



## Discussion Paper #1

# "Intervening in the Early Years of Schooling for Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs"

## Translating evidence and professional wisdom to inform policy and practice

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities and additional learning needs, are provided with quality education. The challenge is to ensure Victoria's schools are inclusive and target appropriate intervention at the earliest opportunity. The Government has a challenge to continuously improve and deliver a high quality education service to students with disabilities and additional learning needs. It is hoped that this paper will contribute towards meeting this goal and addressing this challenge.

### Why is this issue important?

The research is clear that the health, development and wellbeing of the child as well as the functioning of their families are shaped by the environment. What happens to children in the early years has consequences right through the course of their lives.

Where children have disabilities and/or additional learning needs, it is important that these are identified at an early stage and that identification leads directly to effective early intervention and support for families and children.

'It is not only disabled children's impairments which determine the quality of life, but also disabling attitudes and a disabling environment, which can result in unequal access to community services and facilities. Effective intervention strengthens the ability of families to provide effective support to their children, and improves outcomes for the whole family'. (*Every Child Matters*, Department for Education and Skills, UK 2004).

The overarching theme of the National Reform Agenda (COAG 2006) is enhancing workforce productivity and participation through regulatory reform, competition policy and improving the nation's human capital.

The human capital stream of the National Reform Agenda focuses on improving outcomes in early childhood, health, and education and training.

### What does the evidence and professional wisdom tell us?

Research has established that brain development begins well before birth and that during the prenatal period the brain needs protection from environmental hazards which can be detrimental to its development. Appropriate care, nutrition and stimulation affect the actual wiring of neural pathways which are essential to development and learning.

Neurological development in early childhood is a factor influencing health, learning and wellbeing. In the early years, safe and supportive learning environments provide opportunities for play, parental involvement, exploration, discovery, rich language development and experimentation.

Cost benefit studies show that prevention and early intervention are more cost effective, both economically and at a personal level, than treatment later.

Gaps in performance at school open up early and stay mostly constant or increase after 8 years of age. Beyond that age school environments and interventions are less effective in reducing these differences.

The continuing correlation between children with disabilities and additional learning needs and exclusions, low attainment, not being in education, employment or training, and even youth crime, means that there are significant long term economic and social costs involved in failing to intervene at the earliest possible opportunity.

## **How do we translate the research evidence into policy and practice?**

The education system needs to operate on a system based on identification and intervention in the early years, where schools are resourced and staff equipped to meet those needs. The system needs to provide for a broad range of suitable high quality provision to ensure all children are healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being.

Provision of education for all children and particularly those children with disabilities and additional learning needs should promote multi-agency involvement across the key transition phases and through adulthood.

Children with disabilities have generally been categorised and labelled by their disabilities being defined in medical terms. We need to view children with disabilities as having sets of capabilities and determine educational provision accordingly.

The recent Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development report, *Equity in Education: Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages – Statistics and Indicators*, examined the practices of OECD countries in relation to the provision of additional resources to help students with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages to access school curriculum and benefit as fully as possible from their education.

The report notes the international trend towards inclusive education is being driven by an agenda comprising human rights issues, equity, parental involvement and social cohesion. There is a growing understanding among OECD countries that the concept of special educational needs implies that student failures to make adequate progress in learning are, in large part, the responsibility of the school and cannot be viewed as being caused wholly by the 'disability' diagnosis.

### **Issues**

There are many opportunities for early years intervention to make a difference to the lives of children and young people. The evidence shows the most effective time to intervene is early childhood, including the antenatal period.

The school system should better target their intervention in the early years of schooling under the premise that these years are the foundation years for later learning and development. Children with disabilities and additional learning needs should be supported through the transition phases across the education system from early years to post 16 and into adulthood.

This can be achieved through collaboration between all schools, including special schools and children's service providers, working with parents and children to reduce the negative impact of transition between key stages such as the transition between kindergarten and primary school.

There is a universal push for more effective measurement and accountability for progress made by all students including those with disabilities and additional learning needs, and for a renewed emphasis on having personalised learning plans developed and reviewed by teachers and schools. WA articulates their educational plans as an 'ongoing plan of action' that identifies the student's academic, physical, social and emotional needs.

Most jurisdictions in Australia are heading towards the development of robust plans that clearly articulate the supports required and the educational adjustments needed to deliver improved outcomes.

Similarly, the trend is towards determining a student's educational needs and the assistance package required to ensure a fairer and more efficient allocation of resources.

The general trend is to engage with other government agencies to ensure greater information sharing and better assessment processes to deliver earlier intervention. Early identification and support is central to improving the outcomes for all young people including those with disabilities and additional learning needs.

Delivering services to children with disabilities and additional learning needs is a corporate responsibility. Improvements in outcomes for children and their families can only be achieved through mutually respectful partnerships between parents, professionals and agencies working with children and their families.

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