

The Ministerial Working Group on the
Program for Students with Disabilities

Promoting Inclusive Education

August 2005

Government response

Minister's foreword

The diversity of the student population is recognised and celebrated within Victorian schools. The Victorian Government is committed to delivering an inclusive education system that ensures that all students have access to a quality education that meets their diverse needs.

I welcome the report from the Ministerial Working Group on the Program for Students with Disabilities. The Working Group has produced an insightful report on options for addressing some of the major challenges facing the Program and I would like to thank the members for their time, commitment and advice in the preparation of their report.

Victoria has developed an enviable reputation internationally for the way in which the needs of students with disabilities are met. It is important that we continue to build on our significant achievements and the Working Group's advice will help to ensure that best practice is reflected in programs for students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

The Government's ongoing commitment to improving the educational outcomes for those students and to sustaining an inclusive education framework is underpinned by strategies that ensure inclusive practices are in place in schools. Key strategies in schools include:

- providing parents with a choice of the learning environment that best provides for the development of their child
- supporting students and their families to make the transition from preschool to school, and from school to higher education, training and employment
- building effective partnerships between the school, the family, the students and the school community
- engaging students and parents in programming and planning decisions
- supporting students to access programs that enable them to pursue achievable pathways
- ensuring that the expertise of professionals working in mainstream and special schools is maintained and developed
- promoting interagency and interdepartmental cooperation in order to provide the best outcomes for all students.

In response to the advice of the Working Group, a Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs will be established to provide further advice on ways to ensure that students with disabilities and additional learning needs have access to a broad range of general and targeted programs that support them to achieve their potential.

The Working Group's report provides twelve options for action in relation to the broad areas of policy commitment, resource distribution and quality assurance. The Government's response supports ten of the options and has identified actions for their implementation. We believe that two of the options are already being adequately addressed.

I look forward to receiving advice from the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs and will continue to work with parents, teachers, professional and support staff and community members to ensure students with disabilities and students with additional learning needs reach their potential.

Jacinta Allan MP
Minister for Education Services

1. Options for Policy Commitment

Option 1.1

Publish a Ministerial Statement on the government's commitment to students with disabilities and learning difficulties, supported by publications of good practice within government schools.

Position

a) The publication of a Ministerial Statement is not supported.

In the Blueprint for Government Schools the Bracks Government has already outlined a commitment to recognising and responding to the diverse needs of all students. The creation of the Ministerial Working Group on the Program for Students with Disabilities and the actions detailed in this report are further evidence of the Government's commitment to improving educational outcomes for all students.

The Government is committed to the fundamental principle that all young people and all communities in Victoria have a right to a quality education, and that it is the primary role of the government school system to deliver such an education. Through the Blueprint for Government Schools the Government has already established a clear vision for schooling that encompasses all students and recognises that the learning needs of all students are not the same.

The Government provides significant resources to schools through the Student Resource Package and provides additional targeted supports to schools for use with all students, including those supported through the Program for Students with Disabilities. These resources and other supports provide schools with the flexibility to meet diverse student and community needs and to achieve improved learning outcomes by aligning resources to individual student learning needs. This resource flexibility at the local level operates within a context of government policy that commits schools to inclusive practices and to recognising and responding to the individual learning needs of all students.

b) The publication of good practice is supported.

Action

The suggestion that publications of good practice be provided to schools is supported and will happen on a regular basis through materials provided on a Student Wellbeing page to be incorporated in Education Times, and will be pursued through the *Knowledge Bank*, an internet based knowledge sharing resource for Victorians in education and training. The need to celebrate excellent work in schools and new emerging research into most promising practices of educating students with disabilities and additional learning needs is essential and the Department of Education and Training will continue with its commitment to identify and disseminate examples of promising practice.

Timeframe

Ongoing.

Option 1.2

Encourage and mentor research partnerships between schools, clusters, networks and Universities with adequate resourcing.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to pursuing best practice and recognises the value of evidence-based decision making and the need for ongoing research to identify effective

processes and practices to support the developmental learning of all students. It also supports action research in schools supported by external agencies and encourages networks of schools to conduct research into the effectiveness of the programs. The Department of Education and Training, through the Office of Learning and Teaching, produces *Research eLert*, a web-based tool that explores teaching and learning themes in current research and theory. This could provide a further avenue for disseminating research into effective ways to promote the learning of students with disabilities and students with additional learning needs.

Action

This option will be referred to the Department of Education and Training for further development then referred to the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs for oversight.

Timeframe

To be established once this proposal is further developed.

Option 1.3

Strengthen central management unit with appropriate personnel.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to establishing appropriate expertise within the Department of Education and Training to ensure that its policies and programs for students with disabilities and additional learning needs are delivered efficiently and effectively. There has been a restructuring of the School System Reform Division and a General Manager with a specific focus on the redevelopment of programs for students with disabilities and additional learning needs has been appointed. This refocusing ensures that appropriate expertise is available to support the Government's improvement agenda. An Assistant General Manager, Student Wellbeing, has recently been appointed. Additional positions are under consideration within the Division and new personnel will be progressively appointed over the next year. In the interim, expertise is being extended by obtaining advice from external experts locally, interstate and internationally.

Action

The Department of Education and Training will pursue the appointment of staff with appropriate expertise and undertake other action as necessary to strengthen the Department's capacity to identify, develop and manage statewide initiatives and programs and work effectively with Regional offices, schools and stakeholder groups. The Assistant General Manager, Student Wellbeing, will work with staff to develop a comprehensive professional plan for the Student Wellbeing branch.

Timeframe

2005 and ongoing as needs arise.

Option 1.4

Establish a reference/advisory group to monitor implementation and provide advice to the Minister and Department.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to working with groups and individuals who can support the implementation of its policies and programs. It considers that an expert group could provide

valuable advice to the Minister for Education Services and the Department of Education and Training on the implementation of policy and programs. It will establish a Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs to perform this function. The MAC would be expected to provide timely and expert advice on strategic policy directions in relation to the Program for Students with Disabilities, the Language Disorder Program as well as for students with additional learning needs and guide system implementation of agreed options identified by the Ministerial Working Group. It could also oversee projects referred to it by the Minister for Education Services or the Department of Education and Training.

Action

The Minister for Education Services will establish a Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs.

Timeframe

The Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs will be established during Term 3 2005.

2. Options for Resource Distribution

Option 2.1

Continue with a separate Language Disorder Program by providing a framework to regular schools supported by:

- **A Regional Language Development coordinator**
- **Professional development**
- **Established networks**
- **A defined school allocation based on a pre-determined budget and the number of students in regular schools meeting the criteria.**

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to ensuring that all schools and networks are supported to implement the Language Disorder Program. There is support for ensuring that the Language Disorder Program is coordinated at the Regional level.

Action

The Department of Education and Training has established a Language Disorder Reference Group to further enhance the current support available to networks of schools by sharing resources, best practice and professional development strategies across the State.

Regional Offices will continue to support the delivery of the Language Disorder Program in every region across established networks of schools.

Regional Directors will continue to develop Regional Implementation Plans for the delivery of the Language Disorder Program. This model provides the flexibility for each Regional Director to coordinate the delivery of a Program that meets the diverse needs of students within their region.

The Department of Education and Training will further develop the Language Disorder Program developed by Dr John Munroe and Regional facilitators. Regional facilitators will continue to support schools to implement the new Language Disorder Program.

The Department of Education and Training will develop a new funding model that will provide all schools with program funding to deliver the Language Disorder Program to students with additional language needs.

In addition, students with Severe Language Disorder together with critical educational needs will be supported by individual funding allocations to their schools. Resources are provided to ensure all schools have the capacity to support students with additional language needs.

The Department of Education and Training will develop a Language Disorder Program Handbook that will be distributed to schools in Term 3, 2005.

Timeframe

The Language Disorder Reference Group has been established.

Details of the new funding model will be provided to schools in conjunction with the Student Resource Package in September 2005.

The Language Disorder Program Handbook will be distributed in Term 3 2005.

Option 2.2

Contract experts to redefine criteria for students with severe language disorders and critical educational need. Students to be resourced by individual allocations where critical educational need is demonstrated at funding level 3 and above. A school based assessment tool for all other students funded under the Language Disorder Program would also be developed.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to ensuring that appropriate criteria are used when determining the levels of support to be provided for students with severe language disorders and critical educational need and that eligible students receive individual funding allocations.

Action

The Department of Education and Training has commissioned an expert review panel, in partnership with the internationally renowned Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute, to develop revised criteria for students with Severe Language Disorder and critical educational need.

The Department of Education and Training has developed a Language Disorder Program Handbook outlining the revised criteria, and the procedures for making applications for individual finding. The Handbook will also outline a range of assessment tools that can be utilised by teachers and special educators to assist in the identification of students who may require additional language support.

Timeframe

The expert review panel will report in Term 3 2005.

The Language Disorder Program Handbook will be distributed in Term 3 2005.

Option 2.3

Review the other six criteria areas with accompanying measures and incidences of population.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to ensuring that the criteria for identifying educational and support needs are fair and reflect the latest knowledge in this domain. The eligibility criteria for the Program for Students with Disabilities has not been reviewed since 1994. In taking account of new tests, better diagnosis and better understanding of a range of disabilities this review of the eligibility criteria will ensure consistency of assessment and support for all students.

Action

The Department of Education and Training in partnership with leading experts in the field has commenced the task of reviewing the criteria for identifying disability levels and support needs with initial advice being obtained on national incidences of disability.

The Department of Education and Training following consultation with the Department of Human Services and external experts in the field of epidemiology will determine the revised eligibility criteria.

Timeframe

The revision of eligibility criteria for the Program for Students with Disabilities will be completed for implementation in the 2007 Annual Round.

Option 2.4

Conduct a review of the existing Educational Needs Questionnaire (ENQ). In order to do this, relevant and appropriate individuals/groups should be engaged with a commitment to model the outcomes in order to measure the potential impact on students.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to ensuring that the educational needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs are appropriately identified and responded to regardless of the educational setting chosen by parents for their child.

Action

The Department of Education and Training will engage appropriate experts to undertake a review of the Educational Needs Questionnaire. This will assist to determine the level of additional support required through the Program for Students with Disabilities.

Timeframe

The outcomes of the review and a new Educational Needs Questionnaire will be trialled in 2006 for implementation in the 2007 Annual Round process.

Option 2.5

There should be a separation of the assessment process so that those personnel involved in the assessment of support for particular students with disabilities are not also providing that support. State-wide outsourcing of assessments would address this concern.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to ensuring that those engaged in the processes of identifying levels of support required to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities are not also those responsible for the delivery of such support and endorses the proposal to separate the responsibility for these functions.

Such an action will also enable program support personnel to more fully focus on processes for improving program planning and delivery within schools and for improving the outcomes experienced by students with disabilities and with additional learning needs.

Action

The Department of Education and Training will appoint independent, external provider/s with appropriate expertise to undertake assessments of students with disabilities across the state.

The external provider will be required to trial this new approach for two terms. The outcome of the trial and evaluation will inform the outsourcing of future assessments for the Program for Students with Disabilities.

Timeframe

The new assessment process will be trialled in Term 4 2005 and Term 1 2006 for the assessment of students under the Intellectual Disability and the revised Severe Language Disorder criteria of the Language Disorder Program. It is intended that statewide outsourcing for the above two categories will be fully implemented in 2006. An evaluation will occur following the trial.

Option 2.6

Research the impact of resourcing special schools at a weighted mean for a set (three year) period.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to seeking evidence of the impact of the resourcing arrangement for special schools and understands that the research into funding models will provide the Department of Education and Training with a sound basis for considering options in relation to resourcing policies and practices.

Action

The Department of Education and Training will develop a research brief and work closely with the Principals Association of Specialist Schools (PASS) and other stakeholders to undertake this research.

Timeframe

Research will commence Term 1 2006 and be completed in Term 3 2006.

Option 2.7

Establish a research project to compare funding models overseas and in other states of Australia.

Position

This option is supported.

The Government is committed to learning from other systems and thereby building the local knowledge base and considers that an analysis of various overseas and interstate funding models is likely to provide the Department of Education and Training with information to help with the review of resource policies and practices. The challenges we are facing in ensuring that our schools and communities are inclusive are ones that governments everywhere are facing. The Government is committed to ensuring that students, including those with disabilities and with additional learning needs, are provided with a quality education and the findings from this project are likely to contribute to the meeting of this goal.

Action

The Department of Education and Training will develop a research brief and commission a research project to review and compare interstate and international funding models in relation to students with disabilities.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs will guide and monitor this research and provide advice to the Minister on potential future funding models.

Timeframe

Research will commence Term 1 2006 and be completed in Term 3 2006.
The Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs will prepare advice on potential future funding models in Term 1 2007.

3. Options for Quality Assurance

Option 3.1

Develop and implement a Strategic Plan to build the capacity of the education profession to provide inclusive educational practices across all schools in Victoria, e.g. strengthening of individual learning plans, program support group guidelines.

Position

This option is not supported.

The Government is committed to improving the educational outcomes for students with disabilities and to sustaining an inclusive education framework. This commitment is expressed in the endorsement of specific options suggested by the Ministerial Working Group and more broadly in the reform agenda outlined in the Blueprint for Government Schools. As the Blueprint and subsequent advice documents establish a clear vision for schooling that encompasses all students and recognises that the learning needs of all students are not the same, the Government considers that an additional Strategic Plan is not appropriate at this stage.

However, it is important that the needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs are continually identified and that schools and teachers are assisted to develop and reflect upon the effectiveness of programs they assemble to specifically address the needs of these students. In matching programs to learning needs schools, as well as drawing upon a broad range of general learning and personal development programs that are available to all students (including students with disabilities and learning difficulties), schools will draw upon specific programs developed for students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

The Department of Education and Training will undertake work to strengthen the accountability framework to ensure that there is a strong alignment between the needs of students with disabilities and the school's program response and that students with disabilities and additional learning needs are given appropriate support consistent with identified learning targets and goals.

Action

No specific action required in relation to a Strategic Plan.
Ongoing action in the context of the Blueprint for Government Schools.
Department of Education and Training will examine the school accountability framework to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities and additional learning needs are adequately represented.

Timeframe

Ongoing.