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**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**TENTH ASSEMBLY**

**Ministerial Statement**

**Government Response to Auditor-General Report No. 8/2023 - Supports for students with  
disability in ACT public schools**

**Presented by  
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Minister for Education and Youth Affairs  
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Madam Speaker, I rise to update the Assembly on the ACT Government's response to the Auditor-General's report on *Supports for Students with Disability in ACT Public Schools*. The Government response was circulated to members out of session on 23 February 2024.

The Auditor-General's report focused on the effectiveness of supports for students with disability in ACT public schools.

The audit considered practices for:

- Provision of clear and accessible information;
- Understanding the functional needs students with disability in relation to their education;
- Planning to provide adjustments to ensure students with disability can access education on the same basis as their peers; and
- Funding physical accessibility modifications in schools, and providing professional learning pathways for Learning Support Assistants.

I would like to thank the Auditor-General's office, and everyone who contributed to the report, particularly the students and families, teachers, and other stakeholders who shared their personal experiences and expertise.

The Government has agreed, or agreed in principle, to all of the report's recommendations. I will speak in more detail to these after providing some context about the ACT Government's new Inclusive Education Strategy.

The Inclusive Education Strategy was released after the Auditor-General's report in December last year. It was the result of a rigorous two-year consultation process.

I was pleased to attend Lake Tuggeranong College, alongside students from Wanniasa School, to launch the Strategy. The Strategy aims to deliver greater inclusion for students with disability across all ACT public schools by ensuring schools have the support they need to meet the needs of all learners.

Of course, there are already many great examples of inclusive education in our public schools, led by our dedicated and hard-working educators.

Take Gold Creek School's Mita Pota, who received the Excellence in Support Diversity and Inclusion Award at the 2023 Public Education Awards.

Mita, who works in the junior school, was recognised for her kindness, patience, and resilience, while instilling belief, confidence, and belonging, in all students.

The award also acknowledged her ability to proactively identify options for inclusion in all school activities while promoting student agency.

While we know we have many dedicated educators in our schools, we are now working through the Inclusive Education Strategy to put the right supports in place at a system level.

All Australian children have the right to take part in education on the same basis as students without disability. This right is enshrined in the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*.

The ACT Government is committed to inclusive education because it not only delivers positive academic, social, and wellbeing, outcomes for children and young people, it is also key to creating a more equitable society.

The Inclusive Education Strategy is underpinned by three principles:

1. The right to education;
2. A whole of system commitment; and
3. Continuous improvement.

The Strategy's First Action Plan is supported by a \$9.9 million investment which will strengthen and embed inclusive practices across our public schools, including through a new team of expert inclusion coaches, initially working in Tuggeranong public schools, to support teachers to implement inclusive practice.

I am very pleased to be able to inform the Assembly that seven inclusion coaches have now been recruited and allocated to schools. I was privileged to attend the coaches' first planning day recently, where I was able to witness firsthand their passion for supporting children and young people.

Initially, the coaches will work with:

- Lanyon High School
- Isabella Plains Early Childhood School
- Monash Primary School
- Fadden Primary School
- Gowrie Primary School
- Calwell High School
- Calwell Primary School
- Caroline Chisholm School
- Wanniasa School
- Taylor Primary School
- Lake Tuggeranong College, and
- Erindale College

The First Action Plan also commits to a range of other actions including:

- Establishing an Inclusive Education Student Voice Forum so children and young people with disability have a say;
- Professional learning for teachers in key areas such as universal design for learning, managing complex behaviours, and understanding neurodiversity;
- Strengthened partnerships between local and specialist public schools to enable the sharing of expertise and joint activities;
- Work to develop a new needs-based funding model for students with disability; and
- A review of the school allied health model to ensure it is best placed to meet the needs of students with disability across ACT public schools.

Madam Speaker, these actions and the Strategy's principles go a long way towards achieving many of the recommendations outlined in the Auditor-General's report. It was very affirming to

note how closely the work the ACT Government has already started aligns with the report's findings.

The Auditor-General's report makes eight recommendations. In the response, the ACT Government has:

- Agreed to four recommendations; and
- Agreed in principle to four recommendations.

The Government acknowledges the key themes raised from the Auditor-General's report. These themes have been considered in the responses to the recommendations and will continue to inform the ACT Government's work as the Inclusive Education Strategy is implemented. The recommendations agreed in principle will require further consideration and consultation with staff and schools.

I would like to discuss a few of the key actions being delivered by the ACT Government, and Education Directorate, which relate directly to the recommendations in this report.

On the recommendation around clear and information – the Education Directorate will engage in an ACT Government-wide program to consolidate and improve accessibility of website content, including an uplift to the quality of information available to all Canberrans.

On the recommendation around ACT student disability criteria – a new Student Adjustment Matrix is now being trialled in schools to better understand the adjustment needs of students so that resourcing can be determined on student need rather than student diagnosis. Principals have recently been invited to opt-in to the trial in 2024, after a successful pilot with five schools last year.

On the recommendation around allied health – the model for allied health support is undergoing a redesign to ensure it meets the needs of students with disability. We will examine the scope of practice for all allied health professionals within the Education Directorate and how this aligns with broader objectives within the Directorate, including supporting students with disability.

On the recommendation around physical accessibility modifications – infrastructure requirements related to inclusive education will be included within the Education Directorate's Strategic Asset Management Plan. The Strategy's First Action Plan commits to establishing an Inclusive Education Infrastructure Working Group which will seek input from the Inclusive Education Student Voice Forum.

On the recommendation around Learning Support Assistant pathways – this year over 430 Learning Support Assistants have been able to access a nation-leading Universal Training Package based on best-practice research from around the globe.

Participants provided strong feedback that the training was very useful with personal statements including:

- *"I feel more confident, I know more about my job and how I can support the children I work with."*
- *"I learnt so many new strategies and tools, and I understand the theories too."*
- *"All the activities made the learning fun but also gave me ideas of what I can do with kids."*

Work is also under way to progress Recommendation 5 of the Teacher Shortage Taskforce, investigating incentives for current staff in schools, such as LSAs, to complete a teaching qualification. The Directorate acknowledges that providing incentives such as paid time and financial support for current staff in schools, such as LSAs, to complete a teaching qualification, not only provides a broader career pathway for LSAs, but also capitalises on their invaluable experience as an LSA in setting them up for success in a teaching career. The Directorate expects to finalise these incentives in 2024.

The First Action Plan of the Inclusive Education Strategy also commits to establishing formal school partnerships between the ACT's four specialist schools and surrounding local schools which will create mentoring, coaching and observational opportunities for school-based staff.

Madam Speaker, all of this work is important to support the many children and young people in our system with disability or diverse learning needs.

A significant number of students – about 20 per cent of students in ACT public schools – are reported as receiving adjustments for disability or imputed disability under the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability.

A smaller number – about 5 per cent – are in formal disability programs. Programs include:

- the Inclusion Support Program, which resources reasonable adjustments in a general education classroom with same-aged peers
- disability education programs, which typically offer smaller class sizes and a dedicated space for regulation
- specialist schools for students with moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disability; and
- hearing and vision support.

There are existing mechanisms in place to support schools to address the learning needs of all students.

School-based staff can access facilitated staff networks together with a wide range of in-person and online professional learning opportunities.

For example, in term 1, 2024 approximately 40 teachers are enrolled in online training courses focused on Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Understanding and Supporting Behaviour, and Understanding Hearing Loss.

Expert advice is also available from the Education Directorate's School Psychology Service and Allied Health Service, including from occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, social workers, physiotherapists, functional behaviour specialists and allied health assistants.

Along with professional learning and targeted support, teachers can access free curriculum resources through the *Everyone Everyday* program, which aims to create a cultural shift in community attitudes towards disability. Resources are aligned to the Australian Curriculum and are being expanded to include material for all year levels from Preschool to Year 12.

New material is now available for our preschool educators after successfully being trialled last year at Torrens, North Curtin, and Narrabundah Early Childhood School preschools.

Madam Speaker, I look forward to keeping the Assembly updated about the progress of the Strategy, and once again I would like to thank the Auditor-General's office for their thoughtful report, together with the families, students, schools, and others who shared their personal experiences and expertise.