

WACSSO Submission Paper
2020 Review - Disability
Standards for Education
2005



Acknowledgments

WACSSO acknowledges parents as the first educators in their child's life. We celebrate and honour the diversity of families and recognise the vital role they play in supporting children and young people throughout their learning journeys.

This submission has been prepared with the help of Western Australian public school parents, Parents and Citizen Associations and school communities. WACSSO would like to thank those parents who have shared their personal stories and experiences of having a child with disability in the public education system, and for the passion and dedication they show in advocating for more accessible and inclusive education opportunities for all children.

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Who is WACSSO

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. WACSSO provides services and representation at State and National level to over 660 Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs). WACSSO is largely a volunteer organisation made up of a President and State Councillors (representatives) from geographically based electorates and, as such, the organisation has a wide representative reach across the state. WACSSO uses our strong networks with parents, carers and stakeholders in public education to inform our advocacy efforts. These connections allow us to highlight important issues for our affiliates, parents of children in public schools across Western Australia, as we strive to provide a collective voice¹.

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¹ WACSSO recognises the term “parent” to also include a child’s primary carer.

Introduction

The 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education allows WACSSO the opportunity to share the experiences of parents who have children with disability. Parents have the greatest understanding of the challenges their children face in their education journey, and are often required to advocate on their child's behalf in the school setting. It is imperative that the Australian Government actively seek feedback from parents and families; and use these insights to inform positive reforms to the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

Feedback from parents has highlighted the inequity that unfairly burdens students with disability. These inequities exist within a range of different areas, such as qualifications of Education Assistants; issues relating to transport; lack of capacity to provide specialised education; lack of senior secondary pathways; delays in support services; bullying and violence in schools; and a range of other areas. It is the purpose of the Standards to address these areas, however the voices of parents in public schools suggests shortfalls in the Standards, which will be highlighted in this submission.

The lack of knowledge parents have of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 is worrying. For the Standards to be effective they must be understood and embraced in school communities. The Standards are not readily accessible to parents. It is important for information about the Standards to be delivered in a diversity of ways so it is effectively communicated with people from different backgrounds throughout Australia. In this submission paper we will discuss our recent survey which highlighted this lack of knowledge amongst parents and make suggestions as to how the Disability Standards could be better promoted to parents.

Qualified Education Support Assistants

Section 7.2 of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 states that an education provider must take reasonable steps to ensure students have access to general and specialised support services. Feedback from WACSSO affiliates has highlighted concerns regarding the training and qualifications of Education Assistants. It is imperative that Education Assistants working with students with disability are equipped with the professional skills, knowledge and resources to provide the appropriate specialised support. We acknowledge that Education Assistants provide valuable support for students, however there are cases where the Education Assistant is not adequately qualified to deal with the complexities of an individual student's disability and their interaction with classroom dynamics. To address this, more resources must be allocated to ensure all staff are appropriately qualified to support students in their care in our schools. Too often the students with the most complex needs in our schools have the least qualified person in the classroom directing their education.

Currently in Western Australia there is no requirement for Education Assistants working with deaf students to hold a qualification in Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN) from National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. This is just one example where inadequate training of staff impacts access to education and restricts future opportunities for deaf students, contributing to lifelong deficits in employment, citizenship, and mental health. Added support and appropriately trained staff will work towards decreasing the disadvantages students face and increase their options to stay on at school and to access further training and/or employment when they leave school. It has been argued that the cost to be borne in training and employing appropriately qualified Education Assistants to support students with disability would result in undue financial hardship for the education provider, consideration should be given to the lifelong cost of sub-optimal education and the burden placed on individuals, families and society this results in.

Access to Essential Transport Services

Section 7.2.3 of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 states "If a specialised support service is necessary for the student to be able to participate in the activities for which he or she is enrolled, and is of a kind that is not provided by the provider, the provider must take reasonable steps to facilitate the provision of the service to the student by another person or agency," feedback suggests the facilitation of these services is not administered correctly in relation to students with disability receiving much needed transport to their schools. For example, in Western Australia, School Bus Services, who are administered by the Public Transport Authority, are responsible

for providing students with disability free transport assistance when travelling to and from school. Parents have reported instances where a lack of facilitation to certain disabilities has resulted in a student missing out on the services. In one specific case, a vehicle contracted by the School Bus Service did not have the necessary requirements to appropriately facilitate a student in a wheelchair which lead to that student missing out on the service. WACSSO expects that if the Standards were effective, such instances would not occur. In regards to our affiliate's experience, WACSSO believes reasonable steps were not taken to facilitate this student, this is contrary to Section 7.2.3 where the use of the term "take reasonable steps" is used. This term is poorly defined and too open for interpretation and as a consequence can lead to students missing out on much needed services and assistance. We call on State and Federal Governments to address these issues by eliminating gaps in the Standards that contribute to these shortfalls.

Another issue highlighted by WACSSO affiliates was the lack of flexibility of the School Bus Services transport services. We are aware of instances where families who utilised the bus pickup services moved to a different house within the same suburb, however, the student's transport service would not include the new address in their pickup route. This lack of flexibility burdens families as it can restrict choices such as moving house, and often makes it harder for young people with disability to receive the support they need. When striving for equitable education experiences and outcomes for students with disability it is important that the Standards reflect and understand the unique difficulties faced by families.

Violence and Bullying

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, as well as many other reports, clearly show that students with disability are at far greater risk of being victims of violence and bullying while at school. This shows that the Disability Standards for Education 2005 are not effective in this area and need to provide stronger protection for students with disability.

WACSSO calls upon Government to acknowledge and be active in addressing disability specific bullying. Government has a responsibility to ensure that students are emotionally and physically safe and secure in their school environments, free from abuse, bullying, discrimination and undue risk.

The Standards require an education provider to develop and implement strategies and programs to prevent harassment or victimisation of a student with disability. For schools to do this well they must be equipped to understand what disability specific bullying is and will then require the expertise and resources to address disability specific bullying.

Secondary Pathways in School

Feedback WACSSO has received highlights shortfalls in the Disability Standards for Education 2005 effectiveness in areas of participation, curriculum development, accreditation and delivery, particularly when regarding senior secondary pathways for students with disability.

When most students enter their final years of secondary schooling, they have greater access to career and educational pathways, however this is often not the case for students with disability. Feedback from WACSSO affiliates suggests the access to desired Vocational Educational Training (VET) and Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) courses is often less attainable for students with disability, as these pathways do not always have the necessary support in place to meet needs of the student. As an example, we recently received feedback from a parent whose child's ATAR subject selection options were reduced due to their disability. In this scenario it seemed as though it was the rigid and competitive structure of the ATAR pathway, which lead to the student missing out on their desired subject selection. This issue could be addressed with a more comprehensive support structure for students with disability in relation to curriculum development and participation. For example, offering greater flexibility in senior secondary pathways to meet the needs of students with disability.

The Standards should be Familiar and Accessible for Parents and the School Community

A survey recently conducted by WACSSO identified a lack of awareness of the Disability Standards for Education 2005. Feedback from our network of parents showed that of the parents who had a child or children with disability, 54% did not know the Standards existed, 35% had heard about the Standards but did not have a good understanding of what they are for, and only 11% had a good understanding of the Standards. In addition, the feedback showed that many of these parents were having issues in areas that the Standards addressed¹.

In addition, our survey highlighted what parents who did not have a child with disability knew about the Standards, their observations of issues parents who had a child with disability experienced, and their expectations for entire school communities to offer greater assistance to students with disability. From the responses to our survey,

¹ WACSSO's 'Disability Standards for Education 2005 - What do parents and carers know about the Standards' survey received 107 responses and was open from 02/09/2020 - 18/09/2020.

65% of parents did not have a child with a disability, and 36% of these parents suggested that their schools needed a better understand of the Standards. The survey also showed that 63% of parents who did not have a child with disability did not know anything of the Standards. This feedback shows that parents and school communities are calling for stronger support of students with disability and their families.

WACSSO calls on the Federal Government to address this issue of accessibility by better communicating the Disability Standards to parents and the school community; and increase the knowledge and understanding of the Standards in the community through targeted campaigns and promotion. It is crucial that the Disability Standards are well known in school and education settings. Knowledge of the Disability Standards would provide parents a solid foundation from which to advocate for their child and increase access to an equitable education.

Government must work towards stronger collaboration with parent networks such as WACSSO and other State and Territory bodies representing parents of children in Government schools to assist in the dissemination of information relating to the Disability Standards. It is also important that there is a greater variety of communication channels when delivering information to help guide parents through the Standards.

The Standards are not Reaching or Representing a Variety of Audiences

WACSSO's recent survey to parents highlighted the inconsistency of experiences relating to the support received by children with disability. Some parents mentioned that they received excellent support, while others spoke of their struggles to receive necessary assistance in relation to their child's education. This suggests the Disability Standards for Education 2005 are not effectively working as a framework to ensure students with disability are able to receive a high-quality education experience and all that the Australian Public Education system has to offer. WACSSO calls on State and Federal Governments to address these inconsistencies by ensuring that the Standards provide strong representation and protection from discrimination for students with a disability and are properly implemented on a national level.

Summary

WACSSO welcomes the opportunity to play a role in supporting Government to promote the Standards. Our extensive parent and citizens network across public schools in Western Australia, and our proven relationship with education stakeholders' places WACSSO in a prime position to assist the Government by ensuring that the Disability Standards communications are appropriate, informative and empower parents to partner with schools to ensure children and young people living with disability are given every opportunity to reach their potential.