

Submission on Recommendations for Inclusive Education

Overview

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW (the “P&C Federation”) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Communities and Justice’s review to inform the government’s response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (the “Report”). The P&C Federation acknowledges the detailed recommendations aimed at promoting inclusive education for students with disabilities contained at Volume 7 of the Report. These recommendations, covering legal entitlements **(7.1)**, anti-discrimination measures and complaint management **(7.2, 7.10)**, adjustments and supports **(7.3)**, active participation **(7.4)** and funding models **(7.12)**, among others, are pivotal for fostering an inclusive educational environment for all students.

The P&C Federation is a representative voice for parents and students in public education in New South Wales. We have more than 1800 member associations, 5000 association executive members, and represent the 791,000 public school students and their parents. This makes the P&C Federation one of the largest volunteer-based organisations within Australia. Our experience of the issues within education is broad and carries with it the voice of a substantial body of parents and carers.

The P&C Federation supports inclusive education for all students in all school sectors, including students with a disability. In particular, the Federation recognises the substantial positive benefits for both students with and without a disability that an inclusive educational environment can provide. Just as a student with a disability may benefit from learning alongside their non-disabled peers, non-disabled students acquire valuable benefits and perspectives from learning alongside their disabled peers.

As a core initial matter, the P&C Federation believes that any reform in inclusive education must be paired with real and meaningful adjustments to the government funding available to public schools. It is well-known that our State’s public schools are underfunded. Some reviews place the scale of underfunding for a single year in New South Wales at \$1.9 billion. The failure to fully fund public schools prevents schools from offering the full range of supports that students with a disability require as well as those necessary to provide a high-quality education to the entire student population. Attempts at reform in the area of inclusive education will not succeed in improving the educational experiences and outcomes for students with a disability if they are not enacted alongside full and adequate funding for the government school sector in general.

In addition, the P&C Federation believes that all reform in the area of inclusive education must be enacted in a sector-blind manner to ensure that equitable treatment and inclusive education are a core goal across all systems and sectors in New South Wales schools, and that data, reporting, and best-practice guidance reflect the experiences of all school sectors.

Against this backdrop, we offer the following specific response to several recommendations in the Report.

Supported recommendations.

The P&C Federation supports, in general terms, the various measures outlined in Recommendations 7.1 through 7.13, and Recommendation 7.15. We address some of these more specifically below.

- **Legal Amendments and Anti-Discrimination Measures (Recommendations 7.1 and 7.2):** The P&C Federation supports the amendment of education acts to ensure students with disabilities can enrol in local mainstream schools, alongside the necessary funding to support these legal changes. These amendments are essential for removing barriers and guaranteeing equal access to education. Implementing these recommendations successfully requires substantial financial resources to make the necessary adjustments and accommodations in schools. The P&C Federation also believes that for this reform to be successful in providing the full range of educational opportunities to students with a disability, the right to enrol must apply equally to all school sectors that receive public funds.
- **Support and Adjustments for Inclusive Education (Recommendation 7.3):** We agree with developing guidelines for reasonable adjustments to support students with disabilities. This approach aligns with our belief that every student deserves an education that caters to their individual needs. Adequate funding will be crucial to equip schools and systems with the resources needed to implement these adjustments effectively.
- **Participation in School Communities (Recommendation 7.4):** The P&C Federation supports the call for co-location of mainstream and non-mainstream schools wherever feasible and a strong commitment by schools and sectors to create opportunities for interchange between students enrolled in each setting. Where students and their families elect, for whatever reason, to learn in a non-mainstream environment, every effort must be made to have these students participate in educational, cultural, sporting, recreational, and celebratory events with their peers.
- **Funding for Inclusive Education (Recommendation 7.12):** The P&C Federation strongly endorses the review and adjustment of funding models to reflect the actual costs of supporting students with disabilities. This recommendation is vital for ensuring schools have the financial capacity to provide an inclusive and high-quality education to all students. We believe, however, that these recommendations do not go far enough. Adjustments to needs-based loadings and the alignment of funding to levels of adjustment are important, but if a student with a need for adjustments elects to attend an otherwise underfunded public school, the quality of his or her educational experience will remain compromised. Full equity and inclusion for students with a disability must be underpinned by a fully funded, high performing school system.
- **An alternative approach to non-mainstream schools and support units (Recommendation 7.15):** The P&C Federation has carefully considered the DRC Report's recommendations 7.14 ("Phasing out and ending special/segregated education") and 7.15 ("An alternative approach"). As noted above, the P&C Federation supports the creation of legislation that ensures that all students have an absolute right to attend a fully funded mainstream school if that is their choice. In light of the current reality of under-funded and under-resourced schools, we believe that Recommendation 7.15 represents the more realistic approach at present. While many parents and students with a disability will elect a mainstream school, some students and their families will nevertheless prefer a specialised educational setting for

purely individual reasons. Retaining the option for a non-mainstream school thus preserves the element of choice for those students and their families. We emphasize that under no circumstances should attendance at a non-mainstream school be involuntary. The choice to attend a non-mainstream school must be borne of a free choice. We further emphasize that retaining non-mainstream options for education must be paired with and operate alongside all of the principles of Recommendation 7.15:

- All students must have an absolute legislated right to attend a mainstream school of their choice.
- All schools in all sectors selected by a student with a disability must have access to robust funding and local supports sufficient to address students' individual needs.
- Special-purpose schools should be co-located or in close proximity to a mainstream school wherever feasible; and
- Partnerships and regular interchange between mainstream and non-mainstream schools should be the mandated expectation among schools in all school sectors.

Conclusion

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations reaffirms its commitment to inclusive education, recognising that the successful implementation of the recommended measures is intrinsically linked to adequate and specific funding. As we advocate for a phased and well-funded approach to inclusive education, it is imperative that financial commitments are secured to realise the vision of an education system that is equitable, accessible, and fully inclusive for all students.

The P&C Federation urges policymakers to consider the crucial role of funding in achieving these goals, and prioritising its delivery above all other measures, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential within the NSW public education system.