



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

> what parents told us

This factsheet describes what parents and carers of students with disabilities told us about their child's experience of attending school.

Who got involved?

About 776 parents took part in our research by completing a survey, participating in a 'have a say' day or a phone-in or submitting a case study. The majority (617) completed a survey. Their children had a range of disabilities including physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities, mental health disorders, language disorders, illnesses and autism spectrum disorders.

Their children were attending a range of schools – 60 per cent were attending government mainstream schools, 17 per cent government specialist schools, 10 per cent Catholic schools and 9 per cent independent schools. Less than 5 per cent were attending independent specialist schools, completing distance education or home schooling.

What did parents tell us?

Parents told us about their child's experiences at school. They also told us about their own experiences of interacting with the school and advocating for their children.

Enrolment

Most parents (85 per cent) said their child was accepted for enrolment at the first school they applied for. However, some parents had to apply to many schools before their child was accepted.

Some parents said their child was simply refused enrolment, with no reasons given. Others were told that enrolments were full, only to see other children accepted for enrolment. Some parents were told that the school was inappropriate or did not have enough resources to cater for their child. Some parents felt that they had been steered towards specialist schools.

Other parents were concerned that their child was turned away from specialist schools because they did not meet eligibility criteria that parents felt were arbitrary.

Parents were asked for suggestions about how to improve enrolment. Many parents wanted schools to have better consultation processes (244 parents) and improved understanding of disability (236 parents).

Patterns of attendance

The Commission heard reports of students with disabilities attending school part time, even though full time attendance is compulsory in Victoria. We also heard that many students attended multiple schools. To test this, we asked parents how many schools their child had attended, and whether their child attended school full time.

Fifty-two per cent of parents said their child had attended between two and five schools, and 45 per cent said they had attended one school. A few parents (3 per cent) said their child had attended over five schools.

When asked about attendance patterns, 86 per cent of parents said their child attended school full time and nine per cent said they attended part-time.

Six per cent said their child was home-schooled, undertook distance education, or was dual enrolled. While most parents had chosen this arrangement, on their own or with the school, a few parents said that the school required this arrangement.

Out of 359 parents of students in government mainstream schools, 39 had children attending part-time. Of 100 parents in government specialist schools, six has children attending part-time.

“My son was only allowed to attend 6–8 hours a week [because] that's all the aide funding he could get and after I sold my car and furniture I couldn't continue funding extra aide time.”

Ninety parents reported that their child had been suspended, with 30 of these students suspended more than five times. Twenty-three parents reported that their child had been expelled.

Barriers to participation

Parents stressed the importance of genuine participation for their children. This meant more than just getting by or being tolerated by educators and other students.

“These students need to be allowed to be the best they can possibly be...”

A number of parents spoke about positive experiences at their school. These were often based on the attitudes of particular teachers, or were the result of strong leadership in the school.

However, over half the parents we surveyed (53 per cent) indicated their child was not able to participate fully in education. They nominated a range of reasons why their child was unable to participate. The most common reasons were:

- a lack of teacher training to support children with disabilities (244 parents)
- lack of teacher time (199 parents)
- lack of access to specialist support services such as aides (197 parents).

In addition, a substantial number of parents (180 parents) said that inappropriate learning or behaviour techniques were a barrier to their child's participation.

When we asked about behaviour management in more detail, most parents (283 parents) said that their child's school used positive behaviour intervention or time out (216 parents). Significantly, 58 per cent of parents said that staff at their child's school did not have adequate training and support in behaviour management.

Making adjustments

Seventy-one per cent of parents said that the school had consulted with them about reasonable adjustments to support their child. When asked what adjustments they had requested, parents commonly said that they had asked for specialists such as speech therapists or occupational therapists (255 parents), integration aides (249 parents) and teacher professional development (188 parents).

Most parents said that the adjustments they requested were partially made (58 per cent). Ten per cent said that the adjustments had not been made at all.

Parents described how the failure to make adjustments in full had affected their child. Parents reported that their children becoming angry, anxious,

upset, disengaged from school or ostracised by their peers. Some had left school all together.

Funding

Fifty-seven per cent of the parents that we surveyed had applied for funding through the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD). About three quarters of parents told us that their child's application was successful. This is lower than the actual rate of approval for PSD funding. According to DEECD data, approximately 88 per cent of all PSD applications meet the eligibility criteria.

Over half of these parents said that, after a successful PSD application, their child received only partial support to participate at school.

Other parents told us that being ineligible for funding meant that their child missed out on support.

Transitions

Some parents commented on the importance of smooth transitions for students when starting school, changing year levels, transitioning to high school, and leaving school. Some parents reported that crucial information relating to their child's needs was lost along the way. Several reported a reduction of PSD funding following a review when their child was transitioning from primary to high school.

“I have to advocate and educate each new teacher.”

Transport

Around one in four parents said that their child had experienced problems travelling to and from school. Some parents told us about problems with inaccessible public transport. Other parents said their child had experienced problems with specialist school buses because of driver attitudes, lengthy travel times or conditions on the bus.

Bullying and harassment

The majority of parents (65 per cent) said that their child had been bullied or harassed at school. This appears to be higher than results in other parent surveys.

Parents most commonly said that their children had been verbally abused (30 per cent) or ignored, shunned or excluded (36 per cent). Almost one in five parents said that their child had been physically assaulted (18 per cent).

Restraint and seclusion

The Commission had heard anecdotal reports from parents and advocates about the use of restraint and seclusion in schools. We asked parents about restraint and seclusion in the context of a question about behaviour management.

While 283 parents reported the use of positive behaviour management techniques at school, 34 parents reported that their school used restraint on their child and 128 reported that their child had been placed in 'special rooms'.

"My child has been taped to chairs, roped to get out of trees, has been locked in rooms and out of the classroom, he has been locked in the principal's office for hours even when he was having meetings, he has been held down, he has been grabbed by the back of the neck and pulled to the ground, he has been in holds."

Discrimination

Just over half of parents told us that their child had been discriminated against at school. Parents were more likely to report discrimination if their child; was in years 7 to 10; had a language disorder, behaviour-related disorder or learning disorder, or was attending a non-government school.

Complaints

Sixty-eight per cent of the parents we surveyed said they had complained about discrimination. Most parents raised their complaint with the school principal (168 parents), school staff (140 parents) or DEECD (94 parents).

Some parents gave positive examples of how their complaint was dealt with by the school or the DEECD. Other parents indicated dissatisfaction with the complaint process and outcomes.

Some parents said that they did not complain because they thought it would not make any difference (35 parents). Some others were afraid there would be repercussions if they complained (22 parents).

What do parents want?

Based on the survey results, many parents want their children to be:

- enrolled in a school of their choice
- in a safe, supportive and positive environment at school
- supported by teachers and specialist support services who are well-trained and understand disability
- able to achieve to the best of their ability
- supported to overcome barriers to participation in the whole of school life – from the classroom, to excursions, camps, activities, and the social side of school
- supported consistently as they move through the school system.

As parents, they would prefer:

- information about their choices at all stages of schooling
- respectful communication and collaboration with the school, especially when there are problems
- meaningful involvement in decision making about their child
- better and more common use of tools such as individual learning plans and student support groups.

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Need more information?

Contact the Commission:

Enquiry Line 1300 292 153 or (03) 9032 3583
Fax 1300 891 858
TTY 1300 289 621
Email enquiries@veohrc.vic.gov.au
Website humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au

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