



Association for Children with Disability

Snapshot from the Disability Royal Commission

#2: Reasonable adjustments

September 2024

Background

Association for Children with Disability (ACD) is the leading advocacy service for children with disability and their families in Victoria. We are a not-for-profit organisation led by, and for, families of children with disability.

Our vision is an inclusive community where children with disability and their families thrive.

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability made 222 recommendations, including 15 specifically relating to education.

At the heart of the Disability Royal Commission (DRC) report was that students with disability continue to experience poorer education outcomes than their peers, and more can be done to address violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of students with disability.

Many of the DRC findings reflect what we hear from families. This snapshot focuses on the experiences families raise with ACD about reasonable adjustments for their children. It highlights opportunities to extend on the DRC recommends that are specific to the Victorian education system to improve outcomes for students with disability.

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Executive summary

Too many students with disability don't receive the right reasonable adjustments to participate and thrive in school. Reasonable adjustments remain the number one education issue families raise with ACD, and concerns are on the rise.

Thirty-five per cent (35%) of school education calls to ACD's Support Line between May 2020 and June 2024 related to reasonable adjustments.

When schools, students, families and other professionals work together to find the right reasonable adjustments, it reduces the risk of a student with disability being put on a reduced timetable, suspended or expelled, and can increase positive social and learning outcomes.

The DRC highlighted opportunities to improve policies and procedures, and the provision of reasonable adjustments. ACD's analysis of the current system in Victoria found that while Victoria has a great suite of resources around reasonable adjustments, there are gaps between policy and practice. ACD has identified a suite of recommendations across three broad areas that contextualises the DRC recommendations to Victoria's education system to improve reasonable adjustments in school. These areas are:

1. More resources and support for school staff to identify, understand and implement effective reasonable adjustments
2. Additional system-wide infrastructure to measure quality and effectiveness of reasonable adjustments
3. Better monitoring and reporting to understand gaps in adhering to legislation, regulation and policies around reasonable adjustments.

Recommendations

Give school staff more support to identify, understand and implement effective reasonable adjustments

1. Develop a fit-for-purpose training for principals and school leaders on creating inclusive schools, with the latest resources on reasonable adjustments for staff and understanding of their obligations under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*.
2. Develop more best practice exemplars and frameworks to adapt the curriculum and teaching. Give teachers and education support staff sufficient time release to engage with the training and resources.
3. Create evidence-based resources to support teachers adapt the curriculum and provide reasonable adjustments for students with intellectual disabilities and students with complex communication needs.

Introduce additional system-wide infrastructure to measure quality and effectiveness

4. Require all school councils or boards to include metrics on the school's goals and targets for improving outcomes for students with disability in their school plans and as part of annual reporting requirements.
5. Require Disability Inclusion Profiles (in government schools) and reasonable adjustments (in all schools) to be evaluated to ensure they are effective and result in improved student learning outcomes.
6. Develop a quality checklist rubric for Student Support Group meetings that schools are required to measure against.
7. Develop a reporting framework to monitor implementation of the education support staff guidelines, mapped against actions and best practice examples in the guidelines.
8. Strengthen guidance given to non-government schools to ensure students with disability are accessing the right level of adjustment to participate in learning.

Increase monitoring and public reporting

9. Update Departmental guidelines and reporting requirements to acquit tier 3 funding under Disability Inclusion to require funding to be used for the student it's allocated to, while providing sufficient flexibility to pool funds across multiple students where appropriate.
10. Require non-government school to acquit funding used to provide individual reasonable adjustments for students with disability.
11. Explicitly state that non-government schools cannot require families to pay an additional fee to access necessary adjustments, and strengthen oversight to monitor for compliance.
12. Introduce annual public reporting requirements for all registered schools for Student Support Group meetings, Individual Education Plans and Behaviour Support Plans. Requirements could include frequency, quality, and student and parent satisfaction to understand if they are being implemented as intended, or if schools require additional support.
13. Require all registered schools to update their policies to reflect their legal obligation under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* that 'the education provider must consult with the student, or an associate of the student'.

14. Require all registered schools to update their policies to explicitly address the relationship between the statutory duty to provide reasonable adjustments with other duties of care.

1. Identify, understand and implement effective reasonable adjustments

School staff should be given more support to identify, understand and implement effective reasonable adjustments.

ACD's Support Line takes hundreds of calls from families raising children with disability each year about challenges with reasonable adjustments at their child's school. Common challenges include:

- Limited understanding from school staff about why an adjustment is needed and its purpose
- Disagreement between staff, students and families about what kind of adjustment is required
- Lack of clear goals associated with the adjustment
- Poor communication and collaboration around implementing the adjustment and making changes if the adjustment is not working.

Families highlighted school leadership that prioritise inclusion as the key enabler in successfully identifying and implementing the right adjustment for their child. School leaders who champion inclusive approaches don't need to have all of the answers – but they excel in bringing school staff, students, families and other experts together to find solutions that work for everyone.

Other enabling factors to identifying, understanding and implementing effective reasonable adjustments include:

- Clear and transparent communication. This includes speaking honestly when an adjustment isn't working – for the student or the teacher – and coming together to find a solution
- Collaborative partnerships between school staff, students and families, and other professionals
- Respectful relationships underpinned by trust, and an understanding that everyone has the same student-centred goal.

With the right time, resources and support, school staff will be better able to adapt the curriculum and implement reasonable adjustments for students.

'I've found it really good at my daughter's mainstream school that the disability inclusion mindset comes right from the top down from the principal and the assistant principal. They have a disability inclusion specialist teacher who just does disability inclusion so we had the regular SSGs and the teacher who's very approachable so it's sort of just really easy to have those discussions because everybody's really on board.'

'[There's] no support for teachers to try and practice adjustments – so if they don't work the 1st time they stop doing it.'

CASE STUDY: Reasonable adjustments to support full-time attendance

James was overwhelmed and dysregulated at school, which led to challenging behaviours in the classroom and school yard. The assistant principal put James on a reduced timetable with a plan to work with James, his family and school staff to support James to safely return to school full-time.

The assistant principal made it clear to James and his family that they want James at their school, and they wanted him to attend full-time. Importantly, the assistant principal and James's teachers understood and agree that James needed adjustments to thrive, and were willing to trial different approaches until they got it right.

In addition to regular Student Support Group meetings, the assistant principal scheduled weekly 15-minute meetings to keep track of their goal of supporting James's full-time attendance. James's teachers, James's family, and anyone else who needed to be part of the conversation, attended these meetings.

The assistant principal began the meetings by asking how the family were going to acknowledge the impact of James being put on a reduced timetable. Everyone reflected on the adjustments that were working well and what James had achieved in the last week. Then as a group, they talked about which adjustments didn't work and what else they could try. Part of this included identifying and discussing what James needed to increase his time at school and what adjustments would help him.

Everyone agreed on a minimum amount of time James spent at school each day. When James was doing well, they made an assessment about whether James was up for staying for longer, instead of sending him home because he reached the minimum time threshold.

When James was back to full-time attendance, his reasonable adjustments were updated and shared with all teachers in an easy-to-understand document. Student Support Group meetings were held once per term to monitor the adjustments and discuss whether any changes needed to be made.

James and his family felt welcome and part of the school community due to the leadership and dedication of the assistant principal and teaching staff. The respectful, collaborative approach meant James's family felt confident they could raise any issues or concerns in the future as they knew the school would work with them to achieve the best outcomes for James.

2. Measure quality and effectiveness

Additional system-wide infrastructure is needed to measure the quality and effectiveness of reasonable adjustments to improve outcomes for students with disability.

The education system has a range of tools and resources to support teachers implement reasonable adjustments, but limited mechanisms to understand whether they are effective.

Families are concerned about lack of consistency across schools in the use of education support staff, Student Support Group meetings (or Program Support Group meetings in Catholic and independent school), Individual Education Plans and Behaviour Support Plans.

Issues with Student Support Group and Program Support Group meetings made up 19% of reasonable adjustment-related calls to ACD's Support Line between May 2020 and June 2024.

When used well and intentionally, these tools and resources can support teachers and school leaders to monitor whether reasonable adjustments are effective and determine when changes need to be made. However, too often families say whether their child is supported to access the right adjustment comes down to whether school leadership champions inclusion and supports staff to find the right approach.

Families report inconsistencies in their experiences across schools, including:

- Family expertise is not always valued
- Student Support Group meetings, Individual Education Plans and Behaviour Support Plans being used as 'tick box' exercises
- Planning and implementing effective adjustments falling down when school leadership doesn't champion inclusion
- Education support staff being used to replace teachers and exclude students with disability from the classroom, rather than used to support teachers and a student's inclusion.

Introducing system-wide measures that schools can tailor to their unique circumstances – such as school-wide metrics on improving outcomes for students with disability and implementing the education support staff guidelines – would provide clearer benchmarks for schools to ensure reasonable adjustments are high-quality and effective.

'Focusing just on behaviour not talking about reasonable adjustments to support learning [made planning for reasonable adjustments a challenge].'

'[My child's] school doesn't understand SMART goals.'

'Not being listened to as a parent and the expert in my sons needs [is a challenge].'

3. Increase monitoring and public reporting

Better monitoring and reporting are needed to understand gaps in adhering to legislation, regulation and policies around reasonable adjustments.

Additional benchmarks to understand whether resources and tools are effective in implementing the right reasonable adjustment must go hand-in-hand with increased monitoring and reporting systems boost accountability and transparency.

While some families have had positive experiences with their child's school in accessing reasonable adjustments, many families continue to raise concerns about transparency when things aren't working.

Experiences families have shared that system-wide monitoring and reporting would provide greater insights to include:

- Being told their child is not eligible for a reasonable adjustment, Student Support Group, Individual Education Plan or Behaviour Support Plan because their child did not meet demographic characteristics
- Being told the school didn't have the resources to implement the required adjustments without providing an alternative approach, or explaining what resources are available
- Some non-government schools requiring families to pay additional fees for reasonable adjustments as part of their enrolment conditions.

Increasing line of sight to whether schools are meeting their legal obligations and following required processes would increase the confidence of families, and allow the system to respond when it's clear schools need additional support.