



## Discussion Paper #4

# “Building System Capacity to Improve Educational Outcomes”

A key objective of the Victorian government school system is to deliver continuous improvements in teaching and learning outcomes for all students.

The *Blueprint for Government Schools* sets out a clear vision for schooling that identifies the following priorities:

1. recognising and responding to diverse student needs
2. building the skills of the education workforce to enhance the teaching/learning relationship
3. continuous improvement for schools.

By building the capacity of our workforce, focusing on the teaching/learning relationship and promoting new policies and directions, we can enrich the delivery of education in every school.

Mainstream and special schools in Victoria have developed strong reputations for the way in which they effectively cater for students with disabilities and additional learning needs and enhance their educational outcomes.

However, it is essential to develop strategies and initiatives that promote continuous improvement in teaching and learning at the classroom, school and system levels.

These strategies should be aimed at both the current and future teaching workforce, thus positioning the Victorian government school system to not only meet the needs of existing students but future students as well.

### Why is this issue important?

The Victorian Government believes that all government school students are entitled to an excellent education and a genuine opportunity to succeed, irrespective of the school they attend, where they live or their home background.

Improvements in the collection and analysis of data pertaining to students with disabilities and additional learning needs, shows that:

- There is a high concentration of poor outcomes in some schools and regions.
- Within a given school there are frequently high variations in outcomes between classes. This points to the centrality of teaching-learning relationships.
- There are variations in outcomes between schools with similar student populations (*Blueprint for Government Schools*).

Policy and program decisions must recognise the diverse educational needs of students in the system, as these continue to evolve alongside Victoria’s changing socioeconomic and demographic profile. There is a need for strategies to be flexible so that they can meet both local and system-wide needs.

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

Research into patterns of distribution by disability and socio economic disadvantage have revealed major variances in the prevalence of disability across the Victorian metropolitan and non-metropolitan educational regions.

In 2005/06 metropolitan regions had a greater proportion of students with autism spectrum disorder and physical disabilities, while country Victoria had a greater proportion of students with intellectual disabilities.

Moreover, metropolitan regions had (on average) a higher percentage of students with moderate to severe disabilities, while country Victoria had (on average) a higher percentage of students with mild disabilities.

In 2005/06 patterns of disadvantage were also evident across educational regions and schools. The research revealed that metropolitan regions could be broadly characterised as having fewer disadvantaged schools, with more students and a more experienced teaching profile. By contrast, country Victoria could broadly be defined as having more schools with greater underlying disadvantage, a smaller number of students and less experienced teaching profile.

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

This research (and the patterns of disability and disadvantage) provides the platform for the generation of new strategies and initiatives for responding to educational need: responses that are underpinned by data and tailored to local and regional requirements.

The research demonstrates that while there is scope for system-wide policy responses, the most effective mechanisms for improving learning outcomes should be based on ground-up developments and innovations, local partnerships between schools, a sharing of curriculum tools and resources and specialised professional learning opportunities.

Policy responses could, for example, consist of partnership arrangements between special and mainstream schools. With 78 special schools across Victoria, and the majority located within close proximity to mainstream schools, leading practitioners from both settings could convene to reflect on their teaching practice and strategies to cater for the individual educational needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

In addition, purpose-built teaching or tertiary institutions could be supported to develop and deliver professional learning initiatives that are tailored to specific educational needs or disability categories. By employing web-based and classroom-based components, for example, practitioners would have the opportunity to both reflect on world's best practice and partake in

hands-on activities, the most effective learning tools for teachers.

The intended outcome of the initiatives proposed above is the development of schools defined as 'Centres of Excellence'. Focused funding could be provided to such schools to benchmark best practice and coordinate professional learning initiatives, secondments for practitioners from a variety of settings, and the development of evidence-based curriculum tools and resources.

### **Issues**

Across Victoria there are already numerous innovations in the domain of teaching and learning for students with disabilities and additional learning needs. Schools and clusters are working in effective partnerships to continually enhance educational outcomes for this cohort of students.

The challenge for policy makers is to capture such innovations and deliver the resourcing and policy frameworks to promote and extend them across the state.

By introducing students and school-focused funding, coupled with incentives for schools and practitioners to be involved in building system-capacity enterprises, Victoria has the opportunity to extend on our achievements and position itself as a leader in the provision of education for students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

***Student Wellbeing Branch  
Office of School Education  
Department of Education and Training***



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