



Discussion Paper #2

"Strengthening the Links Between Resource Allocation and Educational Need"

Translating research and professional wisdom to inform policy and practice

Improving the learning outcomes of every student is the Victorian Government's key objective for education.

With over 540,000 students in more than 1,600 government schools, the diversity of the student population is recognised and celebrated.

This Government is committed to delivering an inclusive education system that ensures all students have access to a quality education to meet their diverse needs.

A vital component of this commitment is the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD), which provides a range of supports and initiatives to assist the 16,000 government school students with a disability and additional learning needs.

Victoria has developed a strong reputation for the way in which the needs of students with disabilities are met. However, it is essential to continue to build on the significant achievements and assess and reshape the PSD to not only meet the needs of current students but future students as well.

Why is this issue important?

Under section 32 of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, education providers must comply with the *Disability Standards for Education*. To comply, an education provider must make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate a student with a disability. An adjustment is a measure or action taken to assist a student with a disability to participate in education and training on the same basis as other students. An adjustment is reasonable if it does this while taking into account the student's learning needs and balancing the interests of all parties affected, including those of the student with the disability, the education provider, staff and other students.

All students do not have the same level of need. Variable levels of resourcing can help to ensure that

there is equitable opportunity for all students to achieve common educational objectives. Government funding policies must ensure that no student is left without access to adequate resources to meet the expectations held for other students. (*National Report on Schooling in Australia 2002*)

Designing new resource allocation mechanisms for students with disabilities and additional learning needs is an area of major attention both nationally and internationally.

The majority of educational jurisdictions have, to date, determined funding based on an assessment of a student's inabilities or deficits. This mechanism has resulted in a 'more deficits = more funding' model that directs the attention of schools, parents and administrators towards determining and providing evidence for a student's disability, rather than a clear focus on educational need.

What does the evidence and professional wisdom tell us?

The recent Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 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 describes disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages in three categories:

- Category A – organic difficulties, such as physical disabilities
- Category B – learning difficulties but unclear if due to organic problems or social disadvantage
- Category C – difficulties arising from social disadvantage.

The report categorises additional resources in terms of:

- personnel resources;
- material resources; or financial resources.

The report notes the international trend towards inclusive education that 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 their learning are, in large part, the responsibility of the school and cannot be viewed as being caused wholly by the 'disability' diagnosis.

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

This research provides the platform for the generation of new mechanisms for determining the variability of supports that are provided to schools to effectively cater for students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

While the existing mechanism for determining the provision of funding for students with disabilities and additional learning needs has been proven to be adequate in Victoria, research into world's best practice reveals a broad trend towards an assessment of students based on the identification and assessment of individual learning abilities. Moreover, that the provision of funding and supports for certain students and/or cohorts are best determined at the local or cluster level.

New mechanisms could, for example, consist of an 'abilities index'. An abilities index would measure the capabilities of students and the educational adjustments they require.

This would lead to the determination of achievable outcomes and a clear assessment of the supports that

are required to deliver high quality teaching and generate improved educational outcomes.

In addition, a new mechanism could facilitate decision making at the local level (school or cluster based). This would utilise specific knowledge of the need and capacity to cater for students of various learning abilities.

Issues

There are many opportunities and benefits for the implementation of a new resource allocation mechanism. From a policy perspective, the educational landscape for students with disabilities and additional learning needs would shift away from an emphasis on disability and towards the individual capacities and educational needs of students.

To ensure an emphasis on continuous improvement for the education of these students, policy makers could consider options such as: the development of schools deemed 'Centres of Excellence' – sites with a proven track-record that can impart skills and strategies to teachers and school leaders. In addition, the emergence of more robust and detailed data (student profiles, systemic trends) has the potential to inform the development of alternative resourcing mechanisms for particular cohorts of students, such as school-based allocations.

The next potential step in the development of a new funding mechanism is extended research and modeling of an abilities index: an index that caters for the diversity within the Victorian government school system, and effectively accommodates the needs and aspirations of students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

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