

## **SUBMISSION OF THE INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION VICTORIA TASMANIA**

### **REVIEW OF EDUCATION PROVISION AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

**DECEMBER 2014**

#### **Introduction**

The Independent Education Union Victoria Tasmanian (IEU) is the union representing teachers, education support staff and other education professionals in Tasmanian Catholic and independent schools.

The IEU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process of the Ministerial Taskforce reviewing the education provision and support for students with disabilities.

The IEU recognises the initiative of the Minister in establishing an independent taskforce. We note that Communique 1 issued in August 2014 included statements that the taskforce has been established to:

1. Examine current provision and support for students living with disabilities;
2. Review evidence-based research and
3. Provide recommendations to improve educational support for these students and their families.

The IEU would hope that the recommendations include details of the resourcing and funding needed to ensure implementation is possible.

As the timeframe for making submission to the Taskforce is very short and at an extremely busy time of the year it has not been possible for the IEU to extensively canvas member views and gather as much input as would ordinarily be the case. The education provision and support for students with disabilities and its adequate resourcing are significant issues for our members in schools. Therefore the IEU would welcome an opportunity to meet with the Taskforce for a discussion and exchange of views early in 2015.

In this brief submission, the IEU will address the following areas:

- Learning strategies and the provision of education materials;
- How best to report on educational outcomes for students with a disability;
- Disability awareness training for teachers;
- Transitional planning.

## Learning strategies and the provision of education materials

The needs of Special Needs Students should be met through collaboration and consultation with parents, staff and professionals.

It is critical that each student be profiled very carefully and accurately to ascertain his/her individual learning styles and strategies. The profiling needs to be done by a trained and experienced Learning Support teacher and include processing strengths, intellectual ability, specific learning issues including sensory, neurological and physical.

A thorough understanding of the different disabilities, time of diagnosis, early intervention and family dynamics is important in this profiling as well as information gleaned from formal and informal assessments. This is best done within the school by personnel who know the students and their families.

It is essential that Individual Education Plans for students with disability are discussed collaboratively with all key stakeholders – parents, learning support coordinator, classroom teacher and teacher assistant.

These IE Plans outline:

- Goals, specific strategies and actions to achieve goals.
- Who is responsible and in what form will the support be, e.g. 1-1 aide time.
- What programs, educational materials and professional development are required?

Quality profiling is impossible without quality materials therefore they must be provided by the sector and schools in their budgets allocations. So too the quality of resources is critical in ensuring the students have the best possible opportunities to reach their potential. Schools that provide sufficient budgets for special learning needs find that that the learning outcomes for students are immeasurably better.

Review dates with all key stakeholders should be frequent in order to discuss, assess progress and make adjustments, changes and, where necessary, to seek further professional advice, including further training where required.

Numeracy support with the appropriate professional learning and guidance is an area of great need.

**It is imperative that all staff, the class teachers and teacher assistants working with students with disability are professionally trained in the specific disability of the child. Funds must be available for this to take place.** Then they will have fuller understanding of the disability, of how these children learn, and what learning strategies are effective for these children to reach their true learning potential.

There is no place for fads in special learning needs education. Trained and experienced personnel are able to discern which are and which are not. There is no doubt that direct instruction teaching strategies for many students produce the best results. Special programs are available and are costly but the results prove over and over again that they are worth their weight in gold! These programs are best taught one-to-one or in small groups.

Some educationalists, mostly those without specialist training and experience, believe all children can be taught at all times within the classroom but this is not possible where special direct instruction programs that are designed to build a skill base are required.

In saying that, what happens in the classroom is critical to the students' success whereby they are given opportunities, at their level of skill, to practice and enhance their learning in the whole class context. Again this is where a team approach works very effectively.

Staff working alongside professionals, in collaboration with parents, helps provide realistic expectations building on the strengths of the student, tailoring programs to suit the needs and ability level of the individual and scaffolding learning through differentiation of the curriculum.

Good communication between the class teacher of the student and the teacher assistant working with the student is very important. A teacher assistant working closely with a special needs student develops a strong working relationship and an understanding of the student's learning style, their strengths, difficulties they might have, behavioural issues, and their social and emotional well-being. Anecdotal notes made following 1-1, small group work, supported learning time with a teacher aide is vital information for a teacher working in a busy classroom.

Good communication from parents to school and school to home is also very important. For example, a note relating that a student is experiencing difficulties at home or exhibiting certain behaviours at home, or any change in circumstances of home life, is vital information as this may result in behavioural difficulties at school, and likewise problems at school can cause difficulties at home. Working together with parents/school collaboratively and consistently gives good positive outcomes with a focus on success.

### **How best to report on educational outcomes for students with a disability**

While trained central office staff can assist in the profiling of students it is very important that school personnel take primary responsibility for this because they know the students and have to work with them on an ongoing basis. The personal and educational needs of the students are ever changing therefore it is critical that the school 'team', with the class teacher chairing and the support teacher advising, (this team includes the parents) coordinate the programs and provide ongoing assessment and evaluation of them. With all the information at their fingertips they are best able to report on the educational outcomes of each student.

There are a variety of ways to report on progress, but for students who have an IEP reporting against the goals is most beneficial. An effective method is to modify the general report proforma to match the learning profiles of the students whilst maintaining the same 'look', to ensure the students were not seen to be 'different' or defined by their learning needs or disabilities.

This type of report can include the many things the students are able to achieve within the general curriculum, especially the options subjects and should include detailed narrative to give the parents as much information as possible. This plus the IEP report is respectful, comprehensive and meaningful.

## **Disability awareness training for teachers**

Because they are the frontline in the education of children and young people with special learning needs, classroom and subject teachers must have an understanding of the different disabilities. Within the school setting, well-trained and experienced support teachers are best utilised as guides and sharers of knowledge and strategies to empower them in the care of students with special learning needs, writing IEPs and co-ordinating the reporting on their progress. Their main goal however, is to empower the class and subject teachers to take responsibility for the students in their care. They, in turn, need ongoing professional learning that is of high quality and broad in its scope.

There are plenty of opportunities for further study in the field of special learning needs so it is incumbent on employers and schools to make scholarships and other financial and time support available with the expectation that there will be ongoing learning in this specialised area of education.

At no time should the educational programming for students with special learning needs be the responsibility of the Teacher Assistants. While they are very valuable members of the support teams, they are not in a position to make specialised educational decisions or engage in formal testing or writing programs.

Central office staff who provide support to schools must be highly trained and experienced. Their primary task should be to work with support teachers in the schools providing high quality advice and support, in consultation, not as fly-in experts. Some of these staff should have expertise in secondary school special learning needs education and some in the primary and early childhood area.

## **Transitional planning**

There is no doubt that it is critical to the students' confidence and security and that of their families that transitional planning begins as early as possible before the transition to the new setting. Extra planning will very likely be necessary to ensure that necessary adjustments and supports are in place prior to school entry or moving from primary to secondary school.

Transition for students with disabilities and their families will have challenges and uncertainty.

The first step in this process is to meet the family and listen to their aspirations and concerns for their child. The second step is to understand their current educational setting and experiences and discuss their needs with the current support team, including the parents. Thirdly visitation to the new environment is important to assist them to become familiar with it.

As part of this planning for transition it is critically important that school staff are trained professionally in the specific disability that the student has in order to support the child's successful participation in school. Funding must be made available for this to take place. This must take place on enrolment, eg prior to the child commencing school.

Successful transition programs are facilitated for special needs' students through social stories, photo stories, frequent visits to new classrooms and familiarisation with new teachers to ensure a smoother transition.

An example of this is transitional planning is a Grade 6 student to move to Grade 7 in a new school. This involved writing social stories, photo books showing maps of the school, numerous visits to the school, practising travelling the route to school on the bus, meeting teachers and education support staff, and tours of the school for orientation.

The sharing of information from the primary school regarding the student was essential in assisting the secondary school to plan appropriate support and to provide information of effective strategies to assist the student.

Also a psychologist came and spoke to the class about the student's disability (the student was on the Autism spectrum). The psychologist's input was invaluable, and with full support from the student's family and the school he explained the challenges this student faced. He also explained why the student exhibited some behaviours and this gave the students a greater understanding of the difficulties the student faced. This elicited an empathetic response from many of the classmates, and there was more acceptance of the student's difference and more respect for the unique individual.

## **Conclusion**

The IEU is very pleased to contribute to this important discussion paper and looks forward to further consultation on any proposal emerging from this stage of the review process.

**Authorised by Debra James  
General Secretary Independent Education Union Victoria Tasmanian  
19 December 2014**