



Held back: the experience of students with disabilities in Victorian schools

> Voices from the 'have a say' days

The Commission organised 15 'have a say' days across Victoria – in Melbourne, Bendigo, Traralgon, Ballarat, Shepparton and Geelong. These 'have a say days' were two-hour meetings where parents, educators and students told us about their experiences. The Commission also held two meetings with 'critical friends' to discuss the particular experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous students with disabilities. This factsheet describes some of the main issues that were raised at these meetings.

Who got involved?

In all, 169 parents, educators and students participated in 'have a say' days.

A few of these have a say days were aimed at particular participants, including:

- Parents of students with intellectual disability (Melbourne)
- Deaf students and parents (in Ballarat and at the Victorian College for the Deaf)
- Aboriginal parents and support workers in Shepparton (at Rumbalara Family Services)
- Parents and teachers at Emerson Specialist School in Dandenong

The Commission, working with the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, held a meeting with critical friends, who were representatives from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) organisations. The Commission also held a similar critical friends meeting with the Victorian Aboriginal Disability Network.

What did participants tell us?

Amplification of barriers

Several participants told us that barriers for students with disabilities could be even greater if they lived in rural or regional Victoria, were Indigenous, or were from a CALD background.

Living in the country...it's more isolated so there aren't as many deaf people you can relate to... everything and everyone is in Melbourne.

Many parents at 'have a say' days told us about problems with enrolling their child at school. They explained how students in regional areas were particularly disadvantaged if a local school refused an application for enrolment or failed to provide adjustments because parents in rural Victoria may have little choice about where to send their children to school because of the distances involved.

Both critical friends groups told us that cultural barriers can affect parents' ability to access support for their children. For example, language barriers can prevent CALD parents from raising problems with schools. Others told us that many Aboriginal families also find it intimidating to talk to teachers.

Funding

Funding was a significant concern for parents and educators at most have a say days. Both parents and educators described funding application processes as long and emotionally draining.

Many parents raised concerns about the adequacy and transparency of funding arrangements. Some educators also raised concerns about students on the 'borderline' of eligibility for funding, who they said missed out on much-needed support.

Access to specialist services

A number of parents and educators at rural 'have a say' days told us about a critical lack of occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy and other specialist services in rural areas.

I got approval for one student to have a full-time Auslan interpreter. But I could not find a person who would go to (a rural school) to work as a interpreter.

Some parents said that they travelled long distances to access services for their children.

Participants at the Rumbalara 'have a say' day told us that lack of services had a particular impact on Aboriginal families, who may have limited choice of culturally appropriate specialist services. The Victorian Aboriginal Disability Network also raised concerns about the lack of Indigenous integration aides.

It is important for families to feel safe and have programs that are culturally appropriate and disability aware.

Leadership

There was a strong theme in most 'have a say' days that good leadership was important to foster a positive and inclusive school culture. Parents and educators told us that the support of principals and assistant principals was essential to delivering effective programs and support for all students. Others talked about the benefits of a small rural school with a strong sense of community and commitment to inclusion even in the face of resource constraints and long distances to access supports.

Transport

A number of parents raised concerns about long travel times on specialist school buses and access to transport for children living outside of school zones.

Parents and educators of deaf children also raised concerns about transport arrangements due to recent taxi reforms.

They told us that lack of transport has forced some parents out of work because of the time devoted to taking their children to school. This had a significant impact on families in rural/regional Victoria.

We had to enrol him in a special school in (another regional town)... our car travelled 70,000km in one year.

Bullying

Many participants raised concerns about bullying of students with disabilities. Both the critical friends groups mentioned race-based bullying was also an issue for Indigenous and CALD students with disabilities.

Attendance patterns

A number of parents spoke about being forced into part-time attendance, distance education or home-schooling their child.

For example, people told us that there were many Aboriginal students who were restricted to two to three hours a day at school because funding was not available for a full-time integration aide.

The CALD critical friends group suggested that some CALD students with disability may not be attending school. They said that this was sometimes due to inaccessible transport, but often related to the beliefs of these families.

Restraint and seclusion

At a number of 'have a say' days, parents gave examples of their children being restrained or placed in isolation rooms. Parents told us about the emotional distress and physical injury that this caused.

Some educators also raised concerns about a lack of guidance around restraint. A few expressed a desire for greater support for positive behaviour management.

People pointed out that if the child was at a disability service there would be independent oversight of these sorts of restrictive practices – but not at school.

Professional development

Many parents and educators stressed the importance of training and professional development for teachers and integration aides.

Some educators expressed a preference for a 'whole school approach' to learning about teaching and supporting students with disabilities.

What did participants want?

Many participants gave us suggestions for improving support for students with disabilities at school. These ranged from small and specific changes (such as providing microphones in classrooms) to suggestions about changes to systems of funding and accountability.

However, there were some consistent themes in what participants wanted:

- a safe, welcoming, positive and inclusive culture in schools
- support for students to participate in all aspects of school life—including in camps, excursions, school events and the social side of school
- training and professional development for all staff who work with students with disabilities
- respectful communication and collaboration between teachers, specialist services and families
- flexibility and creativity to respond to the individual needs of students
- access to specialist support services, including culturally appropriate services, across Victoria
- better transport options
- support and oversight to ensure that schools implement policy and best practice approaches.

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