the students with additional needs are in specialist settings in countries such as Germany, Belgium and France.\(^{44}\)

Approaches to inclusive education have changed over time. In Norway, for instance, after a phase of increasing placements of students with additional needs into mainstream schools and classes, recent trends indicate a clear growth in the use of special classes and groups in mainstream schools.\(^{45}\) In Australia, by contrast, between 2003 and 2015, enrolment of students with additional needs in special classes in mainstream schools reduced while enrolment in special schools expanded.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{43}\) Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2016, p. 5.

\(^{44}\) Hehir et al., 2016, p. 6.

\(^{45}\) Fasting, 2013, pp. 270-271.

In a number of European countries, students with additional needs and parents often have a preference for specialist settings such as special schools, especially for students with more challenging needs. In Ireland, for example, a study found that parents of students with dyslexia both agreed with the value of inclusive education and preferred the education provided in special settings over education in mainstream settings. In other countries such as the Netherlands, parents of students with additional needs tend to advocate for increased access to mainstream settings. Different conceptions of inclusion often lead to different answers about the place and role of special settings in the school system.

A number of jurisdictions pursuing inclusion value the contribution of special schools to the education of students with additional needs. For example, a review of the role of special schools in inclusive education in the United Kingdom described their importance as part of a flexible continuum of provision. Under this model, special schools are an important element of inclusive education systems. Special schools are conceptualised as partners with mainstream schools in the provision of education, as resource centres for local mainstream schools, supplementing educational provision for learners with severe disabilities, and as providing mainstream schools with expertise through outreach and consultancy.

In most contexts, the shift in role of special schools to become centres of expertise providing extended services requires upskilling special school staff and transforming their operations to enable a focus on collaborative practice, curriculum development, training other teachers, recommending equipment, software and specialist assessment, and sharing knowledge on supporting learners with additional needs. Steps toward reframing the role of special schools as resource centres and hubs of expertise have been taken in several countries, including in Austria, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, while

48 Mitchell, 2015, p. 216.
49 Arduin, 2015, p. 118.
51 Norwich, 2008, p. 140.
Cyprus and Portugal are following a similar path. These trends recognise the importance of system-level approaches to inclusive education, suggesting a place for special schools as partners in progressing toward long-term inclusion.

Special settings with expert staff and adequate resources for students for whom mainstream learning settings are insufficient exist in most school systems. For instance, countries like Belgium, France, Germany and Switzerland use strategies of differentiation between schools as a means to support inclusion. From this system-level perspective, progress towards inclusion is to be assessed by looking at how the elements within an education system work together to offer suitable learning environments with adequate support for all students. This approach recognises that how students are educated matters as much as where they are educated.

Examples of approaches
The first discussion paper used for initial consultations undertaken as part of the present Review described the approach to supporting students with additional needs in the Northwest Territories (Canada) as well as in New Zealand (see Appendix 4). New Zealand was selected for its recognition as a world leader in inclusive education, while the Northwest Territories government, economy, demography and geography make it a jurisdiction with comparable features to the Northern Territory.

In New Zealand, the majority of students with additional needs are in mainstream settings. Two distinct types of special schools enrol high-need students and students with specific impairments or behavioural, social and emotional needs. New Zealand recently implemented a unified model of support based on a single point of contact for students, their families and teachers. Students with additional needs are supported by local Learning Support Teams in charge of sourcing, brokering and purchasing relevant services. These teams are overseen by a Lead Practitioner who assists teachers, families and coordinates the involvement of other health and social services.


53 Mitchell, 2015, p. 216.


55 Arduin, 2015, p. 115.
In Canada’s Northwest Territories, in light of the geographical dispersion of education across the territory, all schools are required to establish a School-Based Support Team that assists teachers to meet the needs of all students. Schools welcome all students within a common learning environment and adaptations are made to the learning programs instead of relying on separate educational settings. Based on their needs and skills, students access a regular, modified, or individual education program. Regional teams are responsible for coordinating and supervising the assistance schools need to meet the needs of their learners, and schools are expected to report to the Department of Education on their inclusive practices.

Common to both New Zealand and the Northwest Territories is the attempt to remove the barriers that impede the ability of schools and teachers to meet the needs of all their students.

**Good practice in inclusive education**

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has produced reviews and analyses of inclusive education across European countries. In 2017, its review of good pedagogical and leadership practices across Europe to raise achievement for students with additional needs included detailed reviews of Italy, Poland and Scotland and emphasised the following:

- the importance of a system focus on continuous support for school leaders and teachers
- the value of school-wide (preventative and intervention) measures to recognise and meet the diversity of student needs
- the positive role of strength-based approaches to students and growth mindsets
- the importance of partnerships with families, flexible learning opportunities and within-school collaboration between staff
- opportunities for making greater use of stakeholder survey for quality assurance purposes

Three years earlier, the same agency had reported on the organisation of inclusive education support in Europe, including case studies in Sweden, Austria, Germany,

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Slovenia and Malta. Focussing on the system level (as opposed to pedagogical and leadership practices reviewed in the 2017 report), the agency highlighted the importance of several strategies for improving inclusive education in Europe:

- improving clarity on the definition of inclusive education
- developing system-level ‘inclusive capability’ by better integrating national and local initiatives and approaches
- enhancing accountability mechanisms and involving learners (or learner views and feedback) in the making of policy decisions
- investing in teacher education and continuing professional development on inclusive education
- clarifying the role of specialist settings (e.g. special schools) as resource centres to build capacity in mainstream schools
- designing curricula, assessments and approaches to teaching based on the objective of providing equitable learning opportunities for all.

Finally, drawing on lessons from Finland, Italy, Alberta (Canada), The Cook Islands, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth report concluded that examples of international good practice in inclusive education involve:

- clear policies and guidelines for policy implementation
- effective leadership supportive of inclusive practices
- positive teacher attitudes and school cultures
- skilled staff in teaching and support positions
- involvement of families and carers in decision making for the student
- flexible curriculum and program options to meet individual needs
- the existence of communities of (best) practice.

Overview of legislation, policy and practice

At the national level, the provision of education for students with additional needs is underpinned by some key legislation and a number of national agreements (see Figure 5).

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58 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2016, p. 17.
The key pieces of legislation include the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA)\(^{59}\) and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*\(^{60}\) (DSE).

The DDA aims to eliminate discrimination against persons with disabilities in education and other areas. It makes it unlawful for educational authorities to discriminate against students with additional needs on the ground of their disability, including as regards enrolment, access and participation\(^{61}\).

The DSE requires schools to make *reasonable adjustments* to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. Discrimination must be prevented in relation to:

- enrolment
- participation
- curriculum development, accreditation and delivery
- student support services
- harassment and victimisation\(^{62}\).

Based on the DSE, ‘an adjustment is reasonable in relation to a student with a disability if it balances the interests of all parties affected’\(^{63}\).

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\(^{59}\) Australian Government, 2016.


\(^{61}\) Australian Government, 2016, p. 25.


The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) is an annual data collection system that provides data on students who receive adjustments in Australian schools to address their additional needs. It captures information on the level of adjustment provided to students, alongside students’ broad category of disability\(^\text{64}\). This provides important opportunities for system level enhancements through benchmarking and other data driven activities.

A recent Australian Senate Inquiry\(^\text{65}\) into current levels of access and attainment for students with additional needs in the school system has called for continuing use of the NCCD and encouraged all states and territories to work together to collect better data and evidence on students with additional needs in school education, including on:

- use of restrictive (i.e. exclusionary) practices and seclusion
- workforce skills and availability of professional learning for school leaders and teachers in inclusive education
- access to allied health support

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\(^{64}\) Education Council, 2016.

\(^{65}\) The Senate, 2016, pp. vii-viii.
student enrolments, attendance and school completion rates
bullying and wellbeing.

NT Legislation

The *Anti-Discrimination Act 2015*\(^{66}\) and the *Education Act 2016*\(^{67}\) are the main Northern Territory legislative documents shaping the provision of education for students with additional needs. These statutory documents have a number of implications for the provision of education to students with additional needs, the Department of Education and teaching staff particularly.

*Education Act 2016*

The *Education Act 2016* (NT) legislates the access of all children and young persons to education programs appropriate to their individual needs and abilities. One of the six objectives\(^{68}\) of the Act is to ensure that education programs are responsive to the individual needs of children and young persons. The first guiding principle\(^{69}\) of the Act is that all students are entitled to quality education capable of enabling them to maximise their achievements and societal contribution.

*Anti-Discrimination Act 2015 (NT)*

The *Anti-Discrimination Act 2015* (NT) aims to promote equality of opportunity in the Northern Territory. It outlaws discrimination on the grounds of impairment and makes direct reference to provision of education in Division 2. Discrimination is defined within the Act as ‘any distinction, restriction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of an attribute that has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity; and harassment on the basis of an attribute’\(^{70}\). In similar terms to the national legislation, the *Anti-Discrimination Act (NT)* protects against failure to accommodate special needs\(^{71}\).

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\(^{66}\) Northern Territory Government, 2015.
\(^{67}\) Northern Territory Government, 2016.
\(^{68}\) Northern Territory Government, 2016, p. 1.
\(^{69}\) Northern Territory Government, 2016, p. 2.
\(^{70}\) Northern Territory Government, 2015, p. 15.
\(^{71}\) Northern Territory Government, 2015, pp. 17-18.
Excerpts of the Act that relate to educational settings, including exemptions, can be found at Appendix 8.

**National Disability Insurance Scheme**

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was established to provide people found to have a permanent and significant disability with the reasonable and necessary supports they need to live an ordinary life\(^{72}\). The NDIS is being rolled out in the NT, and, as at 31 March 2018, 729 people were benefitting from its services, with 206 people accessing support for the first time\(^{73}\).

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has outlined the responsibilities of schools and the NDIS regarding the education of students with disabilities\(^{74}\):

- schools are responsible for making reasonable adjustments to personalise learning and support for students with disability in relation to their *educational attainment* (e.g. teaching, learning assistance and aids, school building modifications and transport between school activities)
- where a student’s impairment impacts their *functional capacity*, the NDIS funds support *not related* to educational attainment (e.g. support for transport to and from school).

Additionally, COAG expectation is for school education systems and the agencies associated with the NDIS to ‘work closely together at the local level to plan and coordinate streamlined services for individuals’\(^{75}\). Policy and governance settings to organise school-level responses are currently being developed around Australia.

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\(^{72}\) Australian Department of Human Services, 2016.

\(^{73}\) Australian Department of Human Services, 2018.

\(^{74}\) Council of Australian Governments, 2015, p. 12.

\(^{75}\) Council of Australian Governments, 2015, p. 8.
Departmental direction

A number of Departmental documents set the direction for all involved in delivering education to children and young people across the NT. The following pages summarise these and show potential foundations for a Framework to guide the Department in effectively supporting students with additional needs. Where policy documents are referred to, it is acknowledged that a growing evidence base and changes in legislation will result in amendments and repositioning. This Review captures information current at the time of writing.

The Education NT Strategy

The Department’s identified need for a framework to guide the provision of education to students with additional needs is one of several pieces of reform presently underway within the agency. The consultations associated with the development of this Review coincided with work underway to establish a new vision and strategy for the Department. The result of the work to establish a new vision was the release of the *Education NT Strategy 2018 – 2022*. The Strategy aims to put the needs of schools and the goal of improving performance at the core of the Department’s approach to education. The present Review of policy and practice for students with additional needs, and its proposed recommendations and framework, were conducted and developed in light of the Education NT Strategy.

The *Education NT Strategy* tasks the Department with focusing on delivery of successful outcomes within five key areas, as illustrated in Figure 6. Together with research findings, consultation and survey feedback, and evidence of activity in other jurisdictions, these five focus areas have been used within this Review to identify elements considered fundamental to the development of a framework for the education of students with additional needs. Three elements emerged as essential to facilitating the ongoing development and implementation of necessary policies, practices, systems, organisation and governance related to students with additional needs:

1. Strengthening shared decision making
2. Improving professional practice
3. Enhancing an evidence-led system.
The alignment of the three framework elements with the five focus areas of the Education NT Strategy is illustrated in Figure 7.

**Figure 7:** Alignment between the Education NT Strategy and the elements of the Framework for the education of students with additional needs
Philosophy of Inclusion

The Department’s philosophy of inclusion for students with disability recognises the differences that exist between students. It aims to minimise barriers in education for students with additional needs.

The Philosophy of Inclusion defines inclusion as:

- valuing all students
- recognising that inclusion in education is one aspect of an inclusive society
- increasing student participation in school culture, curricula and communities
- realigning the culture, policies and practices in schools so that they can respond to the diversity of students.

Students with Disability policy

The Department’s current policy for students with disability is underpinned by an inclusive approach to education. The principles aim to ensure that students with additional needs are able to attend and participate in school without conditions or restrictions, by providing protocols for planning and implementing service provision. The principles provide further guidance in the areas of inclusion, participation, learning programs and assessment, monitoring, collaboration, family/carer engagement and career guidance. The principles stipulate that:

- Students with disability have the right to fully access, without restrictions, an inclusive education through the Australian Curriculum and/or Early Years Learning Framework.
- Learning programs should focus on each student’s abilities and provide learning experiences that are relevant, meaningful and rigorous.
- Schools are to include evidence of how the Students with Disability policy is enacted in their context via their Strategic Improvement and Annual Operational Plans, and should use the Whole School Inclusion Matrix to inform their practice.
- Every student and his or her family/caregivers have the right to expect transparency of process in relation to decisions made about the student. They are recognised as partners in education and must be actively supported in exercising their right to participate in the decision making processes in a timely fashion.
• Students with disability should be connected with, and informed about, appropriate post-school options.

• Schools must have sound reasons and clear processes instituted when considering suspending students with disability.

The Students with Disability policy also indicates that all schools and teachers are to provide reasonable adjustments to meet the schooling needs of students. Adjustments may include: physical, technology and equipment, staffing, time, learning tasks and materials, and assessment adjustments. In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable, school staff are to take into account the nature of the student’s needs, existing adjustments, preferred adjustment and recommended or alternative adjustments.

Additional policies and guidelines

The Students with Disability policy is supported by various guidelines and related documents to guide and support schools and teachers in providing inclusive education for students with additional needs. Alongside the Students with Disability guidelines, designed to guide stakeholders in the application of the Students with Disability policy, key resource documents include the Transport for Students with Special Needs policy and guidelines, Diagnostic Assessment guidelines, Transition from School guidelines as well as a range of supporting documents. The Student Needs Profile guides school communities in identifying the needs of students with additional needs, while the Education Adjustment Plan templates enable them to plan and structure their response to the student’s needs.

Collecting data on students with additional needs

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on school students with disability requires Australian teachers to record the adjustments needed for students to meet their learning needs. It involves a process where teachers make a professional judgment on the need for—and required level of—adjustment across four adjustment levels:

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76 https://education.nt.gov.au/education/support-for-teachers/students-with-disability

1. support provided within Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice,
2. supplementary adjustments,
3. substantial adjustments, and
4. extensive adjustments.

Teachers are also expected to report students’ disability category—physical, cognitive, sensory and/or socioemotional.

In the Northern Territory, mainstream school access to additional resourcing for students with additional needs from the Northern Territory government is based on the Special Education Support Program (SESP). Eligibility for additional resourcing is informed by evidence of a blend of diagnosed disability, educational needs, adjustment and attendance. Both of these approaches contribute to addressing the needs of students with additional needs. While the NCCD places greater emphasis on determination of need associated with required adjustments, the SESP considers a broader range of criteria and uses health professional judgments in diagnosing disabilities, determining eligibility and allocating resources. Both approaches have strengths, but can also present challenges. Obtaining systematic, consistent and reliable teacher reporting on adjustments and disabilities can be difficult as teachers can vary in their assessments of the levels of adjustments required. Reporting can also vary across schools, regions as well as states and territories, producing potentially uneven assessments of need. At the same time, relying on the clinical judgments of health professionals can lead to issues of access, costs and timely diagnosis.

Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework

The Department’s Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework (APIF) aims to improve education and training outcomes through a system of accountability around quality of service. The APIF provides the foundation for:

• a system of accountability for the whole of the Department
• setting clear expectations and standards and requiring performance to be demonstrated against these standards
• promoting a culture of evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement
• providing a system to manage underperformance
• streamlined processes to focus on priority areas that will make a difference.

Approach to staff development

The Department is committed to equipping government schools with the resources required to meet the needs of students with additional needs, including staff skills. As such, it offers to school staff a suite of special education courses online covering the following topics:

• Disability standards and education
• Understanding and managing behaviour
• Understanding autism spectrum disorders
• Inclusion for learners with speech, language and communication needs
• Introduction to special education (NT)
• Understanding dyslexia and significant difficulties in reading.

In addition, since 2017, the Department has offered Supporting Northern Territory Students with Additional Needs Teaching Scholarships that enable teachers to complete an online Graduate Certificate in Special Education from Flinders University. In the first year, 20 recipients were awarded the scholarship.
Section Three: Consultation

Element 1: Strengthening shared decision making

What the Department does well

Consultations at all levels indicated the value of sharing information, strategies and resources in making mutually agreeable decisions about how best to meet the needs of children and young people. Anecdotal feedback from parents and all staff showed clear examples of strong communication between staff within a school and between staff and families and carers. Many school leaders pointed to communication skills as critical to successful collaboration and partnerships. High levels of overall satisfaction with special school approaches to communication are also a strength to build on through practice sharing initiatives.

What could be improved

Feedback from families overwhelmingly focused on their appreciation of collaborative approaches with teachers and schools and on ways to enhance these relationships. This was considered especially relevant in the later years of schooling, where it was felt that engagement and supports for students with additional needs fell away to some extent in some mainstream schools. Families also expressed the hope that schools will do more to assist them to navigate support services and achieve outcomes beyond the school.

Another key issue relayed by this cohort was related to feeling understood and supported, and being included in decision-making about their child. Transparency and open communication were raised in this context, as was a dearth of positive communication about children’s achievements in mainstream schools. This group saw frequent gaps in communication across all levels of schooling that impact on transitions for students with additional needs.

Many participants in the review expressed a keen interest in strengthening the partnerships already in place between schools and other institutions to assist in implementing an effective Student Support Service Model. There was also strong interest from respondents in both mainstream schools and special schools in working together more closely to enhance outcomes for students. Most saw special settings such as autism spectrum units and satellite classes as a key means to achieve this outcome. Many staff in
mainstream schools saw scope for enhancing collaborations between school leaders, special education teachers and in-class support staff so that support for students is optimised. Additionally, building a range of external partnerships between schools and other government groups and services was a major focus of feedback.

Some of the solutions raised by participants included establishing formal protocols and supports for practice sharing between schools (including the development of ‘in-between’ spaces such as satellite classes) and supporting improved collaboration between staff within mainstream schools, especially with an eye to better inter-institutional and inter-agency collaboration.

Participants at all levels noted benefits in an improved collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of Health as a way to support ‘wrap around’ solutions for students and their families. This was reflected in feedback related to interactions and partnerships with other services and institutions, and an urgency in clarifying and strengthening these relationships was seen as critical in the face of the roll-out of the NDIS.

Some solutions were offered by participants, including school level supports to build a collaborative approach and a central system to which all staff have access to support information sharing about students and reduce duplication of effort. For remote schools, greater use of technology was one preferred solution.

Findings
This analysis highlights strengths within the Department that can be built on in terms of shared understandings of inclusion. It also highlights how the approach taken by schools and teachers in communicating and consulting can influence the learning and growth of students with additional needs. The family and carer survey was particularly rich in insights on the importance of student-teacher and school-family and carer communication, as well as on what good communication looks like from their point of view. Cases of excellent communication were reported in both mainstream and special schools, and were seen as critical to making decisions about a child or young person.
The extent to which families and carers (within both mainstream and special schools) commented on communication, and the nature of their comments, demonstrated that for them communication was a key pillar in supporting students with additional needs.

Key gaps have also been identified in how the system works to develop strong and strategic partnerships and collaborations with students, families and carers, and the broader community to better support students with additional needs. Improving these partnerships, and collaborating to make decisions together involves taking action to ensure early and ongoing engagement with families and carers to enable them to be active partners in the education of their children. This links to a goal expressed by many respondents for personalised options to meet specific needs of students, options that have been designed in collaboration with experts and specialist services. More opportunities for collaborations with government and non-government partners were also seen as necessary to creating supports and improving opportunities for students with additional needs.

The analysis suggests that a key gap that should be addressed lies in strengthening partnerships between mainstream and special schools. The role of ‘in-between’ spaces in developing partnerships between special and mainstream schools emerged as a mechanism for closing this gap. Improvements to the collaborative practices in mainstream schools could help too, and should focus on enhancing collaborations between staff in classrooms and within each school, and how these intersect with collaborations and partnerships between schools and other institutions and services.

Feedback was heard regarding the positive culture in some schools, built by strong leaders and supported by knowledgeable and committed teachers, and the benefits in extending this across the sector to meet desires for a partnership approach with schools and families and carers. It was noted, however, that frequently such partnerships are limited where families are reluctant to engage. This raised the possibility of continuing the Department’s focus on building early and ongoing engagement with families to ensure the greatest impact.

**Summary**

All respondents shared a view of an education for students with additional needs that is supported by research around best practice. This view brings together students and their
families, involving them in collaborations with school and system staff and other agencies and support networks to share the decision making around what works best for students with additional needs. Such a view can be developed through early and ongoing engagement with families and carers to promote continuity in educational journeys and support active partnerships in the education of children. Informed and strengthened decisions about teaching and learning will ensure personalised options to meet students’ specific needs and the involvement of experts and specialist services to support student learning.

A graphic summary of consultation can be found at Figure 8. The infographic comprises key messages and comments from the broad range of contributors consulted as part of the Review. Further raw data can be found at Appendix 7a.

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**Recommendations: Strengthening shared decision making**

1. **Empower families to be more involved in decision making around the education of their children with additional needs.**
2. **Strengthen relationships within the Department and with other support networks.**
Figure 8: Strengthening shared decision making

FAMILIES AND CARERS

- Strengthen the methods, frequency and quality of communication employed by specialist schools to facilitate family and carer understanding of the school experience
- Develop a student-centred approach from partnerships formed through strong staff to student and family to agency or support service communication
- Facilitate strong communication between schools, including transition phases
- Optimise use of communication opportunities – open days, meetings and Educational Adjustment Plan (EAP) reviews
- Ensure professional, focused, open and solution-focused communication
- Schools as a hub for information on disability support and external services

MAINSTREAM SCHOOL STAFF

- Leaders taking responsibility in developing strong internal and external communications
- Meet the needs of the student through forming partnerships and having strong communication with families and carers, specialist and feeder schools and other institutions
- Leaders employing ‘open door policy’ with Special Education Teachers (SETs), staff, families and carers
- Internal communication to underpin partnerships between and across teaching and health teams
- Four dimensional communication involving all parties: schools and students, families and carers, within schools, other schools, institutions and agencies
- High level communication all the way through school to meet the needs of the student including at transition and in middle and secondary school settings
- Strengthen in-school communication processes – e.g. teacher to teacher, teacher to support staff including SETs, teacher to leadership

SPECIALIST SCHOOL STAFF

- Develop strong channels of communication between schools, staff and families and carers as a core leadership role
- Strengthen relationships by extending positive in-school communication to local communities and mainstream schools including sharing of best practice
- Have open productive communication with families and carers about student daily activities and learning
- Partner with feeder schools, mainstream schools, service providers and the Department to enable shared decision making and clarity of new government initiatives
- Strengthen students positive experience in transitioning between levels of schooling and into vocational pathway

DEPARTMENTAL, NGO AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- Continuous good practice when consulting with schools
- Strengthen relationships between schools, departmental regional teams, and external support services to ensure stakeholders are working collaboratively with families and carers, teachers and allied services to provide best support for children’s learning
- Ensure user-friendly processes and user-friendly forms to support the students
- Coordinated approach to external agency student support that maximises students time in the classroom
- Working to support the partnerships between specialist schools and their related mainstream schools
Element 2: Improving professional practice

What the Department does well

In each of the aspects studied to inform this review, from policy analysis, contemporary research and feedback through consultations, a key element recognised as pivotal to the success of the delivery of education to students with additional needs was improving professional practice. The quality of assessment, intervention, teaching and support, and the availability of these services across the Territory, is seen as integral to the Department’s ability to meet the needs of its students.

A number of strengths were identified that could be built on to improve workforce capability and professional practice to better meet the learning and support needs of all students. This included the work underway to upskill and build capacity around agreed key topics, including strengthening school-wide approaches, differentiation, and student-centred and personalised approaches. Strong collaborations in providing support for student learning and in partnering with families and carers were valued.

Priorities for teacher upskilling included managing challenging behaviours, identification of additional needs, and where and how to access external support.

There was recognition of pockets of expertise as well as exemplary efforts to offer inclusive education on the part of some school leaders and teachers. In particular, capability in special schools was characterised as a strength to draw on lifting capability across the NT government school sector.

Most participants also pointed to a range of critical supports available for facilitating improvements in professional practice on the ground, such as levels of funding, appropriate physical spaces, devices, technologies and learning aids as well as a supportive leadership and effective peers. They highlighted the differences between mainstream schools and special schools in these respects.

What could be improved

Feedback from surveys, consultations, and research on activity undertaken in other jurisdictions, has identified ways to improve the professional practice of staff across the

79 See section on Staff development for elaboration, p. 46 of this report.
system. Families and carers were clear in their view that there are significant gaps in staff understandings and expertise with regard to students with additional needs in mainstream schools, especially in managing behaviour and supporting trauma affected students. A range of perceived inequalities in service delivery were raised that suggest a need for capacity building around understanding inclusion and related legal requirements, communication, collaboration and respectful interactions.

Families and carers felt that school staff should have greater access to trained in-class support staff and teaching staff with specific disability related qualifications, especially in remote and very remote areas. They identified that schools should be better equipped with appropriate physical spaces, assistive devices and technologies, specialised equipment and access to flexible curricula. They also voiced views that teachers need time to exercise their improved practice following training. Offering appropriate incentives for suitably qualified graduates to take up teaching roles was also raised as a potential solution.

Leaders and school staff noted the importance of making changes and building capacity to:

- improve special needs content in initial teacher training and professional learning for in-class support staff
- increase face-to-face learning on a broader range of topics (identifying and meeting specific needs, managing challenging behaviours, assessing learning for students, communication skills and accessing external supports for students)
- further support new learnings through more frequent and longer follow-up sessions.

Leaders in special schools were generally satisfied with staff capability, but recognised a need for solutions that enable them to meet growing demand for skilled staff. There was support for collaborations between special and mainstream schools to enhance workforce capacity, especially by working together on additional types of special settings in mainstream schools. Within school collaborations were also valued as a solution, especially those involving mentoring by school leaders and peer learning with Special Education Teachers.
Findings

Research related to this area indicated that there are instances of both mainstream and special schools in the NT which have comprehensive processes in place to recruit, retain and support staff in roles relevant to meeting the needs of students with additional needs. The schools provided clarity regarding expected staff performance in these roles, as well as opportunities for mentoring and coaching. A mentor system for leaders which incorporates explicit exploration of the processes these schools engage in would help to strategically build the workforce across the system. A stronger focus on special schools would enable strengths to be built in developing leadership, teaching and support capabilities to meet the learning and support needs of all students. Individual efforts to foster and invest in productive professional collaborations have been identified as a key strength in pockets across the Territory, as is the planning that is occurring with training providers and in expanding online training topics.

Feedback from consultations highlighted the need to improve the preparedness of new teachers by influencing special needs content in initial teacher training, as well as increasing their understanding of inclusion and related legal requirements. A need for training for in-class support staff and more face-to-face learning on a broader range of topics (identifying and meeting specific needs; managing challenging behaviours; assessing learning for students with additional needs; communication skills; and how to access external supports for students with additional needs) was also noted.

Addressing these gaps may reduce the use of exclusionary practices, which was specifically identified by a number of stakeholders as an area for immediate change in several learning settings. This would necessarily involve having improved practice in behaviour management as well as ensuring that educational adjustments are implemented and the reporting of learning progress of students with additional needs is enhanced. It was seen as important that skills are developed in all staff for improved communication and collaboration with other adults including in-class support staff, other colleagues, families and carers. It is considered that the capability of school leaders in understanding, promoting and supporting inclusion is critical in bridging staff capability gaps, and that a strong leadership team that includes a special education teacher who works strategically is an invaluable asset to schools.
Special schools evidence fewer gaps in workforce capability, but seek solutions to meeting growing demand for student placement. The longevity of some functional placements may indicate some gaps that need to be addressed.

Summary
Building a workforce with a strong sense of professional practice can be achieved by strengthening staff recruitment and induction processes to create an explicit focus on inclusive education. The Department’s Strategic Workforce Plan 2016-2018 outlines major recruitment and retention initiatives that aim to ensure high standards of professional practice that support the development of leadership, teaching, corporate and support capabilities to meet the learning and support needs of all students. This plan, and any subsequent strategy, could be enhanced to incorporate a stronger focus on the recruitment, retention and development of experienced and skilled special needs staff. Within and across schools, opportunities for professional learning and collaboration could be made more accessible and in a variety of modes, including face-to-face, especially for remote and very remote areas, to strengthen ability to create responsive learning environments that support the engagement, growth and achievement of students with additional needs.

A graphic summary of consultation can be found at Figure 9. The infographic contains key messages and comments from the broad range of contributors consulted as part of the Review. Further raw data can be found at Appendix 7b.

Recommendations: Improving professional practice
1. Establish a system of coaching and mentoring to build school staff and school leader capability in areas relevant to students with additional needs.
2. Support schools to effectively attract and retain staff with relevant qualifications and experience in teaching students with additional needs.
Figure 9: Improving professional practice

**FAMILIES AND CARERS**
- Equity for all students regardless of ATSI status or location
- Student-centred approaches need to be personalised, inclusive, non-judgemental, understanding and equitable
- Development of clear learning outcomes with regular updates on progress
- Classes should be small and well-resourced
- Appropriate use of physical spaces and equipment, specialist equipment, learnings aids and assistive technologies
- Success dependent on knowledge, expert skills and efforts of teachers and school leaders in specialist schools
- Disability-specific training and support needed for all school staff
- Departmental staff consultations and whole of school approaches important
- Greater consistency across schools and regions

**MAINSTREAM SCHOOL STAFF**
- Support Special Education Teachers (SETs) and in-class support staff to build classroom teacher capacity
- Have collaborations between SETs, classroom teachers and external stakeholders
- Support ongoing teacher professional development and/or formal qualifications in:
  - management of challenging student behaviour
  - early identification of additional needs
  - assessing student learning
  - where and how to access external specialist support
  - legal requirements of inclusive practice
  - how to communicate effectively and respectfully with parents and carers
- Commit to value inclusion by taking ownership of programs that promote inclusive practice
- Develop community relationships to draw highly skilled and stable in-class support staff
- Provide administrative support with data and data coordination

**SPECIALIST SCHOOL STAFF**
- Target professional learning opportunities to develop fit for purpose skills
- Systematically develop staff capacity to share best practice within and across schools
- Enhance workforce capability through mentoring and collaborative partnerships within and across schools
- Collaborate with Special Education Teachers in mainstream schools
- Effectively communicate with families and carers

**DEPARTMENTAL, NGO AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS**
- Communicate the support available to schools to increase onsite support
- Provide incentives for course completion specifically for Trauma, ASD and ADHD
- Include pre-service teachers in professional learning
- Include ‘just in time’ practical classroom strategies
- Consider experts in education and health practitioners when developing courses
- Improve initial teacher training
Element 3: Enhancing an evidence-led system

**What the Department does well**

In 2017 and 2018, the Department has engaged in a reform agenda to establish itself as a system that comprehensively supports student growth and achievement. The Department’s new Strategic Framework 2018-2022 commits to a strong system that implements evidence-based services and programs that have the most beneficial impact and that continually assesses impact to ensure the effectiveness of combined efforts to improve child and student outcomes. Such goals inherently require the use of relevant and contextualised data to inform improvements that focus on the needs of children and young people.

Several strengths in NT schools were identified during consultations, with many participants positively noting the relevance of the Student Support Service Model (SSSM) and current eligibility, identification and planning processes for students with additional needs. The caveat was either their own level of skills or having access to suitable expertise to draw on for deciding on the educational adjustments and plans and having time to review these.

The planning tools embedded in the SSSM, and associated policies, guidelines and tools, including EAPs, are accepted as the key means to systemically support students with additional needs. Key supports for teachers in applying the model include support from other staff such as school leaders experienced in setting up systems to support whole of school processes, special education teachers, and external and Departmental experts and health professionals. Many families and carers reported feeling supported, informed and able to fully participate in the SSSM system and the development of an evidence-based plan for their child that proceeded to implementation and review and which actively sought improved outcomes.

**What could be improved**

While the SSSM was viewed overall as a valuable tool to systemically apply processes that ensure equity and evidence in decision making and resource allocation, its effective application was sometimes complicated by the availability of appropriately skilled staff within schools or in their immediate support networks. Several respondents suggested that improvements to the system could be made by simplifying tools used in these
processes, perhaps through digitalisation, by modifying templates to include built in support or ensuring that data ‘follows the child’. The NCCD was seen to offer possibilities for enhancing consistency of practice across the system, and easy translating of Student Needs Profile data in applying for NDIS support was another opportunity for improvement.

Other strengths to draw on included learning from the approaches of school leaders who had set up systems to support these processes at a whole of school level, which typically involved special education teachers, external and Departmental experts and health professionals.

Feedback suggested that many respondents felt that the system could be enhanced by reducing administrative burden and complexity, through more efficient use of scarce resources and by the more equitable distribution of funding that a needs-based funding model might support. Verification of eligibility for access to limited places in special schools and settings was understood as necessary to maintain. The resource implications of a needs-based model were acknowledged as a challenge.

Some of the solutions raised by participants included the development of more relevant policy, guidelines and procedures and accountability for implementation of the SSSM. It was felt that this would lead to an improved culture within schools and across the system as a whole, fostering the use of practices that support inclusion.

System level gaps include some misalignment of the reporting system against goals in individual learning plans for students with additional needs. Some misperceptions in relation to reporting also emerged and these might best be addressed through communication and consultation.

Findings

At a service level, and using the Education NT Strategy as a tool, moves should continue towards simpler, streamlined and efficient processes for planning adjustments and monitoring student outcomes. The SSSM would be strengthened through further initiatives to support schools to successfully implement it in practice, particularly through enhanced initial training for teachers and professional learning and through collaborative programs in shared settings and practice sharing across schools. A needs based funding
model would also seem to offer many advantages, as evidenced in many other jurisdictions that have adopted this model.

Aligning student planning tools with wider reporting systems would be useful in assisting schools to better meet student needs. Access to data and a culture of using data to inform decision-making is also suggested as an opportunity for improvement, particularly where schools are not yet engaging in these practices.

System level supports are also required to allow for useful data sharing. The Department would benefit from the development of stronger digital systems, supportive processes and resources for schools to draw on in implementing the SSSM, to assist schools to accurately determine student eligibility, assessment needs, required educational adjustments and learning and growth.

Of great importance, too, is the Department’s attention to enhancing consistency in inclusive education practice through the development and implementation of policy and guidelines for NT schools. Alignment of such documents with the Education NT Strategy and the Department’s new governance structure would ensure an integrated and differentiated approach to supporting the learning, growth and achievement of students with additional needs.
Summary
Renewing and revitalising policies and guidelines, processes and systems is important for addressing the needs of students with additional needs. From this point of view, it is necessary to strengthen schools’ capability to use data to inform and improve practice in assessing needs, making educational adjustments, and monitoring learning outcomes for students. At the same time, it is essential to strengthen data systems to ensure future planning for students with additional needs, including equitable allocation of resources, is based on accurate and contextually relevant data. More generally, creating a culture of evidence-based practice and continuous improvement is crucial. This would involve improved data sharing, within the bounds of confidentiality, to improve outcomes for learners.

A graphic summary of consultation can be found at Figure 10. The infographic comprises key messages and comments from the broad range of contributors during consultations conducted as part of the Review. Further raw data can be found at Appendix 7c.

Recommendations: Enhancing an evidence-led system
1. Develop and implement policy and guidelines for inclusive education that:
   a. are aligned to the Education NT Strategy
   b. provide clarity and consistency in the supports available to students with additional needs.
2. Target investment in the right support for students through a systemic model based on student need and led by evidence.
**Figure 10: Enhancing an evidence-led system**

| FAMILIES AND CARERS | Support in the development, implementation and review cycle of EAPs or other formal education plans  
|                     | A strengthened reporting system with regular reports, frequent reviews of EAPs and ease of aligning reporting systems to student goals including the use of student voice and flexible reporting approaches  
|                     | Professional learning in methodologies of collecting student learning data, the identification of students with special needs, the best practice processes in writing EAPs and the legal responsibilities around inclusive education |
| MAINSTREAM SCHOOL STAFF | School leaders participation in the development, implementation and review cycle of EAPs in collaboration with all stakeholders  
|                     | Specialist staff to assist mainstream staff in the collaborative EAP development, implementation and review cycle |
| SPECIALIST SCHOOL STAFF | Enhancing the capacity of the system to offer more personalised, student-centred options to cater to a wider spectrum of additional needs including information sharing in ABLES or similar programs  
|                     | Policies for transitioning students between mainstream and special settings  
|                     | Development of a central IT system to streamline the collection of crucial documentation and minimise the impact on students of transient families  
|                     | Development of an early-needs identification policy to better facilitate early identification, intervention and possible reintegration back into mainstream schooling  
|                     | Considerations of an improved needs-based model that shifts the focus to support all students learning, from medical diagnosis, enrolment and attendance  
|                     | Consideration of the restraints on school staff and resources when developing complex EAPs. Restraints include: wait times for level 2 and 3 supports, and an overly complex, paperwork heavy EAP cycle including the reporting on student outcomes  
|                     | Consideration of the wait times and the expenses from both an education and health systems perspective that families and carers and school staff experience from the initial identification, to assessments and to receiving support including the access to emergency funding and how that is exacerbated by geolocation |
Recommendation summary

From the review and analysis of research, jurisdictional approaches, consultations and existing policy and practice, three key elements emerged as the basis for a framework that will guide the development and implementation of appropriate educational supports for students with additional needs. Further, six linked key recommendations, closely aligned with the Education NT Strategy, have been developed. The elements and recommendations are detailed below.

Element One: Strengthening shared decision making

1. Empower families to be more involved in decision making around the education of their children with additional needs.

2. Strengthen relationships within the Department and with external support networks.

Element Two: Improving professional practice

1. Establish a system of coaching and mentoring to build school staff and school leader capability in areas relevant to students with additional needs.

2. Support schools to effectively attract and retain staff with relevant qualifications and experience in teaching students with additional needs.

Element Three: Enhancing an evidence-led system

1. Develop and implement policy and guidelines for inclusive education that:
   a. are aligned to the Education NT Strategy
   b. provide clarity and consistency in the supports available to students with additional needs.

2. Target investment in the right support for students through a systemic model based on student need and led by evidence.
References


Appendix list

Appendix 1  List of Acronyms
Appendix 2  Data sources and participants
Appendix 3  Consultation guides and questions
Appendix 4  Discussion paper 1
Appendix 5  Variations in questions schedules
Appendix 6  Discussion paper 2
Appendix 7a  Raw data – Consultation feedback – Strengthening shared decision making
Appendix 7b  Raw data – Consultation feedback – Improving professional practice
Appendix 7c  Raw data – Consultation feedback – Building an evidence-led system
Appendix 8  Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Act – Educational setting excerpts
Appendix 1   List of Acronyms

AASE - Australian Association of Special Education
ACECQA - Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority
AS and ASD - autism spectrum and autism spectrum disorder
CIRES - Centre for International Research on Education Systems
COAG - Council of Australian Governments
DFSVRF - Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework
DSE - Disability Standards for Education Act 2005
EALD - English as an Additional Language or Dialect
ECEC - Early Childhood Education and Care
EAP - Educational Adjustment Plan
NCCD - Nationally Consistent Collection of Data
NDIS - National Disability Insurance Scheme
NGOs - Non-government Organisations
NT - Northern Territory
PLS - Positive Learning Services
SESP – Special Education Support Program
SESO – Special Education Support Officer
SESA - Special Education Support Assistant
SNP - Student Needs Profile
SSSM - Student Support Service Model
WISM – Whole of School Inclusion Matrix
### Appendix 2  Data sources and participants

#### Online Surveys

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#### Consultations

**Round 1 Consultations**

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### Families and Carers

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<tr>
<td>Ramininging School</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebery Primary School</td>
<td>2 families and carers of students at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemarluk Special School</td>
<td>3 families and carers of students at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunby Primary School</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No families or carers attended school session, so 3 phone interviews were held as an alternative.

Reinterviewed 2 school staff as families and carers of students at the school.

1 parent who was also on staff attended staff session.

1 also worked at school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Families and Carers</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nhulunby High School</td>
<td>2 families and carers of students at school, 1 elder speaking for others’ experience</td>
<td>1 was also on staff and attended staff session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacFarlane Primary School</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No families or carers attended school session, so 1 phone interview with a parent was arranged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers NT Darwin</td>
<td>6 carers</td>
<td>Carers were accessed through Carers NT to compensate for low attendance at school-run sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers NT Alice Springs</td>
<td>2 carers (1 also staff)</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Department staff</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff, Katherine</td>
<td>2 staff (1 program manager, 1 advisor)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff, Darwin</td>
<td>8 staff (1 transition from school, 1 manager NT wide vision and hearing, team leaders regionally, 1 team leader data and reporting, 1 educational advisor vision 0-18 years, 1 senior education advisor vision (last two cover half NT each), 1 inclusive practices manager professional learning, 1 hearing education advisor Darwin 0-18 government and other schools, 1 senior advisor disability team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior staff, Darwin</td>
<td>2 staff (1 senior psychologist, 1 senior counsellor)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff, Palmerston and Rural Region (PaRR)</td>
<td>2 staff (1 psychologist, 1 ASD advisor)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff, Alice Springs</td>
<td>12 staff (including 1 disability advisor/early intervention, 1 psychologist, 1 early years and inclusion, 1 school psychologist, 1 disability and ASD advisor, 1 remote school counsellor)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NGOs and Peak Bodies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AASE NT; NT Anti-Discrimination Commission</td>
<td>2 representatives (1 per organisation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Education Union NT branch</td>
<td>1 project officer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Staff Count</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors and Disability Rights Service (within Darwin Community Legal Service)</td>
<td>2 staff (from Seniors and General Support team)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT COGSO</td>
<td>2 staff (Executive Officer and Darwin families and carers representative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers NT Carpentaria</td>
<td>1 staff (team lead, occupational therapist)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Darwin University</td>
<td>1 staff (initial teacher education provider)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Principals’ Association</td>
<td>5 representatives including President</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3  Consultation guides and questions

School consultation interview guide

Project overview

The Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University has been commissioned by the Department of Education to review policy and practice for students with additional needs. The purpose of the review is to examine current policy and practice for students with additional needs in NT government schools, and in other Australian and international jurisdictions.

The Review findings will inform the development of a systemic NT Government students with additional needs Framework. The Framework will support NT government schools to provide high-quality educational opportunities to students with additional needs, to meet related legislative requirements and policy commitments, and to ultimately be at the forefront of inclusive school education in Australia.

What will I be asked to do?

You have been invited to participate in a consultation session covering a range of topics regarding students with additional needs. We would like you to share your views on the education of students with additional needs in your school—what is working well, and what are opportunities for improvement.

The sessions will be voice recorded, with no special preparation required. However, you are encouraged to read the discussion paper provided to your school principal or available on the internet <https://haveyoursay.nt.gov.au/33450/documents/72780>. It provides useful context, and contains similar questions to those to be discussed in the consultation. The Department has provided some background information about your school to inform our visit.

The information collected will be used solely for this Review. You will not be identified in any reporting and the information will be confidential. The Department of Education will not have access to the data. If you decide to withdraw from the project after the consultation, please contact the research team.

Who do I contact if I have any questions?

If you have any questions regarding the Review please email NTswanreview@vu.edu.au.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone 03 9919 4781 or 4461.
Questions for school participants

School context regarding students with additional needs

1. What are the most common types of disability found among students with additional needs at your school?
2. What are the specific needs of students with additional needs at your school?

Inclusive education in the NT

3. To what extent do you agree that there are challenges for, and benefits of, inclusive schooling?
4. What factors do you see as important to enhance inclusive schooling?

School capability and practices

5. How do school staff collaborate in providing support to students with additional needs?
6. How does the school identify the needs of students with additional needs?
   • What is the process for deciding what adjustments to provide?
7. What infrastructure, equipment and resources does your school receive to meet the needs of students with additional needs?
8. What are the most common external (i.e. out-of-school) support services the school uses to support students with additional needs?
9. How does the school monitor learning and progress for students with additional needs?

System-wide organisation

Stakeholders consider that the provision of support for students with additional needs is determined by successful cross-departmental and intra-departmental coordination between the Department of Education, Office of Disability and external providers.

10. What are the benefits of this current model?
11. Can you suggest any improvements to this system-wide organisation that you would like to see implemented in the future?

Human resources

The recruitment, training and retention of skilled staff to educate and support students with additional needs is a key challenge in the NT.

12. Which key staff support students with additional needs in your school?
13. What training do staff receive to support students with additional needs?
14. How might the effort invested in staff recruitment, retention and training to support students with additional needs be better leveraged?

**Monitoring and governance**

*Stakeholders consulted so far have considered that school accountability for the learning of, and support provided to, students with additional needs is highly desirable.*

15. How does your school currently monitor the learning of, and support provided to, students with additional needs in your school?
   How could it be strengthened?

**Special settings**

*Special schools and settings make major contributions to inclusive schooling.*

16. What are the current strengths of the service provision afforded by special settings?

17. Could the collaboration between special and mainstream schools and settings be enhanced and, if yes, how?

**Remote schools**

*Remote schools face additional challenges to meet the needs of students with additional needs.*

18. How can the significant challenges of delivering services in regions that are geographically distant from specialised resources be further addressed in the future?
School council and families interview guide

Project overview

The Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University has been commissioned by the Department of Education to review policy and practice for students with additional needs. The purpose of the review is to examine current policy and practice for students with additional needs in NT government schools, and in other Australian and international jurisdictions.

The Review findings will inform the development of a systemic NT Government students with additional needs Framework. The Framework will support NT government schools to provide high-quality educational opportunities to students with additional needs, to meet related legislative requirements and policy commitments, and to ultimately be at the forefront of inclusive school education in Australia.

What will I be asked to do?

You have been invited to participate in a consultation session covering a range of topics regarding students with additional needs. We would like you to share your views on the education of students with additional needs in your school—what is working well, and what are opportunities for improvement.

The sessions will be voice recorded, with no special preparation required. However, you are encouraged to read the discussion paper provided to your school principal. It gives useful context, and contains similar questions to those to be discussed in the consultation.

The information collected will be used solely for this Review. You will not be identified in any reporting and the information will be confidential. The Department of Education will not have access to this data. If you decide to withdraw from the project after the consultation, please contact the research team.

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Questions for school council and family participants

School context

Can we please have some background information about your students at the school?

1. How many children do you have attending this school?
2. Of these children, how many are students with additional needs? What are their specific needs?

**Inclusive education in the NT**

3. To what extent do you agree that there are challenges for, and benefits of, inclusive schooling?
4. What actions do you see as important to enhance inclusive schooling?

**School capability and practices**

5. What types of adjustments are provided to meet the needs of students with additional needs?
6. How do school staff work together with you to support students with additional needs?
7. What are the most common external (i.e. out-of-school) support services the school uses to support students with additional needs?
8. Are there any other external support services available locally that students with additional needs at this school would benefit from?

**Collaboration with families and carers**

9. How involved are you as a parent or carer of students with additional needs in setting learning objectives and discussing reasonable adjustments for your child in their school?
   - How could the involvement of families and carers in this process be enhanced?
10. How does the school report to parents and carers on the learning and progress of your child?
   - How could this reporting be enhanced?

**Special settings**

*Special schools and settings make major contributions to inclusive schooling.*

11. What are the strengths of the support provided by special schools and settings to students with additional needs?
12. How could the contribution of special schools and settings to the education of students with additional needs be enhanced?

**Remote schools**
Remote schools face additional challenges to meet the needs of students with additional needs.

13. How can the significant challenges of delivering services in regions that are geographically distant from specialised resources be further addressed in the future?
Review of Policy and Practice for Students with Additional Needs

Prepared for the Northern Territory Department of Education
January 2018
About CIRES

The Centre for International Research on Education Systems, located at Victoria University, conducts strategic research that identifies how well education systems work, for whom, and how they can be improved to work well for all. The Centre undertakes large-scale survey and policy-related projects covering every state and territory in Australia and every sector of education and training. It also undertakes international comparative research examining the features and performance of education systems around the world.
### Acronyms and abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASD</td>
<td>Autism Spectrum Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSE</td>
<td>Disability Standards for Education 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAP</td>
<td>Education Adjustment Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTE</td>
<td>Full-time equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSSD</td>
<td>More Support for Students with Disabilities program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCCD</td>
<td>Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDIS</td>
<td>National Disability Insurance Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSD</td>
<td>Program for Students with Disability, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTI</td>
<td>Response to intervention model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SESP</td>
<td>Special Education Support Program, Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Purpose of the Review

The Northern Territory Department of Education (the Department) has commissioned a Review of the practices and policies for Students with Additional Needs attending government schools. Services provided by the Department to children below school-age are outside the Review’s scope. The Review is being undertaken by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University.

The Review’s findings will inform improvements so that Northern Territory government schools are at the forefront of inclusive schooling. The Education NT Strategic Framework 2018-2022 states the Department’s commitment to ‘a strong public education system that ensures equity and gives every child the opportunity to engage, grow and achieve’.

Students with Additional Needs are at the centre of the Review, which is guided by the following principles (see Figure 1-1):

- Focuses upon an inclusive education for all students
- Acknowledges the financial and staffing resources available in the Northern Territory
- Seeks to build upon current strengths in supporting Students with Additional Needs
- Considers stakeholder perspectives
- Reflects upon the diverse learning environments in the Northern Territory.

Figure 1-1 Principles to underpin the Review
This discussion paper is guided by three questions:
- how well is the current approach supporting all Students with Additional Needs in all Northern Territory government schools?
- what changes should be made to the current approach to enhance opportunities and outcomes for all Students with Additional Needs?
- how realistic and feasible are the potential changes?

**Impetus for the Review**

Other Australian jurisdictions have reviewed schooling for Students with Additional Needs in recent years. The Department wants to learn from these reviews, alongside the views of those interested or involved in the schooling of Students with Additional Needs in Australia and abroad.

In 2018 the Department will also be undertaking two related pieces of work on how funding is provided to schools for Students with Additional Needs and how information technology systems are used to support schools and teachers.

**The context for the Review**

The Department is committed to meeting its obligations set by the *Anti-Discrimination Act* (NT) and the *Education Act* (NT). These Acts mandate that Students with Additional Needs must have access to a full and inclusive curriculum meeting individual needs, which provides fair opportunities for learning.

**Outcome of the Review**

The Review will generate an independent report that will include recommendations for a new Framework for the education of Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools. Following consideration of the report recommendations by government, the Department will develop a framework to support Northern Territory schools to provide high-quality education for Students with Additional Needs.
2. Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools

Definition and scope of Students with Additional Needs

The Department defines Students with Additional Needs as students meeting the definition of disability provided by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) (see Box 2.1) and:

- are or have been provided an educational adjustment due to their disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students; or
- the student’s disability impacts upon their schooling.

Box 2.1 Definition of disability: Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)

The definition of disability in section 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) comprises:

a. total or partial loss of the person’s bodily or mental functions; or
b. total or partial loss of a part of the body; or
c. the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; or
d. the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; or
e. the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person’s body; or
f. a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or

and includes a disability that:

h. presently exists; or
i. previously existed but no longer exists; or
j. may exist in the future (including because of a genetic predisposition to that disability); or
k. imputed to a person.

A disability that is otherwise covered by this definition includes behaviour that is a symptom or manifestation of the disability.

The above criteria correspond to the scope of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability (NCCD). The NCCD establishes a database detailing the numbers of students with disability receiving adjustments in Australian schools, where their disability impacts upon their education. Students with Additional Needs not provided an educational adjustment to meet their learning needs are not included in the NCCD database.

Discussion question

1. What are the strengths of the current definition and scope of Students with Additional Needs?
   - Are there any groups of Students with Additional Needs not included in this definition?
   - In your view, how could the definition be improved?
Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools

In 2016, there were approximately 6,300 Students with Additional Needs attending Northern Territory government schools, where the education program was adjusted in response to their disability (see Figure 2-1). Of this number, approximately 2,650 Students with Additional Needs received additional support to meet their educational needs via resources and services provided by the Department. Students receiving additional support include those in:

- mainstream schools eligible for the Special Education Support Program (SESP)
- Special programs (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) programs)
- Special centres attached to mainstream schools
- Special schools (including satellite classes)
- Positive Learning Services
- mainstream and other settings receiving support, or with a pending diagnosis.

Figure 2-1 Number of Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools, 2016

Source: Department of Education data.

Students with Additional Needs: facts and figures

In 2017, 2,972 Northern Territory government school Students with Additional Needs received support in addition to school-initiated adjustments, up from 2,650 in 2016. The distribution of these students across disability categories is detailed in Figure 2-2. The 22 per cent of students with no or unconfirmed diagnosis either had a diagnosis pending, were receiving programming and planning support, or were accessing Positive Learning Services.
The distribution of the 2,972 government school students attracting additional support to meet their educational needs across setting types in 2017 is detailed in Figure 2-2.

Of the 2,972 Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools receiving additional support in 2017, 1,298 were enrolled within mainstream classes and met the eligibility criteria to attract additional funding via the Special Education Support Program (SESP). The three criteria for SESP eligibility are that students must have:

- a diagnosed disability
- evidence of educational needs and significant educational adjustments (i.e. substantial or extensive) associated with the diagnosed disability
- attended at least 60 per cent of school days.
3. Current policy and obligations

Overarching legal framework

Several legal and human rights frameworks guide how Australian governments, education authorities, schools and other services support Students with Additional Needs.

International conventions

Australia is a signatory to several United Nations conventions ensuring children with disability have access to an inclusive education and to full and active participation in the community. The United Nations (UN) Draft General Comment on the Right to Inclusive Education defines ‘inclusive education’ as education that accommodates “the differing needs of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility”.

For the purposes of this Review, inclusive schooling is defined as:

school-based arrangements where Students with and without Additional Needs learn together.

This definition distinguishes inclusion from integration, exclusion and segregation (see Figure 3-1).

Figure 3-1  Alternative approaches to education

Source: Based on Hehir et al., 2016, p. 3.

Australian legislation and policy

At the national level, the provision of education for Students with Additional Needs is underpinned by a hierarchy of legislation and national agreements (see Figure 3-2). Collectively, these legislation and agreements reiterate that it is unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a student on the ground of disability.

This policy hierarchy is underpinned by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), alongside the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE). The DSE requires schools to make
reasonable adjustments to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. Discrimination must be prevented in relation to:

- enrolment
- participation
- curriculum development, accreditation and delivery
- student support services
- harassment and victimisation.

Based on the DSE, ‘an adjustment is reasonable in relation to a student with a disability if it balances the interests of all parties affected’.

Finally, the NCCD provides guidance on the numbers of Students with Additional Needs in Australian schools, alongside their disability type and the level of adjustment they receive.

**Figure 3-2 Students with Additional Needs: the national policy hierarchy**

![Diagram showing the national policy hierarchy involving NCCD, Disability Standards for Education 2005, and Disability Discrimination Act 1992.]

**Northern Territory legislation**

The Anti-Discrimination Act 2015 and the Education Act 2016 are the main Northern Territory legislative documents shaping the provision of education for Students with Additional Needs.

**Anti-Discrimination Act 2015**

The Anti-Discrimination Act 2015 (NT) aims to eliminate discrimination, including by educational authorities, and promote equality of opportunity.

**Education Act 2016**

The Education Act 2016 (NT) legislates on the access of all children and young persons to education programs. One of the six objectives of the Act is to ensure that education programs are responsive to the individual needs of children and young persons. The guiding principle of
the Act is all students are entitled to an education capable of enabling them to maximise their achievements and societal contribution.

**Northern Territory Department of Education directions and policies**

**Strategic Framework 2018 – 2022**

The Strategic Framework 2018 – 2022 outlines the Department’s direction for the next five years. The Education NT Strategy 2018-22, included in the Strategic Framework, commits to giving every child the opportunity to engage, grow and achieve. One of the five core principles is to take an inclusive approach, and provide learning pathways for all students.

**Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework**

An Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework supports the Department’s vision for improved educational outcomes. This framework contains four phases: planning, implementing, reviewing and reporting. There are no separate accountability mechanisms specifically for Students with Additional Needs built into the Framework.

**Philosophy of Inclusion for students with disability**

The Department’s Philosophy of Inclusion for students with disability recognises the differences between students and works to minimise barriers in education for students with disability. Inclusion in education is identified as meaning:

- valuing all students
- recognising that inclusion in education is one aspect of an inclusive society
- increasing student participation in school culture, curricula and communities
- restructuring the culture, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students.

**Discussion questions**

2. What are the main benefits of promoting ‘inclusive schooling’ in the Northern Territory government school system? What are the main challenges?

3. To what extent is inclusive schooling being provided to Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools?

4. How well is the Department’s philosophy of inclusion being carried out in the government school system?

5. How important are accountability mechanisms to ensure Students with Additional Needs receive the support they need?
   - If important, what kinds of mechanisms would you include in the Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework focussed on Students with Additional Needs?
4. Current approach to educating Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools

Organisation of support delivery

Support provision for Students with Additional Needs is overseen by the Department and implemented in government schools across the Northern Territory as illustrated in Figure 4-1.

Figure 4-1 Model of governance and service delivery for Students with Additional Needs

Students with Additional Needs enrolled in mainstream government schools can learn in a variety of settings, including:

- School Principals
- Leadership team
- Classroom teachers

- Special Education Teachers
- School-based support staff
- Families and carers

Centre for International Research on Education Systems
Victoria University
- mainstream classes
- Positive Learning Services for students with challenging behaviours
- Special programs for students with a diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) impacting on their learning but without intellectual disability
- Special centres for students with an intellectual disability or meeting functional placement criteria.

Students with Additional Needs enrolled in Special schools can learn in Special school classes or satellite classes physically located in mainstream schools but operated by Special schools.

**Service delivery model**

The Department provides support for Students with Additional Needs based on the Student Support Service Model (see Figure 4-2). This service delivery model applies the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach (e.g. Shores, 2009).

**Figure 4-2 Student Support Service Model**

In the RTI model, the primary intervention type is whole-school or whole-class programs and initiatives, supplemented with specific support and intensive support programs. Students who struggle to learn initially receive school-initiated interventions and adjustments.

No further adjustments are made if these adjustments overcome learning difficulties. Otherwise, students are progressively provided support—including from non-school staff. For students needing intense support, the Department provides services via its Northern Territory-wide and regional teams.
Interaction with other Northern Territory agencies to support Students with Additional Needs

The Department has partnerships with other agencies to support service delivery to Students with Additional Needs, with current partners including:

- Department of Health’s Office of Disability—provides assessment and support to children with a developmental delay/disability and their families in clinics, schools, homes or the community
- Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics—provides specialist transport options for 300 eligible students to Special school settings
- Non-government organisations via grant funding (e.g. Community Based Special Education grant) to complement government services. Examples of additional support include assistive technology for students with vision impairments, orientation and mobility training and computer aided learning.

Role of the National Disability Insurance Scheme in the NT

The progressive roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) across the Northern Territory spans a three-year period from 2016 to 2018. The principles identifying the roles and responsibilities of the NDIS and other services outline that:

- schools are responsible for making reasonable adjustments to personalise learning and support for students with disability in relation to their educational attainment (e.g. teaching, learning assistance and aids, school building modifications and transport between school activities)
- where a student’s impairment impacts their functional capacity, the NDIS funds support not related to educational attainment (e.g. personal care and support for transport to and from school).

The Department, Northern Territory government schools and the NDIS are expected to ‘work closely together at the local level to plan and coordinate streamlined services for individuals’ (COAG, 2017, p. 12).

Policy and practice for the schooling of Students with Additional Needs

The Department encourages parents and carers to choose the school setting that best suits the needs of their children. All students are entitled to enrol in their local school, providing they reside within the school’s Priority Enrolment Area. For Students with Additional Needs, parents can also choose to enrol in a Special setting (Special schools or Special centres), subject to eligibility and the Special setting’s enrolment capacity.

Determining the needs of students

The Student Needs Profile: A Guide for Schools, Parents and Carers (2016) is an instrument develop by the Department to assist schools, parents and carers to identify the educational needs of students and inform Educational Adjustment Plans and related student support plans. Student needs are identified with four categories: participation (engagement in school
activities), **communication** (comprehension and expression), **personal care** (managing personal health and care needs), and **movement** (physical capacity to access learning environments and programs) (Department of Education, 2016, p. 4).

Identifying student needs is expected to be a collaborative process 'with members of the School Support Team, parents/caregivers and other professional as appropriate'.

**Providing adjustments to Students with Additional Needs**

The *Students with Disability: Policy* indicates that schools and teachers are to provide adjustments to meet the schooling needs of students. Adjustments may include: physical, technology and equipment, staffing, time, learning tasks and materials, and assessment adjustments. In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable, school staff are to take into account the nature of the student’s needs, existing adjustments, preferred adjustment and recommended or alternative adjustments.

**Special education settings**

**Special schools**

There are five Special government schools in the Northern Territory (Table 4-1). In 2017, these five schools catered for 456 students and employed 209 staff (106 teaching and 103 non-teaching staff, full-time equivalent (FTE)).

**Table 4-1 Special government schools in the Northern Territory, 2017**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year levels</th>
<th>Enrolments</th>
<th>Indigenous students</th>
<th>Teaching staff (FTE)</th>
<th>Non-teaching staff (FTE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acacia Hill School</td>
<td>Alice Springs</td>
<td>Preschool - Year 12</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forrest Parade School</td>
<td>Palmerston</td>
<td>Preschool – Year 6</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henbury School</td>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>Year 7 – Year 12</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kintore Street School</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Preschool – Year 12</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nembruk School</td>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>Preschool – Year 6</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Special centres**

The work of the five Special schools is supported by nine Special centres located within other mainstream schools. Most of these centres cater for secondary school students. Two Special centres are in each of these four locations: Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy, Palmerston and Humpty Doo. The ninth centre is in Tennant Creek.
Enrolment in Special schools and centres

Enrolment in Special schools and centres takes place at the request of parents or schools, and requires a preliminary meeting between the parents and the principal. The application is reviewed by the relevant Department Student Support: Regional Manager for approval. Eligibility for enrolment in a Special school or centre requires a diagnosis consistent with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed., 2013) (DSM-V).

The two types of enrolment in Special schools and centres are:

- **placement** for students with an intellectual disability meeting the eligibility criteria
- **functional placement** for students with 'complex needs [and] with an identified disability' but without an intellectual disability who meet the eligibility criteria.

All placements are periodically reviewed through consultation between the school principal, parents, the School Support-Regional Manager and relevant professionals. For functional placements, the review process helps determine whether enrolment in a Special setting remains the best option for the student.

**Resourcing for Students with Additional Needs**

Resourcing provided by the Department for Students with Additional Needs has two elements:

- funding provided to schools
- support provided by non-school-based Departmental employees to students and schools.

The methodology used to allocate funding to schools is based on student profile data, enrolment numbers, historical funding arrangements and generic allocations.

**Approach to staff development**

The Department is committed to equipping government schools with the skills required to meet the needs of Students with Additional Needs. The Department offers a suite of online courses in its 'Special Education courses' section, covering the following topics:

- Disability Standards and Education
- Understanding and Managing Behaviour
- Understanding Autistic Spectrum Disorders
- Inclusion for Learners with Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- Introduction to Special Education (NT), and
- Understanding Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading.

Between 2012 and 2014, the Department received $2.9 million in Commonwealth funding under the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) program. Funding was used to develop the capability of teachers in all educational settings via the development of culturally appropriate speech assessment approaches, the use of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, assistive technology professional learning and special education teacher networks.
Support currently provided to Students with Additional Needs still benefits from the outcomes of the MSSD program.

Since 2017, the Department has offered the ‘Supporting Northern Territory Students with Additional Needs’ Teaching Scholarship (20 recipients in 2017). The scholarship enables teachers to complete an online Graduate Certificate in Education (Special Education) from Flinders University.

Discussion questions

6. What are the strengths of the Department’s current organisational structure to support Students with Additional Needs?
   o What are the key areas requiring improvement or reorganisation?

7. Where does the current approach to funding and service delivery for Students with Additional Needs support the provision of inclusive education in Northern Territory government schools?
   o Where could it be improved?
   o How well does the current approach enable schools to make reasonable adjustments for students?

8. In the Northern Territory context, how would you distinguish between what is reasonable and unreasonable in providing adjustments to support access and participation for Students with Additional Needs?
   o Can you give examples of what you see as reasonable and unreasonable adjustments?

9. How well does the current distribution of students in Special schools, Special settings and mainstream schools meet the needs of Students with Additional Needs?
   o How could the enrolment system be enhanced to ensure Students with Additional Needs learn in the setting most suitable to them?

10. How widespread is the use of the Department’s guides and resources to determine the needs of students and provide suitable adjustments?

11. How engaged are families and carers in the process of determining needs, suitable adjustments and best enrolment options for Students with Additional Needs?

12. What impacts—positive or negative—is the roll out of the NDIS in the Northern Territory having upon the schooling of Students with Additional Needs?
   o How can the Department develop strong collaboration with the NDIS to deliver services for Students with Additional Needs?

13. How effective have the Department’s professional development activities and initiatives been in enhancing the skills of teachers and other staff to meet the needs of Students with Additional Needs?
5. Approaches in other jurisdictions

Support for Students with Additional Needs in other jurisdictions

Approaches to supporting Students with Additional Needs in other Australian and international jurisdictions provide insights for future directions in the NT.

At a general level, Australian State and Territory Departments of Education have similar approaches to service delivery for Students with Additional Needs, with a combination of school-based and external staff delivering services. School-based staff generally feature some combination of specialised teaching staff, aides, professionals (e.g. speech pathologists, nurses and psychologists) and/or a unit with staff who assist mainstream teachers. External staff typically comprise department specialists who focus on capacity building in schools or directly provide services.

One area where significant differences exist across Australia is in the involvement of non-government external services. Most services accessed by Students with Additional Needs are provided by state governments through their Departments of Education, Health and Social Services. Exceptions to government provision of disability support services in schools are identified in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1 Non-government provision of additional need support services in schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>School staff may use government services or purchase specific external professional services</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>Social workers are employed as field workers in a learn-at-home program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>A partnership agreement exists to facilitate schools’ use of external specialist professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Training for teachers to provide medical support can be accessed through either internal or external providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>External contractors are used to provide transport for students</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Focussing upon policy and practice relating to Students with Additional Needs in Victoria and Queensland is useful as Victoria has invested significantly in inclusive education and Queensland experiences similar challenges and opportunities to the Northern Territory.

New Zealand and Canada also provide useful reference points. New Zealand is recognised as a world leader in inclusive education, with almost all Students with Additional Needs attending mainstream schools. Canada’s government, economy and population is similar to Australia, including certain regions, such as the Northwest Territories, having high proportions of Indigenous peoples, and unique challenges in remote education.

Table 5-2 summarises the approaches to supporting Students with Additional Needs in these four jurisdictions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resourcing model</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>Queensland</th>
<th>Canadian Northwest Territories</th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) provides supplementary funding and resources to schools to support Students with Additional Needs via:</td>
<td>Schools receive additional resource packages to:</td>
<td>Schools receive conditional funding to fund positions for Specialized Inclusive Schooling Staff</td>
<td>No unified additional funding system for Students with Additional Needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Targeted PSD funding (for students with moderate or high needs)</td>
<td>• Provide individual adjustments based on students’ Education Adjustment Program (EAP)</td>
<td>• Two main types of positions: Program Support Teachers and Support Assistants</td>
<td>Separate funding initiatives or grants coexist: learning support funding, special education and assistive equipment grants, special education grant, targeted at risk funding and targeted funding for isolation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Other PSD funding (to support specialist school settings, program-based funding and administrative and assessment funding)</td>
<td>• Fund adjustments to support students with disability not captured by EAP</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service delivery model</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>Queensland</th>
<th>Canadian Northwest Territories</th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Schools request PSD support</td>
<td>• Inspired by the Response to Intervention (RTI) model</td>
<td>• Department of Education staff for inclusive education: Regional Inclusive Schooling Coordinators, Superintendents and Student Support staff</td>
<td>New Learning Support (previously Special Education) model</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Six levels of targeted PSD funding exist, based on support needs</td>
<td>• Regions and schools provide a continuum of support and services for students with disability, including guidance officers, behaviour support teachers, teacher aides, speech pathologists and nurses</td>
<td>• Departmental collaboration with Health and Social Services and Community Support</td>
<td>Teachers and schools develop and implement a Support Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The 4 education regions (divided into 17 areas) across Victoria align with the existing Department of Health and Human Services areas to facilitate coordination in service delivery</td>
<td>• Department of Education also has central services such as the Autism Hub (centre for research and professional development)</td>
<td>• Schools develop Student Support Plan or Individual Education Plan</td>
<td>A local Learning Support Team is responsible for sourcing, brokering and purchasing relevant services</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Department of Education and Training support for schools is organised into area-based multi-disciplinary teams</td>
<td>• All schools are required to have a School-Based Support Team to help teachers meet the needs of all their students</td>
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<td>The Lead Practitioner (designated by the Learning Support Team) oversees the development of the Support Plan</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special education</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>Queensland</th>
<th>Canadian Northwest Territories</th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 80 specialist schools in Victoria for students with intellectual disability, for hearing impaired students, for students with Autism Spectrum</td>
<td>• Students with disability can enrol in any mainstream state school 15% of students with a diagnosed disability were enrolled in Special schools in 2016</td>
<td>• Schools must welcome all students within a common learning environment</td>
<td>New Zealand also has two types of Special schools, namely</td>
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<td>28 day schools offering specialist teaching to students with high levels of needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>Canadian Northwest Territories</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disorder and for students with a physical disability</td>
<td>the educational settings, with three programs available: Regular Education Program (with or without accommodations), Modified Education Program and Individual Education Plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 residential Special schools: 3 for students with vision or hearing impairments and 3 for students with high behavioural, social and emotional needs</td>
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<td>• Specialist of satellite units within mainstream schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staffing and capacity development</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The Special Needs Plan supports teachers' professional learning</td>
<td>• Staff with specialist expertise located within and outside the Department of Education</td>
<td>• One of the major responsibilities of the Regional Inclusive Schooling Coordinators is to assist with professional learning and capacity building in individual schools and in the region/district</td>
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<tr>
<td>• All new teachers are required to have completed a special needs component in their initial training</td>
<td>• Teachers can access professional development opportunities to improve their ability to support the education of Students with Additional Needs.</td>
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<td>• Existing teachers are required to engage in professional learning to renew their registration</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The Department of Education and Training has a range of Student Support Services Officers who provide specialist support to students and schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental and community involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Students eligible for PSD must become part of a Student Support Group (bringing parents, the student and the school together for education planning purposes)</td>
<td>• Parents are generally involved in developing individual plans, but this is not systematic</td>
<td>• Parents must have the opportunity for meaningful involvement in planning, problem solving and decision-making related to student learning and support</td>
<td>• Families work with teachers to develop and review the student's Support Plan. They can also directly contact the Lead Practitioner via phone or email</td>
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<td>Performance measurement and monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The Framework for Improving Student Outcomes contains an improvement initiative focussed on promoting inclusion</td>
<td>• The 2017 Review of education for students with disability in Queensland state schools found that schools (and therefore the Department of Education) are not systematically able to identify additional needs with precision and monitor progress for this group of students.</td>
<td>• Schools submit financial records to the Department of Education to report on conditional funding</td>
<td>• The Lead Practitioner reviews Support Plans on a regular basis and make adjustments based on the evolution of the needs of the student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The educational experiences and outcomes of PSD students are captured in the School Supplementary Census, NAPLAN data and the On Track Survey</td>
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<td>• Schools share data with the Department of Education on their practices for inclusive schooling</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Schools complete reviews of inclusive schooling practices based on the indicators and timelines established by the Department</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In all jurisdictions reviewed in Table 5-2, schools initiate requests for external support when they consider school support for specific Students with Additional Needs insufficient. Like the Northern Territory, the Northwest Territories in Canada have a regional service delivery model; however, all schools are required to establish a School-Based Support Team. New Zealand’s ambitious approach to inclusive education requires schools to establish Learning Support Teams.

Special education settings are more common in Australian jurisdictions (Victoria, Queensland and the Northern Territory) than in the Northwest Territories and New Zealand. Both of these international jurisdictions offer a broad continuum of services and resources to assist schools in adapting to student needs. In most Canadian provinces and in New Zealand, levels of need guide funding, while the approach to Students with Additional Needs is based on disability categories in Queensland (although Victoria is progressively implementing a new needs-based model).

Performance measurement and monitoring is stronger in the Northwest Territories but weaker in Queensland. In their development of new inclusive education policies, both New Zealand and Victoria are developing tools to monitor progress towards inclusive education.

**Findings and recommendations from related Australian reviews and research**

While much progress has been made in promoting inclusive education, Australian jurisdictions are recognising the need to review and strengthen approaches for Students with Additional Needs to maximise outcomes and investment. Similar reviews and inquiries in other Australian jurisdictions, including most recently in Victoria and Queensland, have found discrepancies between policy and practice in supporting Students with Additional Needs.

**Enrolment and inclusion**

A recent study by Poed, Cologon and Jackson (2017) found significant levels of restrictive and gatekeeping practices across Australian mainstream schools, bringing into question the notion of parental choice and compliance with international and national legislations.

The researchers surveyed 745 Australian families, advocates and students with disability. Over 70 per cent of families had experienced practices that reduce the opportunities for enrolment and participation of Students with Additional Needs in mainstream schooling.

**Teacher training and development**

A recent Australian Senate Inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for Students with Additional Needs in the school system has called for all initial teacher education programs to include a mandatory component on students with disability. Further, all states and territories are encouraged to work together to collect better data and evidence on students with disability in school education, including on:

- use of restrictive practices and seclusion
- workforce skills and availability of professional learning for school leaders and teachers in inclusive education
• access to allied health support
• student enrolments, attendance and school completion rates, and
• bullying and wellbeing.

Victoria

The 2015 Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) in Victoria focussed on improving outcomes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and dyslexia. The review (Department of Education and Training, 2016) highlighted the need for Victoria to:
• develop a more inclusive education policy and framework
• have greater accountability and transparency for funding and outcomes for students with disabilities
• establish a more effective approach to identify and support Students with Additional Needs
• invest in workforce training and professional learning opportunities.

The review recommended a new needs-based funding model to support Students with Additional Needs, aligned with the NDIS. The Victorian Government has implemented a range of reforms in response, including clearer guidelines and tools for schools to implement inclusive practices, a new index for schools to measure inclusive practices and an improved performance and accountability framework that includes the objective of inclusion.

Queensland

In 2016, the Queensland Government commissioned a review of policy, practice and resourcing for students with disability. The review identified the need for:
• clearer guidance for schools on expectations, better aligned with legal obligations
• improved parental engagement and teacher capability development in providing adjustments to engage students in the classroom.

In relation to rural and remote communities, stakeholders identified the following challenges:
• inconsistent access to experienced specialists (e.g. psychologists)
• difficulty in finding adequately trained and experienced educators
• uneasy access to face-to-face professional learning
• lack of channels for schools to share information on best practice for Students with Additional Needs
• concerns from families about making formal complaints about a teacher or school
due to anticipated adverse outcomes (e.g. exclusion and impacting personal relationships outside school).

The Department of Education was found to have limited formal structures in place to engage with remote Students with Additional Needs. The review recommends further consideration of service delivery options for high needs students in remote locations.

In its 2017 consultation with stakeholders on a revised action plan for rural and remote education, the Department of Education identified the need for: continuing consultation with rural and remote teachers to identify what works and what is needed; more targeted
professional learning, including coaching and mentoring, to build the capabilities of staff in rural and remote public schools; and better coordination of services. Additional payment (such as for travel costs) and funding incentives to attract the best teachers and school leaders were also seen as important, as was the need for better information sharing and active partnerships between providers to facilitate student transitions.

As described in the Queensland Action Plan Education for Rural and Remote Education, another noteworthy approach to adequate service delivery in Queensland is schools forming clusters to access additional support and funding, including to professional services.

Discussion questions

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Which approaches in other Australian and international jurisdictions are most relevant to Northern Territory context?</td>
</tr>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>What key insights do you take from the approaches to supporting Students with Additional Needs in other jurisdictions regarding:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The service delivery model, including the use by schools of government and non-government service providers?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The place and role of Special education settings?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Professional development and school workforce training?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance measurement and monitoring?</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Are there other jurisdictions the Review should examine to find models of best practice in the schooling of Students with Additional Needs?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


**Appendix 5  Variations in question schedules**

**Review of Policy and Practice for Students with Additional Needs**

*Round 2 Stakeholder consultations: Questions*

The questions to be asked in consultations are based on that in the discussion guide. Where necessary, the table below identifies revised questions that have been adjusted for the specific consultation group. The table also indicates focus questions for a consultation, based on the key objective for that consultation. The importance of focus questions is identified by the cell colour. Consultations will also be guided by the responses of the participants, in that further follow up questions will often be asked, particularly in high focus questions.

The table below does not contain the questions for the school-based consultations with school staff, school councils and family representatives. These questions are contained in the two respective interview guides. The specific nature of those questions did not closely align with the discussion paper questions.

*Overarching objective: To obtain stakeholder views on issues relevant to the development of a framework for Students with Additional Needs in NT government schools.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion paper question number</th>
<th>COGSO NT</th>
<th>NGOs and Peak Bodies</th>
<th>Australian Education Union NT</th>
<th>NT Principals’ Association</th>
<th>DoE staff: support</th>
<th>DoE staff: senior</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key objectives for consultation</strong></td>
<td>Overarching perspectives of families and school communities as users and observers of the current support model.</td>
<td>Perspectives on the group’s interactions with schools, families and school communities as users of the current support model.</td>
<td>Perspectives on what is working well in terms of recruitment, training and retention of teaching staff and what the possibilities for future changes may be.</td>
<td>Perspectives on what is working well for schools in supporting Students with Additional Needs &amp; what can be enhanced from a school leadership point of view.</td>
<td>Perspectives on what is working well for DoE staff in supporting Students with Additional Needs, and what can be enhanced from an ‘on the ground’ point of view.</td>
<td>Perspectives on what is working well for DoE staff in supporting Students with Additional Needs and what can be enhanced from a management point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context questions</strong></td>
<td>Each stakeholder group will be asked to provide their names and roles. This information will provide context for their comments during the consultation.</td>
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Centre for International Research on Education Systems

Victoria University
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>COGSO NT</th>
<th>NGOs and Peak Bodies</th>
<th>Australian Education Union NT</th>
<th>NT Principals' Association</th>
<th>DoE staff: support</th>
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<td>Discussion paper question number</td>
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Wording in discussion paper - What is working well in the current accountability system for Students with Additional Needs in the NT?
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<td>All wording as per discussion paper - Can you suggest any improvements that you would like to see implemented in the future?</td>
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<td>All wording as per discussion paper - How can the significant challenges of delivering services in regions that are physically distant from specialised resources be further addressed in the future?</td>
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<td>All wording as per discussion paper - How could the Framework for Students with Additional Needs developed as a result of this Review address the specific challenges faced by remote schools?</td>
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Review of Policy and Practice for Students with Additional Needs

Discussion Paper

Prepared for the Northern Territory Department of Education
March 2018
About CIRES

The Centre for International Research on Education Systems, located at Victoria University, conducts strategic research that identifies how well education systems work, for whom, and how they can be improved to work well for all. The Centre undertakes large-scale survey and policy-related projects covering every state and territory in Australia and every sector of education and training. It also undertakes international comparative research examining the features and performance of education systems around the world.
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Centre for International Research on Education Systems

Victoria University
1. Purpose of the Review

The Northern Territory Department of Education (the Department) has commissioned a Review of the practices and policies for Students with Additional Needs attending Northern Territory (NT) government schools. Services provided by the Department to children before school-age are outside the Review’s scope. The Review is being undertaken by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CURES) at Victoria University.

The Review’s findings will inform improvements that lead to NT government schools being at the forefront of inclusive schooling. The Education NT Strategy 2018-22 states the Department’s commitment to ‘a strong public education system that ensures equity and gives every child the opportunity to engage, grow and achieve’, and that it is to ‘take an inclusive approach, and provide learning pathways for all our students’. The Review will build on the solid foundation already in place to meet these aspirations, by identifying how best to organise and enhance existing good practice into a NT-wide framework.

The Review is also guided by the following principles, placing Students with Additional Needs at the centre (see Figure 1-1).

**Figure 1-1  Principles to underpin the Review**
This discussion paper and the Review more generally, are guided by three questions:

- how well is the current approach supporting all Students with Additional Needs in all NT government schools?
- in what ways can the strengths of the current approach be extended to further enhance opportunities and outcomes for all Students with Additional Needs?
- how realistic and feasible are potential changes to implement and achieve?

During January 2018, consultations occurred with Department of Education management and staff, Department of Health staff, school representatives and NT disability bodies and peak associations. These consultations provided preliminary findings reported throughout this paper. The focus of the current consultation phase is to validate preliminary findings and obtain additional insights from a broader group of stakeholders about the strengths of the current approach and what can be done to enhance these further.

**The context for the Review**

The Department is committed to meeting its obligations set by the Anti-Discrimination Act (NT) and the Education Act (NT). These Acts mandate that Students with Additional Needs must have access to a full and inclusive curriculum meeting individual needs, which provides fair opportunities for learning.

The Department also acknowledges the findings of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). A Northern Territory Government response to the Royal Commission findings is currently being prepared.

**Outcome of the Review**

The Review will generate an independent report, inclusive of a proposed framework for Students with Additional Needs. Subsequent implementation of the Students with Additional Needs Framework will ensure the NT is appropriately positioned to build on a strong foundation to respond to growing demand while meeting legislative requirements, by organising current elements of good practice into a more clearly articulated overarching framework for inclusive education for schools, students and their families.
2. Students with Additional Needs in Northern Territory government schools

Defining Students with Additional Needs

The term ‘Students with Additional Needs’ can be taken to mean any student that may have additional needs to access the curriculum and achieve success in their learning at school.

For the purposes of this review, however, ‘Students with Additional Needs’ refers to those students with a disability. More specifically, the definition of ‘Students with Additional Needs’ includes those captured under the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability (NCCD) database. This database records students with a disability receiving adjustments in Australian schools, where the disability impacts upon the student’s education.

For students to be identified as having additional needs in the NT, they must:

- have a disability as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (see Box 2-1)
- be impacted by their disability in their schooling, and
- be or have been provided an educational adjustment due to their disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students.

Box 2-1 Definition of disability: Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)

Section 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) defines disability as:

a. total or partial loss of the person’s bodily or mental functions; or
b. total or partial loss of a part of the body; or
c. the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; or
d. the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; or
e. the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person’s body; or
f. a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or
g. a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person’s thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour;

and includes a disability that:

h. presently exists; or
i. previously existed but no longer exists; or
j. may exist in the future (including because of a genetic predisposition to that disability); or
k. is imputed to a person.

A disability that is otherwise covered by this definition includes behaviour that is a symptom or manifestation of the disability.
Students with Additional Needs in NT government schools

In 2017, approximately 8,750 Students with Additional Needs attended NT government schools and received educational adjustments.

Students receiving additional support and educational adjustments include students in:

- Mainstream schools eligible for the Special Education Support Program (SESP) funding
- Special programs, e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) targeted programs
- Special centres attached to mainstream schools
- Special schools
- Special schools with outreach and/or satellite classes in mainstream schools
- Positive Learning Services
- Mainstream schools and other settings receiving Departmental support, or with a pending diagnosis.

Students with Additional Needs: facts and figures

The Department allocates significant resources to support Students with Additional Needs through direct funding to schools and a range of additional programs delivered by Departmental staff that further provide support to schools and students.

Students with Additional Needs attending special schools and centres are funded through targeted funding while additional specific funding in mainstream schools is provided to support students with diagnosed disabilities. Further funding is provided across all mainstream schools to support the broader cohort of students requiring some level of educational adjustments to enhance their educational outcomes. This funding is distributed through the Department’s needs based funding model which currently incorporates an interim allocation basis. The needs based funding model is being reviewed and will be further refined as recommended by a recent independent review of the Department’s needs based allocation methodology.
Emerging themes

- The term ‘Students with Additional Needs’ may be confusing given that this Review only proposes an initial focus on students with disability. Several stakeholders mentioned that students with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) have additional needs. The Department has acknowledged the need for a clear communication strategy to accompany the introduction of the concept of Students with Additional Needs to ensure clarity amongst stakeholders.
- Stakeholder concerns that a diagnosis is currently required for students to be eligible for additional support, means that students unable to achieve a timely diagnosis may not always be receiving all of the support they require at that specific time.
- The total number of students with a disability impacting upon their schooling in the NT is potentially greater than the estimated number of Students with Additional Needs. This is due to the reliance upon school staff to consistently identify and provide adjustments for Students with Additional Needs.
- Providing further clarity on classification of students with behaviours revealing specific needs, but who do not fall within the definition of Students with Additional Needs, may assist in extending service provision to this larger group of students. For example, stakeholders mentioned difficulties in identifying whether students with complex and challenging behaviours have a disability (as defined in Box 2–1).
3. Current policy and obligations

The Northern Territory approach to Students with Additional Needs

Philosophy of inclusion

The Department’s philosophy of inclusion recognises the differences between students and works to minimise barriers in education for Students with Additional Needs. Inclusion in education is identified as meaning:

- valuing all students
- recognising that inclusion in education is one aspect of an inclusive society
- increasing student participation in school culture, curricula and communities
- realigning the culture, policies and practices in schools so that they can respond to the diversity of students.

Principles: Students with Disability

The following principles of the Northern Territory Department of Education policy on students with disability are intended to ensure that these students with disability are able to attend schools without conditions or restrictions, and to provide protocols for planning and implementing service provision for students with disability. They provide further orientation to the Department’s approach to Students with Additional Needs:

- students with disability have the right to fully access an inclusive education through the Australian Curriculum and Early Years Learning Framework without restrictions
- all education providers must refer to the principles governing ‘adjusted age’ and ‘school participation age’ for students with disability regarding participation, curriculum and assessment
- learning programs focus on each student’s abilities and provide learning experiences that are relevant, meaningful and rigorous
- schools are to include in their Strategic Improvement and Annual Operational Plans how this policy is enacted in their context and should use the Whole School Inclusion Matrix to inform their practice
- each student and their family or caregivers have the right to expect transparency of process in relation to decisions made about the student. They are recognised as partners in education and will be actively supported in exercising their right to participate in the decision making processes in a timely fashion
- all external assessment providers must adhere to the Diagnostic Assessment guidelines when providing services to students with disability
- inclusive education provides all children with the possibility to learn together without discrimination. It should take into account the diversity of disabled children
- all staff providing student profiling or standardised assessments must adhere to the Special Education Assessment Practices
- students with disability are connected with, and informed about, appropriate post-school options
• schools must have sound reasons and clear processes instituted when considering suspending students with disability.

Evidence on the benefits of inclusive schooling

Taking the Department’s philosophy of inclusion as both a starting point and a key reference point, the Review has examined international research on inclusive schooling, finding that learning in inclusive settings is associated with desirable outcomes. These include enhanced academic outcomes and social skill development among Students with Additional Needs (Cologon, 2016; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015). A widely cited report reviewing findings on inclusive education from 89 studies found consistent evidence that inclusive settings are associated with short and long-term benefits for Students with and without Additional Needs (Hehir et al., 2016).

For Students with Additional Needs, short-term benefits of inclusive schooling include the development of greater literacy and numeracy skills, higher school attendance rates, lower rates of behavioural problems and higher secondary education completion rates (Hehir et al., 2016). Long-term benefits include increased participation in postsecondary education, employment and independent living (Cologon, 2016). Meanwhile, a recent meta-analysis of 47 studies found that inclusive schooling is also associated with superior academic achievement for Students without Additional Needs (Szumni, Smogorzewska, & Karwowski, 2017).

A separate strand of research makes reference to the widespread use of special schools as part of what is called ‘Special Education’ in Europe. Countries like Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland successfully use ‘differentiated strategies’ between schools as a means to support inclusion (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013). This is in line with recognition that inclusion operates at a system level and is to be assessed by looking at how the elements within an education system work together to offer suitable learning environments to all students (OHCHR, 2016).

Australian legislation and policy

The provision of education for Students with Additional Needs is underpinned by a hierarchy of legislation and national agreements, which make it unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a student on the grounds of disability (see Figure 3-1).

This policy hierarchy is underpinned by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), alongside the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE). The DSE requires schools to make reasonable adjustments to ensure students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. Discrimination must be prevented in relation to:

• enrolment
• participation
• curriculum development, accreditation and delivery
• student support services
• harassment and victimisation.
Based on the DSE, ‘an adjustment is reasonable in relation to a student with a disability if it balances the interests of all parties affected’.

Finally, the NCCD provides information on the numbers of Students with Additional Needs in Australian schools, alongside their disability type and the level of adjustment they receive.

**Figure 3-1 Students with Additional Needs: the national policy hierarchy**

- **NCCD**
  - Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability: Identifies the number of Australian school students with disability receiving educational adjustments

- **Disability Standards for Education 2005**
  - Determines the rights and duties of various stakeholders to meet the educational needs of all students

- **Disability Discrimination Act 1992**
  - Protects all Australians against discrimination based on disability

**Northern Territory Department of Education policies**

**Policies for Students with Additional Needs**

The provision of additional support to Students with Additional Needs by the Department is predominantly for students with a diagnosis. However, the Department’s current *Students with Disability: Policy* indicates that all students ‘receive an education in a supportive environment that values diversity, inclusion and participation’. The definition of ‘students with disability’ in this policy is the one provided in the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) (see Box 2-1, p.3). The policy also states that students with disability can attend schools without conditions or restrictions, with schools and the Department required to put in place protocols to plan and implement education provision for these students.

The current *Students with Disability: Policy* also indicates that schools and teachers are to provide adjustments to meet the educational needs of students. Adjustments may include: physical, technology and equipment, staffing, time, learning tasks and materials, and assessment. In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable, school staff are to consider the nature of the student’s needs, existing adjustments, preferred adjustment and recommended or alternative adjustments.

Centre for International Research on Education Systems

Victoria University
The Students with Disability: Policy is supported by the:

- Students with disability guidelines
- Diagnostic assessment guidelines
- Enrolment in special schools and special centres guidelines
- Transition from school for students with disability guidelines
- Transport for students with disability policy and guidelines.

**Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework**

An Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework supports the Department’s vision for improved educational outcomes. This framework contains four phases: planning, implementing, reviewing and reporting. There are no separate accountability mechanisms specifically for Students with Additional Needs built into the current Framework.

**Emerging themes and questions**

1. Providing inclusive schooling can be challenging for schools. On the other hand, it may provide learning and growth opportunities for all students; representing progress towards equality of opportunity; and is an essential element for building an inclusive society.

   **Questions**
   - What are the challenges and benefits of providing inclusive schooling?
   - What are the most important strategies to promote inclusive education in the NT?

2. Special schools and settings make a major contribution to enhancing the delivery of inclusive schooling. As such, it may be important to: better understand and benefit from their functioning as intensive settings for Students with Additional Needs; have the support provided in these setting leveraged through systematic collaboration and practice sharing between special schools and mainstream settings; and aspire for those students who are able to successfully transition to mainstream settings, to be supported to do so.

   **Questions**
   - What are the current strengths of the service provision afforded by special settings?
   - Are there ways that the role of special settings in service delivery can be more broadly learnt from; to extend the benefits they provide?
   - What are opportunities for enhanced collaboration across the sector?
   - What other factors do you see as important to enhancing inclusive schooling?

3. Stakeholders considered that accountability for the learning of, and support provided to, Students with Additional Needs, on the part of schools and with respect to families, carers and the Department was highly desirable. Strengthening accountability and refining the measurement of learning and growth by Students with Additional Needs will be further explored in the Review and will be a feature of the Framework.

   Students’ Educational Adjustment Plans is the main formal and individualised accountability instrument for families and carers. As such, stakeholder views on what works well and how to better support users of these tools to improve accountability is a focus of the Review.
School annual reports are the main accountability mechanism to the Department. Ways of supporting schools to make the most of this tool and views on what works well for them at present is another focus. Additionally, the Framework will articulate a role for this mechanism in relation to the current focus on an evidence-based approach to school reporting, which uses systems to inform and improve practice.

The Framework for Students with Additional Needs developed as a result of this Review will more closely articulate the system-level collection and sharing of data on the educational outcomes and growth of Students with Additional Needs, with school-level local practices in developing tailored monitoring instruments.

Questions

- What is working well in the current accountability system for Students with Additional Needs in the NT? What can be strengthened and how?
4. Current approach to educating Students with Additional Needs in NT government schools

Organisation of support delivery

Support provision for Students with Additional Needs is overseen by the Department and implemented in government schools across the NT as illustrated in Figure 4-1.

Figure 4-1  Model of governance and service delivery for Students with Additional Needs
Students with Additional Needs enrolled in mainstream government schools can learn in a variety of settings, including:
- mainstream classes
- Positive Learning Services for students with challenging behaviours
- special programs for students with a diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) positively impacting on their learning but without intellectual disability
- special centres for students with an intellectual disability or meeting functional placement criteria.

Students with Additional Needs enrolled in special schools can learn in special school classes or satellite/outreach classes physically located in mainstream schools.

**Service delivery model**

The Department provides support for Students with Additional Needs based on the Student Support Service Model (see Figure 4-2). This service delivery model applies the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach (e.g. Shores, 2009).

**Figure 4-2  Student Support Service Model**

In the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, the primary intervention type is whole-school or whole-class programs and initiatives, supplemented with specific support and intensive support programs. Students who struggle to learn initially receive school-initiated interventions and adjustments.
No further adjustments are made if these adjustments overcome learning difficulties. Otherwise, students are progressively provided additional support—including from non-school staff. For students needing intense support, the Department provides services via its NT-wide and regional support teams.

Interaction with other agencies to support Students with Additional Needs

The Department has partnerships with other agencies, to support service delivery to Students with Additional Needs, with current partners including:

- Department of Health’s Office of Disability—provides assessment and support to children with a developmental delay/disability, along with their families and carers in clinics, schools, homes or the community
- Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics—provides specialist transport options for 300 eligible students to special school settings
- Non-government organisations via grant funding (e.g. Community Based Special Education grant) to complement government services. Examples of additional support include assistive technology for students with vision impairments, orientation and mobility training and computer aided learning.

Several services provided by the Department of Health’s Office of Disability in the NT are provided to students by the state/territory Department of Education in other Australian jurisdictions, including speech pathology, occupational therapy and physiotherapy.

Role of the National Disability Insurance Scheme in the Northern Territory

The principles identifying the roles and responsibilities of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other services outline that:

- schools are responsible for making reasonable adjustments to personalise learning and support for students with disability in relation to their educational attainment (e.g. teaching, learning assistance and aids, school building modifications and transport between school activities)
- where a student’s impairment impacts their functional capacity, the NDIS funds support not related to educational attainment (e.g. personal care and support for transport to and from school).

The Department, NT government schools and the NDIS are expected to ‘work closely together at the local level to plan and coordinate streamlined services for individuals’ (COAG, 2017).

Practices for the schooling of Students with Additional Needs

Determining the needs of students

The Student Needs Profile: A Guide for Schools, Parents and Carers (2016) is an instrument developed by the Department to assist schools, parents and carers to identify the educational needs of students and inform Educational Adjustment Plans and related student support plans. Student needs are identified with four categories: participation (engagement in school
activities), communication (comprehension and expression), personal care (managing personal health and care needs), and movement (physical capacity to access learning environments and programs) (Department of Education, 2016, p. 4).

Identifying student needs is expected to be a collaborative process ‘with members of the School Support Team, parents/caregivers and other professionals as appropriate’.

**Special education settings**

There are five special government schools in the NT, enrolling 456 students in 2017, and employing 209 staff (full-time equivalent). There are also nine special centres for primary and secondary students located in mainstream government schools in the NT. Two special centres are in each of these four locations: Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy, Palmerston and Humpty Doo. The ninth centre is in Tennant Creek.

**Enrolment in special schools and special centres**

Eligibility for enrolment in a special school or centre requires a diagnosis consistent with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) There are two types of enrolment in special schools or centres:

- *Placement* for students with an intellectual disability meeting the eligibility criteria
- *Functional placement* for students with ‘complex needs [and] with an identified disability’ but without an intellectual disability who meet the eligibility criteria.

**Approach to staff development**

The Department is committed to equipping government schools with the skills required to meet the needs of Students with Additional Needs. The Department offers a suite of online courses in its ‘Special Education Courses’ section, covering the following topics:

- Disability Standards and Education
- Understanding and Managing Behaviour
- Understanding Autistic Spectrum Disorders
- Inclusion for Learners with Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- Introduction to Special Education (NT), and
- Understanding Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading.

Since 2017, the Department has offered Supporting Northern Territory Students with Additional Needs Teaching Scholarships (20 recipients in 2017). The scholarship enables teachers to complete an online Graduate Certificate in Special Education from Flinders University.
Emerging themes and questions

4. The recruitment, training and retention of skilled staff to educate and support Students with Additional Needs is a key challenge in the NT. High turnover in the workforce often leads to skill gaps, with staff who are highly skilled at supporting Students with Additional Needs often faced with a disproportionate number of students to support.

Suggestions for improving the availability of skilled staff included:

a) communicating systematic expectations for high-quality professional learning for all early-career and experienced staff
b) increasing the accessibility of high-quality professional learning
c) building capacity locally, and enhancing the use of information technology to provide support or services remotely
d) fostering local networking and practice sharing between schools
e) enhancing collaboration between specialist staff/schools and mainstream schools and classrooms.

Questions

• How might the Department’s investment to recruit, retain and train staff lead to both improved staff capability, and enhanced support for Students with Additional Needs?

• What is working well to support the retention of skilled staff, and their capacity to deliver services to Students with Additional Needs?

5. Stakeholders consider that the provision of support for Students with Additional Needs depends upon successful cross-departmental and intra-departmental coordination and collaboration between the Department of Education, Office of Disability and external providers.

Question

• What are the benefits of this model of inter and intra-departmental collaboration?

• Can you suggest any improvements that you would like to see implemented in the future?

6. Remote schools face additional challenges to meet the needs of Students with Additional Needs—including limitations in service availability and a higher level and wider range of needs.

Question

• How can the significant challenges of delivering services in regions that are physically distant from specialised resources be further addressed in the future?

• How could the Framework for Students with Additional Needs developed as a result of this review address the specific challenges faced by remote schools?
5. Approaches in other jurisdictions

Approaches to supporting Students with Additional Needs in other Australian and international jurisdictions provide insights for future directions in the NT, provided that the specificity of the NT context is recognised. Several jurisdictions, including Queensland, Victoria, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, the Canadian Northwest Territories and New Zealand are being examined as part of the Review. This section presents findings and recommendations from related Australian reviews and research.

Findings and recommendations from related Australian reviews and research

While much progress has been made to promote inclusive education, Australian jurisdictions are recognising the need to review and strengthen approaches for Students with Additional Needs, so as to maximise outcomes and investment. Similar reviews and inquiries in other Australian jurisdictions, including most recently in Queensland and Victoria, have found similar challenges in seeking to close the gap between policy and practice in supporting Students with Additional Needs, alongside examples of leading practice.

Enrolment and inclusion

A recent study by Poed, Colgon and Jackson (2017) found significant levels of gatekeeping and obstructive practices across Australian mainstream schools. The researchers surveyed 745 Australian families, advocates and students with disability and found that over 70 per cent of families had experienced practices that reduced the opportunities for enrolment and participation of Students with Additional Needs in mainstream schools.

Teacher training and development

A recent Australian Senate Inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for Students with Additional Needs in the school system has called for all initial teacher education programs to include a mandatory component on students with disability. Further, all states and territories are encouraged to work together to collect better data and evidence on students with disability in school education, including on:

- the use of exclusionary practices and seclusion
- workforce skills and availability of professional learning for school leaders and teachers in inclusive education
- access to allied health support
- student enrolments, attendance and school completion rates, and
- bullying and wellbeing.

Queensland

In 2016, the Queensland Government commissioned a review of policy, practice and resourcing for students with disability. The review identified the need for:
• clearer guidance for schools on expectations, better aligned with legal obligations
• improved parental engagement and teacher capability development in providing adjustments to engage students in the classroom.

In relation to rural and remote communities, stakeholders identified the following challenges:
• inconsistent access to experienced specialists (e.g. psychologists)
• difficulty in finding adequately trained and experienced educators
• difficult to access to face-to-face professional learning
• lack of channels for schools to share information on best practice for Students with Additional Needs
• concerns from families about making formal complaints about a teacher or school due to anticipated adverse outcomes (e.g. exclusion and impact on personal relationships outside school).

The Queensland Department of Education was found to have limited formal structures in place to engage with remote Students with Additional Needs. The review recommended further consideration of service delivery options for high-needs students in remote locations.

In its 2017 consultation with stakeholders on a revised action plan for rural and remote education, the Department of Education identified the need for: continuing consultation with rural and remote teachers to identify what works and what is needed; more targeted professional learning, including coaching and mentoring, to build the capabilities of staff in rural and remote public schools; and better coordination of services. Additional payment (such as for travel costs) and funding incentives to attract the best teachers and school leaders were also seen as important, as was the need for better information sharing and active partnerships between providers to facilitate student transitions.

The Queensland Action Plan Education for Rural and Remote Education also identifies a noteworthy approach to ensuring adequate service delivery in Queensland, with schools forming clusters to access additional support and funding, including to professional services.

**Victoria**

The 2015 Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) in Victoria (Department of Education and Training, 2016) highlighted the need for Victoria to:
• develop a more inclusive education policy and framework
• have greater accountability and transparency for funding and outcomes for students with disabilities
• establish a more effective approach to identify and support Students with Additional Needs
• invest in workforce training and professional learning opportunities.

The review recommended a new needs-based funding model aligned with the NDIS to support Students with Additional Needs. The Victorian Government has implemented a range of reforms in response, including clearer guidelines and tools for schools to implement...
inclusive practices, a new index for schools to measure inclusive practices and an improved performance and accountability framework that includes the objective of inclusion.

**International approaches**

In Europe, approaches taken within school systems to providing ‘Special Education’ vary between countries and jurisdictions. Some systems place students mostly in mainstream settings; others offer a mixture of mainstream and special schools and settings; whilst others focus more strongly on special schools and settings. There was much debate in some systems on whether special education could be considered inclusive education. In certain systems, special education is now recognised as an appropriate approach for certain students, where student needs are assessed, and differentiated schooling adjustments meeting these needs. However, more recently it has been understood that an inclusive approach can meet student needs by reshaping provision across an entire education system. Different conceptions of inclusion lead to different answers about the place and role of special education settings in the school system (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013).

In many European countries, parents and children often have a preference for special schools, especially for students with severe disabilities. Many countries pursuing inclusion have invested in special schools and value their contribution. For example, a review of special schools in the United Kingdom recommended that special schools not be undervalued or excluded from sector developments. Generally, commentators agree that special schools are an important element of inclusive education systems, albeit with a specific role as partners with mainstream schools in the provision of education; resource centres for local mainstream schools through increased collaboration with special schools; schools supplementing educational provision for learners with severe disabilities; or institutions providing mainstream schools with expertise through outreach and consultancy (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013).

In most contexts, assisting special schools to take on some of these specific roles requires investment in staff upskilling to enable a focus on collaborative practice, curriculum development, training other teachers, selecting appropriate equipment, software and specialist assessment and sharing knowledge on supporting learners with disabilities. Expanding special schools into resource centres is occurring in several jurisdictions, including Austria, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Cyprus and Portugal have also moved in the same direction. These trends recognise that integrating learners with disabilities is resource intensive, suggesting a place for special schools as partners in implementing long-term inclusion (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013).

Policies and practices for Students with Additional Needs in New Zealand and Canada also provide useful reference points for the Review. New Zealand is recognised as a world leader in inclusive education, with almost all Students with Additional Needs attending mainstream schools. Canada’s government, economy and population is similar to Australia’s, including certain regions, such as the Northwest Territories, having high proportions of Indigenous peoples, and unique challenges in remote education.
Discussion question

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<th>Question</th>
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<td>Are there any recommendations or practices from other jurisdictions that have relevance to the NT context? If yes, what are they and how could they be applied locally?</td>
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References


Element One: Strengthening shared decision making

The analysis in this section focuses on some of the key strengths to build on in terms of feedback on quality communication and consultation. These include examples of strong internal communication between staff within a school on one hand, and communication with families and carers on the other. It is important to note that many school leaders pointed to communication skills as a necessary support for successful collaboration and partnerships. High levels of overall satisfaction with special school approaches to communication is also a strength to build on through practice sharing initiatives. Many of the participants in the review expressed interest in building stronger partnerships between schools and other institutions to assist with implementation of the SSSM. There was also strong interest from respondents in both mainstream schools and special schools in working together more closely to enhance outcomes for students. Most saw special settings such as ASD units and satellite classes as a key means to achieve this outcome. Many staff in mainstream schools saw scope for enhancing collaborations between school leaders, special education teachers and in-class support staff as vital to enhancing support for students. Additionally, building a range of external partnerships between schools and other government groups and services was a major focus.

Identified strengths in current policy and practice

Findings – surveys

Families and carers in mainstream schools

Responses to the parents and carers survey show that slightly under half of those with a child in a mainstream school are satisfied with the communication and consultation approach of the school. The strengths highlighted by family and carers included the ability of staff to communicate with them, with students directly, and the school’s involvement in communicating across agencies and services to support students with additional needs. Communication with families, carers and the child was described as one way to develop a student-centred approach to learning and growth.

The affective dimension of communication between school staff and students and families was described as important, especially for students with challenging behaviours. Families and carers emphasised the quality of communication in which staff ‘reassure
[them] that [their] child is as important as the more well behaved ones’ and that communicating effectively with families and carers was linked to improved communication with students with additional needs. In involving some students in the communication process, systems such as the Picture Exchange Communication System were also described positively.

Flexibility and diversity in the means of communication used by school staff is another aspect of the best practice in some NT government schools. Families and carers were satisfied with schools communicating through emails, text messages or phone calls. The adaptability of teachers in terms of communication was seen as important.

Among the various means of communication used by mainstream schools, communication books were repeatedly described as invaluable. Used on a daily basis, describing the activities of the day and allowing for feedback from families and carers, communication books are described by families and carers in a positive light.

Some families and carers of students in mainstream schools recognised that they may not be familiar with the specific forms of support that their child needs. Some valued the role communication played in helping them understand their child’s needs for learning and so improving the consistency of school and home supportive practices. For instance, email communication was described as helping with sharing homework requirements and thus supporting out-of-school learning for students with additional needs.

The content of communication also matters, with families and carers in the survey praising mainstream schools for engaging in communication in which the strengths and challenges of students were both openly discussed and addressed.

Strong communication practices in mainstream schools were particularly likely to be described in mainstream schools with a special setting (satellite classes, autism unit and/or Positive Learning Services).

These respondents primarily reflected on partnerships and collaboration involving the school and families and carers. For mainstream schools, families and carers reflected on several types of partnerships and collaborative practices that they saw as important to allow students with additional needs to learn and grow in mainstream environments. The most important instrument to enable school-family collaboration was seen to be the EAP.

A number of families and carers of students with additional needs in mainstream settings
reflected positively on the EAP process and its importance in facilitating a partnership approach to setting and attaining goals for students.

Two other levels of collaboration were mentioned by families and carers responding to the survey. The first involves within-school collaboration. Schools with a collaborative approach to student support involving special education teachers and regular classroom teachers were seen in a positive light by respondents. These schools are said to provide emotional stability and consistency of expectations and practices, thus facilitating a positive overall school experience of students with additional needs. Strong collaborative practices between teachers was seen as particularly important for secondary schools, where consistency across several teachers in expectations and action is key. A few respondents saw between-student collaboration (that is, students with and without additional needs) as important to foster inclusion. One example that was provided involved three students at different levels of expertise sitting next to one another and working as a team to support a student with additional needs in their learning.

Families and carers particularly appreciated between-school partnerships involving primary and secondary schools to arrange the transition of students into secondary education. Dedicated protocols to facilitate and adapt the transition to student needs, including by providing a more extensive and longer transition program, were saluted. The other major aspect of inter-institutional collaboration involving mainstream schools relates to the relationships between educational and health services. A number of mainstream schools were described as providing space and time for specialist interventions (from health and allied health services) to take place in the school. Families and carers found this form of collaboration useful to adequately support their children.

Families and carers in special schools

Analysis of the family and carer survey results suggests that excellent communication on the part of special schools with families and carers is one of the features of their general efficacy in supporting students and meeting their learning needs. Families and carers of students in special schools are often pleased with the one-on-one attention and individual support their child receives, from staff who give encouragement and are understanding of particular needs. Such student-centred practices are impossible without successful communication occurring between school staff and students, suggesting that
the quality of school staff-student communication is a strength of special schools in the NT.

Survey responses also show that special schools are generally as good at communicating with families and carers as they are at communicating with students. Here, too, good communication involves reciprocal relationships and mutual information sharing. Features of school-family communication valued by families and carers of students in special schools include the professional, solution-focused, open and regular nature of communication. This can occur in less structured interaction times, such as at drop off or pick up, or using more structured communication tools.

As with mainstream schools, the value of a communication book as a daily snapshot was highlighted by families and carers. In involving students in the daily communication process, some families and carers discussed the value of using the Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display system in the communication book, while others gave positive feedback on the use of a social story or learning journal application. Adapting communication means to the student was seen as important not only for communicating with families but also for learning. In such cases, special schools were described as strong at providing integrated supports (e.g. visual communication supports) based on the specific communication needs of students.

In addition to daily communication, families and carers often praised the value of other structured communication opportunities, such as open-day events and families and carer-teacher meetings, including EAP reviews.

For families and carers of students in special schools, one of the most praised forms of partnership was the relationship schools build with families. Families and carers often feel supported, understood and more involved in their child’s educational development and wellbeing than they had previously been in their child’s mainstream school experience. The ability special schools have to develop collaborative practices with families, in part based on high-quality communication, allows families and carers to take a more active part in their children’s school experience.

In line with such comments, some families and carers reported that special schools do good work in building the school community. Rather than having one-sided communication from the school to the home environment, special schools often succeed in working with families and carers to bring recommendations made by specialists into
the school environment and to implement them in making educational adjustments. In other words, special schools assist families and carers in making the link between out-of-school support for children with additional needs and their experiences in school. These practices support a mutual approach to information sharing.

Some respondents highlighted the way in which schools advise them of things they can do at home to support learning at school. Confidence in the expertise of staff in special schools was important in this context. Here, too, use of the EAP often serves this purpose and is a key resource to support families’ involvement in their children’s education.

The availability of allied health services, such as physiotherapy or speech therapy, in special schools was described as a successful form of collaboration by a number of families and carers of students with additional needs.

**Mainstream school leaders**

Mainstream school leaders reflected on strengths in communication along two main lines: internal communication between staff within schools and communication with families. Examples of good practice were provided demonstrating the ways in which effective communication was a necessary condition for successful collaboration.

Importantly, school leaders saw the development of strong communication internally and externally as their responsibility as leaders. Fostering positive communication was highlighted as a key aspect of what school leaders do to meet the needs of students with additional needs.

For example, some mainstream school leaders reflected on the way in which internal communication within schools underpins effective partnerships between teams within the school such as pathway units, wellbeing support teams and similar collaborative efforts. Many survey responses underlined that within-school communication, between classroom and special education teachers, but also different support teams, underpins support of students with additional needs.

School leader reflections on the best practices for fostering strong and positive communication highlight ‘open-door’ policies and more generally, accessibility and openness in communicating with staff. For some school leaders, ‘open-door’ policies were extended to families who were welcome to initiate communication with them. Such
practices allow for a collaborative approach to meeting student needs that also includes families and carers.

Mainstream school leaders responding to the survey recognised the importance of partnerships and collaborative practices at different levels. Some mainstream schools appear to be effective at developing such partnerships with stakeholders and all relevant parties, with the effect of improving the support available to students with additional needs.

Within-school collaboration was described in survey responses as the foundation of adequate support for students. Successful school-level collaborative practices in NT mainstream schools assist in “fostering a safe, collaborative learning space for all students through [the] school”. Teachers, leaders and other school administrative and support staff working together underpins the quality of support available to students in such contexts.

In order to foster such partnerships, relationship building activities and communication are important. One school leader noted that “regular staff meetings [that] allow [for the] development of collaborative practice are important for student support”. Some leaders also commented on the value of whole-school approaches to support students—as opposed to discrete initiatives and practices—as an effective form of collaboration.

In engaging their community, mainstream school leaders emphasise the importance of partnerships with families and carers. Strongly supporting the involvement of families and carers, via communication and dedicated programs and activities, was presented as a way to build such school-family partnerships. Some mainstream school leaders reported that an open-door policy was in place with families and carers, and that this practice was helpful in the development of a collaborative approach to meeting students’ needs.

Some mainstream schools appear to have been successful at developing comprehensive networks involving all the relevant parties. In these schools, within-school collaboration, partnerships between school staff and families, and strong relationships between schools and external support services operate in concert to provide a wrap-around approach to support that benefits students. In some cases, mainstream school leaders see it as a key aspect of their work to ensure the school is “working collaboratively with families and carers, teachers and allied services to ensure the student is best supported in their learning”.
The SSSM was also praised by some mainstream school leaders as an effective way to organise collaborative practices and partnerships across institutions and within schools. For those who find the SSSM useful, working with external support agencies and services is one of the aspects of partnerships that allows student needs to be met. Strong connections with the Departmental regional team is another dimension of these well-developed networks.

Specialists and allied health professionals from Departmental support teams and other government and non-government providers are an important link in the collaborative networks established by some mainstream schools. In these cases, schools work closely with these specialists to see student needs being met. Importantly, some mainstream school leaders hold that school visits from specialists are generally helpful and effective at supporting students with additional needs, explaining that support teams often provide good services and resources.

Finally, satellite classes occupy an important place in system-level partnerships, as they are situated at the interface between mainstream and special schools. School leaders from mainstream schools with a satellite class saw these ‘intermediary’ types of settings as useful for students with specific behavioural and cognitive profiles and needs. Importantly, they were presented as an effective way to promote student inclusion in the NT.

Special school leaders

Results from the school leader survey suggest that the development of strong channels of communication between school staff and families is one of the key strengths of special schools. These school leaders see the development of positive and sustained communicative practices between the school and families as a core part of their role and responsibilities.

Promoting positive within-school communication was also described by a number of special school leaders as a strength. Models of ‘inclusive leadership’ and ‘collaborative practice’, using resources such as ‘Leading Learning 4 All’, were described in a positive light by some leaders, in this respect.
Special school leaders also emphasised the importance of open communication with families and carers about their child’s daily activities and learning as a valuable strategy to foster their engagement in the child’s schooling.

A small number of special school leaders saw their communication role extending beyond their school community to either the local community in general or other local schools specifically, especially those with satellite classes. Here, too, strong local community support or engagement, as well as positive partnerships across special and mainstream schools, appear to rely heavily on effective communication.

Based on their survey responses, special school leaders appear to put partnerships between schools and families at the centre of their conception of collaboration and collaborative practices. Moreover, building partnerships with families appears to be a key strength of special schools, as affirmed in positive comments from families and carers with a child enrolled in a special school. School leaders view it as part of their role to develop such family partnerships in order to give them a voice in the learning and growth process for their children.

The same could be said of their successes in developing local partnerships with a range of actors, especially since the majority spoke of developing partnerships with other local schools. In some cases these networks are formalised (for example, the Casuarina Education Precinct), which appears to foster strong collaborative practices between schools in supporting students.

Mainstream school teachers and other staff

Across all types of schools, teaching and support staff reported on four dimensions of communication that they identified as important factors shaping quality of support for students with additional needs:

1. communication with students
2. within-school communication
3. communication with families and carers
4. communication with other schools, institutions and agencies.

At the student level, mainstream school staff highlighted the importance of flexibility and adjusting their communication to meet the communication needs and preferences of
students. Some staff identified communication friendly classrooms that benefit all students, but especially those with additional needs as both a current strength and an important element of a needs-based approach to teaching and learning. Responses indicated that good communication between support assistants and special education teachers is understood to be a key part of best practice for student support.

These school staff most commonly reported that the most successful communicative practices were related to school-family communication. Key practices in place in mainstream schools include regular (e.g. daily) interactions with families or carers (including email and phone conversations), the use of communication books, the establishment of open door and open classroom policies, the provision of regular feedback, communication with families around positive achievement (as opposed to only issues and challenges), and open communication about issues and challenges.

The value of the communication book was emphasised repeatedly by school staff from mainstream schools. For instance, one learning support assistant explained: “I’m one-to-one with a student in a wheelchair and use a communication book to inform family about his day and coming events.” Its regular and consistent use were described as effective ways of fostering engagement with the families of students with additional needs.

Openness and honesty in disclosure of important information and balance regarding student’s successes and difficulties were among the most commonly discussed aspects of positive communication with families and carers. Furthermore, viewing communication with families and carers as a mutual, two-way relationship was also seen as effective in underpinning high-quality, consistent support for students with additional needs.

Reciprocity in communication with families and carers was also described as an element of respectful communication. One of the key ways by which enhanced communication with families and carers improved student support was through its impact on sharing strategies and building consistency for the child across contexts, mainly home and school.

School staff saw multiple ways in which high-quality communication can occur with families and carers. Both oral and written communication methods were described as important to build relationships with families, with written mediums being particularly useful for sharing information on progress and school processes. Beyond traditional forms of communication, however, a number of school staff praised the use of technology to mediate communication with families, as in the case of schools using
student portfolio tools like Seesaw. Finally, drawing on the local, community and cultural knowledge and skills of schools’ Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers for these purposes was seen as good practice by some. Communication strategies and practices were described by school staff as some of the most important means to foster family and carer engagement in all children’s schooling.

A minority of mainstream school staff reported good practices in inter-agency communication. In one case, the respondent saw communication between outside services to which families and carers are seeking or being referred and the school as a key strength of the school ecosystem of student support. From this point of view, constant communication between all stakeholders is key.

Positive aspects of communication in and around mainstream schools emphasised by staff in mainstream schools include the quality of partnerships and collaborative practices. Two main categories of partnerships emerge from the survey of school staff: within-school collaboration (between staff), on one hand, and; partnerships with families and carers on the other.

Mainstream school staff repeatedly described strong collaborative practices within their school as a precondition for high-quality support for students with additional needs. These staff noted the existence of collaborative working teams, putting student needs at the centre, and their approach to working in partnership with other school staff to develop consistent routines for students. Examples included teachers working collaboratively to adjust and differentiate curriculum. In all of these cases, as in the case of collaborative planning between assistant teachers and teachers, the benefits were increased consistency for students and ability to understand and meet specific needs.

In some NT mainstream schools, having Special Education Support Officers (SESOs) or Special Education Support Assistants (SESAs) available to support teachers in the school are among the key strengths of the current collaborative system in place to support students with additional needs. In others, collaborative teams formed around classroom and special education teachers are presented as an important formalised structure of collaboration. In both cases, it appears that, in developing such collaborative practices, a whole-school approach to supporting students is a strong model.

Positive relationships with families and carers form another key dimension of successfully supporting students with additional needs, according to mainstream school staff. As
previously mentioned, building strong partnerships with families requires high-quality communication practices (such as having regular interactions with families or having an open door and open classroom policy, as well as regular positive feedback). These are also built through school-wide social events, drawing on assistance from family liaison officers, and regular EAP review meetings.

Building trust with families and carers who may not be comfortable with engaging with the school as an institution is an important preliminary step, especially when a cultural distance may exist between the demands of the school and the habits and norms in the family and community. Some mainstream schools provide volunteering opportunities for families and carers in the school; others commit to visiting families directly and provide release time for teachers to do so. Based on mainstream school staff comments, these are effective ways of connecting with less engaged families.

**Staff in special schools**

Special school staff views on high-quality communication practices were similar to those held by mainstream school staff. Firstly, as in mainstream schools, communication books were repeatedly described as a valuable instrument to foster family and carer engagement in schooling matters. Although the extent to which families are engaged in their children’s schooling may vary between mainstream and special schools, it is worth noting that communication books appear to be a strong communication tool across school settings.

Secondly, special school staff also appeared to be skilled at using latest technology instruments and tools to build communication with families. A number of special school staff reported using technology to streamline and integrate communication with families and carers. Special school staff mentioning software or applications such as Yammer or Storypark were positive about their effect on communication with families and carers. While special school staff provided only limited comments around strengths in developing collaborative practices and building relationships, face-to-face consultations highlighted their strengths in connecting with their students’ families and carers, as well as in building partnerships with local community organisations. Staff relationships in NT special schools seem to facilitate collaborative practices. For example, a staff member responding to the survey was not unusual in reporting strong collaborative relationships
with their fellow staff and support from senior leaders, echoing many of the comments made by other such staff during face-to-face consultations.

Special school staff ability to distance themselves from ‘ownership’ of classrooms and students (i.e. from the model of ‘my students’ and ‘my classroom’) seems to be one of their strengths in constructing school-wide collaborative systems. In turn, these school cultures permit the development of mutual support systems from which staff benefit, both in terms of knowledge sharing and emotional support.

**Findings – consultations**

Finding in this section across Round 1 and Round 2 of the consultation were highly consistent.

Most participants had a shared view of inclusive education as beneficial for all students and for society as a whole. This was typically due to views that it prepares all students for life in an inclusive society and is a valuable way to foster the further development of such a society.

Families and carers of high-need students in special schools were particularly well represented in the consultations, potentially explaining why these findings reflect more positive experiences with special schools and to a lesser degree with special settings.

The main reasons families and carers provided were that these environments allowed them to feel that their children would be safe, the expertise of staff, one-on-one attention for children, good learning programs and approaches, and a consultative approach with families and carers.

According to both families and carers and to some school staff in all settings, a key factor enabling collaboration between schools and families and carers is strong and regular communication. Both groups agreed that frequent, flexible (in form and content) and balanced (as regards achievements and challenges) communication is a model of strong collaboration. It is also important to take a consultative approach which draws on many perspectives in supporting students with additional needs.

According to some teaching staff, problems in the relationships between families and carers and schools are exacerbated by their concerns not being communicated between staff (e.g. from the Assistant Principal to the Principal).

Gaps in teacher training around working with other adults also reportedly left some staff poorly equipped to work collaboratively with other staff in their classroom to support
students. Effective communication between groups of staff in a school was a particular issue. Where communication between staff within a school was strong, that was characterised as a key support for lead practice. The three main aspects of good within-school communication were: (1) communication between teachers (especially for secondary schools), (2) communication between teachers and support staff, and (3) communication between teaching and leadership staff. Among these, the most frequently mentioned example of successful communication involved teaching and support staff. Mainstream school staff emphasised the importance of discussing expectations and goal setting. For example, one mainstream school staff member highlighted the value of a whole school approach, using the same language across all year levels to promote consistency.

Stakeholder views on consultations between the Departmental staff and schools referred primarily to the work of Regional Office Advisors and other Department support staff in schools and indicated that these were generally highly valued. The same was true of consultative efforts on the part of health and allied health practitioners and NGOs. Findings across Round 1 and Round 2 of the consultation were highly consistent. School leadership was seen to be critical to creating and sustaining effective collaborations to support students in school level teams. This was due to the expertise, resourcing, mentoring and general levels of support for classroom teachers that result from such collaborations and, ultimately, for students with additional needs. Leadership capacity is thus one key strength to build on in moving all schools toward positive and productive collaborations.

Some challenges arose for schools in seeking to partner with some groups of families and carers. NGO staff, Departmental staff and teachers acknowledged time spent fostering family and carer engagement and building relationships, before beginning on the journey of securing funding for students, identifying their needs and making educational adjustments. They also stressed the challenges of responding to diversity in family and carers’ views on preferred settings for students with additional needs, and sometimes unrealistic expectations of what support can be offered in both mainstream and in special schools. These include ‘overprotective’ families and carers seeking full-time support for their child at the expense of chances to develop independent living skills, and families
and carers determined that their child remain in mainstream settings, but without the requisite supports to succeed.

Conclusions

This analysis highlights many strengths to build on in terms of shared understandings of inclusion, and in how these impact school and individual teacher approaches to communication and consultation with families and carers, schools, community and external agencies, in support of the learning and growth of students with additional needs. The family and carer survey was particularly rich in insights on the importance of student-teacher and school-family and carer communication, as well as on what good communication looks like from the point of view of families and carers. A positive finding is that cases of excellent communication were reported in mainstream and in special schools.

The extent to which families and carers commented on communication and the nature of their comments, demonstrated that for them communication was a key pillar in supporting students with additional needs. It is important to note that this view was shared by families and carers in both mainstream and special schools.

While school-family and teacher-student communications are a focus, broader perspectives on system-level communication and the need for strong communication between the Department, schools and teachers are also valuable. High-quality communication is a necessary condition for successful partnerships and collaboration at many levels. Attention to communicating and consulting is therefore important to reflect in recalibrating accountability systems to ensure consistency of high-quality communication.

The analysis suggests that the key gaps to address in term of collaboration and partnerships are: supporting partnerships between schools and other institutions to assist with implementation of the SSSM; and supporting partnerships between mainstream and special schools. The role of ‘in-between’ spaces in developing partnerships between special and mainstream schools emerged as a mechanism for doing so. Improvements to the collaborative practices in mainstream schools could usefully focus on: collaborations between staff in the classrooms, within schools, and how these intersect with collaborations and partnerships between schools and related institutions and services.
Commentary on collaborative effort in the consultations frequently touched very similar themes to those that emerged in the surveys. This reinforces the widespread interest in improving support for collaborations within and between schools, between schools and the Department, as well as other external organisations, and across parts of the NT government.

The positive cultures in some schools, built by strong leaders and supported by knowledgeable committed teachers, need to be extended across the sector to meet desires for a partnership approach with schools on the part of many families and carers. The limits on the ability of schools to foster engagement if families and carers are reluctant should also be acknowledged. However, a greater focus on building early and ongoing engagement with families and support for families’ ongoing involvement in the education of their children, in partnership with schools may have an impact.

The role of schools as a liaison point for families in accessing external support services, including specialist services to support student learning, shoring up employment options and navigating the legal and judicial system might also be considered. At the least, improving partnerships between health and education institutions and services is especially important in remote areas.

There is widespread support for building strong and strategic partnerships and collaborations with students, families and carers, and the broader community.
Case studies: Strengthening shared decision making

Case Study 1 - A remote special school promoted communication and consultation across the school community and directly with families and carers through devoting time to building relationships through service delivery and shared approaches to that service delivery. As an example of the first point, this school organises daily transport to bring students to school, because the public transport option is unfeasible. Pick up is used as a time for building personal relationships with students and families. The school also engaged with local Departmental staff and staff from a range of external organisations on local initiatives and ways of working across settings to support students. Internally, the school engages in debriefing regularly with its staff, and partly as a result of this support for staff, the school had maintained a stable staffing profile for some years.

Case study 2 - A remote special school promoted inclusion by developing multiple partnerships with mainstream schools. These partnerships allowed for a range of programs and transition supports to be put in place to facilitate inclusion of their students in mainstream schooling both on a short term and a permanent basis. There was an overarching emphasis on early interventions to build children’s skills so that they might more readily thrive in mainstream settings.

Case study 3 - A community that includes a special school and a range of mainstream primary schools has a local model of partnering and collaboration that results in enhanced inclusion for students with additional needs. Relevant children are offered intensive early supports and intervention with the express aim of transitioning to a mainstream school before upper primary. Strong collaboration and ongoing communication between the special school and local mainstream schools has allowed for a strong program of staged and supported transitions into the mainstream schools to be developed. Use of satellite classes to build partnerships and enhance collaboration locally, through offering staff in mainstream schools opportunities to upskill, has resulted in a growing number of successful collaborations over time. This includes innovative programs in which students from mainstream schools mentor students with additional needs during joint project-based learning activities.
Areas for growth in current policy and practice

The data collated in this section is strongly focused on themes including enhancing communication, collaboration and consultation between families and carers, schools, community groups and other government and non-government agencies. For schools, gaps in these areas are seen to impact ability to implement the SSSM. Within schools, the most critical gaps are communication and collaboration between staff whose roles involve working together to support students. The NDIS was raised as a challenge for schools in this context.

For families and carers, the key issues were feeling understood and supported and being included in decision-making about their child. Transparency and open communication were raised in this context. So was a dearth of the communication of positive information about children’s achievements in mainstream schools. Additionally, families and carers saw communication across levels of schooling as having ‘gaps’ that impact transitions for students with additional needs.

Some of the key options for improvement suggested by participants included: school level supports to build a collaborative approach; and a central system to which all staff have access to support information sharing about students and reduce duplication of effort. For remote schools, greater use of technology was one preferred solution to current gaps. More balanced, open and frequent communication was sought by families and carers, as was greater coordination across all of the agencies that they deal with.

The feedback presented in this section identifies views about a number of limitations in collaborations and partnership across schools and partnerships between schools and families. A key issue was how related difficulties problematise the implementation of the SSSM in schools. Others difficulties were noted with regard to schools partnering with relevant services and institutions. Concerns about relationships again surfaced in relation to the NDIS.

Some of the solutions raised by participants included: formal protocols and supports for practice sharing between schools; the promise of ‘in-between’ spaces such as satellite classes in this respect; and support for improved collaboration between staff within mainstream schools, especially with an eye to better inter-institutional and inter-agency collaboration. At a higher level, closer relationships between the Department of
Education and the Department of Health were desired by many as a way to support ‘wrap around’ solutions for students and their families.

Families and carers focused on collaborative approaches with teachers and schools and ways to enhance these relationships. This was especially so in the later years, where it was felt that engagement and supports for students with additional needs fell away to some extent in some mainstream schools. Families and carers also express the hope that schools will do more to assist them to navigate support services and achieve outcomes outside and beyond the school. Some sought more collaboration with the Department.

Findings – surveys

Families and carers in mainstream schools

Families and carers participating in the survey described some of the gaps, challenges and struggles they have experienced in terms of communication. Good communicative practices on the part of mainstream schools were present in some but not all of these schools. A common challenge for families and carers with students with additional needs enrolled in mainstream schools was feeling unsupported and not understood. Families and carers also wanted improved communication between school staff—especially teachers—and themselves. In addition, they reported the need for mainstream school teachers to allow students a more active role in shaping their own learning.

Respect, forthrightness, honesty, open-mindedness, initiative, proactivity, transparency, regularity, accuracy and comprehensiveness were some of the key words emerging in feedback on how communication between schools and families could be improved in NT mainstream schools. Some families felt that they had little to no communication initiated by schools and that families and carers were constantly ‘chasing them up’. Families and carers sought more open and ongoing communication about children’s daily and overall progress at school, especially to let them know as issues were developing rather than only at crisis point. Some families and carers also indicated that their willingness to help out at schools in a variety of capacities had not been fully taken up.

Regular communication was seen as particularly essential for students with additional needs who are not able to explain their day at school to families and carers, in terms of learning, emotional experiences and social experiences. Families and carers see value in
receiving such information on a regular basis, to help make the transition from school to home smoother and vice versa.

Communication of important information about students, their learning needs and required adjustments between school staff was also seen as sometimes problematic. Those in a position to compare often noted that effective and systematic communication of information between teachers in special schools was a good model for mainstream schools to emulate. This kind of communication is required to support successful use of EAPs and also impacts the overall quality of support available to students.

Some families and carers called for more formal monitoring by the Department of the processes by which special education teachers record information about additional needs and communicate with other teachers on planning collaborative measures to address them. A few families suggested further training for specialist staff in communicating with families. Ideally, the communication lines between the school as a whole, the classroom teacher, principal and home need to be ‘open and continuous’. Specific communication tools, such as a communication book or an electronic equivalent, were seen to enhance school-parent communication in some cases.

Families and carers were particularly dissatisfied when communication occurred mostly when issues, struggles or problems arise for students with additional needs. The communication of learning difficulties was valued by respondents, but not to the exclusion of communication on other aspects of the student’s experience in school. Further, some families and carers found the communication of positive milestones (i.e. EAP goals achieved) and special events (e.g. excursions, shopping days or kitchen days) insufficient, emphasising the need for frequent and regular communication to monitor learning and identify needs as they develop.

Negative communications within a school community, such as between families and carers of students with and without additional needs was described as a concern. Some families and carers of students in mainstream schools noted that families and carers of mainstream students can be ‘abusive or discriminating against families and carers of students with additional needs’, mirroring forms of bullying that students with additional needs can experience in schools.

The key features of desirable communication according to families and carers of students in mainstream schools are that: it is clear, consistent and regular; it provides them with
detail around what has been implemented to address issues; and it gives them a good understanding of what a classroom teacher’s current goals or objectives are for a child, to facilitate home and school coordination.

Some families and carers also reflected on communication challenges beyond school-parent relationships. In particular, some called for better communication between school, specialists and Departmental and other government support services. In such cases, a clearer understanding of ‘who works with who on what’ is desired. In remote areas, this is especially important as some services may not be available but have the capacity for remote linking ‘if you know to ask for it’. Relatedly, families and carers expected better communication between school staff and external agencies so that school based planning processes could effectively utilise all services available. A number of family and carers required the assistance of Departmental and school staff to assist them in locating, identifying, and navigating out-of-school support services available to students with additional needs. Some families and carers sought to know in advance when Departmental staff would be visiting a school to support their child. The role of the Department was also mentioned in seeking information for families around the NDIS, about which little was known by families.

A lack of strong partnerships and widespread collaborative practices in some mainstream schools was deplored by families and carers responding to the survey. Generally speaking, families tend to want greater collaboration between themselves and teachers and to be more involved in decision making processes regarding learning objectives and reasonable adjustments. Families particularly expected more negotiated partnerships between families and schools in middle and high schools, where students with additional needs can face heightened challenges to fit in the school environment compared to primary school.

A significant finding was an expectation that schools do more than facilitate learning and growth within schools and assist families and carers to navigate support services. These families and carers expressed disappointment at schools’ currently limited engagement with these forms of collaboration and support.

A majority of these respondents stressed a need for improved collaboration between schools and diagnostic services to deliver timely assessment of students’ needs. The extensive waiting time for obtaining a diagnosis often limits the support students receive.
Relatedly, families and carers report a lack of clarity on how to navigate support systems. Some felt that schools redirect them to external services without adequate liaison between them and other services. Even when services are accessible, disagreements about needs and relevant support between school and specialist staff were reported by some families, to the detriment of learners.

Improving partnerships between health and education institutions and services was described as especially important in remote areas where the number of services available locally makes networks more realistic for schools to establish. This was described as crucial in the context of limited service availability and support alternatives. In response to these identified shortfalls, a number of respondents called for school-based allied health staff as a solution to enhance the synergy between services provided by specialists and school support.

Other key partnerships expected from mainstream schools include improved pathways between school and employment options for students with additional needs and the need for stronger collaboration between education and the legal and judicial systems. In the former case, families and carers of students with additional needs in mainstream schools expect more linking between secondary education and local industry or training organisations, including the development of school-based vocational education pathways. In the latter, families and carers argue that schools need to do more to protect students in vulnerable situations, such as those experiencing domestic violence, by drawing on legal instruments to ensure student safety in and out of school.

Finally, a small number of respondents called for the Department to establish more stable and ongoing collaborations with families and carers and teachers to consult them on all new initiatives that are expected to affect educational experiences. This refers to policies and initiatives related to students with additional needs, as well as to broader educational policy.

**Families and carers in special schools**

The vast majority of families and carers of students with additional needs appeared satisfied with their communication with special schools. Some perceived some communication challenges around teacher-student communication and the need for teachers to adapt their approaches to communication to the specific profile of students.
Cases of unsatisfying communication between special schools and families and carers were rare. One parent mentioned having asked for the school to maintain and increase parental involvement and communication but this was highly unusual. Similarly, there was some mention of more focus on the development of student communication skills, especially communication with people who do not have a disability. However many special schools do have programs in place to address this need. Some families and carers’ perspectives on their children’s schooling experience over the years motivated them to comment on between-school collaboration and systemic improvements to enhance inter-school communication and consultation. Transition points (between primary and secondary school, for example) were highlighted as both especially difficult to navigate for students with additional needs and not always a time when primary and secondary special schools communicate and work together effectively to support students in transition.

As was the case for mainstream schools, some families and carers of students in special schools expected more from special schools than their focus on intellectual, social and emotional development in school. This included a stronger focus on real-life work experiences, for which school-industry partnerships could provide an avenue. The importance of pathways out of secondary school into employment was a key gap identified in terms of scope for greater collaboration.

Other families and carers considered allied health support in schools to be insufficient, again highlighting collaboration between education and health services as a gap. Therapists were most often mentioned, but other health staff, such as nurses, were also mentioned in this context. Calls for improved collaboration between education and health staff was not limited to in-school health service delivery; some families and carers wished that greater communication between therapists providing services to their children and school staff was in evidence.

Some respondents suggested that special schools might develop stronger partnerships with mainstream schools so as to be ‘more inclusive’ and enhance relationships across settings (without specifying the ways in which this could be achieved). Other between-school partnerships were mentioned, such as having access to voice and vocal lessons from NT Music School.
Finally, some families and carers of students in special schools called for formal partnerships, such as a school committee with a focus on students with additional needs, a committee that might include families and carers, teachers, Departmental staff and health and allied health practitioners.

**Mainstream school leaders**

A number of gaps emerged related to communication within mainstream schools. Most of the challenges for mainstream school leaders related to their relationships with external agencies, support services and Departmental services. Some school leaders were concerned that bodies including the Office of Disability or local organisations such as health clinics didn’t communicate with the school sufficiently or effectively about students with additional needs and their needs, while others called for better sharing of information between services and support providers and schools. One school leader wished that schools and special education support staff could spend more time just discussing lead practice in this respect.

In many cases, face-to-face communication was preferred. Ongoing, engaged and meaningful communication was seen as a pre-condition to effective support for students with additional needs across the system, including in the development of strong collaborative practices. Accordingly, strengthening communicative practices was described as one of the ways in which the SSSM could be improved.

A minority of mainstream school leaders also reflected on the particular importance of communication strategies and practices for rural and remote schools. Some thought that use of Skype and other connective technologies could be employed to encourage the growth of connections between remote schools and other agencies and build partnerships at a system level.

Mainstream school leaders saw a number of limitations in the collaborations and partnerships involving mainstream schools. In a small number of cases, school leaders identified gaps in partnerships between schools and families. For example, a school leader was expecting their wellbeing, engagement and behaviour needs team to build better partnerships with the relevant families and carers. By far the most common issue though was partnerships between schools and other institutions. This led some leaders to
view the SSSM as inadequate for their school. Others identified more general difficulties preventing them from building strong networks with relevant services and institutions. As an organising tool for collaboration between schools and other agencies, the SSSM was viewed as effective for some mainstream schools. Where it was not, the limitations included that it lacked relevance and was excessively bureaucratic. In addition, its inability to access services to partner with undermines its effectiveness. Other leaders made similar comments without directly critiquing the SSSM.

A small number of school leaders noted gaps between the SSSM as it exists on paper and provision of external support to NT government schools. For example, one school leader spoke for many in their remark that access to support services ‘doesn’t always come through’. When noting that ‘NT-wide teams don’t deliver tiered support’, however, this school leader did not clarify whether these limitations stem from the model or its operationalisation.

Some mainstream school leaders described more effective collaboration between schools, Departmental staff and external services for students with additional needs as a key way of improving the SSSM. This includes improving relationships between the Office of Disability and schools. For example, one leader noted that staff don’t share effective student programs across schools. A number of leaders noted the ‘excessive’ paperwork required to obtain support and that a ‘diagnostic model’ of funding access makes collaboration between services difficult. For example, the focus can then be on assessments for those purposes rather than on supports for students in schools.

Relatedly, some leaders emphasised gaps in the availability of support as a key factor limiting partnerships between schools and external agencies. For these leaders, the frequency of contact with external supports are too limited to allow strong partnerships to develop. Many leaders also called for support staff of various kinds to be ‘on the ground’ for longer periods of time. Further, the range of services which mainstream schools call on are often uncoordinated in their approach to service delivery (should these services even be available). One school leader gave the example of specialists who remove a child from class during key learning tasks. This issue was raised by many special school leaders in face-to-face consultations.

Gaps identified in collaborative efforts between mainstream and special schools include lack of access to expertise in special schools. Many felt that there should be formal
supports for deeper formal partnerships between special and mainstream schools. Developing these partnerships could involve new strategic responsibilities for special school staff, but also new activities for mainstream school teachers. For example, suggestions include teachers in special schools being given time to visit mainstream schools to further support students and their teachers at their 'home-school', especially with respect to managing behavioural concerns.

Improving partnerships between mainstream and special schools was not necessarily seen by mainstream school leaders as involving schools only. Indeed, one leader highlighted that Departmental advisors who work with mainstream schools should also be working in partnerships with special schools, to close the loop. Broader networks of support for students with additional needs could also address the issue raised by a mainstream school leader that special centres can be often ‘left out of the conversation’ between special schools and those agencies and bodies that they collaborate with regularly.

School leaders in special schools

A number of special school leaders were dissatisfied with the communication involving the school and other agencies. Concerns were raised about the adequacy of communicative practices of Departmental regional services, while recognising that the volume of demands on these support teams made it very difficult for them to engage in effective communication.

Nevertheless, some special education leaders saw better communication of external support services with schools as being beneficial. Improvement in communication was once again described as a means by which the functioning of the SSSM could be improved.

To special school leaders, the biggest gap in communication between external agencies and the school was absence of basic notification in some cases. Turning up unannounced and on an irregular basis was described as particularly problematic. Simple and straightforward communication protocols would be sufficient to resolve these challenges, along with more regular communication from these services. Other suggestions for improvement included teachers having regional checklists of services available to support students with additional needs.
Finally, a number of special school leaders expressed concerns about the implications of the roll out of the NDIS in the NT. The lack of communication and the limited availability of information were problematic for special schools in limiting forward planning. In places where the NDIS is already rolling out, servicing was described as poor, as was communication to schools.

Feedback from special school leaders resonates with comments made by mainstream school leaders. A number highlighted challenges in their relationships with external support providers. One of these argued that these providers could do better at working with students and staff on a regular basis and building relationships with staff, students and the community. Concerns about the relationships with external providers were heightened in light of the roll out of the NDIS. The gap in partnership building for successful delivery of the NDIS was clearly outlined by several leaders.

On the other hand, the main limitation in collaborations in support of students with additional needs that was identified by special school leaders was insufficient partnership building between special and mainstream schools. Some explained that developing practice sharing would be important in this respect.

The role of ‘in-between’ and collaborative spaces in developing partnerships between special and mainstream schools was emphasised by both special and mainstream school leaders. Physical co-location was seen as an approach that fosters partnerships, such as the development of new types or new instances of special settings in mainstream schools. In the same vein, special school leaders suggested more satellite classes will assist in expanding the range of ‘middle-ground’ options available to students with additional needs.

Special school leaders reflected on the ways in which such ‘intermediate’ spaces could foster improved collaboration between schools. For instance, expanding the number of mainstream schools with satellite classes for students who do not meet the criteria for enrolment in special school settings could lead to more ‘cross pollination’ of teaching and learning strategies and programs between schools and increase opportunities for collaboration. At the same time, possibilities for improvement in the operations and functioning of existing satellite classes were identified, given a view that there are very good examples of collaborations around satellite classes, but that in some instances relationships could be improved.
Finally, one special school leader reflected on system-level and cross-system opportunities for collaboration, calling for the development of interstate partnerships and noting the value of drawing on the networks of professional associations to do so.

Teachers and staff in mainstream schools

The challenges identified by mainstream school staff around communication mirror the positive feedback provided on the strengths of communication in NT special schools. Respondents mentioned communication difficulties with students, other school staff and other institutions and agencies. On the other hand, mainstream school staff responding to the survey did not commonly report challenges in communicating with families and carers.

In communicating with students, mainstream school staff identified a number of gaps. In particular, some wished to improve their ability to use alternative forms of communication with students based on their specific communication needs, suggesting one area for further training.

Issues of within-school communication were more commonly mentioned than challenges in communicating with students. Inefficient communication can occur between teachers within a school, leading to inconsistencies in practices and expectations. Poor communication between classroom teachers, support staff and special education teachers appears to be the most critical gap area in the within-school communication of mainstream schools. This includes classroom teachers not finding it easy to access documentation on students held by special education teachers, poor communication between the special education staff and classroom teachers, and the like. Such limitations in communication mean that essential information is not shared, resulting in students’ needs not being adequately met.

In proposing solutions, some teachers in mainstream schools wanted clearer communication from special education teachers, including classroom strategies to support students within and outside of formal learning plans, and involvement in planning processes. Communication between staff in special settings and mainstream classroom staff was also raised.

For mainstream school staff, desired improvements in communication did not stop at the school door. In fact, inter-institution, inter-agency and inter-school communication were
seen as paramount to improve overall communication at the system level. Middle school staff called for better communication between primary and middle schools to support student transitions across levels using information provided by primary schools. According to some respondents, information provided from primary schools needs to be received earlier on in the year with more specific details, goals and suggested strategies to this end.

When health professionals or other educational institutions already have relevant information about students with additional needs, this often comes late or not at all to a new school, level of schooling or setting, thus making the provision of necessary educational adjustments more difficult than it needs to be. Mainstream school staff repeatedly described gaps in communication with health agencies and practitioners (e.g. health clinics and paediatricians) as an area for improvement. Additionally, information sharing across Departmental services was seen to be a gap that impacted on coordination of efforts to support students, as well as information sharing with schools. This included communication from the Department on where and how to access external supports for students.

Staff identified strategies to improve communication across institutions and services, including developing central information systems for student records so that information is transferred with students, enabling classroom teachers to have timely access to information about new students. School staff also suggested that development of a communication system which allows for open communication between the different services associated with the care of a child would help, so that teachers and not just leaders can access all relevant information.

School staff reported some emerging communication challenges for remote schools associated with the rollout of the NDIS. Communication challenges associated with the rollout of the NDIS may require special attention in rural or remote areas.

Mainstream school staff responses suggest that improving collaborative practices involving mainstream schools should focus on four fronts: (1) within classrooms, (2) within schools, (3) between schools and (4) between schools and related institutions and services.

Mainstream school staff rarely mentioned improving their collaborative practices in the classroom directly. However, some comments reflect such needs, such as those
mentioning staff wishes about improving their skills in connecting with their students, especially those with challenging behaviours. Some staff also voiced an interest in involving students in determining learning and growth goals and outcomes (where appropriate). For these teachers, upskilling in teacher-student interactions and collaboration may be valuable.

Mainstream school staff provided feedback on challenges faced in establishing collaborative practices in a school. Relationships between specialised staff and classroom teachers were raised by respondents who felt unsupported by their special education teacher and student support colleagues. More generally, improving collaboration by supporting teachers (especially by leaders and through mentoring opportunities) was seen as a key element of improving collaborations that adequately support students with additional needs. It would assist in improving partnership-building with families if there was scope for more frequent reviews of EAPs.

As with other groups of survey respondents, mainstream school staff identified inter-institutional and inter-agency collaboration as the main aspect of partnerships on which to focus partnership building efforts. For them, this would involve school-school relationships (such as through improved sharing of information between schools when students make key transitions), but also relationships across education and health services. For instance, one respondent called for greater access to partnerships with health services such as the Office of Disability to help with interventions, goal setting and reporting against goals for students with additional needs. Cross-agency collaboration between education and health was the primary focus of comments on gaps in this regard, noting that a collaboration between health and education services to address basic needs would impact upon learning.

To this end, availability of school-based allied health and therapy staff and an increase in school-based support staff was seen to be important to enable more comprehensive partnerships and collaboration across services. At a system level, the need for closer relationships between the Department of Education and the Department of Health was raised often. Such high-level partnerships would ideally even extend beyond education and health, developing ‘an alignment of health, education, and social services agencies working collaboratively in a wrap-around service delivery model’.
Finally, a number of respondents pointed to necessary improvements in the networks that rural and remote schools are able to build to support students. The key issue is access. For example, increasing the availability of school-based support staff (assistant teachers, SESOs/SESAs and special education teachers) in remote locations was desired to make it easier to build better support teams in schools. Improving access to health specialists and health professionals was a key need. There was interest in developing collaborative networks of teachers and education professionals across remote and urban settings.

**Teachers and staff in special schools**

In feedback from special school staff, two categories of comments were particularly relevant: improvements to communication with students, on one hand, and to inter-agency communication on the other.

While some special school staff see their ability to communicate with their students as one of their strengths, others see this as an area for improvement. For the latter group, more resources within a classroom, including electronic communication devices, were felt to be needed to improve learning support for students. Gaps in communication between teachers and students also implies a need for training, with some teachers especially keen to learn new ways to teach communication skills and assess what suits different groups of learners. More generally, some special school teachers expressed interest in professional development around alternative communication styles and systems.

Special school staff also noted problems stemming from poor inter-agency communication on meeting student needs. Inadequate communication was seen to affect both needs identification and support provision. As did mainstream school staff, special school staff reported that communication of information on new students from another school can lag and for this group, communication with health services also loomed large. These results underline the need noted earlier for better sharing of information between schools and services to improve planning and the provision of educational adjustments for students with additional needs.

Only a small number of this cohort identified gaps in collaborative practices or suggested ways of improving existing limitations in partnerships. A small number wished to increase
partnerships and working relationships with other special schools, including developing formal and supported networks *between* special schools to share best practice and expertise.

In line with other commentary from both mainstream and special school staff, some respondents saw the need for developing and strengthening relationships between mainstream and special schools. This was particularly true with regard to levels of schooling, with some special school staff seeking a more prominent role in building a more collaborative approach between primary and secondary settings in transitioning students with additional needs, including the continuation of programs and strategies which are working well for students. High levels of agreement regarding the need for better collaboration between special and mainstream settings to improve system-level support to students with additional needs in NT government schools suggests that this is an essential avenue to pursue in developing and implementing a Framework for students with additional needs.

**Findings – consultations**

Findings across Round 1 and Round 2 of the consultation were highly consistent. They suggest a number of areas in which gaps in communication and consultation on the part of the Department and schools might be addressed.

One of these was the inconsistency in understandings of what inclusion means across mainstream schools and special schools. For example, special school staff and families agreed that students enrolled in special schools, including some in functional placements, rarely return to mainstream schooling. The transfer from mainstream schools to special schools is one-way in most cases, with a few notable exceptions. This is not consistent with policy expectations.

In a similar vein, many families and carers raised concerns about the wellbeing, safety and meaningful inclusion in learning activities of students with additional needs in mainstream settings, as well as school staff having low expectations for learning of students with additional needs. With regard to special schools, there may be a need to consider some family and carer concerns that access to academic learning, age-appropriate peer modelling, and skills for independently navigating life post-school are sometimes lacking. Families and carers saw challenges in ensuring all children’s safety and learning in the face of extreme behaviours by some students with additional needs.
across all types of school settings. This suggests that policy expectations around behaviour management may not be being met in all schools.

Some commentary across all groups also touched on the impact of the NDIS roll out in the NT. Generally, schools raised concerns about the impact on learning of unmanaged access by external health practitioners to schools. Departmental staff noted that a policy response is being developed. Some schools were considering becoming providers, as were various NGOs and government departments. Families were mixed in their views about whether the NDIS would mean ‘more hoops’ to jump through or be a useful addition to supports they were already accessing. There was scepticism about a market-based approach, given the dearth of local providers presently. A few respondents across various groups were positive about the potential to make shared use of students’ individual resources within schools.

Commentary on gaps in regard to collaborative effort in the consultations frequently touched on very similar themes to those emerging in the surveys. They reinforce that there is widespread interest in improving support for collaborations within and between schools, between schools and the Department, as well as with other organisations, and across parts of the NT government.

Some collaborations between classroom teachers and special education teachers in large mainstream schools suffered from expectations that the special education teachers complete all EAPs, differentiate curricula and assessments for other teachers, and/or provide cover for staffing gaps regularly. This detracts from their ability to work strategically in mentoring and guiding other staff in their practice with respect to students with additional needs. (This is discussed in more depth in Appendix 7b on improving professional practice).

In other schools, special education teachers reportedly collaborate with other teachers at a more strategic level, offering professional learning and coaching to peers and developing whole of school programs. More generally, special education teachers’ strategic work in close collaboration with school leaders was seen as a critical influence on inclusion. In Round 1 feedback in particular, there was a lot of praise for collaborations in which teachers were ‘doing a lot with a little’ by working creatively together and with external organisations.
There was feedback from a wide range of stakeholders around a need for a greater focus on enhancing the capacity of the education system to offer more personalised, student-centred options, to cater to a wider spectrum of additional needs. There were many suggestions regarding how to bridge gaps in this respect. They included developing a wider range of special services and more flexible policies for transitioning students between mainstream and special settings. Other suggestions were to develop an early-needs identification policy based on comprehensive screening for students with additional needs in Early Childhood Education and Care, coupled with intensive effort to meet their learning needs at this level of schooling. This strategy may facilitate the reintegration of students with additional needs, when appropriate, into mainstream schooling.

A wide range of stakeholders agree that some delays in identification of needs stem from parental disinclination to recognise needs or to pursue diagnoses, despite a school’s best efforts. Many ethnic and cultural groups perceive disability as undesirable, or in the case of Aboriginal groups, may not recognise the concept. There is shame and fear around acknowledging certain conditions. Others reject labelling and use of deficit language. Families and carers may resist school and health worker efforts to support them in seeking diagnoses needed to access supports. Early identification can involve a long process of ‘acceptance’. Other families and carers describe quite late indications from professionals that a child has additional needs as a delay.

Many stakeholders noted that there were additional challenges for families and carers in negotiating intertwined health and education system services for students with additional needs, even for educated, motivated ‘insiders’ of one kind or another. In line with this, some NGOs and peak bodies suggest that wider access to formal advocacy would assist families and carers to obtain better value from these systems and reduce inequalities in outcomes. An independent mediator was described as a useful ‘circuit breaker’ when relationships between families and schools break down. Enhancing families and carers’ knowledge of their legislative entitlements regarding educational adjustments and what is ‘reasonable’ to expect from schools and teachers was also mooted.

Stakeholder views on collaboration between the Department and schools referred primarily to the work of Regional Office Advisors and other Departmental support staff in
schools. These were generally highly valued, but the consensus was that numbers of staff and visits have been both insufficient and declining, especially in remote areas. There were many calls for health services to be based in schools to enhance collaborative efforts across silos and bring services to students at the point of need. Touching on sector wide collaborations and beyond, the consultation and survey data referenced many instances in which a lack of information sharing between various stakeholders, government departments and external agencies had negatively impacted access to support for students with additional needs and inclusive education more broadly. These included the Department of Health, Department of Education and Territory Families.

Conclusions

The analysis in this section has suggested that communication and consultation with families and carers, schools, community and other agencies could be enhanced. There is scope for the Department to direct additional effort towards developing and implementing an inclusive education policy and supporting guidelines that provide clear, practical and culturally relevant information to all stakeholders. Additionally, further resources might be developed to support the learning and growth of all students in Northern Territory government schools.

The analysis in this section has revealed that key gaps to address in supporting students with additional needs in NT schools are system-level and school-level supports for strong and strategic partnerships and collaborations with students, families and carers, and the broader community. To achieve this end, and to enhance support for students with additional needs in other ways, early and ongoing engagement with families and carers is critical to ensure that they are enabled to be active partners in the education of their children. School-level collaborations to inform and strengthen decisions about teaching and learning are important. These help to provide personalised options to meet specific needs of students. Personalised options work best when they are devised by parents in conjunction with experts and specialist services. More opportunities for collaborations with government and non-government partners are needed to create supports and improve opportunities for students with additional needs.
Appendix 7b  Raw consultation data – Improving professional practice

Element Two: Improving professional practice

Across the data collected for this report, there was evidence of some strengths to build on in improving the workforce capability to better meet the learning and support needs of all students. These included: leaders and all staff recognising the need to upskill, to achieve this aim. There was consensus around key topics, which included: strengthening school-wide approaches; differentiation; student-centred and personalised approaches. Collaborative approaches to learning and in partnering with families and carers were valued.

Priorities for teachers in upskilling included: managing challenging behaviours; identification of additional needs, and where and how to access external support. There was recognition of pockets of expertise as well as exemplary efforts to offer inclusive education on the part of some school leaders and teachers. In particular, capability in special schools was characterised as a strength to draw on in lifting capability across the NT government school sector.

Most participants also acknowledged a range of critical supports available to support improvements in professional practice on the ground, such as levels of funding, appropriate physical spaces, devices, technologies and learning aids as well as a supportive leadership and effective peers. They highlighted the differences between mainstream schools and special schools in these respects.

Identified strengths in current policy and practice

Findings – surveys

Families and carers

Analysis of the parents and carers survey responses identified other strengths to build on with respect to workforce capacity. The inclusion efforts of individual teachers were valued, as were special programs in mainstream schools that made appropriate use of physical spaces. A minority of this group of respondents provided examples of student-centred approaches in mainstream schools. These included teachers who had offered their children personalised supports and/or employed strategies such as differentiated learning to ensure their inclusion in the class, and who were understanding and non-judgemental in their approach.
A further minority of families and carers highlighted strengths at a school level that support mainstream teachers to engage in lead practice, such as: access to support staff to facilitate adequate one-on-one assistance for students; and access to physical spaces such as ‘hubs’ and ‘engine rooms’ or ‘time out spaces’ for children with additional needs, specialised equipment, assistive technology and appropriate learning aids.

Families and carers value special schools as centres of expertise as well as inclusive schooling. The parents and carers survey results suggest this is a strength to build on in enhancing capabilities across NT schools. A majority of the responses from those with children in special schools were extremely positive about the knowledge, expertise and skills of teachers and school leaders. In addition, the learning outcomes that children were being supported by staff to achieve were clear and their progress towards them was regularly reviewed and communicated to families. The tailored programs and personalised learning offered by teachers was deeply valued. Family and carers themselves reported feeling supported, understood and more involved in their child’s educational development and wellbeing, in contrast to their experiences in mainstream schools. The survey respondents’ comments indicate that many of them understand that small classes and well-resourced schools facilitate individual support, encouragement and attention.

Families and carers had mixed views on special settings (satellite classes, autism units and Positive Learning Services). These combined efforts between special school and mainstream school were discussed positively by some respondents and negatively by others. At their best, these are seen as a means to facilitate building of capacity across schools, allowing for collaboration between mainstream and special schools.

**Mainstream school leaders**

The school leader survey results are pleasing, in suggesting that these respondents had a clear understanding of the importance of building teacher capabilities in order to better meet the needs of students. Whether through improvements to initial training, ongoing professional learning or support from peers, capacity building was framed by leaders as a key practice that they undertake to ensure that the needs of students are met. They also acknowledged the value of specific qualifications and expertise in special education. In particular, leaders recognised that capacity for differentiation is key to
offering inclusion education. School leader support for enhancing workforce capability is a strength to build on devising systemic supports that assist school leaders to achieve these aims.

Furthermore, the majority also recognised the importance of values-based and school-wide approaches in supporting teacher capacity. These included a commitment to inclusion inside and outside of the classroom as well as valuing diversity, cultural sensitivity and awareness; wellbeing programs (including KidsMatter, ConnectED and SafeKIDS); and student support programs (engagement programs, literacy and numeracy programs).

They also recognised how other supports at a school level enhance mainstream teachers’ ability to engage in lead practice, such as: access to additional classroom support from special education teachers, tutors, teaching aides and assistants.

**Classroom teachers**

The majority of respondents to the teacher survey, regardless of the type of school they were currently located in, at just over two thirds of the group, sought access to capability around students with additional needs. Further, close to half of those teachers had experience with a special setting (Positive Learning Services, satellite class or ASD unit). Teachers in special schools were reasonably well represented, at just under a third. Around two thirds of the responses were from teachers in urban schools, with the remainder being remote or very remote. Most were either classroom teachers or special education teachers, with a smattering of responses from other groups.

It is very positive that the majority (66%) of those answering a question on previous specific training with regard to supporting students with additional needs had completed some training. Most typically this had been in-service teacher training, part of a postgraduate degree or course, or less often a combination of these forms of training. Further, despite roughly a third of the respondents noting more than a decade of experience working with students with additional needs, the majority of respondents were aware of the need to further improve their skills. Typically, the growth areas that they identified included: managing challenging behaviours, early identification of additional needs, assessing learning for students with additional needs, and knowing where and how to access external support. It is also encouraging that a majority
identified collaboration, including mentoring by leaders and positive relationships with families, as among the most important school level supports for students with additional needs.

Staff in mainstream schools also highlighted the following strengths of the in-school supports available to students:

- access to SESOs or SESAs to support teachers
- access to the skills and expertise of other staff (special education teachers, leadership, teaching and support staff), and
- a strong whole-school approach to students with additional needs.

In their responses to this question, staff in special schools focused on capacities and conditions that contribute to capacity to support students, which included:

- small class sizes
- strong staff communication and collaboration
- caring and supportive attitudes towards students and meeting their needs
- good relationships with families and carers, and
- ability to provide differentiated learning and student-centred approaches.

Findings – consultations

Findings across Round 1 and Round 2 of the consultation were highly consistent. For this topic, much of the detailed feedback was gathered in Round 2. In mainstream schools, leadership and culture emerged as key and connected strengths to build on, especially given the current variability of practice in this respect. There is scope to learn from schools that invest in building the skills of a stable group of in-class support staff. Whole of school programs are judged to be effective. Some schools support special education teachers to build capability, and the feedback as a whole suggests that this is a key strength to replicate.

In regard to special schools, recognition of high levels of capability were coupled with ad hoc efforts by staff from each type of school to engage in practice sharing for capability building. Special school leaders were also positive with regard to expanding use of special settings in mainstream schools, partly to serve the same purpose. Conversations with
Departmental staff and external partners about new professional learning opportunities and approaches highlight other strengths.

Teacher, Departmental staff, and family and carer comments on mainstream schools underline the importance of school leadership and culture in ensuring a school-wide focus on inclusive practices. Where leaders take a strong stance on valuing and promoting inclusion this is very influential in schools.

Stakeholders broadly shared the view that, among school leadership teams, strong collaboration between the Principal and one or more special education teachers is a key enabler to adequate support for classroom teachers and, ultimately, for students.

School leadership is also critical but feedback from families and carers, as well as school staff, on collaborations within schools around inclusion stressed its variability. This explains why some respondents saw room for further shifts toward autonomous decision-making at the school level, as a strength to build on. However, others raised concerns about such shifts promoting further inconsistency across regions and schools.

Leaders themselves reported variable efforts to promote and support staff collaborations.

The expertise of in-class support staff and the training available to this cohort was described as particularly problematic. This group are largely casual staff who are mostly families and carers and community members. Strengths to draw on in this data include learning from schools who had developed successful strategies to ensure retention of classroom support staff, such as: building strong partnerships with local communities, investing in training, using creative ways to remunerate, value and recognise support staff contributions; and considering their work in succession planning.

There was a consensus among educators and Departmental staff that whole of school programs on general awareness of disability and additional needs had been effective in raising baseline understanding and awareness of students with additional needs.

In some mainstream schools, special education teachers reportedly collaborate with other teachers at a more strategic level, offering professional learning and coaching and developing whole of school programs. More generally, the strategic work of special education teachers in close collaboration with school leaders was seen as a critical influence on inclusion. In Round 1 feedback in particular, there was a lot of praise for
collaborations in which teachers were ‘doing a lot with a little’ by working creatively together and with external organisations.

Skills and expertise were generally seen as fit for purpose in special schools and in some special settings and this was a source of satisfaction on the part of families. Families and carers of high-need students in special schools were particularly well represented in the consultations, potentially explaining why this group typically report more positive experiences with those schools and to a lesser degree with special settings. Staff ability to communicate effectively with families and carers was highlighted as a particular strength in these schools.

Key reasons for family and carer satisfaction were: confidence about the safety and wellbeing of their children; strong appreciation of staff capacity to create inclusive cultures that welcome children and their families; high levels of involvement with children’s learning and daily communication with teachers; constant attention from teachers and support staff. In addition, personalised and appropriate curricula and pedagogy; setting appropriate learning goals (including life skills and vocational skills) and communicating progress towards outcomes were appreciated. Commonly, families and carers spoke of ‘getting their lives back’ due to not being frequently called to a school to remove their child, or to respond to mainstream school concerns.

These positive experiences in special schools and settings were attributed to factors including: specialised skills, expertise and training of staff and school leadership; purpose-built facilities; a high ratio of staff to students; and small classes (relative to mainstream schools). School staff and some families and carers pointed out that students attract a higher level of funding for comparable needs in a special school as opposed to mainstream schools. This higher funding and resultant support is seen to support positive outcomes.

Some special schools engaged in capacity building through observations at mainstream schools, shared programs or working particularly with the special education teachers in such schools in these instances. Teachers, school leaders and Departmental staff reported mostly uncoordinated and informal activity in the area of inter-school collaboration in staff mentoring, coaching, upskilling and training. For example, school staff visiting local and distant schools—including special schools—to observe and learn from expert staff often occurred on an ad hoc basis or was organised through informal networks.
Another strength to draw on in terms of workforce capacity is the positivity in responses from school leaders with regard to expansion of special settings in mainstream schools, along with the opportunities for strengthening partnerships between special schools and mainstream schools that such collaborative work enables. Staff in both special and mainstream schools and some families and carers did speak about a range of programs and settings that allow students in special schools to participate in learning activities with students of mainstream schools in a positive way.

According to consultations with staff from the Department, NGOs and peak bodies, conversations and initiatives designed to improve skills and expertise among NT government school staff are underway with training providers. Departmental staff reported that the suite of six online courses that they offer enjoys wide uptake, including by trainee teachers who are yet to graduate. Some stakeholders suggest that the range of topics could be expanded, with input from specialist staff external to the Department, such as higher education providers, NGOs and specialist health practitioners. Greater communication around the availability of courses and additional incentives to complete them were also mentioned.

Examples were given of shared development and delivery of professional learning that involved schools and a range of local service providers, which had been well received by participants. Other examples of local initiatives by various NGOs and peak bodies suggest that teachers are highly responsive to professional learning that offers them ‘just in time’ practical classroom strategies.

Conclusions

The data analysed in this section indicated that at best, both some mainstream and special schools have in place comprehensive processes to recruit, retain and support the professional growth of staff in roles relevant to meeting the needs of students. They provided clarity about those roles regarding expected staff performance, as well as opportunities for mentoring and coaching. As such, existing workforce capability and expertise—particularly in special schools—are strengths to build on in development of leadership, teaching and support capabilities to meet the learning and support needs of all students. Individual efforts to foster and put time to productive professional collaborations are another key strength, as are the planning that is occurring with training providers and in expanding online training topics.
Case studies: Improving professional practice

Case study 4 - A very remote school responded to cultural preferences in their community by offering the same level of remuneration to all community members working at the school regardless of their role. This school worked hard to foster a whole of community approach to wellbeing and inclusion beyond the school by partnering with local community groups and other government agency staff in the health and policing systems. The school enjoyed strong, informed, stable leadership and had engaged in succession planning to maintain this strength.

Case study 5 - A remote mainstream school responded to challenges shared by many others by putting in place very strong programs to foster early parental engagement, which enhanced the availability of a group of trained support staff from year to year, from within the school community. Careful staff selection processes for hiring capable and committed new teaching staff were complemented by one-to-one mentoring of new teachers, availability of psychologists for staff when in need of support, an open-door policy from school leadership and shared spaces and times for collaboration between a range of school staff to support inclusion.

Case study 6 - An urban special school ensures that there is a teacher and a Special Education Support Officer (SESO) in every classroom. All SESOs are qualified to Certificate III at least. Teachers may not all have special education training but are experienced. The school is proactive in targeting ‘southern’ universities for placements and suitable graduates to recruit. Professional learning is a major investment, and it employs a range of internal and external partners. There is a deliberate effort to access recent research, and professional learning is linked to professional development plans through use of Eportfolios. All of the school’s practices are guided by a collaborative, team-based approach.

Case study 7 - A remote special school works with early childhood teachers in very remote communities to enhance skills through innovative and technology based solutions. An example is bringing students from those surrounding communities for assessment. Video footage of assessments is taken back to the community for a local teacher and their assistants and parents to view, to gain a clearer understanding of how to work with that child effectively. The school also participates in regional networking for special education teachers, where they regularly share expertise especially around behaviour management.
Areas for growth in current policy and practice

The data collated for this report highlighted some gaps in capability on which to focus in making improvements. These include: inadequate special needs content in initial teacher training; untrained in-class support staff; the need for more face-to-face professional learning on a broader range of topics (identifying and meeting specific needs; managing challenging behaviours; assessing learning for students; communication skills and accessing external supports for students); and the support for teachers while engaged in implementing new learning needing to be of greater frequency and longer duration. Leaders in special schools were generally satisfied with staff capability, but seeking solutions that enable them to meet growing demand for places. There was support for collaborations between special and mainstream schools to enhance workforce capacity, especially working together on additional types of special settings in mainstream schools. Within school collaborations were also valued as a solution, especially mentoring by school leaders and peer learning with special education teachers.

Families and carers identified significant gaps in understanding and expertise with regard to students with additional needs in mainstream schools, especially in management of behaviour and support for trauma affected students. A range of perceived inequalities in service delivery were raised that suggest a need for capacity building around: understanding of inclusion and of related legal requirements, communication, collaboration and respectful interactions.

Supports identified by families and carers to enable growth in teacher capacity included: trained in-class support staff and teaching staff with specific disability related qualifications, especially in remote and very remote areas, appropriate physical spaces, assistive devices and technologies, specialised equipment and access to flexible curricula. Families and carers also voiced views that teachers need time to build their professional practice, not just through training. Incentives for suitably qualified graduates to take up teaching roles were raised.

Findings – surveys

Families and carers in mainstream schools

The majority of families and carers in mainstream schools who responded to the survey identified significant gaps relating to workforce capability. They saw the general level of
understanding and expertise with regard to students with additional needs as low. An especially taxing issue for respondents was that behaviour management skills are inadequate. Both families and carers of students with additional needs and families and carers of other children strongly voiced concerns around a need to enhance capacity in de-escalating aggressive behaviours, managing bullying, and supporting trauma affected students.

They view mainstream classroom teachers as having inadequate access to supports like teaching assistants and tutors to support them.

Communication skills appear to be another key gap. Families and carers report feeling unsupported and not understood by school staff when communicating with them about their child. There was strong interest in developing the skills to underpin more collaborative relationships, including greater levels of involvement in decision-making about their child’s learning journey. In particular, a significant subsection of this group had experienced ‘judgemental’ responses from staff that indicated a lack of understanding of specific disabilities and related challenges for families and carers.

A subset of comments from this group focused on:

- Perceived inequality between services provided to indigenous students and non-indigenous students, especially in remote areas
- Teacher focus on students with additional needs negatively impacting the learning of other children, or conversely bullying on the part of ‘mainstream’ students impacting teacher ability to assist students with additional needs
- Mainstream schools discouraging families and carers from enrolling
- Families and carers of mainstream students being abusive toward or discriminating against families and carers of students with additional needs.

These comments imply that teacher capacities with regard to communication, collaboration and respectful interactions with member of schools communities are critical in equipping them to deal with daily challenges. They further underline a need for a clear understanding on inclusion and of legal requirements that schools and teacher are bound by. They also suggest a role for the Department in consulting with school communities to resolve these matters to a satisfactory outcome.

Families and carers in special schools
This subset of respondents were highly positive about workforce capacity in special schools. Respondents recognised that ability to effectively meet the needs of students was supported by small class sizes, low student to staff ratios and access to highly specialised equipment and resources.

_Families and carers on capacity in special settings (satellite classes, autism units, Positive Learning Services)_

Some families and carers of students with additional needs voiced fears around the safety of their child in satellite classes, mainly related to risks of bullying, being a ‘flight risk’ or not coping socially and emotionally in mainstream settings.

_School leaders in all schools_

The school leader survey results highlight key perspectives on gaps in current workforce capability. The majority of respondents from mainstream schools sought access to a greater range of training and professional learning opportunities for teaching staff and teaching support staff. Their preferred strategies to meet these needs included: additional special needs content in degree courses; more face-to-face professional learning, as well as additional online training modules, coupled with support to implement that learning from those with specific expertise, during on-site visits that are both more regular and of extended durations. In particular, most saw great value in staff from special schools as well as Departmental advisors being onsite to facilitate practice sharing.

Most respondents to the teacher survey who were located in mainstream schools agreed that priority learning areas in which to upskill teaching staff in order to better serve students include a greater understanding of how to meet specific needs such as trauma, ASD and ADHD.

Interestingly, there was also widespread support for the creation of a school based administrative role tasked with coordinating flows of information, support and planning for students with additional needs, from leaders and from teachers.

Furthermore there was strong consensus that whilst visits from external experts and professionals as well as Departmental advisors were supportive and helpful in building capacity, increasing the frequency and duration of access to these supports would assist
in capacity building. Access to trained in-class support staff and recruitment of staff with specific qualifications, especially in remote and very remote areas, are key concerns. Suggestions included incentives for suitably qualified graduates to take up teaching roles, especially in remote and very remote areas. There was also strong support from most respondents for building better partnerships and more support for collaborations between special and mainstream schools to enhance workforce capacity, in particular through the creation of an expanded range of ‘hybrid’ settings to complement existing special settings.

Leaders in special schools were generally satisfied with staff capability, but seeking solutions that enable them to meet growing demand for places.

**Classroom teachers in all schools**

Teacher responses highlight some key themes. Many acknowledge that their initial training had not adequately equipped them to meet the needs of students. There was strong support for efforts to upskill in-class assistants and aides. In terms of improvements in their own capabilities, they sought supported access to more relevant training, suggested making this training compulsory, and suggested that teachers require more time to focus on planning for and providing adjustments and tailor learning for students with additional needs, not just training.

Substantive gaps in expertise that were identified by survey respondents included capabilities around: identifying additional needs; managing challenging behaviours; differentiation of teaching to meet individual needs; mastering specific strategies to support students with different kinds of needs; assessing learning for students with additional needs; knowledge of specific disabilities; communication with families and carers; and knowing where and how to access external supports for students with additional needs.

Additionally, a range of supports were cited as enhancing teacher ability to exercise their skills effectively or to build their capacity. These included: collaborations with staff with relevant expertise (special education teachers, mentoring by school leaders, counsellors, staff from special schools); access to supports (appropriate physical resources, including spaces, assistive devices and technologies, specialised equipment and in-class assistants and aides); and access to flexible curricula.
Consultations

The Round 2 consultations were the major source drawn on in the section below. In mainstream schools, the teaching workforce capability gaps identified in consultations were: use of exclusionary practices; ineffective behaviour management; non-implementation of agreed adjustments; inadequate reporting on learning progress; non-collaborative approaches and ineffective communication. Collaborative skills in working with other adults (e.g. SESOs, SESAs and teaching assistants) is a significant gap. The capabilities of school leaders in understanding, promoting and supporting inclusion were critical in bridging these gaps. A strong leadership team that includes a special education teacher who works strategically is an invaluable asset to schools.

Some of the complicating issues identified were: that professional learning must often be repeated to capture all staff and requires support for implementation to be effective; disparity in funding—and therefore resourcing—for students in special versus mainstream settings or due to family location; lack of information sharing across government agencies, such as when children with additional needs are in and out of home care; and variability in capabilities across levels of schooling.

Few gaps in capability were identified with respect to special schools, apart from the surprising longevity of some functional placements, which may indicate a gap in understandings of how to apply policy.

Special settings were generally highly valued by all stakeholder groups. Variability in these settings was another factor impacting skills and capability. Satellite classes and ASD units were described as quite varied in their ability to foster inclusion.

Collaborations between differing types of schools present one solutions but ad hoc efforts are not systemically supported as yet.

In mainstream schools, non-inclusive practices were reported by many participants. These included: families and carers being discouraged from enrolling students with additional needs; bullying, especially during unstructured and unsupervised non-class times; non-implementation of agreed adjustments; inadequate reporting on progress; ineffective communication between schools and families and carers or a non-collaborative approach; ineffective differentiation, including children simply being given an iPad to ‘keep them busy’; frequent classroom exclusions, suspensions and expulsions.
As some families and carers said, simply being in a mainstream school is not inclusive schooling. For children without additional needs, the impact of unmanaged extreme behaviour on all children’s safety and wellbeing, and learning disruptions due to teachers being focussed on students with additional needs, were noted. These experiences reflect some capabilities to enhance.

Capacity of school leaders with regard to understanding, promoting and supporting inclusion was reported to vary widely, but be a critical factor in capability. Leaders themselves reported variable understanding of inclusion and efforts to promote and support staff collaborations to meet the needs of students. Relationships between families and carers and schools are worsened when their concerns are not communicated between staff (e.g. from the Assistant Principal to the Principal). Some respondents saw room for further shifts toward autonomous decision-making at the school level. Others raised concerns that this would promote further inconsistency in service delivery for students across regions and schools.

Among school leadership teams, strong collaboration between the Principal and one or more special education teachers was framed as a key enabler to adequate support for classroom teachers and, ultimately, for students. Some collaborations between classroom teachers and special education teachers suffered from expectations that special education teachers complete all EAPs, differentiate curricula and assessments for other teachers, or provide cover for staffing gaps regularly.

Many participants agreed that inadequate initial teacher training leaves some ill-equipped to work collaboratively with other adults in the classroom. Low levels of training and high turnover of in-classroom support staff (e.g. SESOs, SESAs and teaching assistants) can also drive poor collaborations.

Teachers and others reported that teachers can be ‘overwhelmed’ by the range of competing demands, needs and priorities involved in classroom management and facilitating learning for their students. Key ‘gaps’ include understanding specific but relatively common student needs, in order to develop adjustment strategies. Ensuring that school staff have time to plan and consult to support the quality of these processes was also noted to be vital. So was understanding that behavioural issues require support, and are not misbehaviour to be punished. Other ‘gaps’ are skills in effectively
differentiating curricula, and working collaboratively with staff in support roles and with special education advisors.

Families and carers of many high-need students (such as some children with ASDs, Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and developmental delays or learning disorders) reported unsatisfactory experiences in mainstream schools, indicative of skills gaps. There was wide acknowledgement that many teaching staff in mainstream schools ‘try their best’, but may: lack basic awareness of disabilities and related needs; lack knowledge of how to meet specific needs; be operating in inadequate spaces with limited resources; and/or have large classes with few and untrained support staff. Inconsistency in capability amongst teaching staff was a frustration, especially if progress students made in one class, year or school was erased in the next.

Feedback from all groups suggests that initial teacher training and ongoing professional learning are inadequate for equipping mainstream teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to meet the challenges of inclusion. Teachers also struggle to find sufficient time to undertake professional learning. Training and professional learning must often be repeated to capture new graduates and new hires, given high levels of staff turnover. Moreover, as students with additional needs have different teachers each year, upskilling efforts must often be repeated. Some external providers noted that the skills and strategies presented in training were not always used by teachers, partly due to a lack of support for implementation of training in practice.

The capabilities of classroom support staff and the training available to them was described as particularly problematic. As a group of largely casual staff who are mostly drawn from families and carers in local communities, schools rarely have sufficient resources and incentives to invest in suitable professional learning for these staff. High turnover in support staff was also an issue for some schools.

Difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitably equipped staff, especially in remote settings, exacerbate the problems flowing from perceived inconsistencies in leaders, teachers and in-class support staff regarding their knowledge, skill and understanding of students with additional needs.
Departmental staff confirmed a number of these challenges, such as those arising from responses to extreme behaviours. As did teachers and school leaders, they flag variability in students’ specific needs as a challenge, especially in the context of teachers’ inconsistent expertise and inadequate initial training. Like families, carers and teachers, they see difficulties in accessing a stable group of trained in-class support staff. They had system level perspective on the challenges of high turnover and transience, particularly in remote schools.

Peak bodies and NGOs raised similar challenges, including disparity in funding—and therefore resourcing—for students with additional needs in special versus mainstream settings and inequity of access to special schools and settings due to family location, effectively precluding school choice for some. Inadequate teacher training, both initial and ongoing was mentioned, as was inadequate in-class support. Impediments flowing from a lack of information sharing across government agencies were highlighted, such as when children with additional needs are in out of home care unbeknownst to schools, or it is unclear which case manager to liaise with.

School level was perceived as an ‘external’ factor in mainstream inclusion for students with additional needs. Some families and carers mentioned fewer supports and less collaborative staff in middle school in contrast to pre-primary and primary levels, or that front-ended supports had been prematurely ‘ripped away’ in later years. Interestingly, some teachers claimed that families and carers are more difficult to engage at higher school levels. Other stakeholders said that entry to middle school is a challenging transition point where previously unrecognised needs surface, as expectations of students’ academic performance increase. Transitions were generally seen as challenging, across schooling levels and between kinds of settings.

Special settings in mainstream schools can also be improved. Autism units and satellite classes were described as quite varied in their physical settings and organisation. That said, both types of special settings were generally highly valued by all stakeholder groups. Special and mainstream school staff explained that the extent to which satellite classes in mainstream schools foster inclusion depends on the host school’s ability to engage and collaborate with the satellite class’s staff and students, as opposed to simply providing a space for their learning. The quality of hubs, engine rooms, ASD units and of the physical
spaces used for these was reportedly variable. Some families and carers of students attending special schools feared for their child’s safety when participating in these.

Challenges with respect to special settings, such as Positive Learning Services and flexible learning centres were less often discussed, perhaps due to the small sample of people with experience in them.

Some collaborations around capacity between mainstream and special schools experience barriers. Consultation data suggest that these mainly arise from a lack of system level supports for this to work, such as adequate relief coverage for staff to pursue what is often a strong interest in working together and learning from each other.

Very few gaps in capacity in special schools were noted, but teachers overwhelmingly saw workforce skills as the key factor determining adequate support for students with additional needs, especially small student-to-teacher ratios, small class sizes and the availability of school-based support staff (e.g. assistant teachers, SESOs and SESAs). Adequate professional learning for teachers was acknowledged as crucial, as were other resources available to support inclusion and collaboration in a school.

One exception may be that special school staff and families agreed that students enrolled in special schools, but not on functional placements, rarely return to mainstream schooling. The transfer from mainstream schools to special schools is one-way in most cases, with a few notable exceptions. This seem to be a gap in understandings of how to apply policy.

Conclusions

This section has highlighted some gaps in capability in mainstreams schools on which to focus in making improvements, including: redressing inadequate special needs content in initial teacher training through understanding of inclusion and of related legal requirements; training for in-class support staff; and more face-to-face learning on a broader range of topics (identifying and meeting specific needs; managing challenging behaviours; assessing learning for students with additional needs; communication skills; and how to access external supports for students with additional needs).

Addressing these gaps may reduce the use of exclusionary practices; improve behaviour management; ensure that educational adjustments are implemented; enhance reporting
of learning progress for students with additional needs; and build skills in communication and collaboration with other adults including in-class support staff, other peers, families and carers. The capabilities of school leaders in understanding, promoting and supporting inclusion are critical in bridging capability gaps. A strong leadership team that includes a special education teacher who works strategically is an invaluable asset to schools. Special schools evidence fewer gaps in workforce capability, but seek solutions to meeting growing demand for places. The longevity of some functional placements may indicate some gaps to address.

Schools seek support to implement new learning, of greater frequency and longer duration. They support collaborations between special and mainstream schools to enhance workforce capacity, especially working together on building new types of special settings in mainstream schools. Within school collaborations were valued, especially mentoring by school leaders and peer learning with special education teachers. Collaborations within schools and between differing types of schools are solutions for which systemic supports are not yet in place.

Further, these findings imply that some of the resources, skills, capacities and knowledge that are requisite for all NT teachers to be effective in meeting the needs of diverse learners, including students with additional needs, are:

- Leadership teams that have a clear understanding of all students and how to meet their needs
- Adequate focus on meeting the needs of diverse learners and related topics in pre-service training, supplemented by context specific professional learning subsequently
- The skills to work effectively with non-teaching staff in the classroom, consistent understandings of disability and engagement, and communication with families/carers and school communities
- Access to coaching and mentoring to facilitate successful implementation of new practice based on new learning
- Structured access to professional collaborations within schools and between schools
- Access to an evidence-base of ‘what works’ to guide teaching practice
• Access to the student data required to inform effective planning and decision-making about students with additional needs, as students move along their educational journey.

The gaps and capabilities outlined so far provide a basis for developing a comprehensive workforce plan to support the development of capabilities to meet the learning and support needs of all students. It would be especially useful to provide professional learning and opportunities for professional collaboration, especially for remote and very remote areas. Strengthening staff recruitment and induction processes to create an explicit focus on inclusive education would also be useful.
Appendix 7c  Raw consultation data – Enhancing an evidence-led system

Element Three: Enhancing an evidence-led system

Analysis of the data collated in this section suggests some further strengths to draw on in NT schools. Many participants with experience in mainstream schools were positive about the relevance of the SSSM and current eligibility, identification and planning processes for students with additional needs. The caveats were either their own skill levels or access to suitable expertise to draw on in deciding on educational adjustments and plans, and having time to review adjustments and plans.

Key supports for teachers in applying the model and planning tools associated with it included other staff, such as ‘involved’ school leaders who set up systems to support these processes at a whole of school level, special education teachers, as well as external and Departmental experts and health professionals. Teaching staff in special schools were especially likely to report what they saw as lead practice in these respects.

Whilst families and carers reported highly variable experiences in this respect in mainstream schools, across all schools, the comments of those who had felt supported, informed and able to fully participate in making decisions about a child indicate strengths to draw on. Communication skills were part of this picture. Equally, some schools had demonstrated their strengths to families and carers by ensuring that plans were implemented, reviewed and were supporting improved outcomes for children.

In term of feedback on current policy, guidelines and procedures and accountability for implementation of these in practice, it has already been noted that many participants were positive about the relevance of the SSSM and associated policies, guidelines and tools. The planning tools embedded in this model, including EAPs, are accepted as the current key means to ensure accountability for supporting learning of students with additional needs.

Whilst there was little direct commentary on enhancing accountability at a school level from school-based respondents, the analysis as a whole suggests that school cultures which promote respect for student diversity and include families and carers as integral members of the school community foster the use of practices that support accountability, such regular meetings with families and carers to discuss progress with learning and
growth for students with additional needs. These are strengths to build on and learn from going forward.

Identified strengths in current policy and practice

Findings – surveys

Mainstream school leaders

School leaders were generally very positive about the strengths of current eligibility, identification and planning processes for students with additional needs. Many of them cited EAPs and other plans as key practices that enable support for students. However, they qualified these comments by stressing that the usefulness of tools is dependent on access to suitable expertise in determining educational adjustments and to inform planning and goal setting, as well as regular reviews. Lead practice examples in this respect included principals who made time to attend all EAP meetings, providing professional learning and coaching to other staff during these processes; and implementing school level monitoring of planning and review processes.

For the roughly half of school leader respondents who indicated that they thought the SSSM was working well, comments endorsed both the model and the value provided by successful implementation of it in mainstream schools. Very few respondents had specific suggestions for enhancing accountability for lower level tools such as student plans. That said, it is highly positive that a majority of all school leaders across all school types listed EAPs and other plans as one of the key practices that their school implements to foster inclusive education.

Given the feedback from families and carers below, it is equally a strength to build on that the majority of school leaders listed planning and communication, collaboration and engagement with the school community as a key practice used to ensure the needs of students are met.

These comments are supported in the survey responses from teachers about good relationships with families and carers as being key strengths of the current support system for students at their school. In particular, staff in special schools emphasised the importance of regular communication about progress with families and carers.

Additionally, the majority of teacher suggestions for strengthening the reporting system for students with additional needs focused on more regular reporting, more frequent
reviews of student plans, greater ease of aligning the reporting system to goals in student plans and use of the student voice in these processes. These responses suggest a keen interest in enhancing accountability and a clear understanding of what this would require to be effective.

**Classroom teachers reflecting on systems and processes**

Classroom teachers generally agreed on the strengths of current eligibility, identification and planning processes. These included: planning tools such as the EAP being a useful tool to set clear goals and to measure student progress against goals; the involvement of staff with expertise in Special Education in planning processes affording access to helpful guidance on effective strategies for supporting learning and growth. Teaching staff in special schools were especially likely to report what they saw as lead practice, such as a rigorous requirement that teachers address and report on goals each day using an EAP checklist and uploading of EAPs to the school server to facilitate information sharing between staff.

As did leaders, many teachers did note that the usefulness of these tools was heavily reliant on: time for planning and to make educational adjustments; time to review and update EAPs and other plans; adequate input into planning processes from families and carers, teachers and/or advisors with the ability to suggest practical strategies to use in the classroom, and health professionals.

**Families and carers on systems and processes in schools**

Families and carers reported very mixed experiences with this aspect of their children’s experiences in mainstream schools. They were far more positive about eligibility, identification and planning processes when: they had felt supported during these processes and clear about what next steps they needed to take; their involvement in decision-making had been supported by school staff and had unfolded as part of ongoing strong communication and efforts to meaningfully engage them in their child’s learning; planning was successfully implemented early in the child’s educational journey at the school, to the best of the school’s ability; and planning and implementation of adjustments and supports were having a demonstrable effect on improving learning outcomes in desired areas (academic, behavioural, social and emotional).
Survey responses from all families and carers that touched on positive experiences with regard to accountability were quite consistent, regardless of school setting or if they themselves had a child with additional needs. They highlight as strengths schools that set and enforce high expectations around accountability to families and carers for implementing, reviewing and regular and comprehensive reporting on results from student plans in terms of achieving desired outcomes.

Findings – consultations

Findings from Round 2 of the consultations were the main data source on this topic. Analysis of the consultation data indicates that it largely converged with the themes identified in the survey responses, with some new topics arising from the additional perspectives included.

Evidence-based approaches and systems in mainstream schools

Responses from both school leaders and teachers with regard to practices associated with the SSSM and current eligibility, identification and planning processes for students echoed the results of the survey responses on this topic. Additionally, leaders and teachers in all schools were very positive about the recent reduction in length and complexity of EAPs. Simplification has improved uptake of Departmental templates in schools; however, some schools still use an adapted version of the template that they developed independently.

Some teachers, including those in special education specific roles, noted that they struggled to interpret how the ‘jargon’ used in medical and allied health assessments can be applied in making educational adjustments and completing EAPs. There were many suggestions made to build on the strengths of these tools by moving them online and modifying the templates to include drop down lists of intervention and support strategies, as is the case in the comparable version of the instrument in other jurisdictions. Additional access to supports and expertise in translating health assessments into practical classroom strategies was sought.

Data collected for the NCCD was viewed by some school staff as offering new possibilities to draw on in creating stronger shared understandings of what are reasonable adjustments.
The SNP was less commonly used to identify needs, but was seen to be a good tool overall by users. That SNP data could usefully and easily be used in applying for NDIS support was noted as a strength by some participants. Families and carers noted some example of lead practice in mainstream schools in this respect, despite extremely mixed experiences, in line with the survey results. These included skilled and committed teachers who worked collaboratively with them in getting effective planning in place, making the required adjustments, reviewing progress and communicating results.

Evidence-based approaches and systems in special schools

Evidence-based approaches and systems in special schools were generally held to be a particular strength of these schools by many with experience of them. For example, many of these schools have invested in data based tools to help them effectively monitor student progress against the goals incorporated in plans on a very regular basis, including vocational training and quite incremental progress for very high needs students. Additionally, having high expectations of what these students can achieve and planning and goal setting accordingly at these schools was acknowledged by families as a key strength. Some special schools invest heavily in accessing specialist input into planning for their high needs students.

Families and carers as well as staff in special schools suggested that these strengths might be built on by allowing flexibility for schools to modify curriculum to the needs of the students. This includes a greater focus on life skills as well as vocational skills. A minority of families stills voiced concern that ‘families and carers don’t have enough of a say’ in these processes in these settings. Additionally, some called for extended time (a Year 13 option) to allow students to shine. That said, while high levels of family and carer engagement reported by many in special schools are a strength, not all are in this enviable position.

Across school-based staff, and in some commentary from Departmental staff and those from external bodies, a subset of participants saw opportunities to enhance current strengths in this respect through developing and implementing a needs-based model. A shift from emphasising medical diagnoses, enrolments and attendance towards a more ‘needs-based’ model would reduce administrative burdens on teachers, complexity for
families and carers, and free up scarce medical and allied health staff for direct service delivery. A more equitable distribution of funding across school types (special and mainstream) and locations (urban to remote) would result. While verification of eligibility for access to limited places in special schools and settings was understood to be necessary, identifying the adjustments required to support all children’s learning in mainstream settings, according to need, was desired. The resource implications of a needs-based model were acknowledged to be a challenge.

Comments on this topic in the consultations reinforce the analysis presented above in suggesting that a key strength to build on in enhancing school level accountability for supporting the learning, growth and achievement of students with additional needs is the success in some schools of creating positive school cultures and deep engagement with their communities. Positive whole of school cultures facilitate the kind of communication and collaborative approach that supports strong individual accountability based in relationships.

Additionally, some of the comments from a wide range of stakeholders touched on the use of strong school level accountability and reporting systems in some schools as a lesson to learn from in this respect.

There was also feedback from a wide range of stakeholder around a greater focus on enhancing the capacity of the education system to offer more personalised, student-centred options, to cater to a wider spectrum of additional needs. Some of the suggestions to bridge gaps in this respect included: developing a wider range of special services, developing more flexible policies for transitioning students between mainstream and special settings, and developing an early-needs identification policy based on comprehensive screening for students with additional needs in Early Childhood Education and Care coupled with intensive effort to meet their learning needs through effective early interventions at this level of schooling to increasing the reintegration of students, when appropriate, into mainstream schooling.

Conclusions

At a service system level, moves towards more easy to use, streamlined and efficient processes for planning adjustments and monitoring student outcomes should continue. The SSSM would be strengthened through further initiatives to support schools to successfully implement it in practice, particularly through enhanced initial training for
teachers and professional learning and through collaborative programs in shared settings and practice sharing across schools. A needs based funding model would also seem to offer many advantages, as is implied by the adoption of this model in many other jurisdictions.

The data analysed in this section indicated that key strengths to build on in enhancing accountability for achieved outcomes for students with additional needs include a focus on developing positive school cultures and deep engagement with families and carers. Additionally, putting in place mechanisms to enhance the consistency of school level accountability efforts would be productive. At a system level, aligning the student planning tools with the wider reporting systems will be useful to assist schools to better meet student needs. Access to data and a culture of using it to inform decision-making is also clearly a strength to build on where schools are not engaging in these practices already. System level supports are also required to allow for useful data sharing.
Case studies: Enhancing an evidence-led system

Case study 8 - An urban special school promoted lifelong inclusion through building partnerships with service providers, parents and carers and key employers. The school successfully modified curricula and developed innovative programs, including vocational and work integrated learning programs, in order to support the development of valuable life skills to underpin vocational and independent living related outcomes for students. A data driven approach had clearly helped to underpin these successes. Data was used in planning, recording and assessing achievement against learning goals and in detailed and regular reporting of outcomes to families and carers.

Case study 9 - A remote special school promoted high levels of accountability to families and the school community through a strong and multi-level system of ongoing consultation and reporting back to parents and carers, other educators, and therapists who were also engaged with supporting students. This attention to information sharing and co-development of goals was embedded in a system of daily reporting and feedback to families, followed up with extensive and detailed formal reporting at various intervals throughout the school year on achievements and challenges against individual goals. Families were deeply appreciative of this approach, in part because it allowed them to align support for their child at home and at school.
Areas for growth in current policy and practice

Analysis of the various data collated in this section suggests some further strengths to draw on. The relevance of the Response to Intervention model and current eligibility, identification and planning tools and processes for students with additional needs were mostly affirmed. Their application in practice was complicated by school-based staff skill levels and access to suitable expertise to draw on. Simplification of tools used in these processes was identified as a strength to build on, perhaps by digitalising them. Additionally, templates could be modified to include built-in supports. Finally, data needs to ‘follow the child’ from school to school (digitising would help in this regard). The NCCD was seen to offer possibilities for enhancing consistency of practice. Easy translating of SNP data in applying for NDIS support was another.

Other strengths to draw on include learning from the approaches of school leaders who had set up systems to support these processes at a whole of school level, which typically involved special education teachers, external and Departmental experts and health professionals. Additionally, committed and skilled teachers and leaders had ensured that some families and carers felt supported, informed and able to fully participate in making decisions. They also reported instances of schools ensuring that plans were implemented and reviewed to support improved learning outcomes. High expectations for students with additional needs were also valued.

Current strengths were felt by some to be potentially be enhanced by the reduced administrative burden and complexity, more efficient use of scarce resources and more equitable distribution of funding that a needs-based funding model might support. Verification of eligibility for access to limited places in special schools and settings was understood as necessary to maintain. The resource implications of a needs-based model were acknowledged as a challenge.

In term of feedback on current policy, guidelines and procedures and accountability for implementation of these in practice, it has already been noted that some school-based participants were less positive about the relevance of the SSSM and associated policies, guidelines and tools. Some of the issues involved in implementation of these were canvassed in the foregoing section. This section focuses on gaps to address in terms of accountability.
As in the section on current strengths in this respect, the planning tools embedded in this model, including EAPs were affirmed as being the mains means to ensure accountability for supporting learning of students with additional needs currently. There was some commentary on enhancing accountability at a school level from school-based respondents, with positive school cultures again emerging as a prime support to address in fostering the use of practices that support accountability.

System level gaps include some misalignment of the reporting system with goals in individual learning plans for students with additional needs. Some misperceptions that may need to be addressed through communication and consultation, as well as transparency in reporting, also emerged.

Findings – surveys

Families and carers on systems and processes in schools

Families and carers reported mixed experiences with this aspect of their children’s’ experiences in mainstream schools. They were typically less positive about eligibility, identification and planning processes when: they had felt unsupported during these processes and unsure of what next steps they needed to take; their involvement in decision-making had been discouraged or curtailed by schools staff; or agreed planning had not translated into adjustments being made in a timely or adequate manner.

Other particular concerns included the quality and regularity of meetings to facilitate and capture planning processes. A reasonably large sub-group of respondents voiced concerns about ‘rushed’ meetings that do not always include all relevant contributors. Additionally, they reported that EAPs were not always reviewed and updated at the required intervals, which reduced their usefulness. Some felt that they were being asked to interpret assessments made by health practitioners in planning meetings.

A variety of respondents, but especially families and carers stressed that with respect to needs identification and responses to children displaying extreme behaviours, it is important that all school staff can recognise these behaviours as indicative of unmet needs. Similarly, they emphasised that children with less obvious needs should still have these identified early in their schooling, particularly applicable to remote settings.

Overall, the analysis indicates that careful attention be paid to better targeting of all levels of need in future.
Most family and carer concerns in regard to accountability related to a lack of mechanisms to ensure that: plans are developed in a timely manner for all students; plans reflect adequate educational adjustment to meet their child’s needs; families and carers are involved in developing their child’s plans; plans are actioned as agreed; reviews are carried out in a timely manner; and adequate reporting of plan outcomes to families and carers is in place.

A minority of families and carers raised grievances around views that Aboriginal students are better supported to access services for students with additional needs than are non-Aboriginal students, especially in remote communities; or that students with additional needs take up a disproportionate amount of teachers’ time and focus, disadvantaging other students.

School leaders on systems and processes in all schools

Mainstream school leaders affirmed that the key tools to plan for educational adjustments and measuring learning and growth for students with additional needs are EAPs and related plans. Notwithstanding the usefulness of these plans, one of the main gaps highlighted was that the documentation is time consuming, due to the consultation processes involved and difficulty in assembling all of the necessary inputs and participants. Additionally, the expertise required is sometime lacking, as noted in Appendix 7b. Eligibility determinations with regard to level 2 and 3 supports were felt to take too long, due to both the time needed to assemble to relevant evidence required and to have applications processed. As a result, students with additional needs can be left unsupported.

Responses to the relevance of the SSSM were mixed. The ‘gaps’ identified by the half of this group who were less positive about the model overall, in order of frequency, included that: it is not relevant to all needs they encounter, especially trauma and mental health related needs; they have experienced an inability to access the services referred to in the model in practice; it requires ‘too much paperwork’ to implement properly; and it is unaffordable, in that the adjustments which are required are too costly to implement in practice.

Their suggestions for improving the model included: additional resourcing to support implementation; reducing wait time for accessing Departmental support services and to
access external health and allied health services that are required in order for schools and students to access to level 2 and 3 supports; enhancing collaboration across government services and agencies, including better information sharing, to support implementation of the model; and changes to the model to allow them better support for students without relevant diagnoses but with clear evidence of additional needs.

Suggestions made by leaders for enhancing the reporting system for students with additional needs to support student learning included: streamlining and simplification; reducing ‘double-up’ of information; reducing the ‘paperwork’; making reporting more accessible to families and carers; wider use of the Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) system and other systems that can support sharing of information within schools and between them; enhancing scope for inclusion of academic goals in EAPs or an alternative tool; and better means for more integrated reporting using EAPs as a base.

Responses to a question about what system level changes would improve the ability of remote schools to better meet the needs of students focused on reducing paperwork and increased support to diagnose and assess students in a timely manner. Equity with the funding provided to special and urban schools was raised in this context.

The majority of leader and teacher suggestions for strengthening the reporting system for students with additional needs focused on more regular reporting, more frequent reviews of student plans, greater ease of aligning the reporting system to goals in student plans and use of the student voice in these processes. These responses suggest a keen interest in enhancing accountability and a clear understanding of what this would require to be effective.

Classroom teachers reflecting on systems and processes

One of the most important school level gaps identified by teachers in this respect was the ability to clearly identify students with additional needs in a timely manner. Identification and verification processes, especially those dependent on obtaining a diagnosis, were frequently described as slow and lengthy. The identification process was characterised as time consuming, unclear and excessively bureaucratic (i.e. too many steps included in the process and requiring excessive amounts of paperwork that was double handled). This perhaps explains support for moving to a needs-based model of funding.
Difficulty in accessing health professional services (especially in the public sector) means that a large number of students with additional needs remain undiagnosed, but also creates inequalities in access to support based on families’ different capacities to seek private health services. These issues are exacerbated in remote contexts, which are particularly disadvantaged in pursuing current identification processes that require diagnoses or verification.

Suggestions made by teachers for enhancing the reporting system for students to support student learning included: more regular reporting; more frequent reviews of EAPs and other plans; flexible reporting approaches (including with respect to making adjustments to the curriculum to meet student needs) integrated with these tools; support with use of non-standardised reporting approaches that can be tailored to student needs; training for staff to collect data on student learning; greater support for use of tools such as ABLES, to focus on general capabilities; aligning the reporting system to learning goals (e.g. EAP goals) as opposed to using the ‘A to E’ reporting system and the Australian Curriculum achievement standards; simplifying the reporting system; and a greater use of student voices in determining goals and outcomes. A minority of teachers called for wide use of the SNP as a first step in identifying needs and planning for students with additional needs.

Findings – consultations

Findings across Round 1 and Round 2 of the consultations were highly consistent with regard to this topic. The bulk of the relevant data was gathered in Round 2. The time and effort and access to the resources required to understand and successfully navigate the current need identification and adjustment provisioning systems was the most frequent complaint in all of the feedback. A current funding driven focus on diagnosis was seen as an impediment to supporting students. These difficulties were acknowledged by many to be far greater in remote settings, and in mainstream schools as opposed to special schools.

Nonetheless, delaying educational adjustments until students receive formal diagnoses is inconsistent with reasonable adjustments under national legislative obligations. Use of restrictive practices and non-implementation of adjustments reinforce that awareness of obligations is a significant gap.
Very few gaps were identified in these respects with regard to specials schools. The exceptions were the verification processes required for eligibility for both functional and standard placement in a special school. These were viewed by some stakeholders as lengthy and expensive. 

As a response to some of the issue summarised here, as well as other reasons related to equity, calls for a needs-based model as a solution to many of the current gaps also surfaced in these findings.

Evidence-based approaches and systems in mainstream schools

As documents designed to record goals, plans and adjustments for students with additional needs, EAPs were again accepted and valued in this feedback. Simplification of the EAP was said to have improved uptake of the Departmental template in schools; however, some schools still use an adapted version of the template that they developed independently. The value of modifying the template to include drop down lists of intervention and support strategies, as is the case in the comparable version of the instrument in other jurisdictions, was raised by a subset of respondents as a very valuable potential improvement to enhance consistency of service delivery for students with additional needs.

The SNP was less commonly described as a means to identify needs, but was seen to be a good tool overall by users. Some teachers, including those in special education specific roles, noted that they struggled to interpret how the ‘jargon’ used in medical and allied health assessments as inputs to SNPs and EAPs can be applied in making educational adjustments.

All stakeholder groups raised what they saw as significant challenges in the current approach to identifying students with additional needs in the NT government school system. A current focus on diagnosis was seen as an impediment to supporting students. The need for a formal medical diagnosis, as the culmination of multiple assessments completed by various specialists, to access Special Education Support Program funding in mainstream schools was widely criticised.

A great many participants called for a central IT system which, with regard for privacy laws, collated student medical and allied health assessments and past adjustments,
would reduce duplication of effort for transient populations and provide an accessible ‘point of truth’ that ‘follows the student’ for staff in schools.

The current system as a whole was seen as difficult to navigate. Needs identification and adjustment processes were again described by most as being excessively bureaucratic and time consuming. Typically, long lags in diagnoses for students were reported, sometimes extending to well over a year. This was attributed to wait times for services in the public systems of health and education, as well as high costs and inaccessibility of the private system and great difficulty in accessing either system in remote settings.

‘Slowness’ was of particular concern in accessing emergency funding. So too was diversion of scarce medical and allied health staff effort into assessing and verifying as opposed to providing direct support.

These difficulties were acknowledged by many to be far greater in remote settings. The local unavailability of health services to diagnose disabilities means that students rarely receive the additional support they would need and, in turn, remote schools do not receive the additional resources required to support students.

Additionally, some of the findings presented earlier around workforce capability are reinforced by data examined here. In particular, there was evidence that educational adjustments are being delayed until students with additional needs receive a formal diagnosis and are eligible for Special Education Support Program funding. Some respondents pointed out that completion of an EAP or SNP is not dependent on a diagnosis and should be actioned as part of the process of reasonable adjustments under national legislative obligations.

With regard to additional resources provided to schools as a result of diagnosed disabilities, many teachers and Departmental staff voiced concerns that the 60 per cent student attendance criteria for access to Special Education Support Program funding was counterproductive. There was concern that remote schools were at a disadvantage, given that the disengagement and non-attendance of many students who were as yet undiagnosed was partly due to mainstream learning environments not meeting their needs. For example, children with undiagnosed hearing impediments may be excluded from learning, and so disengage from schooling.

Use of restrictive practices and non-implementation of adjustments reinforce that awareness of obligations is a significant gap. Some families and carers reported significant
pressure from mainstreams school to move their child to a special school or setting, or that after a long wait, adjustments were not made for their child, or that if adjustments were made, they were unsatisfactory. NGOs and peak bodies substantiated these claims. Other families and carers had not been including in planning processes but had been pressured to sign off on plans made in their absence.

Evidence-based approaches and systems in special schools

Very few gaps were identified in these respects with regard to specials schools. The exceptions were that the verification processes required for eligibility for both functional and standard placement in a special school were characterised by some teachers, families and carers, if not by all stakeholders, as lengthy and expensive. Relatedly, there were again calls for a move to a needs-based funding model in this data. All stakeholder groups agree that the number of children with additional needs, as defined within the relevant legislation, far exceeds the proportion who will ever receive a formal diagnosis, for a variety of reasons. Access to a functional placement for some of these students occurs through a damaging process of escalation in behaviours, exclusions and suspensions as a ‘ticket’ to access requisite supports or settings. Some stakeholders suggest that students with challenging behaviours on functional placements in special schools could have their needs met in mainstream schools if they had the right support systems in place. Relatedly, there was widespread agreement that schools are allocating resources to manage students with challenging behaviours, so that students with equal needs in terms of learning support, but who are well-behaved, can be disadvantaged.

The key issue pertaining to accountability emerging from the consultation data was inconsistent approaches to use of EAPs. Families and carers described instances where the administration of EAPs can fall short of policy expectations, including where there is a lack of parental involvement and input in developing the plans, infrequent reviews and updates to goals, and an absence of systematic school to Department accountability mechanisms in place around these two concerns. Some respondents suggested that lodging EAPs in a central Departmental repository, or regular audits of the implementation and quality of supports and adjustments.

There was also no consistent approach identified for monitoring student learning and progress. More broadly, inconsistency in the instruments, tools and software used by
schools to monitor student learning and progress for students with additional needs was reported by a range of stakeholders, which adds to this situation. Patterns of progress for some students led some schools to seek guidance on which tools are best to capture more incremental and social and emotional gains, as well as more academic gains, or those related to life skills and vocational outcomes. All of these types of outcomes were important to students, their families and for school planning. Additionally, some families and carers saw a need for more systematic and frequent communication with schools on adjustments and progress on goals (e.g. emails, discussions, parent-teacher meetings, additional EAP meetings or use of communication books) and responsiveness to parental preferences for mode of communication. Others stressed that third party involvement in the EAP process, if disagreements cannot be resolved between families and schools, can be highly beneficial.

An online system was preferred by many as a way to support greater transparency and accountability for inclusive practice and student outcomes. It was noted by teachers especially, but also by families and carers, that this might be achieved through information about adjustments ‘following the student’ from school to school and across settings for smoother transitions. Other advantages identified include that EAP information could be regularly reviewed and stronger monitoring of outcomes might be used to inform and improve practice and to strengthen accountability.

Other commentary suggested that accountability might be enhanced by greater transparency regarding Department of Health and Department of Education roles, responsibilities and efforts. These comments relate to the consultation findings regarding system-wide collaboration also described in Appendix 7a, Strengthening shared decision making.

Conclusions

Analysis of data in this section indicates a need to develop stronger digital systems, supportive processes, and associated resources for schools to draw on in implementing the SSSM in determining eligibility, assessing needs, making educational adjustments and measuring learning and growth for students with additional needs. There is also scope to address capability gaps in use of data by schools to meet student needs. Improved data sharing would also help to improve support and outcomes for students. These gaps might
be closed by offering systematic access to data sharing, and stronger tools to support desired practices.

The analysis in this section has also suggested further effort be directed toward developing mechanisms to support enhanced consistency in the implementation of the inclusive education policy and guidelines for NT schools in practice. The SSSM would be strengthened through further initiatives to support its successful implementation. In particular, these would include initiatives like enhanced initial training for teachers, professional learning and a greater use of data (to inform and improve practice, strengthen accountability and transparency and inform future strategic planning).

Enhancing school-based staff access to data and other supports will help schools, teachers, and families and carers to make decisions that support student learning and growth. This would be assisted by agreement on a clear whole of government approach, with respect to information sharing on students with additional needs.
Appendix 8   NT Anti-Discrimination Act – Educational setting excerpts

The *Anti-Discrimination Act 2015 (NT)* proscribes ‘failure to accommodate special need’. This includes ‘making inadequate or inappropriate provision to accommodate the special need’ which is further defined in a way that echoes national legislation. Inadequacy or inappropriateness of provision is when ‘a person acts in a way which unreasonably fails to provide for the special need of another person if that other person has the special need because of an attribute’. Determining breaches depends on ‘all the relevant circumstances of the case’ including, but not limited to:

(a) the nature of the special need;
(b) the cost of accommodating the special need and the number of people who would benefit or be disadvantaged; and
(c) the financial circumstances of the person; and
(d) the disruption that accommodating the special need may cause; and
(e) the nature of any benefit or detriment to all persons concerned.

Furthermore, specific clauses relating to discrimination in education stipulate that:

(1) An educational authority shall not discriminate:

(a) by failing or refusing to accept a person’s application for admission as a student; or
(b) in refusing or rejecting a person’s admission as a student; or
(c) in the way in which a person’s application is processed; or
(d) in the arrangements made for, or the criteria used in, deciding who should be offered admission as a student; or
(e) in the terms and conditions on which a person is admitted as a student.

(2) An educational authority shall not discriminate:

(a) in any variation of the terms and conditions of a student’s enrolment; or
(b) by failing or refusing to grant, or limiting, access to any benefit arising from the enrolment that is supplied by the authority; or
(c) by excluding a student; or
(d) by treating a student less favourably in any way in connection with the student’s training or instruction.
A number of exemptions exist:

(1) An educational authority that operates, or proposes to operate, an educational institution wholly or mainly for students of a particular sex may exclude applicants who are not of that sex.

(2) An educational authority that operates, or proposes to operate, an educational institution in accordance with the doctrine of a particular religion may exclude applicants who are not of that religion.

(3) An educational authority that operates, or proposes to operate, an educational institution wholly or mainly for students who have a general or specific impairment may exclude applicants who do not have that impairment.