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

TENTH ASSEMBLY

ACT Auditor-General's Report No.8 of 2023

Supports for Students with disability in ACT public schools

Government Response

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Introduction

The ACT Government welcomes the ACT Auditor-General's Report No.8 of 2023, *Supports for Students with Disability in ACT Public Schools*.

The report focused on the effectiveness of the ACT Government's practices for providing supports for students with disability in ACT public schools. The audit considered¹:

- provision of clear and accessible information about available schools, educational settings and adjustments
- understanding the functional needs students with disability have in accessing their education
- planning to provide adjustments to ensure students with disability can access education on the same basis as their peers
- funding physical accessibility modifications in schools and providing professional learning pathways for Learning Support Assistants.

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's vision is that every child and young person is welcomed, valued, and can access quality education designed to meet their needs. In ACT public schools, this means that all children and young people can learn and participate in education on the same basis as their peers, and the views of children and young people, and their families, are considered in designing learning options to meet their needs. ACT public schools welcome and support children and young people with disability and make reasonable adjustments for all students who need them. Eligible students can access formal programs within schools including:

- resourcing to preschools to support children with disability or developmental delay
- the Inclusion Support Program, which resources reasonable adjustments in general education classrooms where children learn alongside their same-aged peers, and is available in all public schools
- disability education programs, which typically offer smaller class sizes and a dedicated space for regulation, and are available in all public schools except early childhood schools
- specialist schools, for students with moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disability
- hearing and vision support is also available at all schools, which builds teacher capability and provides specialist support for students from preschool to year 12, including Auslan interpretation where required.

Students enrolled in the Health Care Access at School (HAAS) program also have an individualised care plan in place to guide staff engaging in the provision of needed medical intervention for individual students. This is developed by the Canberra Health Services (CHS) HAAS nurses in consultation with the student, their family, and their treating team.

ACT public schools support all students who need adjustments, regardless of their eligibility for formal programs, and there are examples of excellent practice occurring in every school, every day.

¹ ACT Auditor-General's Report No.8 of 2023 *Supports for Students with Disability in ACT Public Schools*.

School staff can access a wide range of professional learning opportunities to support inclusive education as well as expert advice from the Education Directorate's School Psychology Service and Allied Health Service and Complex Case Management team. These services comprise of occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, social workers, physiotherapists, functional behaviour specialists and allied health assistants.

The ACT Government is committed to strengthening inclusion across all schools and has been consulting widely with school communities and stakeholders as well as researching international and national best practice to develop an inclusive education strategy. *Inclusive Education: A Disability Inclusion Strategy for ACT Public Schools 2024-2034* (the Strategy) was launched in December 2023.

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. It also focuses on supporting students during transitions, including from school to employment.

The Strategy is underpinned by three principles:

1. **The right to education.** Every child and young person has the right to access education on the same basis as their peers. Equity, access, inclusion and agency are critical to this vision.
2. **A whole of system commitment.** Every part of the Education Directorate, every school, every staff member, every child and young person, and every member of our school and ACT community, has a role in delivering the Strategy.
3. **Continuous improvement.** Implementation will be evidence-based, accountable, and planned in consultation with school staff, parents, carers, children, and young people.

The Auditor-General's Report aligns with the Government's work to drive improvements in the supports provided to students with disability. The Government notes the Report's conclusions in relation to the need for clear and accessible information for students and families; how schools understand student needs and plan for adjustments; the provision of reasonable adjustments relating to physical accessibility, and the role of Learning Support Assistants.

The ACT Government would like to thank the Auditor-General's office and everyone who contributed to the report and provided input, including students and families, teachers, and other stakeholders who shared their personal experiences and expertise.

The report makes eight recommendations. In our response, the 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 Strategy is implemented. The recommendations agreed to in principle will require further consideration and consultation with staff and schools.

Government Responses to Auditor-General's Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Clear and Accessible Information

The Education Directorate should systematically review and improve communication material for students with disability and their families, including:

- a) the Education Directorate's website;*
- b) individual school websites; and*
- c) other written communication material provided to students and families.*

Agreed.

Content on the Directorate's web site has recently been rewritten to improve information for students with disability and their families and to reflect the release of the *Inclusive Education: A Disability Inclusion Strategy for ACT Public Schools (2024-2034)* (the Strategy).

The Education Directorate will also engage in an ACT Government-wide program to consolidate and improve accessibility of website content, which will uplift the quality of information available to all Canberrans.

Other written communication material for students and families, including consistent content for use on individual school web sites, will be considered in 2024.

Recommendation 2: ACT Student Disability Criteria and Disability Education Program

Application

The Education Directorate should amend its processes associated with the application of the Disability Education Program Application and ACT Student Disability Criteria to ensure alternative criteria can be applied for students who have immediate support needs in their school context but do not have formal medical diagnoses.

The amended processes should ensure these students are not disadvantaged in access to resourcing or timely implementation of reasonable adjustments.

Agreed in Principle.

The Strategy's *First Action Plan 2024-2026* commits to developing a new needs-based funding model for students with disability. The current Disability Education Program Application and ACT Student Disability Criteria will no longer be required under the new needs-based funding model.

Recommendation 3: The role of school psychologists

The Education Directorate should identify and evaluate alternative case coordination and social work models currently being trialled in ACT public schools and determine if they are effective in:

- a) reducing routine, administrative, coordination and liaison work for school psychologists and school leaders;*
- b) supporting families to access medical diagnosis and the NDIS; and*
- c) supporting implementation of reasonable adjustments for students with disability.*

Agreed in Principle.

The Education Directorate continues to explore and evaluate models of service delivery. This includes the work undertaken by school psychologists and allied health, including social workers. The design and trial delivery of a new service model for social workers and youth workers is under way.

The Strategy's *First Action Plan 2024-2026* commits to review and redesign the allied health model to ensure it meets the needs of students with disability. This work will examine the scope of practice for all allied health professionals within the Education Directorate and how this will align with broader objectives within the Directorate, including supporting students with disability.

Recommendation 4: Student Centred Appraisal of Need

The Education Directorate should prioritise work to transition from the Student-Centred Appraisal of Need (SCAN) to a functional needs-based assessment model that:

- a) considers students' voice, aspirations, goals and strengths;*
- b) considers students' functional needs in their school context;*
- c) is aligned to NCCD levels of adjustment; and*
- d) is clearly linked to provision of reasonable adjustments.*

Agreed.

As outlined above, the Strategy's *First Action Plan 2024-2026* commits to developing a new needs-based funding model for students with disability. SCAN will no longer be required under the new needs-based funding model.

The Education Directorate is currently trialling a needs-based alternative to SCAN using a Student Adjustment Matrix and Preschool Adjustment Matrix that considers student voice and functional needs in a school context to inform the new model, which will be aligned to NCCD levels of adjustment and clearly linked to provision of reasonable adjustments.

Recommendation 5: School resource allocation model

The Education Directorate should make information on its school resource allocation model for students with disability publicly available, including:

- a) the eligibility requirements for different levels or types of funding;*
- b) allowable uses for different levels or types of funding;*
- c) case studies illustrating how funding may be effectively used in different types of schools and for different student cohorts; and*
- d) funding rates and calculation methods.*

Agreed in Principle.

The Education Directorate is currently developing a new Students with Disability Needs Based Resource (NBR) Model which will transition from the current diagnosis driven model to an adjustment-based allocation model anchored by the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data. The information made publicly available about the new NBR model will be considered at a later stage as it is implemented.

Recommendation 6: Physical accessibility modifications – documenting approval and prioritisation criteria

The Education Directorate should develop a policy and associated procedural guidance for the assessment, approval and prioritisation of requests for physical accessibility modifications in ACT public schools.

Agreed.

Infrastructure requirements related to inclusive education will be included within the Education Directorate's Strategic Asset Management Plan, the Public-School Infrastructure Renewal Program (PSIRP) infrastructure prioritisation tool and the Education Directorate Infrastructure Specifications (EDIS) where appropriate.

The Strategy *First Action Plan 2024-2026* also commits to establishing an Inclusive Education Infrastructure Working Group, embedding inclusive education in the Directorate's Strategic Asset Management Plan, and engaging the Inclusive Education Student Voice Forum to provide advice on infrastructure decisions.

Recommendation 7: Physical accessibility modifications – minimum standards

The Education Directorate should provide information to schools and on their website about:

- a) the minimum physical accessibility features or upgrades available for ACT public schools;*
- and*
- b) the process for obtaining these.*

Agreed.

Minimum physical accessibility features for ACT public schools will be identified in the Education Directorate Infrastructure Specifications (EDIS).

Information about these requirements and the process for requesting these works will be made available to schools and on the Directorate website.

As above, the Strategy *First Action Plan 2024-2026* also commits to establishing an Inclusive Education Infrastructure Working Group to provide advice on infrastructure modifications required, embed inclusive education within the Directorate's Strategic Asset Management Plan, and engaging the Inclusive Education Student Voice forum to provide advice on infrastructure decisions.

Recommendation 8: Learning Support Assistant pathways

The Education Directorate should provide a clear, incremental learning pathway for Learning Support Assistants, with different learning opportunities clearly aligned to different and more specialised roles or classifications, including:

- a) a paid, centralised induction for new Learning Support Assistants, similar to that provided for new teachers*
- b) sufficient paid hours for Learning Support Assistants to participate in formal professional learning and school-based planning and preparation; and*

c) *more opportunities for Learning Support Assistants to observe better practice in specialised schools and settings.*

Agreed in principle.

Professional learning was provided for Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) in Week 0, Term 1, 2024.

A new professional learning package for LSAs has been developed and delivered in 2023 and has already been accessed by more than 200 staff. This package will be assessed and refined for continued use in 2024 and beyond. This package of professional learning is available to all LSAs throughout the year and supports the school-based induction of LSAs which occurs throughout the year.

Formal professional learning for LSAs is supported through the LSA Scholarship Program, providing free access to a Certificate IV in Education Support or Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.

Work is 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 provides direct incentives to develop in an area directly relevant to their duties, and capitalise 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 relevant enterprise agreement includes a continuing commitment by the Directorate to “developing career pathways for School Assistants that build on the expertise of current and future employees to support improved student outcomes; value and encourage lifelong learning; and foster stronger partnerships with teachers.”

To support this commitment, the Directorate, in consultation with relevant unions and employees, will develop and implement a framework for the central engagement, transfer and placement of School Assistants. Creating a framework will provide greater opportunities for the mobility of LSAs across the system including further exposure to a range of different settings and programs and greater career pathways.

The Strategy *First Action Plan 2024-2026* also commits to developing support guidelines for LSAs and exploring the development of an “online classroom” to lift the capability of the LSA workforce. The *First Action Plan 2024-2026* 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.