

# Diving for pearls



An account of parents' quest for an  
**inclusive education in Queensland**

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Project worker Glenys Mann coordinated the research project and is the author of this report. Professor Suzanne Carrington (QUT) conducted the focus group research and facilitated the three focus groups.

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Building inclusive communities... requires us to break with the historical models and habits of the past. Trying to build inclusive communities, while separating children on the basis of impairment, is untenable – illogical, unnecessary, damaging and out of step with the fundamental obligations of the UN Convention.

## Preface

QPPD was founded by parents passionately seeking inclusive lives for their sons and daughters with disability. Thirty years on, QPPD continues to vigorously pursue the right of people with disability to be valued and contributing members of their community. Despite significant progress towards inclusive education, the right of *all* students to be included in regular education on the same basis as their peers remains out of reach for too many – a matter of chance, even extreme good fortune. Genuine inclusion is a rare treasure – rather than something parents can reliably expect without significant personal cost or advocacy.

“Diving for Pearls” speaks to this rarity and the significant efforts of parents of students with disability who long for what other parents may take for granted – the “pearls” of welcome, of belonging, of academic challenge, achievement in learning, friendship, acceptance, and recognition of contributions. Too often, as this report reveals, parents feel they must trade one or more of these pearls – they sacrifice being rooted in their local community school for an attitude of welcome, they may forfeit effective academic programs for maintaining enrolment, others surrender dreams of friendship and participation for mere presence.

As parents, we do not seek something extraordinary. All we seek is the right for our children to receive a quality education in local neighbourhood schools. QPPD has long believed that inclusive education is the absolute cornerstone of an inclusive life path as well as an essential tool in building an inclusive society and achieving education for all (Salamanca Declaration 1994). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability affirms this direction and heralds a radical shift – the embracing of people with disability as equal citizens.

QPPD acknowledges the significant progress in inclusive policy development in recent years and the sustained efforts of educators within Education Queensland and elsewhere in support of inclusive education. Nevertheless, despite this, exclusion, rather than inclusion, continues to be the reality for too many.

This is unsurprising – inclusive education remains in its infancy. Building inclusive communities – dismantling what Goggin and Newell have called Australia’s “disability apartheid” – requires us to break with the historical models and habits of the past. Trying to build inclusive communities, while separating children on the basis of impairment, is untenable – illogical, unnecessary, damaging and out of step with the fundamental obligations of the UN Convention. Further, it sustains the current rarity of “genuine inclusion”.

This report is not, however, only a record of what we have yet to achieve. “Diving for Pearls” also captures the “gems” of inclusion – the wondrous beauty of acceptance, belonging, the joy we experience as parents when we see our children participating alongside their peers, the gratitude for those teachers who “get it” and skilfully adapt to the needs of our children. For this reason, we will continue to tell other parents that it is worth “diving for pearls”! Nevertheless, we fervently hope for a time when the pearls of inclusion will be (though still beautiful!) so ubiquitous as to be completely and utterly unremarkable. We also dream for a day when our children’s gifts, talents and contributions will shine brightly – in the same classrooms and playgrounds as other children.



Lisa Bridle

President, QPPD

This research highlights the work that still needs to be done to truly open up the general education system to all children.

## Executive summary

In 2010, QPPD commissioned research to investigate whether parents' experience of inclusive education in Queensland schools reflected the changes in policy and legislation over the past ten years.

The research comprised a survey of 179 parents of children with disability, either on-line or through a phone in. Three facilitated focus group discussions elicited further qualitative information from 25 participants.

The research found that parents cannot yet feel confident that inclusive policy is being put into practice in all Queensland schools. It indicated that all children with disability do not yet have true membership, with the sense of belonging and achievement that membership entails, in regular classrooms in local schools. Exclusion is still either a reality or a risk for students with disability and their families.

The research revealed that schools *can* be inclusive and that children can be valued and participating members of their local communities. However just over a third of survey respondents are not able to access education on the basis of equal opportunity and are not at the school of their parents' choice.

Parents described barriers to enrolling in their school of choice including direction to a different school, negativity at the preferred school, the need for significant parent input to achieve enrolment in a regular school and a lack of support

or expertise available at the preferred school. A number of parents had opted for special schools. QPPD believes the regular system has failed these families.

Meanwhile a significant number of students with disability who are enrolled in regular schools are only present in regular classrooms for half the day or less. The survey shows that children are more likely to be excluded from regular classrooms in a school with a special education program.

While more than half of the respondents reported that their child with disability follows the same classroom program as their peers, almost 40% of parents reported that their child only sometimes, if ever, follows the same program. The research indicates that curriculum modification is an essential ingredient for program participation.

The survey evidence suggests that curriculum modification is more likely in schools with special education programs; however students in these schools are also more likely to be withdrawn from regular classrooms and lunch areas and to be excluded from the general curriculum.

Parents indicated that specialist facilities, including teacher aide support, could enhance inclusive experiences when used flexibly. However the research also suggest that these supports, rather than assisting inclusion, can act as a barrier to participation of students with disability in regular activities.

From the survey results, it appears that special education programs can perpetuate traditional, segregated approaches to teaching students with disability. Parents of children in these settings were more likely to be dissatisfied with the time their children spent with their peers and were less likely to be satisfied with their children's learning outcomes.

Just over half the parents surveyed were not happy with, or had mixed feelings about, their child's learning outcomes. Teachers' attitude, knowledge and skills were seen as fundamental for effective outcomes for children with disability.

Despite examples of positive peer support and social development, about three quarters of parents reported their children were not developing relationships with other students.

The evidence from the survey suggests that a major obstacle to inclusive education is a belief that it is a child's disability which limits their learning, participation and belonging rather than schools and teachers that do not welcome, accommodate and support all learners.

QPPD has developed a set of recommendations based on the research findings. These recommendations address the need to improve the performance of education systems in delivering on inclusive policy and legislation. They outline what is required of Education Queensland and other schooling systems to achieve genuine inclusion.

This research highlights the work that still needs to be done to truly open up the general education system to all children. QPPD will continue to work with government, education systems and other stakeholders to ensure all parents of children with disability can access inclusive education as a right, rather than an elusive treasure.

## The pearls

*The survey highlights what parents are seeking for their children with disability:*



welcome  
belonging  
to be valued  
learning  
success  
community  
opportunities  
certainty  
friendship

*Parents who have had inclusive experiences talked of:*

positive attitudes  
flexibility  
support  
skills and knowledge  
involvement  
good communication  
understanding  
modification  
advocacy  
commitment



## Recommendations

1. Education Queensland and other schooling systems will develop clear and consistent guidelines that regular schools are the first and recommended option for students with disability. Education staff will not recommend, direct or pressure families to enrol in an alternative school, special school or home schooling.
2. Furthermore, principals and education staff will welcome students with disability into full time and unconditional enrolments. A positive and collaborative approach will be an expectation not a hope.
3. The allocation of resources between schools will be adjusted to reflect inclusive education policy statements. Better sharing of resources will occur, so that funding and support for special education services are readily available at local, regular schools rather than tied up in special schools and other specific locations.
4. Schools will focus on the use of differentiated instruction and curriculum modification rather than relying on teaching assistants to enable inclusion.
5. Education Queensland and other schooling systems will have clear and transparent processes through which schools can review their inclusive practice (e.g. Index for Inclusion) and be held accountable.
6. Education Queensland and other schooling systems will develop an impartial process through which parents can give feedback (e.g. School Checklist TRIM 09/176347 for parents) and lodge complaints.
7. Education Queensland and other schooling systems will review and develop guidelines regarding the operation of special education programs so that they work flexibly to promote inclusion rather than facilitating systematic withdrawal.
8. Education Queensland and other schooling systems will explore and develop guidelines regarding the function of teacher aides, focusing on positive input within regular classrooms.
9. Education Queensland and other schooling systems will nurture and review inclusive practice and adopt a continuous improvement model. Good practice will be shared between teachers and schools.
10. When parents request special, segregated settings, this will be seen as a failure of the system to be inclusive and a cause for review and improvement. What parents are seeking in special settings will be used as guidance for what can be provided or improved in regular settings.
11. Education Queensland and training institutions will have a strong, ongoing focus and commitment to professional development in inclusive education for both pre-service and in-service teachers.
12. The development of relationships will be everybody's business. Opportunities for the development of social connections will be provided and supported by both parents and teachers. It will be recognised that relationships are more likely when children spend time together, over extended periods of time, in shared activities, with support for this to happen.
13. QPPD will develop resources and workshops on inclusive education for parents.
14. Through the recommendations above, Education Queensland and other schooling systems will build the capacity of regular schools to include students with disability and to address barriers to inclusive schooling.
15. QPPD will nurture parents' belief in inclusion by sharing positive and successful experiences and the provision of opportunities for skill and knowledge building.

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability (QPPD) is a parent-based, mission-driven organisation that was established in 1981. The mission of the organisation is to vigorously defend justice and rights for people with disability by exposing exclusionary practices, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disability as respected, valued and participating members of society.

## About QPPD

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability (QPPD) is a parent-based, mission-driven organisation that was established in 1981. It receives funding from the National Disability Advocacy Program within the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). QPPD is funded to do family and systems advocacy on behalf of people with disability. The mission of the organisation is to vigorously defend justice and rights for people with disability by exposing exclusionary practices, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disability as respected, valued and participating members of society.

### QPPD's beliefs about education and students with disability

QPPD's beliefs about education for students with disability alert the organisation to practices of exclusion and injustice in the schooling system.

QPPD believes that students with disability:

- are people first, regardless of the nature of their disabilities
- can develop and learn
- achieve better educational outcomes in regular settings and with access to the general curriculum
- should be encouraged to lead typical lives.
- are more likely to achieve a typical and valued life in the community if they are part of regular educational services alongside their peers
- can make a positive and valuable contribution to their local schools
- may need extra supports and assistance in order to participate fully in regular educational services.

Based on work with parents and families over three decades, QPPD asserts that students with disability are at risk of being:

- labelled and viewed with lowered expectations because of those labels
- neglected and subject to life-wasting activities
- rejected from the main arena of schooling
- provided for in specialised places away from other students and with different cultural and social norms
- provided with special and /or alternative programs, thereby missing opportunities for access to the richness of the general curriculum.

### QPPD's beliefs about education systems

QPPD recognises that contemporary education systems are informed by disability legislation and have developed inclusive education policies. We believe that systems have the capacity and authority to expect, guide, promote, fund and support positive and successful inclusive experiences for all students.

However QPPD agrees with the observations made by the Community Resource Unit (CRU) that all systems operate within a wider social context and, as a result, share a long history in which people with disability have been segregated and excluded. QPPD believes that the following issues identified by CRU also apply within education systems, in that they can:

- operate in largely unconscious ways i.e. without direct understanding of the impact of their policies and procedures or of how those policies and procedures are implemented
- reflect negative societal views of students with disability
- use complex and bureaucratic processes that work against positive experiences for students and parents
- show a difference between what they say they do and what they actually do
- exert power over others in a way which is to the detriment of students with disability and their families.

Through inclusive education, we teach all children the importance of belonging and the democratic strength of diversity.

"Inclusive education, in early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, adult and community education, is the foundation for social inclusion and participation of all citizens."

*(from the Blue Skies Scenario, Blue Skies Group Queensland 2009)*

## Introduction

"For twenty years QPPD has advocated for the inclusion of people with disabilities into their communities. At the heart of our advocacy QPPD has held a belief that when people with disability are connected and have relationships with others they are safer, more respected, have greater opportunities, and enriched lives."

*Fiona Connelly (former QPPD President, QPPD Placement Policy report, 2001)*

It is now ten years since QPPD's Placement Policy Report urged government to create schools which reflect the full diversity of our society and which value the contributions of each member. In 2011, QPPD's commitment to inclusive education remains undiminished; as it is through the power of learning and growing together that children with a disability enter adulthood as participating members of society. Through inclusive education, we teach all children the importance of belonging and the democratic strength of diversity.

"Inclusive education, in early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, adult and community education, is the foundation for social inclusion and participation of all citizens."

*(from the Blue Skies Scenario, Blue Skies Group Queensland 2009)*

A faithful long-term commitment to inclusive education has fuelled QPPD's vigorous ongoing advocacy efforts on behalf of Queensland families seeking regular schooling for their sons and daughters with disability\*. Key examples of these advocacy efforts in the past ten years have been included in the brief history at right which outlines significant milestones in the move towards inclusive education.

- 2001 UNESCO Report on Inclusive Education
- 2001 QPPD Placement Policy report
- 2002 Senate Enquiry into Students with Disabilities
- 2002 Inclusive Education Summit (Education Queensland)
- 2002 Inclusive Education Definition in Disability Initiatives Update (see below)
- 2002 Ministerial Taskforce on Inclusive Education established
- 2003 QPPD family survey and focus groups
- 2003 QPPD report: There's Small Choice in Rotten Apples
- 2004 Ministerial Advisory Committee on Inclusive Education established
- 2005 Education Standards (Disability Discrimination Act)
- 2005 Inclusive Education Statement (Education Queensland)
- 2006 SMS-PR-027 (Enrolment in State Primary, Secondary, and Special Schools) implemented (replacing SM-19; SM-18) (Education Queensland)
- 2008 The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability ratified by Australia
- 2008 QPPD report: Inclusion or Segregation for Children with an Intellectual Impairment: What does the Research Say?
- 2009 QPPD report: All Children Belong Together

### Inclusive Education 'Education for All':

A process of responding to the uniqueness of individuals, increasing:

- Presence
  - Access
  - Participation
- and
- Achievement
- in a learning society.

*Disability Initiatives Update, Education Queensland, June 2002*

\*For a history of inclusive education and advocacy in Queensland see QPPD (2009) *All Children Belong Together* .

To access the Blue Skies Scenario go to [www.blue-skies.info/scenario](http://www.blue-skies.info/scenario)

# Changes to policy and legislation

The changes to policy and legislation in recent years voiced powerful and important statements about what families can expect for their children with disability in the schooling system. Summaries are provided below. For more information see Appendix 1 or go to the listed websites.

## **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**

Article 24 of the Convention deals with education and directs governments to ensure that students with disability are not excluded from the general education system and can access an inclusive, quality education on an equal basis with others in their communities. Schools are required under the Convention to provide reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements and effective, individualised support measures in order to maximise academic and social development. The goal, as outlined in the Convention, is full inclusion.

## **Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) – Education Standards 2005**

The Education Standards make it unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against someone because that person has a disability. Children with disability have the right to study at any educational institution in the same way as any other student. The standards are there so that students with disability can enrol on the same basis as students without disability; can expect reasonable adjustments to ensure participation; can expect additional support; and can be provided with curriculum and resources appropriate to their needs.

## **Inclusive Education Statement (Education Queensland)**

Education Queensland's statement in 2005 described an education system where principles of equity and social justice underpin policy, practice and decision making. A system of high expectations is described, with intellectual challenge for all; alignment between curriculum, teaching and learning approaches and assessment; community capacity building through partnerships with the community; respect for diversity; and a reduction in barriers to learning. Inclusive education practices are described as central to quality education.

## **Catholic Education policies (www.bne.catholic.edu.au)**

"Catholic schools in the Archdiocese are committed ...to providing high quality, inclusive schooling" (Enrolment of Students in Catholic Schools Policy, June 2004). The Marginalised Students Policy (May 2009) describes a commitment by Brisbane Catholic Education schools to actively combat exclusion. This will be achieved through various strategies including access to flexible curriculum structures and programs; access to essential learning tools and targeted assistance; and intentional, equitable resource allocation. The policy is to be implemented through the promotion of just, informed communities with a spirit of welcome, inclusion and partnership.

## **Independent Schools Queensland (www.aisq.qld.edu.au)**

The independent school sector includes a diverse range of non-government schools. The Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) website (2010) describes some shared commitments which include catering to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the individual student and achieving the best possible outcomes for all students. An ISQ Media Release (July 2010) stated that "[s]tudents with disabilities are an important and growing part of our school communities and deserve the same opportunities and life chances as other Queensland children".

## Rationale for this research

QPPD has observed the changes to policy and legislation with a sense of hope for the future but also with caution. International educators observing similar developments in other countries (Lloyd, 2008; Gibson, 2006; Vlachou, 2004) have commented that inclusive policy has not necessarily been followed through with inclusive practice. Either old forms of segregation have been renamed (Slee, 2006) or new potential forms of segregation have sprung up, for example, the proliferation of special education units and classes in recent years. In some countries, special, segregated schools not only still exist, but have increased in number since discussions about inclusion began (Miles & Ahuja, 2006).

QPPD has found that families in Queensland are also questioning whether inclusive education policy is being put into practice in government and non-government schools.

Contact with QPPD over school issues has not diminished since EQ's Inclusive Education Statement and similar commitments from Catholic and independent education sectors. QPPD has received 400 calls and emails about education since the start of 2005. A closer look at those received from January 2009 to January 2010 reveals that parents had concerns about part-time placements; pressure to go to special school; pressure to home school; lack of accessibility (both physical and curriculum); lack of support; low expectations of teachers; and the ability/skills of teachers.

While policy rhetoric had become inclusive, no review of the state's compliance with the Education Standards had been undertaken by 2010 and exclusionary practices appeared to still exist. The need for advocacy was as strong as ever. In response to the ongoing feedback that, in spite of the changes to policy and legislation, students with disability were not routinely welcomed and catered for in local schools, QPPD decided to undertake research into parent experiences of accessing mainstream/regular education settings in Queensland.

QPPD specifically wanted to find out:

- the extent to which parents are experiencing barriers to enrolling their child with a disability in their school of choice including their experiences of the enrolment procedure itself
- the extent to which students experience barriers to inclusive schooling including:
  - physical presence in classrooms
  - participation in the curriculum
  - friendship
  - learning outcomes
- the nature of barriers to inclusive schooling
- the factors that are working in favour of families seeking regular education settings.

## References

- Gibson, S. (2006). Beyond a 'culture of silence': Inclusive education and the liberation of 'voice.' *Disability & Society*, 21, 315-329.
- Lloyd, C. (2008). Removing barriers to achievement: A strategy for inclusion or exclusion? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 12, 221-236.
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- Slee, R. (2006). Limits to and possibilities for Educational Reform. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10, 109 – 119
- Vlachou, A. (2004). Education and inclusive policy-making: Implications for research and practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8, 3-21.

# Methodology

## The Plan

In order to find out about parent experiences of inclusive education, QPPD board members decided to conduct a phone-in survey followed by focus group interviews. QPPD employed a project worker and formed a reference group of QPPD members.

A media campaign publicised the phone-in event. Announcements were placed in community newspapers throughout Queensland and a media release was sent to major media outlets, including radio, television and newspapers. In addition, promotional flyers were sent to schools and through Education Queensland networks. They were also distributed via QPPD's community networks to families and related organisations. Information about the phone-in was available through the QPPD website.

QPPD advertised the survey widely with the hope that many Queensland parents of students with disability would respond. Feedback was sought from families in state, Catholic and independent schools as well as across age groups. Members of QPPD were not targeted specifically. Participants were not randomly selected. Any parent who wished to participate was welcome.

## The Survey

44 questions were designed in consultation with the reference group aiming to gather both quantitative and qualitative data (see Appendix 2). Questions in seven sections covered background information about parents and students; presence in schools; enrolment experience; presence in classrooms; participation in school and class activities; and social experiences. Some questions were multiple choice and some were open-ended. For many questions there was an opportunity to comment or add further information. Respondents did not have to answer each question and could choose more than one answer. After a trial with two parents the project worker adjusted the survey to make it clearer. Survey Monkey online survey software was used to create a web-based survey. Hard copies of the online survey were also used during the phone-in interviews.

## The Phone-in

Phone-in interviews were conducted at QPPD's office in Salisbury during the week from Monday 22 March to Friday 26 March 2010. Following an invitation to reference group members and other QPPD members to participate as phone interviewers, nine volunteers worked in shifts throughout the week, with a supervisor available whenever possible to assist with the process.

All volunteers were given an orientation booklet with directions on how to conduct the interviews and how to complete the survey. The phones were staffed from 8am- 4pm each day, with two volunteers working at a time; one to take calls and one to return missed calls. A designated message bank allowed interviewers to collect the details of parents who called when the lines were busy. Interviews took approximately 30-40 minutes to complete.

The survey was also available online via a link on the QPPD website. Parents could choose this method of response. Phone interviewers had the option to enter responses directly through Survey Monkey or onto a hard copy of the survey. All written responses were subsequently entered online via Survey Monkey.

## Analysis

Quantitative analysis - the percentages and cross tabulations quoted throughout the report – was derived via the Survey Monkey software. The project worker undertook thematic analysis by categorising responses to open-ended questions and identifying themes. At a workshop in June 2010 the research reference group and other interested QPPD parents also categorised survey comments and identified themes. The findings from this workshop were used to cross check the project worker's analysis.

## The Focus Groups

To gain a more in-depth understanding of families' experiences QPPD followed the survey with focus group interviews, facilitated by Professor Suzanne Carrington of QUT (see Appendix 3). Focus group interviews were conducted with two groups of parents in Brisbane on 28 April 2010 and one group of parents in Townsville on 29 April 2010. QPPD invited parents to participate in the study with a flyer (Appendix 4) distributed through parent networks. The research had QUT ethical approval. The interview questions were distributed to participants who responded to the QPPD flyer before the focus groups, and signed consent forms were collected before the interviews began in each location.

The technique of using focus group interviews provided benefits from the interaction of the group. The facilitator encouraged participants to respond not only to the interview questions but to each others' contributions as well. This process was supportive and empowering for a group of parents of children who have a disability.

"The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299).

The facilitator of the focus group interviews has previous experience in working with parents who have children with disability. She is also familiar with the topic of the inclusive education policy in Queensland schools. The facilitator ensured participants were comfortable and confident in sharing their views and were reminded of the confidential nature of the discussion.

The focus group interviews were guided by a set of open-ended interview questions (Appendix 5) focusing on how parents perceived the implementation of inclusive education policy in practice. Probe questions were often used to gather more information or to clarify a response from the parents.

Participants explored issues and the facilitator encouraged an open discussion that allowed the participants to respond and build on others' points of view. The focus group interviews in this study were conducted at a number of meeting rooms used by parents of children with disability and took between one and two hours in length. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed for theme based analysis in response to the research questions and sub-questions.

This report includes the main messages from the focus group discussions. A separate detailed focus group report is available from QPPD on request.

## References

Kitzinger, J (1995) Introducing focus groups, *British Medical Journal*, 311, 299-302

# Profile of respondents

## Survey respondents

There were 179 responses to the survey by parents of students with disability. Respondents did not have to answer every question, and some questions would not have been applicable to all (e.g. questions about changing schools). 139 respondents answered all the questions on the survey.

Parents heard of the survey mainly through their school (26%), directly from QPPD (25%), or through a service organisation (e.g. Autism Qld) (23%).

54% of respondents answered the survey online and 46% participated in the phone in. Most of the parents (85%) who answered the survey were *not* members of QPPD.

Families from all over Queensland were represented (see table below) with the largest proportions coming from the Brisbane area (30.9%) or far north Queensland (22.2%).

Postcode	No. of parents	%
4000 - 4199 (Brisbane area)	50	30.9
4200 - 4299 (e.g. Beenleigh, Beaudesert, Gold Coast)	8	4.9
4300 - 4399 (e.g. Ipswich, Toowoomba, Warwick)	17	10.5
4400 - 4499 (e.g. Dalby, Roma, Western Downs)	3	1.9
4500 - 4599 (e.g. Caboolture, Sunshine Coast)	24	14.8
4600 - 4699 (e.g. Maryborough, Bundaberg, Gladstone)	10	6.2
4700 - 4799 (e.g. Rockhampton, Mackay, Longreach)	14	8.6
4800 - 4899 (e.g. Mt Isa, Cairns, Weipa)	36	22.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100%</b>

Just over a quarter of the respondents (25.4%) were parenting on their own as either single or divorced parents. Many (41.1%) had a university degree or postgraduate qualification. When asked about current education documents, the majority of parents either hadn't heard of or hadn't read Education Queensland's Inclusive Education Statement (68%); the DDA Standards for Education (80.4%); or the Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (78.7%).

Just over half of children who were the focus of this survey were in the primary years (52.6%). The following table shows the school years that were represented.

School stage	No. of children	%
Prep	15	9.9
Primary	80	52.6
Secondary	44	28.9
Post-secondary	8	5.3
Other	5	3.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100%</b>

Respondents' children attended a variety of education settings. Almost half were in regular state schools with a special education program, while others were in regular state schools, Catholic schools, independent schools, other settings, a state special school or a split placement across one or more of these options.

## Focus Group Participants

Participants in the focus group interviews were mainly parents but also included one adult with disability who had recently finished school (and her communication assistant), a teacher aide and a therapist who supported children and parents. All families represented had children in regular school settings except for one parent who had recently moved from an inclusive school setting to a special school.

There were 25 participants in the focus group interviews; 15 in Brisbane (across two groups) and 10 in Townsville.

Children discussed ranged in age from pre-prep to university and included 19 boys and 9 girls. Appendix 6 provides more detailed information about these students.

## What did parents tell us about enrolling at the school of their choice?



Are students with disability enrolled in schools on the “same basis as students without disabilities” as the Education Standards of the Disability Discrimination Act stipulate?

Have families found that their children with disability “are not excluded from the general education system” as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires?

Have families told us that their children with disability are accessing education on the basis of “equal opportunity”?

# Access to schools

## What did parents consider when looking for a school?

By far the most common response to this open-ended question was that parents were looking for a school that would meet their child's educational needs and provide suitably qualified staff and appropriate specialist facilities and support. Although these were mainly general comments, when parents specified the type of setting they were looking for, more parents indicated that they were looking for this in regular rather than in special schools.

***“The support needs that were in place. A good special education program. Wanted inclusion into the mainstream class ASAP.”***

A caring attitude by staff was also a common response. The approach of the school towards students with disability was important to parents.

***“Welcoming atmosphere and where all children are treated as individuals with talents and gifts to share. Where there is balance between academic and citizenship, and emphasis on community spirit.”***

The location and size of the school were often referred to, with parents wanting a small school that was near to home.

***“Wanted my daughter to go to school with local children that she would progress with through to higher education.”***

Many parents indicated that they were directed to a particular school rather than deciding on this themselves.

***“Didn't have a choice. There was nowhere else to go. I was forced.”***

Less prominent themes included the skills and understanding of teaching staff; a suitable curriculum (e.g. academics; a good education); and the reputation of the school.

Poignantly, the criterion for a small number of parents was any school that would take their children.

***“Just wanted a school for them to go to.”***

## How did parents decide on a school?

121 parents answered this question. Some chose more than one answer.

The most common factor (39.7%) in decision making was proximity to home. The local school, however, was not available to all children. A number of parents felt that local schools were not willing /able to meet their child's needs or they were directed to a school away from their neighbourhood.

***“We have moved 46km away and would prefer a closer school but I am aware our current school is like a 5 star compared to local ones.”***

***“Wanted a local school but they directed to me to XXXXX as they said there is a lot more support there.”***

In fact, just under a quarter (the next most common answer) of parents were told or advised by education staff to go to a specified school. It must be noted that *all* of those at special schools indicated that they had been directed there.

***“Some Principals said “We just don't have the resources to cater for him” Was directed to the current school by one of those Principals.”***

Parents again commented that they had no choice in the decision about where their child could be enrolled.

***“Reality is that you can't really go to the school that you want.”***

## Where are children with disability enrolled?

Given that specialist services and an inclusive setting were so important to parents in considering a school for their child with a disability, it is not surprising that almost half of the children were in a special education program in state (regular) schools. What is not so apparent from this question (but will be explored in later questions) is whether this setting provided the welcoming attitude and inclusive experience that policy documents specify and that many parents were seeking.

School setting	No. of children	%
State special school	10	6.8
Split placement	9	6.2
State regular school with SEP	70	47.9
State regular school without SEP	21	14.4
Catholic Education school	15	10.3
Queensland Independent School	8	5.5
Other (e.g. Distance Ed, AQ, Montessori, post-school)	13	8.9
Total	146	100%

Some children were only offered part-time enrolment and just over half of parents (52.4%) indicated that their child with a disability was *not* at the same school as siblings. While the reason for being separate from their family was not always disability related, in a number of cases it would seem that the child with a disability was not able to enrol on the same basis as their brothers and sisters.

## How did parents find the enrolment process?

Parents varied widely in their experiences of enrolment. While some found the process to be similar to their other children and a positive experience, many found it to be very different and difficult (e.g. having to jump through hoops, extended waiting, having to fight). A number of children weren't diagnosed at the time of enrolment so these parents weren't able to comment.

It is to be expected that the enrolment process for a student with disability would involve extra meetings and paperwork, as many parents indicated. What parents weren't expecting from a supposedly inclusive process, however, was:

- the rejection of an enrolment

***"I was told he couldn't be enrolled and was asked to go away. No acceptance of us at all."***

- a conditional enrolment

***"The school refused to take my kids with a disability without more funding, it apparently costs more money to say hello and tell my children where to sit and when to go."***

- exclusion from the decision-making process

***"We were bitterly disappointed as there were a series of conversations...without our knowledge and input – people who decided this was not the right school for S and decided which was the right school. We felt completely locked out of the process and powerless – the parents were not thought to know anything."***

- a stressful and emotional process

***"When I arrived at the meeting I felt completely ambushed...They all just sat there and looked at me sobbing."***

- or that decisions would not take into account the individual strengths and needs of their child.

***"At both enrolment interviews we were told that it probably wasn't the place for my son (but that's not an isolated thing) ... the only knowledge they had was that [he was] autistic."***

It must be noted that not all parents found the process to be a negative one.

***"It was welcoming, friendly and open."***

***"I felt very supported by all of those in the school, there was extra support given to me as staff explained the extras my son would be able to access."***

## Was the school where children were enrolled the school of choice?

129 parents responded to this question. Just over a third (36.4%) indicated that their child's current school is *not* their first choice. This percentage was higher (50%) for those in special schools.

When asked why not, a major theme was the lack of choice, (which was also discussed earlier in how decisions about schooling were made). Other common barriers faced by parents, which were also raised in focus group discussions, were:

- negative attitudes and rejection by schools

***"The closest state high school just did not want to know us because she had a disability ...the closest school, because of the socioeconomic area (upper) didn't want us because she was not a star performer."***

***"We got the...official letter that they'd rejected the enrolment on the basis of undue hardship at the school. We approached other schools who were very, very discouraging." (focus group participant)***

- inadequate support/funding.

***"The local school for one child is our first choice but for our other son the school he attends now is not. I would have preferred him to stay at our local school but unfortunately they could not accommodate his needs."***

***"We've got to pull money out of thin air for early intervention and for schooling...the financial stress on the family has been nothing short of phenomenal and enormous." (focus group participant)***

An issue raised, although less frequently, was the inflexibility of the system.

***"We are one street out of catchment for another local school that has disability access all sorted out, such as hoist in the pool, lifts etc but they won't let us go there."***

Comments from parents who were at the school of their choice were few and reflected parents' satisfaction with the specialised programs that were available. Although small in number, some of these comments gave an added insight into the barriers to inclusion.

***"Don't have any faith in mainstream schools to educate children with ASD."***

Some observations show the complexity of the issue of 'choice' for parents; particularly for those who would prefer regular schooling but did not believe regular schools could provide the necessary supports for their child to be happy and successful.

***"My son has had many school changes - this has affected him emotionally. The failure to provide sufficient resources and support for him over the years in regular school has contributed to his anxiety disorder. I needed to capitulate about special school so that there would be no more changes for him until he finishes school."***

## How happy are parents with their current school?

129 parents responded to this question. The most common answer chosen (31.8%) was "okay". As can be seen from the table below just under a quarter (24.1%) of parents indicated that they were unhappy or very unhappy while almost half were happy or very happy.

Are you happy with your child's current enrolment?	No. of respondents	%
Very unhappy	17	13.2
Unhappy	14	10.9
Okay	41	31.8
Happy	21	16.3
Very happy	40	31

The large percentage of parents who indicated they were happy in their schools was reflected in the focus group discussions, where many inclusive experiences were described.

***"They're just very open, loving; they'll accept you no matter what."(focus group participant)***

When invited to comment on why they were unhappy, however, half of the respondents took the opportunity including some who had said they were happy. It was most common for parents to describe "happy but..." situations, indicating that there were mixed feelings about the enrolment; not surprising given the large number who chose "okay".

***"It has been a bit of a hit and miss dependent on the actual teacher for the year, and some have been great while others dreadful."***

***"Happy, but would like to see a more inclusive environment."***

For some it appears that a compromise had been made.

***"Yes except that we want them to teach him! not just have him sit there in the classroom."***

When parents were unhappy, they most frequently referred to the following issues, which were also identified through the focus group discussions:

- the system (e.g. inflexibility; instability of staff; communication with parents)

***"If you call the school to talk to a teacher you get the answering machine and nobody gets back to you."***

***"I guess just the lack of influence that you have to opt in and out of various things ... the inflexibility has been a barrier." (focus group participant)***

- the knowledge and skills of teaching staff (e.g. lack of understanding; lack of training)

***"There are NOT enough trained people in the schools, to deal with children like ours, who is quite challenging. The approach is always HEAD ON, it's their way or NO WAY, never negotiation. Time after time we would deliver him to the school, as happy as could be and before the 20 - 30 minute trip home was completed, the phone would ring, the school would say, come and get him. I would arrive to find him in such a hysterical state, not wanting to leave the school, screaming out I am sorry, I am sorry."***

***"I spoke to the teacher and she had no idea he had a disability." (focus group participant)***

- attitudes (e.g. negativity of staff; lack of acceptance)

***"Our son has been in school for one year now and we realise that acceptance, tolerance, flexibility and an environment of inclusion was only skin deep or a thin veneer."***

***"I found that they [teachers] always focus on the negative and not on what she can do." (focus group participant)***

Funding was also raised as an issue, although not as frequently as the themes above. Specifically, parents commented on the lack of money for teacher aide support and for material resources.

While it is encouraging that so many parents reported being happy with their current enrolment (and there were positive comments about specialised programs, skilful teachers and inclusive attitudes), QPPD's considerable experience with parents provides a cautionary context. Firstly, current enrolment is not always the whole story of a family's experience (as the next section of the report indicates). Secondly, experience suggests that pursuing a regular placement 'wears parents down' and can lower expectations. Parents can talk about feeling "happy" with not having to fight any more or with situations that are less than what they could be.

***"There would be no better anywhere else."***

***"I have tried to make the most positive experience it could be for my son's sake but it has been very stressful and frustrating on an almost weekly basis for five years."***

**Have parents always been happy with the child's enrolment? Have there been changes of schools because of disability related issues?**

46 parents indicated that their children have changed schools. 50% have done this because they were unhappy with the previous school and 34.8% were asked or persuaded to leave. It is notable that a much higher proportion of those in special schools (62.5%) had been asked or persuaded to leave their previous school.

Open-ended responses to this question provide some insight into the barriers at previous schools. Some themes identified from the comments were:

- exclusion/rejection by school staff

***"Was asked to leave as the teachers weren't able to deal with him and used the excuse that 'they were not suitable for his needs'. In other words - he was in the 'too hard basket'."***

- lack of support/funding

***"Not providing services at that stage. Weren't going to help him so encouraged us to leave, politely."***

***"We were unhappy because the previous school refused to meet the specific needs of our son.... We made a complaint and were labelled trouble-makers. Our son developed severe anxiety and depression. The school refused to accommodate for these needs and we were forced to leave."***

- dissatisfaction with teaching and staff skills.

***"The teacher at the school said that if she had wanted to teach special school kids she would have studied for it."***

***"[The school] wanted to graduate my son illiterate year before last. Changed school to facilitate more time to finish school WITH an education."***

It was more common for parents to change school so that their child would be more included.

***"Felt that the special school was not challenging her at all. Wanted inclusion within local community with local children that she would grow up with."***

However, a small number of parents, including one from the focus groups, indicated that they left the regular system for a more specialised setting.

***"Left this school. They tried to integrate him and he couldn't handle it - the noise, the movement; couldn't handle it whatsoever."***

Parents approaching a school to enrol their child with a disability clearly cannot yet feel confident that their child will be accepted warmly and will receive the support and skilful teaching that he or she needs.

## Discussion – access to schools

It is no surprise that the things that parents of children with disability have said they want from the education system seem similar to the things that all parents would want: schools close to home; schools that welcome and value their child; the resources that their child needs to be successful in learning. The question is, have parents of children with disability been able to find, or even look for, the education they want in their choice of a local, regular school? Parents' experiences have been varied. While the survey can only provide a glimpse into a complex situation, the following discussion provides some insights.

While the results indicate that many children *are* enrolled in regular schools, the following points are noteworthy:

- A large number of these children are in special education programs. The potential, therefore, for a segregated and congregated approach to education remains. How schools are operating will be explored in following sections of this report.
- Some of these children have restricted hours in regular schools (as few as one hour per week) and/or have enrolments that are conditional.
- Some comments on the enrolment process signal that seeking inclusion can be a difficult road for parents. Descriptions of extended, stressful and negative enrolment procedures suggest that the first

introduction to a school can be a discouraging experience and an indication of the ongoing advocacy, commitment and energy that will be required of parents.

- There are a number of families that have been asked to leave, or have changed school because parents were unhappy with their child's experiences. This suggests that inclusive enrolments are unstable – and that parents who seek inclusion may then experience uncertainty and the need for constant vigilance.
- A child's school may not be the one that parents would have specifically chosen. A number of parents indicated that they had little or no school choice and that education staff directed or influenced their child's enrolment. This sense of feeling powerless was also raised in focus group discussions in reference to parents' lack of access to information about policy and resourcing. The fact that many children are not at school with their brothers and sisters may be further evidence that the child with a disability was not able to enrol on the same basis as their siblings. The fact that many children are not at local schools also supports this indication.
- Some parents did not want to enrol their child in a regular school or were in regular schools and did not want to be there. Comments suggest that these parents did not have faith (or had lost faith) that regular schools and teachers could provide the skills and resources that their child needed.

As was discovered in QPPD's "Small Choice in Rotten Apples" report, choosing a school for children with disability is a complicated process for parents. Even when parents do describe having a choice, this process can reflect constraints and compromises that other parents do not have to consider.

It is heartening that so many children with disability are enrolled in regular, local schools and that in both the survey and the focus group discussions, there were families who feel welcome and supported there. However, there is also evidence to suggest that inclusion happens by chance rather than by design. Parents approaching a school to enrol their child with a disability clearly cannot yet feel confident that their child will be accepted warmly and will receive the support and skilful teaching that he or she needs. While there continue to be stories of children who have been rejected or "passed around" by schools; of enrolment decisions taken away from parents; of choices made because of the failures of the system; or of the difficulties involved in choosing inclusion it is not possible to conclude that the vision of the Inclusive Education Policy, the DDA and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a reality in all Queensland schools.

## What did parents tell us about their children's presence in regular classrooms?



Is the goal of “full inclusion”, specified in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, being applied to classrooms?

Are students with disability being provided with “reasonable accommodation” and “effective individualised support” to enable their access to regular classrooms with other students their age?

Are specialised resources, such as educational staff and materials, being used to facilitate the inclusion of children with disability in regular classrooms?

# Access to classrooms

## How much time do children spend in regular classrooms?

139 parents answered this question, but as they could choose more than one answer (e.g. if their child was in a split placement), there were 145 responses. Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents. As can be seen from the following table, the most common response (34.5%) was that children are in regular classes "most of the time". Not including the students enrolled in special school, the same percentage (34.5%) of children spends half their time or less in classrooms with their peers.

Time in regular classrooms	No. of respondents	%
Special school	12	8.6
None of the time in regular classes	18	12.9
Some of the time	20	14.4
Half of the time	10	7.2
Most of the time	48	34.5
All of the time	37	26.6

When the results for this question were cross-tabulated with school setting, it became evident that students who attend schools with special education programs (SEPs) are more at risk of exclusion from regular classrooms than those who don't.

Class-rooms	State school with SEP	State school without SEP	Catholic school
Half the time or less	42.7%	14.4%	20%
Most or all of the time	61%	85.7%	80%
Total	68	21	15

Parents were given the option to comment and 74 took this opportunity. The most common theme was one of a systematic withdrawal or exclusion process e.g.

- children are not in regular classes because they are not at school

***"My sons have one hour of school a week and no support for this time...not even to tell them the time is up and to leave... I have to search for them each and every TIME! They are left to wander around until I get there."***

- or schools use a segregated approach.

***"Doesn't even have a seat in the classroom."***

***"Spends all her time in the unit. Supposed to go to the classroom but it doesn't happen."***

When parents did comment on their child being included in regular classrooms, this was made possible by flexible and inclusive processes.

***"The school tries to support by going into the classroom rather than segregating."***

Although not as prominent, funding for support staff was also raised both as a barrier to, and an enabler, of classroom presence.

***"Would like a place for son to go. Small school. Limited resources."***

A disturbing theme was parents' lack of faith in the system to be able to accommodate their child. Some parents expressed the belief that because of their child's disability, they would not be able to cope, or were not coping, in the regular classroom.

***"Child has very high support needs - physical and intellectual. Unable to do regular class work."***

Although less common, some parents referred to the following:

- the unsuitability of the regular curriculum and some subject areas

***"Son attends learner support for alternate English lessons and spare lesson. Disappointed [with] subject choices for students with disability."***

- the negative attitude of teachers

***"Battled for three years. Specific teachers don't want my daughter in their class."***

- the lack of communication between schools and parents

***"It is very hard to know how much time the child spends in the classroom. I am very dependent on teachers telling me, and there is no other real way to know."***

- and the suitability of staff who withdraw children. Focus group discussions highlighted the importance of how teacher aides and support staff are used.

***"Teacher aides remove my son from his class and take him to a room alone where he is supposedly instructed by them - a person with no educational training or skill as a teacher."***

***"With the specialist support staff I think it's like a lucky dip and there's only one or two good prizes in a basket." (focus group participant)***

**What insight can parents give as to when, specifically, children are not in regular classrooms?**

118 parents answered this question. As they could select multiple answers, there were 123 responses. Percentages have been calculated based on the total number of respondents. The most common response was "other" followed by an indication that students are slightly more at risk of exclusion from regular classrooms when academic lessons are timetabled.

When children are separate from regular classrooms	No. of respondents	%
Special school	12	10.2
Always	11	9.3
For all academic lessons but participates in non-academic (e.g. music/PE/art)	20	16.9
For maths and English only	14	11.9
Only at student's request (e.g. break)	17	14.4
Other	49	41.5

Parents who chose "other" were invited to comment. Many of these comments give an insight into factors that work against children being in regular classrooms.

The most common theme was the curriculum. Parents' comments suggest that in some schools, separation of students with disability occurs when regular class work is too difficult and hasn't been modified.

***"The work is too hard, so he goes back to the unit."***

Students were also withdrawn when alternative programs had been established instead.

***"Spends some time withdrawn to the unit each day doing a "special" program or for cooking or community access."***

Again in this question, there were some parents who did not trust that the system could, or would, provide what their child needs in the regular classroom; who saw their child's disability as a barrier.

Although not a major theme, some comments suggest that in some schools, the separation of students with disability is a routine procedure.

***"Dropped off and picked up from SEU. Little mixing, when the school had assemblies, stayed in yard and watched from there."***

A factor which seemed to support presence in general classrooms was the use of support within the room.

***"Sometimes he works at his level in the class with her. Sometimes he is included with all the class."***

There was also reference to the flexible use of specialist support and facilities, so that students could withdraw only when if they needed to.

***"School is very adaptable therefore some time may be entirely with the class and other times may be separated when XXXX is struggling."***

**What insight can parents give as to why, specifically, children are not in regular classrooms?**

112 parents answered this question. Again they could select multiple answers, so there were a total of 215 responses. Percentages have been calculated both on the total number of respondents and the total number of responses. Results suggest that children are most commonly removed from classrooms for individual instruction and because the regular classroom curriculum is too difficult.

Why children are separate from regular classrooms	No. of respondents	% of parents	% of responses
Regular program too difficult	48	42.9	22.3
For one-one instruction	54	48.2	25.2
Behaviour issues	34	30.4	15.8
Funding	19	17	8.8
Lack of aide support	29	25.9	13.5
Other	31	27.7	14.4

Parents were asked to specify if they chose "other", but comments were general and have been used here to add to the picture about what helps or hinders the presence of children with disability in regular classrooms. The majority of comments referred to the barriers to participation.

The most common theme in the 79 responses was a reference to the child's disability. There was a clear message that the disability constituted a barrier and that parents doubted the capacity of the regular classroom to include their child.

***"Unable to cope in regular mainstream classroom."***

Other themes, in order of frequency, were:

- the provision of specialised, alternative programs rather than modified class work

***"Special needs teacher's way of programming - for small group learning."***

- the inability of teachers to include children with disability

***"Teachers don't have the skills, and Special Ed. won't let go."***

- the funding or support that would be required to facilitate inclusion in regular classrooms.

***"Because there is not enough aide support she has to go to the SEU more if she needs help. She isn't able to stay in the classroom."***

Although not as common, there were also comments on the negative attitudes of teachers.

***"Not wanted by teachers - too hard. Easier to be out of class; ... easier to pass the buck."***

Comments also illustrated factors which worked in favour of inclusion e.g. the flexible use of specialist facilities. This allowed children to be in regular classrooms by enabling them to withdraw only when and if necessary.

***"To give him a chance to calm down by removing excessive stimuli."***

Other positive themes were the modification of the curriculum and the use of support to enable children to be present in the classroom.

The link between funding and inclusive practice appears to be more complicated than just providing teacher aides. Parents' responses indicate that aide support can enhance inclusive experiences but can also be used to separate students from general classroom learning.

## Discussion – access to classrooms

That a little over a quarter of children with disability spend the whole day in regular classrooms is an encouraging indication that inclusion is possible. The research does not suggest, however, that this is the norm across schools. It would appear that many children, although enrolled in regular schools, are still spending half of their day or more segregated from their peers. The following discussion explores the insights that parents have given into factors that are working for or against inclusion in regular classrooms.

While there was some reference to funding and the provision of teacher aide support, this theme was not, as might be expected, the most obvious one. In fact, there was evidence to suggest that, for some children, aide time did *not* guarantee presence in classrooms but in fact supported exclusion. The link between funding and inclusive practice appears to be more complicated than just providing teacher aides. Parents' responses indicate that aide support can enhance inclusive experiences but can also be used to separate students from general classroom learning. As was discussed earlier, a reliance on aide time can also result in conditional and part-time enrolments.

A prominent theme was that of how specialist support and services were provided; the approach used within schools. It was clear from parents' comments that *how* support is given has worked either for or against inclusion. While some parents described in-class support and program modification which enabled their child to be in regular classrooms, there was also indication of the opposite. The withdrawal of children appears to still be a routine strategy in some schools and this is particularly so if the school has a special education program.

There was also evidence to suggest that the withdrawal of students, if used flexibly and only when and if it is warranted (rather than as the norm), has been used to enhance students' inclusive experiences.

Another common theme was the difficulty of regular classroom work. There was an indication that the curriculum has been a barrier to inclusive practice. Rather than modifying class work, children have been separated for special, alternative programs.

Notably, it was common for parents to refer to their child's disability as a barrier to being in the regular classroom. Given the importance of parents' input, a lack of faith in the capacity of the regular system to welcome and educate their child has the potential to be a significant barrier to inclusion. It needs to be noted that for a small number of parents, the regular classroom has failed their child. They have given up on inclusive schooling and moved to a special, separate educational setting. Parents want more than just presence in the classroom; an issue which will be explored in the next section.

The results indicate that even when children with disability are enrolled in regular schools, parents cannot feel assured that they will be working in regular classrooms. While many children do spend all or most of their day with their peers, the research suggests that this is not standard procedure. How schools approach the education of students with disability appears to vary; making true inclusion elusive. Parents cannot yet feel confident that their child will be successful and welcome within regular classrooms and will be learning from a suitably modified general curriculum alongside their classmates.

## What did parents tell us about how their children spend their day?



Are students with disability participating effectively in Queensland schools?

Are “reasonable accommodations” being made as required in law and policy?

Is “full and equal participation” being facilitated as required under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

Are differentiated activities provided so that students with disability can participate with their peers as the Education Standards of the Disability Discrimination Act specifies?

Is additional support provided with flexibility (as required under the Education Standards) and with explicit, scaffolded teaching (as per Education Queensland policy)?

Is the curriculum and material appropriate so that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment align to and meet the needs of all?

# Participation

## Do children with disability follow the same program as their classmates?

136 parents answered this question. 59.6% said their child mostly or always follows the same program. 40.4% of parents indicated that they don't know or that their child only sometimes, if ever, does.

How often children follow the same program (at suitable level)	No. of respondents	%
Special school	12	8.8
Don't know	5	3.7
Never	12	8.8
Sometimes	26	19.1
Mostly	35	25.8
Always	46	33.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>100%</b>

When these figures were cross-tabulated with school setting, children were more likely to be excluded from the classroom curriculum if the school had a special education program. Compared with three-quarters of students from Catholic and Independent schools, and 85.7% of students in state schools without SEPs; only 58.2% of students in schools with SEPs were mostly or always following class programs.

60 parents took the opportunity to comment further on this question and their comments reflected the factors which have worked both for and against children participating in the same program as their peers. Nearly every comment about barriers reflected the use of withdrawal strategies. In other words because students were not present in classes they could not follow the same program.

*“When he is at school he has the same routine but because he is not at school for most of the day he misses out on a lot.”*

*“She is withdrawn from the whole lot. It has gotten worse as she has gotten older.”*

Other comments, both by survey and focus group participants, highlighted the issue of curriculum that is too difficult and the use of unmodified programs.

*“I am continually asking for a modified program but they won't do it.”*

*“...the teacher was handing out the papers and I knew he wouldn't be able to do that. So she'll put him on like a maths program on the computer or literature program or whatever but he is not doing what the rest of the class is doing.” (focus group participant)*

The provision of separate or special programs was another theme in survey responses.

*“Attends social skills group at unit.”*

There were also comments (although few) on the inadequacy of teacher skills and knowledge.

*“Special privileges – if too hard then they don't worry about it. Let him do what he wants. I want him learning what the other kids are learning.”*

The majority of positive comments from parents indicated that when children are participating, it is the modification of programs that allows them to do so.

*“Last teachers [have] been a godsend – modified and followed the same program adapted. This term it is all coming together for her.”*

*“She goes at her own pace, as do all of the children in the class. She may do less complicated activities but nevertheless still participates at her level of ability on the same topic that is being taught.”*

Other positive comments (although infrequent) included references to individual qualities of the child.

*“He tries to fit in, doesn't like to feel different.”*

Some positive comments noted funding for support which enabled participation.

*“If she needs extra help with her maths or writing tasks she is given the help by the teachers aide.”*

### Is the regular curriculum modified?

134 parents answered this question. The most common response was that the curriculum is modified sometimes.

Is the regular curriculum modified for your child?	No. of respondents	%
Don't know	11	8.2
Never	25	18.7
Sometimes	40	29.9
Mostly	30	22.4
Always	29	21.6

When cross-tabulated with the type of school setting, it is evident that while special education programs (SEPs) can put students at greater risk of exclusion from regular classrooms they, on the other hand, can provide more curriculum modification. 47.8% of parents from schools with SEPs indicated that modification was mostly or always provided, as opposed to approximately a third in all other school settings.

Modification of curriculum	State school with SEP	State school without SEP	Catholic school	Independent school
Don't know	6%	14.3%	6.7%	0%
Never	20.9%	19%	20%	0%
Sometimes	25.4%	33.3%	40%	62.5%
Mostly	22.4%	23.8%	20%	37.5%
Always	25.4%	9.5%	13.3%	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>

### Are children being taught reading, writing and numeracy?

The table below indicates that a large number of children are participating in the learning of these basic skills.

	Don't Know	Yes	No	Total
Reading	7	107 (80.5%)	19 (14.3%)	133
Writing	5	109 (83.8%)	16 (12.3%)	130
Numeracy	4	116 (89.2%)	10 (7.7%)	130

For those children who aren't being taught these skills, parents' comments provided an insight into why not. 62 parents commented.

Parents indicated that unsuitable programs were a significant barrier to their child's learning.

***"It can be very frustrating as each year my son was taught the same thing. He was sick of repeating the same information, and learning how to write his name yet again."***

***"My son has often complained of the babyish material for these subjects."***

They reported that teachers lacked adequate skills and knowledge or that their child was not being taught.

***"It's just a babysitting service – there's not much teaching going on. GRRR! It's a constant battle to have his work/assessment appropriately set."***

***"One hour is insufficient for any learning. 'Sheets' is what one son conveyed, the other says 'they don't know what I am supposed to do so I wander around till you come and get me.'"***

Some parents believed that because of their child's disability, they could not learn these basic skills.

***"Taught these but not good at them...not sure."***

Some, although few, indicated it was a funding and support issue.

Positive themes emerged from the comments, highlighting factors which were enabling learning. These themes included the use of assistive technology.

***"He is finding it a lot easier because of the digital delivery of the program; traditional handwriting is extremely difficult for him as opposed to using a computer."***

Another factor identified as enabling learning was the provision of suitable work.

***"It is adapted to a level appropriate to my son."***

### Are children with disability being given homework?

Trying to get a true picture of how included students with disability are can be a complex task. What might be the indicators? If valued as a learner and seen as a real member of a class, it would be reasonable to expect that a student with a disability would be included in the same homework routine as classmates. 130 parents answered the question about this. 85 (64.9%) said that their child receives homework, leaving 46 (35.1%) who don't.

Parents were given the opportunity to comment. 64 parents responded and the most common barrier described was that teachers either didn't offer or didn't support homework.

***“Never been offered, would be capable if at his academic level.”***

***“Not marked by class teacher - doesn't get marked.”***

There were also comments about the unsuitability of the homework.

***“When I pushed they sent work home that my son had never seen. I asked for relevant homework and that was the last I ever heard about homework.”***

Of the comments about students who *did* do homework, it was common for parents to reflect on their own support and advocacy for this.

***“I do a lot of work at home with him.”***

***“Had to advocate strongly for modification.”***

It must be noted that for some parents and some children, homework was too difficult and it was their choice *not* to do it.

***“This is such a hassle!! After school is a nightmare with three kids who are struggling to understand...”***

***“He finds it too stressful to continue schoolwork at home. He is tired and irritable. This has been true since he started school and a constant battle.”***

### Do children with disability spend lunch breaks with classmates?

138 parents answered this question. Some selected more than one response. 63.7% said that their children mostly or always spend their lunchbreaks in regular playgrounds, which leaves just over a third who only sometimes, if ever, do.

How often children spend lunch breaks in regular playground	No. of children	%
Special school	11	8
Never	24	17.4
Sometimes	18	13
Mostly	26	18.8
Always	62	44.9

When cross tabulated with school setting, there was a similar trend to the question on time in regular classrooms. Students at schools with SEPs were more at risk of being excluded from the group. Almost a quarter of children in SEPs never spent time in the playground compared to 14.3% in schools without SEPs and 0% in Catholic and independent schools. Similarly, while only 34.8% of children in SEPs were always in regular playgrounds, a large percentage of children in schools without SEPs (EQ 76.2%, Catholic 66.7%, independent schools 71.5%) were there for all of the time.

### Are parents satisfied with the amount of time their children spend with classmates who don't have a disability?

132 parents responded to this question. Over half (56.9%) said they were satisfied or very satisfied. 27.3% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

How satisfied are parents with the time their children spend with classmates without a disability?	No. of responses	%
Very dissatisfied	20	15.2
Dissatisfied	16	12.1
Neutral	22	16.7
Satisfied	34	25.8
Very satisfied	41	31.1

Cross tabulating these results with school setting revealed that none of the parents of children at special school were satisfied or very satisfied. Parents at Catholic schools were most likely to choose very satisfied (53.3%) followed by parents at state schools without a special education program (SEP) (45%).

74 comments were made. Although the focus of this question was intended to be general, because it followed the question on lunch breaks, some responses indicate that parents were thinking about social aspects of school when they commented.

The most common theme overall was school processes and procedures acting as barriers to participation e.g. - lack of support for participation

***“There is no integration supported or encouraged. I am just grateful if the amount of times my children are not ridiculed by mainstream students is minimised...there is no integration.”***

- grouping students because they have a disability

***“My son seeks out the regular kids but is still grouped with the ‘unit kids’ as they call them.”***

- using withdrawal approach

***“Even the playground has a special area for students with a disability.”***

***“She is never given the opportunity to lunch with the others. All her time is spent in the unit - even lunch time.”***

The importance of a supportive, inclusive approach is evident as it also came up as the most common factor enhancing participation.

***“School accepts and provides appropriate support for my son.”***

***“The Principal, teachers and students have all been very inclusive. For most of the children, they accept him for who he is and what he can do. Many will restate instructions in a simple way for him, or wait with him if he is trying to process what he needs to do next.”***

***“School places an emphasis on building social networks.”***

A second common barrier was parents' focus on their child's disability and the impact this has on participating with peers.

***“Child not good with social skills. School can't cope. Son doesn't initiate so is reasonably happy doing his own thing.”***

***“Child is autistic and lacks self esteem so very insular and not at all included by the regular children.”***

Other issues raised (although infrequently) were inadequate staff skills, lack of funding for support, and peers.

***“If he spends time with the so called normal children in the school he gets bullied.”***

Some parents preferred that their child be separated.

***“Would like him to get more 1-1 time. 1-1 he excels. ... Not finding the regular classroom to be the best place for my son.”***

While physical presence does not guarantee inclusive experiences it is certainly a pre-requisite. Children cannot participate in the daily activities of schools if they are not there.

## Discussion – participation

Parents have told us that for a number of Queensland children, “full and equal participation” is still rhetoric rather than a reality. The greatest risk to participation appears not to be funding but the use of educational approaches that keep students with disability separate from their peers.

The survey results indicate that while the specialist knowledge of special education programs (SEPs) enables a greater degree of curriculum modification (which has enhanced inclusive opportunities for children), the availability of a specialist, separate facility is also more likely to promote the withdrawal of students from general classrooms and lunch areas. While physical presence does not guarantee inclusive experiences it is certainly a pre-requisite. Children cannot participate in the daily activities of schools if they are not there.

There is also evidence to suggest that a traditional segregated approach is more likely in a school with a special education program. A number of parents referred to specialist, alternative programs and a lack of support for access to the general curriculum of classrooms. The question of how SEPs operate is clearly an important issue. It would seem that there is no standard use of specialist facilities, so parents have no way of knowing, when they enrol, whether support will be given in the regular or separate classroom.

It is encouraging that such a high percentage of students are participating in what could be seen as core work of schools – reading/writing/numeracy. As this *is* such essential learning for all children, however, it would be reasonable to expect that *all* students would be taught this and that teachers would have the necessary skills and knowledge to do so. It would also be reasonable to expect that what is seen as important for other learners e.g. homework, would be seen as important for students with disability too.

Once again it was common for parents to refer to their child's disability as a barrier to participation. Although it is evident that some schools address the challenges associated with a disability through modification, support and an inclusive approach, this is not consistent across all schools.

It was notable that all parents in the special school system, including those who preferred this setting, felt dissatisfied that their child was not spending time with children without a disability. It is QPPD's experience that parents want their child to be part of the community and will often choose special settings only because they have been failed by the regular system. It would seem that part of our work in driving inclusive education forward is strengthening parents' belief in the possibilities of inclusion and their confidence in the system to welcome and support their child.

The survey provides clear evidence that it *is* possible for students with disability to participate fully. However, this does not happen universally. Participation appears to happen if parents are lucky enough to find schools that support inclusive education rather than maintain a traditional segregated approach. Parents cannot yet feel confident that their child, although enrolled in a regular school, will participate fully and equally with peers in regular classroom activities.

## How effective is the time spent at school?

Are students with disability showing development to their “full potential” as required under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

Has social and academic development been maximised as the convention requires?

Have barriers to learning been reduced in accordance with Education Queensland policies?

Have skills, knowledge and understanding been developed as specified in the Education Standards of the Disability Discrimination Act?



# Outcomes

## What have parents told us about the effectiveness of the teaching process?

137 parents responded to this question (and some chose more than one answer). While almost half of parents (49.7%) thought the teaching process was effective or very effective, just under a third (30.7%) thought it was ineffective or very ineffective. It was interesting that such a large number of parents were unable to decide or had mixed feelings. This was mirrored in responses to earlier questions when a number of parents' comments reflected a "happy but..." feeling about their child's enrolment.

How effective do you feel the teaching process is for your child? (Do you believe they are getting 'good teaching'? Are they learning?)	No. of responses	%
Very ineffective	20	14.6
Ineffective	22	16.1
Neutral	30	21.9
Effective	46	33.6
Very effective	22	16.1

Cross tabulating the results with the school setting revealed that parents in schools with special education programs (SEPs) were least likely to feel that teaching was effective or very effective (40.3% as compared to state schools without SEPs, 52.3%; Catholic schools, 66.7% and independent schools, 75%). Similarly they were more likely to find that teaching was ineffective or very ineffective (SEPs, 37.3%; without SEPs, 23.8%; Catholic schools, 6.7%; independent schools, 25%). Given that parents were seeking specialist teaching when they enrolled in their school, and that SEPs have been established to provide the teaching that students with disability need, this is an interesting result.

A deeper insight into this was provided by the 87 comments made by parents.

A prominent theme in both the survey and the focus group discussions was teacher knowledge and skills, both as enhancing teaching outcomes

***"The teachers at my son's current school try very hard to meet his needs. They are very open to input, and communicate with us well."***

and more commonly, as a barrier to effective teaching.

***"Teachers should know how to make adjustments. I have had to find these things out and to make suggestions."***

There were also comments, again in both the survey and the focus groups, indicating that attitudes influence teaching outcomes.

***"Could be better. Regular teacher given up. SEU not pushing enough."***

***"Wanted a reading book like everyone else; was told they didn't have time to put it in his bag."***

Parents spoke about the unsuitability of the curriculum.

***"Needs to have programs she can achieve in. Constant failure at shopping and towel delivery does nothing for her self esteem."***

There were also comments about the lack of funding and teacher aide support.

***"Lots of periods of the day where he is left sitting with no support."***

***"They refuse to support until more aide time is approved...for one hour of contact time! It is now end of term and soon it will [be] another year wasted..."***

Less frequently, parents referred to the approaches that teachers used. ***"Teachers are great but what is effective for class is not necessarily effective for my son."***

Factors described which seemed to enhance learning were parent support and input, and good communication between parents and teachers. Focus group discussions gave a much deeper insight into the importance of the role that parents play in good inclusive outcomes:

***"She did blossom under that system and it worked, but it worked I think largely because I spent a lot of time up there advocating and getting on well with the teachers and ensuring that things happened."***(focus group participant)

## What did parents say about social outcomes? Do their children have good relationships? Do children play with other children at school?

There were 134 responses. Of these, 62.6% answered that their child only sometimes if ever plays or socialises with other children at school.

When he or she is at school, does your child play or socialise with other children?	No. of responses	%
Don't know	6	4.5
Never	7	5.2
Rarely	22	16.4
Sometimes	55	41
Mostly	46	34.3

Parents were asked to identify if playmates had a disability. While many did answer this question specifically, other comments were also made. Of these comments, most reflected attitudes that worked against positive social outcomes e.g.

- difficulty of parents believing that this is possible

***“It’s hard for my child to participate in all activities because of physical impairment.”***

- and in both survey and focus group results, but much less frequently, bullying by peers.

***“He suffers from a lot of anxiety and bullying, because they act differently.”***

***“He’s getting called a retard; he’s coping with all of this crap and stuff. He’s totally disengaged in the mainstream, which is a third of every day this child literally sits there and just doesn’t speak.” (focus group participant)***

Some parents described the lack of processes to support socialisation.

***“Teachers do not support children at social times. Lunch hours are big stressors.”***

Positive attitudes and supportive school processes were also reflected in comments about enhanced social experiences.

***“He loves playing with kids and I have found this school very accepting of each other.”***

***“Children without disability come up and say hello and give her pictures but she has to be prompted to acknowledge it but will return the favour if encouraged.”***

### Do children invite friends home from school?

72.4% of parents indicated that children never or rarely invited a friend home. Only 8.7% responded that this happened often.

Does your child invite friends home from school?	No. of responses	%
Never	71	51.4
Rarely	29	21
Sometimes	27	19.6
Mostly	12	8.7

When cross tabulated with school setting, it appears that children enrolled in a school with a SEP are less likely to invite friends home (61.2% never invite friends home as opposed to 42.9% in schools without SEP; 46.7% in Catholic Education school and 25% in ISQ schools).

### Do children get invited out by other children?

71.5% of 137 parents indicated that children were never or rarely invited out.

Is your child invited out by other children from school?	No. of responses	%
Never	61	44.5
Rarely	37	27
Sometimes	31	22.6
Mostly	9	6.6

***“Has no friend to speak of.”***

***“Unfortunately these things don’t seem to happen.”***

***“Even in special school he only had one friend in the five years he was there.”***

***“Other parents don’t seem to want to allow their kids to play.”***

Parents indicated that when socialising does happen, it relies heavily on input from parents and family friends.

***“But when I go away my child does go to sleepovers at friends’ houses whose children go to school with my child...but it is always on my initiation.”***

The fact that children did not go to schools in their local area was raised a number of times as a barrier to friendships.

***“Distance a factor - school out of local area.”***

***“The friends he has are the ones we made friends with as a family, as the school is not in our area.”***

The role of peers seemed to be important, both as an issue;

***“His friend moved away and since hasn’t had anyone over for at least 12 months.”***

And also as a strength e.g. specific children who have taken an interest. Focus group discussions included many examples of how peers supported students with disability.

***“He has made some friends in high school, and even has a best friend who is a girl, [they] do normal 15 year old stuff, chatting on line, movies, hanging out. I’m air punching!”***

***“And I think the other things that I’ve seen which I really appreciate is when kids just get how to support S in a way that’s quite invisible...And he had some of those kind of long term friends in primary school who just, you know, just made sure he didn’t lose everything every day. And again not in an intrusive way that maybe an adult being there all the time would have done. I think, yeah, these are the things that have been the highlights for me.” (focus group participant)***

Almost three-quarters of students have no or rare contact with peers outside school hours. This is clearly an area that schools need to pay attention to. Friendships are not just the responsibility of families. Most of the groundwork for relationship building takes place at school and there is much that can be done there to foster social connections.

## Discussion – outcomes

Although physical presence and active participation are essential ingredients, the final marker of effective inclusive practice is the academic and social development of all children. The results indicate that there *are* parents who believe that their children with disability are learning effectively in regular schools and that the factors contributing to this include skilful teachers, involved parents, and positive attitudes and expectations (of parents, teachers and students). It would be interesting to see how this compares with the perspectives of parents in general, as these would seem to be factors important to effective learning for all children.

While these results are encouraging, and suggest that effective teaching and learning is possible in regular schools, there is also evidence to suggest that barriers to learning continue to exist for a significant number of students with disability. The factors that get in the way of learning mirror those that enhance learning, that is, teachers' skills and attitudes. In addition, unsuitable curriculum and a lack of support staff also seem to play a part in preventing children from reaching their potential.

School is not just about academic learning. Most children and parents would agree that the friendships and social learning experiences made possible through school communities are *as* important, if not more so. For children with disability, however, social connections remain elusive. The Australian Government has recognised this vulnerability in its vision of a "socially inclusive society

... in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society" ([www.socialinclusion.gov.au](http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au)) yet if this vision is to become a reality, the role of schools is vital.

The lack of social outcomes is one of the most worrying findings of QPPD's survey, given that this is a major reason for inclusive schooling. While focus groups indicated that peers *do* play a positive role in children's lives, almost three-quarters of students have no or rare contact with peers outside school hours. This is clearly an area that schools need to pay attention to. Friendships are not just the responsibility of families. Most of the groundwork for relationship building takes place at school and there is much that can be done there to foster social connections.

It could be argued that social outcomes are closely linked to access and participation issues. Children need to not only be present but regularly sharing in classroom activities with peers, if relationships are to have a chance to develop. The evidence from the survey supports this idea (e.g. while 63.7% of parents indicate that their child is mostly or always in the playground, 62.6% of children only sometimes if ever play or socialise with other children at school). Social outcomes may reflect just how much children are actually participating in school life. Such a stark contrast between the findings of this section and the other areas of the survey give cause for serious questioning about the nature of children's experiences at school.

At this time, it is clear that social development has not been maximised for a large majority of children with disability in Queensland schools. As former Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commissioner Susan Booth said (2009) when she launched QPPD's booklets "Inclusion or Segregation for Children with An Intellectual Impairment: What does the Research Say?" and "All Children Belong Together" if children with disability are to receive the same social acceptance as their non-disabled peers, then we must all take up the challenge of working on the building of relationships between students.

With the changes to legislation, policy and international agreement that have occurred in the last ten years, the hope of inclusive schooling has become very real. It is understandable that Queensland parents would believe that if they chose regular schooling for their children with disabilities, education systems would honour and support that choice.

## Summary – key messages from parents

With the changes to legislation, policy and international agreement that have occurred in the last ten years, the hope of inclusive schooling has become very real. It is understandable that Queensland parents would believe that if they chose regular schooling for their children with disability, education systems would honour and support that choice. However it is people who welcome children into classrooms each morning; not legislation, policy and international agreements. In spite of the rhetoric and the changes that are taking place, it would seem that parents cannot yet feel confident that inclusive theory is being put into practice in all Queensland schools. All children with disability do not yet have true membership, with the sense of belonging and achievement that membership entails, in regular classrooms in local schools. Exclusion is still either a reality or a threat for those who have a family member with a disability. The following points summarise what parents have experienced in the schooling system in 2010.

### **Are students enrolled in schools on the same basis as students without disability? Have families found that their children with disability are able to access the general education system on the basis of equal opportunity?**

1. A significant number of children with disability (just over a third of survey respondents) are not able to access education on the basis of equal opportunity and are not at the school of their parents' choice. They are not there because they are not wanted or not supported to be there. For some families, pursuing the hope of inclusive schooling also means 1] coping with negativity and rejection 2] having to deal with part-time enrolment 3] living with the stress of conditional placement 4] direction to schools away from their homes and 5] entrusting their children to teachers who either don't want to - or don't know how to - work with them.

The stories of exclusion are made all the more poignant by the many stories of welcome and success. The evidence from the survey and from the focus groups clearly indicates that schools *can* be inclusive and that children with disability *can* be valued and participating members of local school communities. This appears to happen by chance, however, rather than on the same basis as children without disability. Parents cannot yet assume that all schools will welcome and educate their child.

2. QPPD's earlier research (Placement Policy, 2001; Small Choice in Rotten Apples, 2003) found that although governments espoused the importance of choice for parents (and cited this as a major reason for the continuation of special schools), choice was, in reality, a myth for parents of children with a disability. This remains so for many parents now. As in earlier findings, parents participating in the survey described a number of barriers to being able to exercise their right to enrol at their school of choice on the same basis as other families: professional persuasion or direction to a different school; the negativity and discouragement experienced at the preferred school, particularly at the time of enrolment; the additional efforts, advocacy and stress associated with preference for a regular placement; and the lack of support or expertise available at the preferred school. There is evidence that some parents decide on a special placement, not because it was their first choice, but because the regular school was too difficult.

3. It must be noted that, while they were in the minority in this survey, some parents are happy to access a special school (a lawfully-provided option within the scope of the DDA) or are in regular schools and would prefer access to a separate, specialist setting. For these parents, the regular system has failed. It may be that their child has been, or is, unhappy, unwanted, or unsuccessful in their local school. Or it may be that it becomes impossible to sustain the parent advocacy and input needed to

make the regular system work, as identified in the focus group discussions. QPPD supports these parents in seeking success, certainty, welcome and safety, and acknowledges the difficulties that can be faced with regular placements. QPPD believes that these families have experienced a lack of will and/or skill in the implementation of inclusive practice according to the requirements of legislation and policy.

4. Although enrolled in regular schools, a significant number of students with disability (just over a third) are only present in regular classrooms for half of the school day or less. They still experience exclusion, and are particularly at risk when enrolled at schools with a special education program (SEP) and/or a segregated approach to teaching.

That so many children with disability are in regular classrooms for most if not all of the day is evidence that presence in regular classrooms is not only possible but is the expectation in some schools. Again this appears to depend on individual schools and teachers rather than systemic policy and guidelines. Parents cannot yet have confidence that their child will have equal access to the general education system, even in a regular school.

**Are reasonable accommodations being made and is full and equal participation being facilitated? Are differentiated activities and additional support provided so that students with disability can participate with peers?**

5. Based on the survey, a significant number of children (36.7%) only sometimes, if ever, follow the same classroom program as their peers. The evidence indicates that segregated practices continue to exist in regular schools and that children are particularly at risk of segregation when curriculum is not modified.

Evidence also suggests that the majority of children *do* mostly follow the same program as their classmates; however this appears to depend on the skills and attitudes of individual schools and teachers. Participation in the same curriculum is possible, but parents seeking inclusion still have cause to wonder whether their child will be supported to participate in classroom activities or segregated to work on alternative, 'special' programs.

6. Special education programs (SEPs) have presumably been established to support inclusive practices, and there is evidence from the survey to suggest that in schools with SEPs, the curriculum is more likely to be modified for students with disability. However, students in these schools (who represent the majority in this survey) are also more likely to be withdrawn from regular classrooms and lunch areas, and to be excluded from the general curriculum. Parents of students in schools with SEPs are more dissatisfied with the amount of time that their children spent with peers.

Parents indicated that specialist facilities, including teacher aide support, have enhanced inclusive experiences when used flexibly. However, the research also suggests that special education programs, rather than assisting inclusion, can act as a barrier to the participation and presence of students with disability in regular activities. From the survey results, it appears that SEPs can perpetuate traditional, segregated approaches to teaching students with disability.

**Are students with disability developing to their full potential? Have social and academic development been maximised and barriers to learning been reduced?**

7. Approximately a third of parents who participated in the survey are not happy with their child's teaching and learning. A further 21% are undecided or have mixed feelings about learning outcomes for their child.

Parents are less likely to be satisfied with learning outcomes if their children are at schools with special education programs (SEPs). A key message from parents from both the survey and the focus groups is that when their children are not learning it is because teachers lack the appropriate attitude, knowledge and skills for effective teaching.

Nearly 50% of parents are happy with their child's learning outcomes, and comment on the skills and knowledge of individual teachers and the effective teaching approaches of specific schools. Clearly, students with disability *can* achieve positive learning outcomes in regular schools. As long as there is a reliance on individuals and the "hope" that teachers will have the appropriate knowledge and skills, however, parents will not be able to feel confident that all schools have the capacity to maximise their child's academic potential.

8. The argument that providing the opportunity for friendships and social development is one of the most important roles that schools play is a major driver for inclusive schooling. This was supported in the focus group discussions with many examples of positive peer support. It is worrying then, that the survey found many students with disability (approx 75%) are *not* developing relationships with other students. It is also significant that *all* parents whose children are in special schools (including those who preferred this setting) are unhappy that their children are not spending time with peers who don't have a disability.

9. Sadly, the evidence from the survey suggests that a major obstacle to inclusive education is a belief that it is a child's disability which limits their learning, participation and belonging rather than schools and teachers that do not welcome, accommodate and support all learners. When education systems develop the capacity to teach to diversity and parents have faith in those systems, then the pathway to inclusion will clear.

# Recommendations

## What did parents prioritise?

Parents themselves should have the first say. The survey asked parents to list their three priorities for improving the schooling experience for their sons and daughters.

The over-arching priority rated in the top three by most parents was improving processes and procedures, that is, *how* schools go about the business of educating their children (e.g. teaching and learning strategies, working with parents, curriculum, organisational issues, and systemic issues).

The single issues most frequently cited in parents' list of priorities were:

1. the need for improving teachers' knowledge and skills
2. the need for more specialist staff
3. improved teaching and learning strategies
4. the need for positive attitudes and an inclusive approach by schools.

## On the basis of the survey responses, QPPD makes the following recommendations:

***So that parents in Queensland can expect, rather than just hope, to enrol their children in regular schools if that is their choice,***

1. *Education Queensland and other schooling systems will develop clear and consistent guidelines that regular schools are the first and recommended option for students with disability. Education staff will not recommend, direct or pressure families to enrol in an alternative school, special school or home schooling.*
2. *Furthermore, principals and education staff will welcome students with disability into full time and unconditional enrolments. A positive and collaborative approach will be an expectation not a hope.*

***So that parents can choose regular schools knowing that funding support will be available at their school of choice rather than at specified alternative or segregated settings,***

3. *The allocation of resources between schools will be adjusted to reflect inclusive education policy statements. Better sharing of resources will occur, so that funding and support for special education services are readily available at local, regular schools rather than tied up in special schools and other specific locations.*

***So that parents can expect that their child's enrolment will be unconditional, that is, not tied to funding or the availability of teacher aides,***

4. *Schools will focus on the use of differentiated instruction and curriculum modification rather than relying on teaching assistants to enable inclusion.*

***So that parents in Queensland can expect a standard response to the enrolment of students, rather than relying on chance,***

5. *Education Queensland and other schooling systems will have clear and transparent processes through which schools can review their inclusive practice (e.g. Index for Inclusion) and be held accountable.*
6. *Education Queensland and other schooling systems will develop an impartial process through which parents can give feedback (e.g. School Checklist TRIM 09/176347 for parents) and lodge complaints.*

***So that parents can feel confident that all Queensland schools will use inclusive rather than segregated approaches,***

7. *Education Queensland and other schooling systems will review and develop guidelines regarding the operation of special education programs so that they work flexibly to promote inclusion rather than facilitating systematic withdrawal.*
8. *Education Queensland and other schooling systems will explore and develop guidelines regarding the function of teacher aides, focusing on positive input within regular classrooms.*
9. *Education Queensland and other schooling systems will nurture and review inclusive practice and adopt a continuous improvement model. Good practice will be shared between teachers and schools.*
10. *When parents request special, segregated settings, this will be seen as a failure of the system to be inclusive and a cause for review and improvement. What parents are seeking in special settings will be used as guidance for what can be provided or improved in regular settings.*

***So that students with disability can expect to be taught by confident, knowledgeable and skillful educators,***

11. *Education Queensland and training institutions will have a strong, ongoing focus and commitment to professional development in inclusive education for both pre-service and in-service teachers.*

***So that students with disability are more likely to develop social connections,***

12. *The development of relationships will be everybody's business. Opportunities for the development of social connections will be provided and supported by both parents and teachers. It will be recognised that relationships are more likely when children spend time together, over extended periods of time, in shared activities, with support for this to happen.*

***So that parents are well informed about policies, legislation and procedures,***

13. *QPPD will develop resources and workshops on inclusive education for parents.*

***So that parents are strengthened to believe in inclusive schooling and to have faith in the capacity of regular schools to welcome and educate their children,***

14. *Through the recommendations above, Education Queensland and other schooling systems will build the capacity of regular schools to include students with disability and to address barriers to inclusive schooling.*
15. *QPPD will nurture parents' belief in inclusion by sharing positive and successful experiences and the provision of opportunities for skill and knowledge building.*

# Conclusion

## The pearls

*The survey highlights what parents are seeking for their children with disability:*



**welcome**  
**belonging**  
**to be valued**  
**learning**  
**success**  
**community**  
**opportunities**  
**certainty**  
**friendship**

*Parents who have had inclusive experiences talked of:*

**positive attitudes**  
**flexibility**  
**support**  
**skills and knowledge**  
**involvement**  
**good communication**  
**understanding**  
**modification**  
**advocacy**  
**commitment**



Inclusive education is in its infancy. We are only just at the beginning of our understanding of what it will take to truly open up the general education system to all children regardless of their individual characteristics.

What challenges do the Disability Discrimination Act and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability present to us as parents and educators?

We have the opportunity, *now*, to take up those challenges with commitment and in good faith so that what we build reflects the intention and the vision of those documents.

Will inclusive education, a prerequisite for an inclusive life in the community, remain an elusive treasure?

Or will we choose to make it a reality for all children?



## Appendix 1.1 – Education Standards extract

*From Disability Discrimination Act – Education Standards (2005)*

### Standards for Enrolment

#### 4.3 Measures for compliance with standards

Measures that the education provider may implement to enable the prospective student to seek admission to, or apply for enrolment in, the institution on the same basis as a prospective student without a disability include measures ensuring that:

- (a) information about the enrolment processes:
  - (i) addresses the needs of disabilities; and
  - (ii) is accessible to the student and his or her associates; and
  - (iii) is made available in a range of formats depending on the resources and purposes of the provider and within a reasonable timeframe; and
- (b) enrolment procedures are designed so that the student, or an associate of the student, can complete them without undue difficulty; and
- (c) information about entry requirements, the choice of courses or programs, progression through those courses or programs and the educational settings for those courses or programs is accessible to the student and his or her associates in a way that enables the student, or

### Standards for participation

#### 5.3 Measures for compliance with standards

Measures that the education provider may implement to enable the student to participate in the course or program for which the student is enrolled and use the facilities and services provided by it on the same basis as a student without a disability, include measures ensuring that:

- (a) the course or program activities are sufficiently flexible for the student to be able to participate in them; and
- (b) course or program requirements are reviewed, in the light of information provided by the student, or an associate of the student, to include activities in which the student is able to participate; and
- (c) appropriate programs necessary to enable participation by the student are negotiated, agreed and implemented; and
- (d) additional support is provided to the student where necessary, to assist him or her to achieve intended learning outcomes; and
- (e) where a course or program necessarily includes an activity in which the student cannot participate, the student is offered an activity that constitutes a reasonable substitute within the context of the overall aims of the course or program; and
- (f) any activities that are not conducted in classrooms, and associated extra-curricular activities or activities that are part of the broader educational program, are designed to include the student.

### Standards for Curriculum Development, Accreditation and Delivery

#### 6.3 Measures for compliance with standards

Measures that the education provider may implement to enable the student to participate in the learning experiences (including the assessment and certification requirements) of the course or program, and any relevant supplementary course or program, on the same basis as a student without a disability, include measures ensuring that:

- (a) the curriculum, teaching materials, and the assessment and certification requirements for the course or program are appropriate to the needs of the student and accessible to him or her; and
- (b) the course or program delivery modes and learning activities take account of intended educational outcomes and the learning capacities and needs of the student; and
- (c) the course or program study materials are made available in a format that is appropriate for the student and, where conversion of materials into alternative accessible formats is required, the student is not disadvantaged by the time taken for conversion; and
- (d) the teaching and delivery strategies for the course or program are adjusted to meet the learning needs of the student and address any disadvantage in the student's learning resulting from his or her disability, including through the provision of additional support, such as bridging or enabling courses, or the development of disability specific skills; and
- (e) any activities that are not conducted in a classroom, such as field trips, industry site visits and work placements, or activities that are part of the broader course or educational program of which the course or program is a part, are designed to include the student; and
- (f) the assessment procedures and methodologies for the course or program are adapted to enable the student to demonstrate the knowledge, skills or competencies being assessed.

For the full copy go to

<http://www.comlaw.gov.au/comlaw/management.nsf/lookupindexpagesbyid/IP200507339?OpenDocument>

## Appendix 1.2 – Inclusive Education Statement extract

from *Inclusive Education Statement - 2005*

*Inclusive Education is for everybody and is everybody's business. (R. Slee)*

### **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

Inclusive education in Education Queensland:

- fosters a learning community that questions disadvantage and challenges social injustice
- maximises the educational and social outcomes of all students through the identification and reduction of barriers to learning, especially for those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion
- ensures all students understand and value diversity so that they have the knowledge and skills for positive participation in a just, equitable and democratic global society.

### **INDICATORS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

Valuing and responding to diversity are critical indicators in judgment about quality at all levels of the system. The following indicators can be used initially as guidelines to review current practices, promote dialogue, plan for change and implement reform. Later, they can also be used to help evaluate outcomes.

### **Indicators of Inclusive Education - System, Districts and Schools**

Principles of equity and social justice are embedded in policy, practices and decision-making at all levels. Professional learning opportunities are provided to enhance understanding of the recognition of difference and the factors that contribute to educational disadvantage, especially an appreciation of factors such as: poverty; gender; disability; cultural and linguistic diversity; and sexuality. Community capacity is built through effective partnerships within the school community and with all of the agencies responsible for supporting children, young people and their families. Stories of effective delivery of inclusive education are documented and disseminated. Plans reflect an ethos, organisation, culture and values underpinned by principles of social justice and by democratic processes. Data on access, participation, outcomes and retention of diverse groups are used to evaluate progress, to identify priorities for further action, to plan for improvement and to inform professional learning communities.

### **Indicators of Inclusive Education – Teaching and Learning**

There is a 'no blame' culture that is underpinned by high expectations for all groups of students. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are aligned and meet the needs of diverse student groups. Curriculum is intellectually challenging for all students and connected with student and community imperatives and experiences. Curriculum programs are informed by student outcome data and by current research relevant to diverse student needs. Teachers build bridges from the knowledge and skills that students bring from their homes and communities to the knowledge and skills they need for success in schooling. All students are provided with the explicit and scaffolded teaching they need for success in schooling and beyond. Students are recognised as partners in the teaching/learning process and opportunities are provided for student voice, for example through negotiating curriculum and assessment. Evaluation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment provides evidence that the interests, skills, knowledge and experiences of diverse groups are central features in the design of learning.

## Appendix 1.3 – Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities extract

### *Article 24 Education*

1. States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning directed to:

- (a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- (b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- (c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

2. In realising this right, States Parties shall ensure that:

- (a) Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;
- (b) Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;
- (c) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;
- (d) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
- (e) Effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:

- (a) Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;
- (b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;
- (c) Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximise academic and social development.

4. In order to help ensure the realisation of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

5. States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.

## Appendix 2 – Survey questions

### Survey Details

1. How did you find out about this survey?  
*QPPD; school; a friend; service organisation; other (please specify)*
3. Current QPPD member  
*No; yes*
3. Please insert the date you completed the survey
4. How are you completing the survey?  
*Online; hard copy; phone with QPPD interviewer*

### Background Information - Parent

5. Education (highest educational qualification you have achieved)  
*High school certificate; diploma; university degree; postgraduate qualification; other (please specify)*
6. What is your occupation?
7. Suburb/Town  
*City/Town; postcode*
8. Marital Status  
*Single; divorced; married; other*
9. What do you know of the following? (Don't know of it; aware but haven't read; have read it)  
*EQ Inclusive Education Policy (Or Catholic Education equivalent; DDA Standards for Education; CRPD)*

### Background Information - Student

10. How old will your child be at their 2010 birthday?
11. How many children in your family
12. Position of child in family
13. School Stage  
*Prep; Primary; Secondary; Post secondary; other*
14. School in 2010 (Note: Special Education Program (SEP) is the current term for what was an SEU or Special Education Unit) *State Special School; Split Placement; State Regular School with SEP; State Regular School without SEP; Catholic Education School; Queensland Independent School; Other*
15. If your son or daughter has a split placement, what are the placement options?
16. If your son/daughter has changed schools at this stage of their schooling, why did they change? (This does not refer to usual changes of school e.g. from primary to secondary)  
*Asked or persuaded to leave first school; unhappy with first school; relocated (if unhappy or asked to leave please describe why)*
17. Would you consider your current school to be your local school?  
*No; yes*
18. Do your other children attend, or have they attended the same school?  
*No; yes (if not why not?)*

### Access to Classrooms- Physical Presence

19. How much time does your child spend in regular classrooms?  
*N/A Special School; none of the time; some of the time; half of the time; most of the time; all of the time;+ comments*
20. When is your child physically separate from his/her class?  
*N/A Special School; Always; for all academic lessons but participates in non-academic subjects; only for maths and English; only at the student's request e.g. for a break; other*
21. Why is your son/daughter physically separate from his/her class? (Please tick as many choices as relevant)  
*Regular program is too difficult/not suitable; for one-on-one instruction; behaviour issues; funding; lack of aide support; other (please specify)*
22. Does your son/daughter spend lunch breaks in the regular playground?  
*N/A Special School; never; sometimes; mostly; always*
23. How satisfied are you with the amount of time your child spends with classmates without a disability?  
*Very dissatisfied; dissatisfied; neutral; satisfied; very satisfied + comments*

## Participation

24. Does your child follow the same classroom program as the rest of the (regular) class? (They may not be doing exactly the same thing, but they are participating in the same subject/activities/program at a relevant level.)  
*N/A Special School; don't know; never; sometimes; mostly; always + comments*
25. Is the regular curriculum modified for your child?  
*Don't know; never; sometimes; mostly; always*
26. Is your child currently being taught the following? (don't know; no; yes)  
*Reading; Writing; numeracy + comments*
27. Is your child given homework regularly?  
*No; yes + comments*
28. How effective do you feel the teaching process is for your child? (Do you believe they are getting 'good teaching'? Are they learning?)  
*very ineffective; ineffective; neutral; effective; very ineffective + comments*

## Social Outcomes

29. When he or she is at school, does your child play or socialise with other children?  
*Don't know; never; rarely; sometimes; mostly + please add whether children with disability, without, both*
30. Does your child invite friends home from school?  
*Never; rarely; sometimes; often + children with disabilities; without; both*
31. Is your child invited out by other children from school?  
*Never; rarely; sometimes; often + children with disability; without; both*
32. Is your child happy to go to school? Does he/she feel welcome there?  
*Never; sometimes; usually; always + comments*
33. Do YOU feel happy to be in the school? Do YOU feel welcome there?  
*Never; sometimes; usually; always + comments*

## Enrolment

34. In what year did you undertake the enrolment process for your current school?
35. How was the process similar to the process for your other children?
36. How was it different?
37. Is your current school your first choice?  
*No; yes (if not, why not? What were the barriers to the school of your choice?)*
38. How did you decide on the school?  
*Recommended by friends; my other children go there; our local/closest school; other; told or advised to by education staff (which education staff and why?)*
39. What was important to you in choosing a school for your child with a disability? If there were different considerations to choosing a school for your other children, what were these?
40. Are you happy with your child's current enrolment?  
*Very unhappy; unhappy; ok; happy; very happy (if you are not happy, why not? Ideally where would you like your child to be?)*
41. Times or examples of when you feel your child is well included?
42. Times or examples of when you feel your child is NOT well included?
43. What would be your three priorities for improving the schooling experience for your son or daughter?
44. Have you any other comments about the schooling experience?

## Appendix 3 – Facilitator profile

### *Professor Suzanne Carrington*

Suzanne is the Head of School, School of Learning and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology. She has conducted research and published in international journals in the areas of inclusive culture, policy and practice, learning support, autistic spectrum disorder, teaching/professional development and Service Learning.

Suzanne is the Chairperson of the Non-School Organisations (NSO) Committee (2005-2010). The Non School Organisations Program provides funding to help improve the educational opportunities, learning outcomes and personal development of children with a disability in Queensland. The program is managed through an independent committee and administered by the Department of Education and Training. The committee has representation from Education Queensland, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, Independent Schools Queensland, relevant stakeholders and community groups.

Suzanne was the Foundation Director and Manager of the Staff College, Inclusive Education, Education Queensland, 2004-2006 (on leave from QUT). Her key role was to establish the Staff College and direct professional development of Education Queensland teachers to progress the inclusive education agenda. Suzanne is on the Editorial Boards of 4 International Peer Refereed Journals including International Journal of Inclusive Education; Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities; International Advising Committee and Editorial Board for Journal of Research and Special Education Needs and Australasian Journal of Special Education.

## Appendix 4 – Focus group invitation

# FOCUS GROUPS FOR FAMILIES OF STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY

*Queensland Parents for People with a Disability Inc. would like to thank you for participating in the recent state-wide phone-in and to warmly invite you to attend one of our April Focus Groups.*

Focus Group A: 10am - 12:30, Wednesday 28 April 2010  
QPPD Office, 2/70 Flanders St, Salisbury 4107

Focus Group B: 7:30 - 9pm, Wednesday 28 April 2010  
Mater Hospital (Potter Building; Annerley Rd)

Focus Group C: 10am - 12:30, Thursday 29 April 2010  
AEIOU, 22 Ridley Rd, Kirwan TOWNSVILLE



Please RSVP by **Monday 19 April** to confirm your place.

Mail: 2/70 Flanders St, Salisbury 4107

Phone: 3875 2101

Fax: 3875 2152

Email: [qppd@qppd.org](mailto:qppd@qppd.org)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Focus Group you wish to attend (*please circle*): A B C

Education Stage of your son/daughter: \_\_\_\_\_

Son/daughter's disability: \_\_\_\_\_

*"defending justice and rights for people with a disability"*

## Appendix 5 – Focus group questions for parents

### Introduction:

My name is Suzanne Carrington and I will be facilitating the focus group interview today. The interview will be recorded and transcribed and I have your signed participant consent forms. QPPD will have a full copy of the de-identified transcript and the analysis of the key issues that emerge from the interviews. Later in the year, I will work on a journal publication with staff from QPPD that will publish the data in a journal paper in the Australasian Journal of Special Education. All data will be de-identified.

In the focus group today, you will be sharing information about your own experience in the education system and considering how your child is included. We are wanting to find out if the Inclusive Education Policy is being implemented in practice in the school environment. The information raised in the interview will be confidential and I ask that participants not share information outside this forum.

Once I ask the questions, please state your first name before talking so I can track the conversations in the interview transcript. All names will be de-identified before distribution to QPPD and for analysis and publication.

### Questions

What type of education program is your child participating in now?

Have you made any recent moves to different school settings? If so why did you move your child to a different school?

What type of program and support is required to keep your child in a regular primary or secondary school?

Can you tell me how you and your child are made to feel welcome in your school community now?

What things are happening in the school that are supportive for your family and your child?

What are the barriers and problems for your child to be included at school?

What type of specialist support is there for your child?

How do teachers and specialist staff work together to support the children in the classroom?

## Appendix 6 – Children represented at focus group interviews

**Table 1: Age of children**

Grade 1	3 children
Grade 2	3 children
Grade 3	1 child
Grade 4	1 child
Grade 5	1 child
Grade 6	2 children
Grade 7	—
Grade 8	3 children
Grade 9	3 children
Grade 10	2 children
Grade 11	1 child
Grade 12	—
University	2 children

**Table 2: Type of Disability**

Autism	9 children
Learning difficulties	6 children
Cerebral palsy	4 children
(Severe) intellectual disability	4 children
Physical disability	4 children
(Severe) dyspraxia	3 children
Vision impaired/legally blind	2 children
Sensory issues	2 children
ADHD	1 child
Dravet syndrome (seizure disorder)	1 child
Down syndrome	1 child
Gifted	1 child
(Severe) epilepsy	1 child

The following school settings were discussed as current school placements in the focus group interviews).

**Table 3: Current school settings (NB some children have a split placement)**

State school with a SEU	9 children
Catholic school	5 children
Early Childhood Development Program	3 children
University, TAFE	2 children
Private school	3 children
Special school	2 children
Autism Early Intervention Program	2 children
Kindergarten	1 child
Independent school	2 children







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