



# NSW Education specialist settings

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# Purpose

The NSW Department of Education (the department) offers a range of specialist settings to provide access to quality education for all students, and facilitate the adjustments required so every student can thrive.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the different specialist settings available in NSW, with a focus on settings to support students with disabilities both in mainstream schools or specialist education settings designed and resourced to support students with additional needs.

This document contains:

- an overview of specialist settings available to meet the strengths, interests and needs of students in NSW, including but not limited to opportunity classes, specialist high schools (such as those specialising in creative and performing arts, sports, and technology), and **Schools for Specific Purposes**
- detailed information to explain how specialist settings for students with disability operate, their role in the NSW public education system in supporting students and their families and how to access these settings. Other information regarding students with disability can also be found on the department's website. Some key document links include:
  - [Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability](#)
  - [Disability Strategy](#)
  - [Student Behaviour Strategy](#)
  - [Outcomes Framework](#)
  - [Disability Standards for Education](#)

# Inclusive practice across all settings

The department recognises that every student is an individual, with unique personal circumstances, needs and aspirations. NSW public schools reflect our communities, therefore our students and staff are diverse. Teaching and learning practices need to be designed for diversity and intersectionality, taking into account how different individuals experience the world.

The department's commitment to inclusive education involves setting high expectations for all students and staff, delivering the supports and reasonable adjustments required to meet students' individual needs. All students are entitled to enrol at their local public school and attend mainstream classes. There are no criteria related to disability type or level of support needs which impact this right. All principals and teachers have legal obligations to ensure that students with disability can participate in education on the same basis as their peers at every stage of their school life. For most students this means attending their local school with individualised support, noting that more than 85% of students with disability currently learn in mainstream classrooms in mainstream public schools. Some students may attend more than one learning environment during their education. For example, attending a School for Specific Purposes (SSPs), or a support class in a primary or secondary school.

Specialist settings as one part of the department's inclusive and flexible system of supports are guided by the goals of maximising student outcomes, enabling parent/carer choice, and constantly adapting to reflect the best available evidence.

Support classes in mainstream schools and SSPs are available to deliver highly personalised and responsive services, supports, and infrastructure for students with disability. All education programs in place for a student with disability, and the decision to place a student in a support class, should be regularly reviewed with the student and their parents/carers to determine its ongoing appropriateness.

In the NSW public education system inclusive education is achieved through practice, and inclusive outcomes are not limited to mainstream settings. Evidence demonstrates that a range of specific factors work together to improve educational, social, and employment outcomes for students.

The factors that form the basis of inclusive education<sup>1</sup> – including adjustments to curriculum delivery and assessment, staff skills, teaching methods, and physical structures, as well as structured transition arrangements – can operate in different educational settings. These factors are also specifically enabled within specialist settings in NSW.

The department's goal is that every student is engaged and challenged to learn, and that all students, teachers, and leaders in every school continue to improve every year.

Ensuring that all students can access and fully participate in learning is therefore central to the department's role and strategy.<sup>2</sup> Specialist settings provide additional flexible options for students to achieve demonstrable learning, wellbeing, and independence outcomes, in a safe and supportive environment that is specifically tailored to accommodate their needs.<sup>3</sup>

The department is committed to strengthening inclusive practice across all our settings. The department is focussed on supporting consistent positive outcomes for all students. By providing a range of education options along a continuum of student need, the department can ensure that the best interests of every student remain a primary consideration.<sup>4</sup>

## Overview of specialist settings in NSW

Specialist settings are available in the NSW public education system to meet the needs of our diverse student cohort. These settings provide parents/carers and students a choice regarding their education.

Specialist settings have been developed and resourced to provide more extensive and targeted support where this is relevant and necessary to strengthen a student's academic achievement, specific skills or interests, emotional wellbeing, and/or social development.

Specialist settings range from classes within or attached to mainstream schools, to dedicated environments where students have access to specific infrastructure, facilities and staff with specialised knowledge and skills.

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1 NSW Department of Education. (2019). Disability Strategy: A living document – Improving outcomes for children and young people, and their families. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/our-disability-strategy/disability-strategy>

2 NSW Department of Education. (2019). Disability Strategy: A living document – Improving outcomes for children and young people, and their families. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/our-disability-strategy/disability-strategy>

3 Consistent with Australia's obligations under Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 24 January 2007, A/RES/61/106, article 24(2)(e).

4 Australian Government. (17 June 2020). Background Paper on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – Part 2: The right to education in article 24. Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability [CTD.9000.0001.0012], para 24.

Importantly, specialist settings do not operate in isolation from each other or from mainstream school settings. Many specialist settings are intended to be accessed by students for a specific purpose and limited period of time. Further, students can be supported to transition between settings, where this is appropriate, to best support their educational individual outcomes.

While this document focuses on the specialist settings designed to support students with disability, this section provides a brief overview of the broad scope of specialist settings available to students in NSW. The department offers specialist settings to support students whose potential exceeds that of students of the same age in one or more domains (intellectual, creative, social-emotional, and physical).<sup>5</sup>

Longitudinal studies of the school journey of gifted students with disability show clearly that support for both giftedness and disability is required to help these students achieve their best.<sup>6</sup>

The specialist settings designed for high potential and gifted students include opportunity classes, selective high schools, and a range of specialist high schools:

## Opportunity classes

Group students of similar ability using specialised teaching methods and educational materials at the appropriate level. Parents/carers normally apply when students are in Year 4. Students who accept a place in an opportunity class will typically leave their current school to attend a government primary school with an opportunity class for Years 5 to 6.

## Selective high schools

Support students with high intellectual ability in Years 7 to 12. Placement at a selective high school is determined by academic merit. Students either sit the Selective High School Placement Test to gain entry to a fully or partially selective high school from Year 7, or can apply for entry to selective high schools in Years 8 to 12 through alternative assessment procedures involving individual school selection committees.

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<sup>5</sup> NSW Department of Education. (Updated, 2022). High Potential and Gifted Education: Guidance on implementing effective learning and teaching practices to develop the talent of high potential and gifted students. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2004-0051>; NSW Department of Education. (16 May 2022). General information: High potential and gifted students. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/selective-high-schools-and-opportunity-classes/general-information/high-potential-and-gifted-students>

<sup>6</sup> Cain, M, Kaboski, J & Gilger, J 2019, 'Profiles and academic trajectories of cognitively gifted children with autism spectrum disorder', *Autism: Journal of the National Autistic Society*, vol. 23, no. 1.

## Aurora College

An initiative of the 'Rural and Remote Education: Blueprint for Action', students in Years 7 to 10 who attend a NSW public school classified as rural and remote can apply to study English, mathematics and science using an online conferencing system. Eligible students apply through the Selective High School Placement Test. Stage 6 (Years 11 and 12) classes are also offered for 'academically able' students, as well as opportunity classes for Stage 3 (Years 5 and 6).

## Creative and performing arts high schools

Enable students to pursue excellence in the creative and performing arts and prepare for careers in the arts and associated industries. While studying the core curriculum, students can also specialise in dance, drama, music and/or visual arts. Students are further supported by a specialised environment with performance and creative arts spaces, lighting and sound systems, dance studios, and specialist teachers.

## Sports high schools

Enable students to pursue sporting excellence while also studying the core curriculum. They offer flexible educational programs that are supportive of students' training and competition commitments, while also providing specialised training facilities and fields.

## Technology high schools

Focus on the use and application of technology across a range of fields, including a rural context. In addition to core subjects, students can study specialist technology subjects to help prepare them for the changing needs of today's society.

## Other specialist settings

Other specialist settings include **Intensive English Centres (IECs)** and the **Intensive English High School (IEHS)**, for newly arrived, high school aged students whose first language is not English and who require intensive English tuition to participate in secondary education. In addition, the IECs and IEHS provide orientation, settlement, and wellbeing programs to help these students transition to mainstream high schools and facilitate their engagement in the wider community.

Eligible Year 6 students may transfer from a primary school to an IEC/IEHS to prepare for entry to high school the following year.

Further, **Environmental and Zoo Education Centres** operate as specialist settings to support schools to integrate sustainability practices and environmental education across a variety of subject areas. As NSW public schools staffed by trained teachers, they provide excursion and incursion programs for visiting school groups, linked to NSW syllabuses and classroom learning, as well as providing professional learning activities for teachers.

Specialised support is also provided in the form of 2 **early intervention programs** for children over 3 years of age with a confirmed disability. They operate during school terms in a limited number of public schools across NSW, and work with parents/carers, early childhood educators, and other professionals to meet the individual needs of each child, and plan for their successful transition to school.

Early intervention support classes provide an individualised preschool program in a class of 5 to 8 children, and children attend for 2.5-hour sessions 2 or 3 days a week. Resource support involves an Early Intervention Teacher working with the child's regular childcare centre or preschool to support the child and the staff at that centre.<sup>7</sup> Transition support teachers, early intervention (TSTEI) work with local schools and with families, other professionals and agencies to support the transition to early intervention or to school.

The **NSW Centre for Effective Reading** is a specialist setting offering multidisciplinary assessment and intensive, individualised support for students with complex reading difficulties. As a joint initiative of the department and NSW Health, it operates state-wide with sites at Dubbo, Manly, Wagga Wagga and Westmead, and is staffed with special education teachers, speech pathologists, educational psychologists, as well as neuropsychologists and paediatricians accessed through the Child Development Unit at The Children's Hospital, Westmead.

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<sup>7</sup> Note this includes itinerant early intervention teachers in some cases.



It offers up to 12 months of support to the school and parents/carers of referred students and enables online access to evidence-based information and resources on effective reading instruction.

The department also offers Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) that provide specialist and intensive support in a dedicated setting for students with moderate to high learning and support needs.

SSPs cater to students from Kindergarten to Year 12 who meet the department's Disability Criteria, and may include students with intellectual disability, mental health conditions or autism, students with physical disability or sensory impairment, and students with learning difficulties or behaviour disorder.<sup>8</sup> SSPs designed to support students with disability are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

Other SSPs provide educational options to support students facing particular challenges – such as disruption to their education due to ill health or injury, or students whose behaviour disrupts or disengages them from learning – to transition back into mainstream schools:

## Hospital schools

Provide continuity of quality education for students within the NSW Health hospital system through strong partnerships with students, families and census schools, to deliver personalised learning and support as well as strong coordinated health and education transition planning. The vastly different needs of students, based on their health status and enrolment patterns, require differentiated methods of education delivery that supports an equitable access to education for both government and non-government school-aged students. Some hospital schools also have established support classes (co-located inpatient units) for students with acute mental and/or forensic health needs, student placement in these classes is through hospital admission.

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<sup>8</sup> NSW Department of Education. (13 July 2020). Schools for Specific Purposes. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/programs-and-services/special-schools-ssps>

## Tutorial centres and programs

Provide age-appropriate short-term intervention for students who have difficulty managing their behaviour in a mainstream setting. These centres and programs generally cater for students in Years 5 to 12, and are attached to a base school. Tutorial centres and programs assist students to manage their behaviour and understand its consequences. They provide students with access to literacy and numeracy within a broad curriculum, based on an individual plan targeting their specific educational and behavioural needs. They also collaborate with the student, their family, and their home school to develop a negotiated transition plan to mobilise the student's re-entry to school.

## Suspension centres

Provide an intervention for students on a suspension longer than 5 days who have been identified by their school as likely to benefit from a structured program to assist with a successful return to their school as soon as possible. They build capacity and understanding of students in how to re-engage at school, re-integrate positive work habits and prevent recurrence of behaviours of concern. They also adopt a coordinated approach and work collaboratively to increase the home school's capacity to support the student's return, and enable skills development opportunities and support for the parents/carers of students.

## Schools within youth justice centres

Deliver the curriculum and provide a stable and consistent daily contact point for students while in custody. Many young people enter custody with a history of fractured school attendance and lack of success in achieving the same academic milestones as their peers. These specialist settings enable differentiated instruction, meaning that each student is working towards their own educational goals in class. Schools in youth justice centres work closely with Youth Justice and Justice Health to provide wrap-around educational, criminogenic, therapeutic and health related support for young people in custody and as they transition to the community. The department does not control student intake into schools within youth justice centres.

# Overview of specialist settings for students with disability

The department is committed to serving the educational needs of all students in NSW.

Every effort is made to support a student's individual learning needs within a mainstream classroom setting.<sup>9</sup>

This is achieved by teachers applying reasonable adjustments including, but not limited to, quality differentiated teaching practices and inclusive teaching strategies. Funding to support all students in mainstream schools is provided through the Resource Allocation Model. This includes Integration Funding Support, for eligible students with moderate to high disability needs.

As a result, the overwhelming majority of students with disability in NSW (97%) learn in mainstream schools, and over 85% of students with disability learn in mainstream classes within mainstream schools. All students have a right to be enrolled in their local school in line with the enrolment policy.<sup>10</sup>

However, as the NSW Ombudsman's inquiry into behaviour management in schools highlighted, 'some students with complex needs...may require a different approach to what is typically provided' in mainstream settings.<sup>11</sup>

The inquiry noted the need for smaller class sizes, personalised support, and a more flexible approach to delivering education.

The NSW education system is structured with this in mind, to accommodate all students through the provision of differentiated supports along a continuum of need.

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9 NSW Department of Education. (11 January 2022). Personalised learning and support. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/personalised-support-for-learning/personalised-learning-And-support>

10 NSW Department of Education. (29 October 2021). Enrolment of students in NSW government schools. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2002-0006>

11 NSW Ombudsman. (August 2017). NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into behaviour management in schools. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/la/papers/Pages/tables-paper-details.aspx?pk=71578&houseCode=la>

Some students who meet the department's disability criteria attend support classes within mainstream schools or Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs):

1. **Support classes in mainstream schools:** Located onsite within some mainstream primary schools, high schools, and central schools. Support classes can accommodate students with higher support needs, as class sizes are generally smaller (6 to 18 students). They can enable participation in mainstream classes while also providing opportunities for students with disability to engage with mainstream peers.
2. **SSPs:** Specialist education settings designed and resourced to provide students with complex needs with more intensive support.

Selected examples of adjustments implemented within these settings include:

- support classes having fewer students than mainstream classes<sup>12</sup>
- every support class having a teacher and a school learning support officer
- students having access to itinerant support teachers (hearing and/or vision)
- attracting teaching staff with the necessary qualifications to support the education and learning of students with complex needs.<sup>13</sup>

Specialist settings for students with disability are part of a comprehensive system of support offered by the department, to deliver increasingly personalised learning and support in response to the needs of individual students.

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12 NSW Department of Education. (2014). Specialist support classes in regular and special schools. <https://schoolsequella.det.nsw.edu.au/file/3180627a-c80c-44e4-8378-8e2c4222395/1/Specialist-support-classes.pdf>

13 NSW Government. (30 April 2021). Submissions in reply to Counsel Assisting's written submissions – Public Hearing 7. Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability [SUBM.0012.0001.0004], para 122.

# Accessing specialist settings for students with disability

In NSW, access to support classes and Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) requires an application (including confirmation of disability) and the process is discussed below. Our support classes and SSPs are further categorised as<sup>14</sup>:

- mild intellectual disability
- moderate intellectual disability
- severe intellectual disability
- range of disabilities with similar support needs
- autism
- autism and/or moderate intellectual disability
- physical disability
- behavioural issues
- mental health issues
- blind or vision impaired
- deaf or hearing impaired
- deaf blind impaired
- disability support prior to school.

Access to specialist settings for students with disability is based on a number of factors including both student needs and parent/carer choice. It is enabled by a localised process called the 'access request' where parents/carers collaborate with schools to submit an access request. Currently the process requires confirmed clinical diagnosis of disability in one of 8 categories. Schools manage the application while consulting with parents/carers to gather their input on their child's needs, and their preferred support provisions.

The application is reviewed by a multi-disciplinary panel who consider a range of factors and decide on the access request. Panels comprise local experts with their operation governed by centralised guidelines to appropriately balance the benefits of contextual knowledge with consistency in decision-making.

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<sup>14</sup> Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). (6 June 2022). Specialist support classes by school and support needs type. <https://data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset/specialist-support-classes-by-school-and-support-needs-type>

# Profile of specialist settings for students with disability<sup>15</sup>

**SPECIALIST SETTINGS BY THE NUMBERS**

There are **2,216** Schools in NSW

INCLUDING **784** schools with **1,685** support classes

AND **117** Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) with **7** subtypes<sup>1</sup>




## STUDENT PROFILE

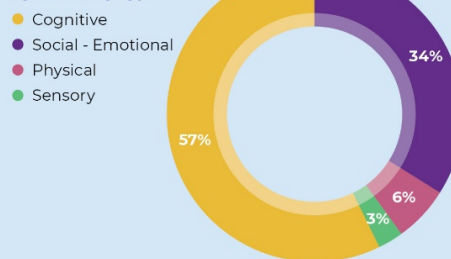
The proportion of students with a disability is growing<sup>3</sup>

Proportion of Total Students receiving an NCCD Adjustment



Students have a diverse set of disabilities, split into 4 categories<sup>2</sup>

Percentage of Students by Disability Type



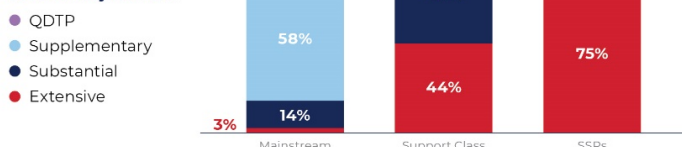
## ENROLMENT SETTINGS

The majority of students with a disability are enrolled in a mainstream setting<sup>4</sup>



SSPs have a larger proportion of 'Extensive' and 'Substantial' adjustments<sup>5</sup>

Proportion of Student Enrolments by School Setting and NCCD Level of Adjustment



## NCCD Adjustments

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) defines the level of adjustment provided to a student to address a disability. These adjustments, in order of increasing adjustment, are: quality differentiated teaching practice (QDTP), Supplementary, Substantial and Extensive.

FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:  
[https://www.nccd.edu.au/sites/default/files/h5p/content/167/docs/endorsed\\_levels\\_of\\_adjustment.pdf](https://www.nccd.edu.au/sites/default/files/h5p/content/167/docs/endorsed_levels_of_adjustment.pdf)

<sup>1</sup> NSW Education Data Hub, see <https://data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset> extracted April 2022  
<sup>2</sup> NSW Department of Education Data, 2021 (based on primary diagnosis/need)  
<sup>3</sup> NSW Department of Education Data, 2021    <sup>4</sup> NSW Department of Education Data, 2020  
<sup>5</sup> NSW Department of Education Data, 2020

# Best practice principles for specialist settings

These principles guide the operation of specialist settings for students with disability in NSW:

## 1. Student and family-centred<sup>16</sup>

All students are valued as individuals and are supported to participate in decisions that affect them. The capacity of students to solve problems, set goals, and self-advocate is valued and developed. Feedback from students drives continuous improvement within education settings and across the system.

Teachers and schools work in partnership with the student's parents/carers and support people to achieve the best outcomes for their child's education.

## 2. Strengths-focused<sup>17</sup>

Personalised Learning and Support planning is informed by student strengths, interests and needs. Students' full and effective participation is enabled within education settings and in the transition to further education, meaningful employment, or other options. Where beneficial, transitions are enabled between educational settings.

## 3. Evidence-based and led<sup>18</sup>

Services, settings, and supports are developed based on the best evidence available.

The system is dynamic and responsive to change, continually reviewed to accord with new research and contemporary understandings of disability supports and behavioural adjustments.

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<sup>15</sup> The NCCD is not intended to count every student who is protected from discrimination under the DDA, including students who have a health or other condition where their condition does not impact on their ability to participate in schooling on the same basis as their peers.

<sup>16</sup> NSW Department of Education. (2020). Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability, p 2.

<sup>17</sup> Strnadová, I., Dowse, L., Danker, J., & Tso, M. (2020). A Review and Synthesis of Educational Supports for Students with Disability: Evidence-Based Practices in Australia. Summary Review. UNSW Sydney, pp 7-11.

<sup>18</sup> Strnadová, I., Dowse, L., Danker, J., & Tso, M. (2020). A Review and Synthesis of Educational Supports for Students with Disability: Evidence-Based Practices in Australia. Summary Review. UNSW Sydney.

## 4. Collaborative<sup>19</sup>

Collaboration is encouraged and facilitated between professionals, including school staff, other education professionals, medical practitioners, policy makers, and advocates. Professionals work together with the shared goal of maximising educational outcomes for each individual student.

## 5. Appropriately supported and resourced<sup>20</sup>

Services, settings, and supports are resourced to accommodate student need.

Investments in the system are strategic and committed on a long-term priority basis.

# Practices and operation of specialist settings for students with disability

In the following sections we outline the key elements of the practice and operation of specialist settings for students with disability in NSW. This includes the:

- delivery of personalised learning and support through specialised staffing, adjustments to curriculum and assessment, equipment, and infrastructure
- opportunity to systematically reinforce parent/carer choice and individual agency
- ability to foster inclusive outcomes by creating the conditions for effective transition arrangements between education settings
- benefit of resources and partnerships to facilitate effective transitions post-school.

## Personalised learning, support, and infrastructure

In NSW specialist settings provide flexibility in the learning environment including smaller class sizes and personalised learning planning, as well as the staffing, equipment, and infrastructure necessary to better enable educational outcomes for individual students.

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19 CESE. (2020). What works best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance, 2020 update, pp 38-41.

20 NSW Department of Education. (2021). Resourcing your Strategic Improvement Plan.



## Flexible approach to class sizes

Specialist settings provide the opportunity for smaller class sizes. Every support class has at least one teacher and at least one school learning support officer. This facilitates personalised learning, support and goal-setting for students with moderate to high support needs, as well as the opportunity for staff to build partnerships with families.

Smaller class sizes can also offer quieter and calmer spaces for their students. This can create a more positive learning environment for students with significant anxiety and sensory processing difficulties, as well as students with a background of substantial trauma and/or complex mental health conditions.

## Targeted curricula, learning and assessment plans

Personalised Learning and Support planning in partnership with staff (teachers and School Learning Support Officers), students, and their parents/carers provide the framework to identify and support a student's learning needs.

Specialist settings enable teachers to collaborate with other support services that the student and/or their family is accessing, and to obtain the relevant internal and external multi-disciplinary input required to develop plans that comprehensively support students with complex needs. The adjustments needed to deliver on these highly personalised plans are enabled through specialist settings. In specialist settings, the NSW curriculum can be substantially adjusted for access and relevance to students with higher support needs, and assessment processes can be tailored to focus on specific skills development (e.g. communication).

For students with disability this includes the use of specialist assessment tools<sup>21</sup> that provide meaningful information to staff, students and their parents/carers about their educational development and outcomes.

## Staffing and specialist accreditation

Additional staff are available in specialist settings for students with significant mobility, self-care, or health needs. For example, older students (e.g. secondary school level) who use wheelchairs may require multiple people for safe changing. Recent research conducted by JFA Purple Orange highlighted that 'current and past students who had School Learning Support Officers in class described more successful experiences of participating in class and having the support they needed'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For example, the Students with Additional Needs program developed by the University of Melbourne, the Passport for Learning, and the National Literacy and Numeracy Precursor Indicators.

<sup>22</sup> JFA Purple Orange. (n.d.). Experiences and insights from students living with disability in NSW public schools and their parents/carers: Summary report. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/our-disability-strategy/initiatives/key-research/student-parent-and-educator-voice>, p 11.

School Learning Support Officers (Student Health Support) also provide health support as required so that students can participate in and access educational programs.

Specialist settings coordinate multi-disciplinary supports where necessary, including partnerships with allied health and behaviour support providers, such as Occupational Therapists and Speech Pathologists. Specialist Settings also draw on support from the team around the school including specialist itinerant teachers and assistant principals supporting students with hearing or vision impairment, assistant principals learning and support and support teachers transition.

Specialist settings have a concentration of staff with specialist expertise or experience in educating students with complex needs including, but not limited to, skills in behaviour and student management, teaching technique and practice, pedagogy and curriculum.

The department continues to invest in building the capability of our workforce to meet the needs of students with disability across all settings, including specialist settings.

For example, the department offers **Inclusive Practice in Education (IPiE)** scholarships for staff to undertake a Masters in inclusive/special education; Masters with a specialisation in the area of deaf and hard of hearing or blind and low vision; or Graduate Diploma in inclusive/special education.

The IPiE program is aiming to boost the supply of teachers qualified in inclusive/special education by 350 by 2025/26.<sup>23</sup> In the first 2 years of the program, 244 scholarships have been awarded, of which 158 were to staff from specialist settings.<sup>24</sup>

## Equipment and infrastructure

The learning environment plays a significant role in facilitating the best possible outcomes for students. Specialist settings can accommodate infrastructure adjustments as required and in ways to address students' specific needs.

Some design, infrastructure and environmental elements are effectively accommodated in a specialist setting. Similarly, other equipment, technology and supports can be utilised in parallel with infrastructure and environmental elements, in specialist settings.

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<sup>23</sup> NSW Department of Education. (19 July 2021). Inclusive Practice in Education (IPiE) Scholarship. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/strategies-and-reports/our-disability-inclusion-action-plan-2021-2025/projects/inclusive-practice-in-education-scholarship>

<sup>24</sup> NSW Department of Education. (2022). Internal data.

Specialist equipment, and other technology supports and resources are available to all schools through the Specialist Technology and Equipment Program. Based on local school and student needs, Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) may have additional innovative and emerging technologies that serve the student cohort, including:

- virtual and augmented reality equipment for multi-sensory/immersive learning experiences
- accessible hydrotherapy pools
- artificial intelligence robotics for learning and social skills development across Key Learning Areas
- adapted music creation technologies
- interactive boards and monitors with the latest education software and hardware
- augmentative and alternative communication systems
- adapted Physical Education equipment, such as play gyms, bicycles, swings, beach wheelchairs, and trampolines
- switch-activated and accessible technologies
- induction hearing loops.

These resources enable access to more interactive learning experiences for individual students.

Students who are enrolled in a support class or SSP who are assessed as unable to travel independently, and have parents/carers who are unable to provide transport to and from school (either fully or in part), may be eligible for transport through the Assisted School Travel Program (ASTP).

ASTP is funded by the NSW Government and managed through the department. ASTP organises the transport arrangements for each student, arranging pick up and drop off times to and from the student's school. Assisted Travel Support Officers (ATSOs) are employed through the department and work with the school, parents/carers, contractors and drivers to provide a high level of supervision and support for students when on transport.<sup>25</sup>

## Positive perspectives from parents/carers and students

The results of the 'Tell Them From Me' parent survey (2021) demonstrate a substantially higher level of parent/carer satisfaction in the supports and adjustments available for children with disability in specialist settings, as compared with mainstream settings.

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<sup>25</sup> NSW Department of Education. (n.d.). Assisted School Travel Program. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/astp>

When asked if they agreed that their child's school provides enough resources to help students with disability, the percentages of parents that reported agreement were:

59% of parents of a child with disability enrolled in a mainstream primary school (Years 4 to 6).

52% of parents of a child with disability enrolled in a mainstream secondary school (Years 7 to 12).

91% of parents of a child with disability enrolled in an SSP.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly positive perspectives have been expressed by students with moderate and high support needs enrolled in specialist settings.

The department recently commissioned the University of New South Wales to undertake world-leading work to develop specialist student voice tools specifically suited to this cohort of students.

The tools developed for this trial, collectively known as 'My Say My Way' address a gap in NSW, Australia, and worldwide in ways to enable students with moderate and high support needs to have a voice and participate in decisions about their education.

A trial of these tools involving 195 students from 24 specialist settings (22 SSPs and 2 support classes) provided unprecedented insights into the educational experiences of this cohort of students. Initial data indicates that specialist settings are valued by their students and provide them with positive educational experiences:

The majority of students who completed the 'My Say My Way' V2 [Easy Read format] stated that they like school (85.8%) and that they are doing well at school (83.7%).<sup>27</sup>

When asked how they feel at school, almost 70% of students enrolled in specialist settings reported positive emotions. Specifically, feeling happy, excited, and proud about their school.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> TTFM is not compulsory. Schools choose to run TTFM and have discretion over which students are offered the surveys. Parents can opt their children out of the surveys. Likewise, students do not have to complete the survey and may skip any question.

<sup>27</sup> Strnadová, I., Dowse, L., Danker, J., Loblinzk, J., Alonzo, D., & Tso, M. (2021). *Capturing perspectives on the school experience of students with intellectual disability and/or students on the autism spectrum in NSW schools: Listening to the voices of students with moderate and high support needs*. UNSW Sydney, p 29.

<sup>28</sup> Strnadová, I., Dowse, L., Danker, J., Loblinzk, J., Alonzo, D., & Tso, M. (2021). *Capturing perspectives on the school experience of students with intellectual disability and/or students on the autism spectrum in NSW schools: Listening to the voices of students with moderate and high support needs*. UNSW Sydney, p 29.

## Parent/carer choice and student agency

In NSW public schools, decision-making regarding educational settings is based on a number of factors including both student need and parent/carer choice.

It is the duty of parents/carers to enrol a child of compulsory school age, beginning at the age of 6, and continuing until they either complete Year 10 or turn 17 years of age.<sup>29</sup> After Year 10 and until the age of 17, students must be in:

- school, or registered for home schooling; or
- approved education or training; or
- full-time, paid employment (average 25 hours/week); or
- a combination of these three.

Our system has been designed to support parents/carers to make an informed choice regarding the type of education provided to their child.

Parents/carers are provided with a range of support options for their children. Specialist settings further extend this important element of choice, as one alternative within a system of supports designed to address the varied needs of individual students. Evidence consistently demonstrates that students perform better at school when parents/carers and teachers work together to facilitate positive learning environments that are adapted to suit each student's individual needs.<sup>30</sup>

In NSW public schools, decisions about appropriate strategies for students with disability involve collaboration between parents/carers, teachers, and students.

The NSW education public education system aims to a range of educational options which are responsive to student need. As demonstrated by recent results from the 'Tell Them From Me' parent survey (2021), the majority of responding parents who identified with having a child with disability answered that their child is enrolled at the parents' first choice of public school. The results are comparable across educational settings.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See s. 22 of the *Education Act 1990* (NSW), which provides for the parental duty, and s. 21B, which defines the various circumstances in which a child will be of 'compulsory school age'.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel, G. (2015). Patterns of parent involvement: A longitudinal analysis of family-school partnerships in the early years of school in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, vol. 40(1), 119-128

<sup>31</sup> TTFM is not compulsory. Schools choose to run TTFM and have discretion over which students are offered the surveys. Parents can opt their children out of the surveys. Likewise, students do not have to complete the survey and may skip any question.

## Transitions between educational settings

The department is committed to building a more inclusive education system, one where all students feel welcomed and are learning to their fullest capability. This means ensuring that all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation, or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similarly aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs.<sup>32</sup>

The department offers support to teachers and school leaders in how to enable successful transitions between settings, and how to create inclusive spaces in schools across all education settings. This includes professional learning in collaborative teaching practices, in addition to strategic advice to teachers and schools on how to design and use their learning spaces purposefully.

The department's 'Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability'<sup>33</sup> expresses a commitment to inclusive practice that is embedded system-wide across all settings and domains of the education experience.

This includes supporting student agency and self-determination, partnering with parents/carers, valuing diversity and enhancing accessibility, curriculum adjustment, quality teaching, and by being championed across school leadership.

NSW education specialist settings operate in partnership with, rather than in isolation from, other school or classroom environments.

Transitions between mainstream and specialist settings are facilitated and, in some cases, a shared enrolment model is applied. Transition arrangements vary in practice to provide a level of interaction, engagement and participation that is aligned to each student's needs, requisite adjustments, and choice, and their parent/carer preference.

Continuity of learning is recognised as crucial for optimising improved learning and wellbeing outcomes, beginning at the very earliest stages of a student's education. Educators from early childhood settings help to facilitate successful transitions to primary settings, sharing information about each student's knowledge and skills, to build on foundations of earlier learning.<sup>34</sup> Experience and expert staff within specialist settings support students, parents/carers, and teachers to design and prepare transition arrangements for students with disability.

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32 NSW Department of Education. (2019). Disability Strategy: A living document – Improving outcomes for children and young people, and their families. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/our-disability-strategy/disability-strategy>, p 6.

33 NSW Department of Education. (2020). Inclusive Education Statement for students with disability. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/our-disability-strategy/inclusive-education>

34 NSW Department of Education. (2020). Strong and successful start to school: Transition guidelines. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/early-learning/media/documents/el-strong-and-successful-start-to-school-transition-guidelines.pdf>

Each transition arrangement fosters and builds on a student's strengths and is effectively implemented to maximise the likelihood of positive educational and social outcomes for that student. Regular review facilitates student transitions into and out of specialist settings as determined by their needs and educational goals, and parent/carer choice.

## Research and evidence on inclusive practices

The evidence regarding the **factors** that improve outcomes for students with disability are not necessarily tied to the **physical settings** in which these factors are delivered.

Inclusive education is facilitated when education environments adapt the design and physical structures, teaching methods, and curriculum, as well as their culture, policy, and practice, to enable the greatest level of accessibility to all students.<sup>35</sup> The range of specific factors (such as resource availability, the expertise of teaching staff, and efforts taken to enhance opportunities for inclusion)<sup>36</sup> that have been demonstrated to improve outcomes can in fact operate in multiple educational settings.

Research undertaken by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth into best practice approaches to inclusive education found that 'the idea that "good practice" for inclusive education can exist in one measurable form is...unfitting. Inclusion is highly context dependent.'<sup>37</sup>

Their research identified principles and practices that have been employed with some success to create inclusive environments 'across a variety of contexts', including by:

- providing educational settings that focus on identifying and reducing barriers to learning and participation
- creating learning environments that respond to the needs of all learners to achieve the greatest impact on their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development
- developing a relevant, stimulating, and appropriate curriculum that can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse learners
- strengthening and sustaining the participation of students, teachers, parents/carers and community members within the educational setting.<sup>38</sup>

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35 UNICEF. (2017). *Inclusive Education: Understanding Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, p 3.

36 Wilson, E., & Campaign, R. (2020). *Fostering employment for people with intellectual disability: The evidence to date*. Hawthorn, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology, p 20.

37 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). (2013). *Inclusive Education for Students with Disability: A review of the best evidence in relation to theory and practice*, p 18.

38 ARACY. (2013). *Inclusive Education for Students with Disability: A review of the best evidence in relation to theory and practice*, p 18.

These principles and factors are specifically enabled within specialist settings for students with disability in NSW.

The department commissioned the University of New South Wales to undertake research into evidence-based practices and interventions to support students with disability across diverse settings. This research identified numerous practices that deliver positive outcomes for students with disability through a personalised learning approach, which has been identified as one of the core features of inclusive education.

The department is committed to promoting and enhancing the use of evidence-based practices by teachers in order to effectively support students with disability across diverse settings.<sup>39</sup>

## Transitions post-school

Beyond education settings, transition planning for students with higher learning and support needs should commence well before their final year of schooling so there is sufficient time to develop the requisite skills for their chosen career.

Transition planning 'not as an add-on activity for students with disabilities once they reach age 14 or 16, but rather as a fundamental basis of education that guides the development of all educational programs'.<sup>40</sup>

The department employs **Support Teachers Transition (STT)** to specifically work with schools across a range of settings to support student-centred transition planning for students with additional learning and support needs. This involves collaborative planning and information sharing with schools, students and their families, and various agencies.

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<sup>39</sup> Strnadová, I., Dowse, L., Danker, J., & Tso, M. (2020). *A review and synthesis of educational supports for students with disability: Evidence-based practices in Australia. Summary review.* UNSW Sydney.

<sup>40</sup> Kohler, P.D. & Field, S. (2003) Transition-Focused Education Foundation for the Future, *Journal of Special Education*, 37, 10.1177/00224669030370030701.



The STT role can include supporting student goals related to:

- choosing curriculum options, subject selection, and workplace learning, such as Vocational Education and Training
- planning for post-school destinations, such as employment, further education and training, or community activities
- planning for extra-curricular/post-school interests and needs. For example, transport and mobility, personal care, community living options, community participation, and recreational pursuits
- accessing community information to support options for transition planning. For example, NDIS Providers (for students who are NDIS participants), educational institutions, and local community supports
- connecting to specialist programs and supports provided by government and non-government agencies to enable access to vocational and post-school pathways. For example, this can include connecting students where appropriate with the NDIA and Disability Employment Services.

Specialist settings may form partnerships with local employers and consequently enable students to undertake work experience. This is key to supporting students' decision-making regarding their future careers.

Effective transition planning is time intensive, requires partnerships and trusting relationships with students to clearly understand their preferences.

This takes a combination of 'education programs and extra-curricular activities across multiple years'.<sup>41</sup>

There is diverse practice in transition-focused education across specialist settings for students with disability and the department is committed to continuously improve practice to support student transitions. Specialist settings provide structures and resources to deliver the medium-term planning and personalised learning and support required to facilitate effective transitions to employment for students with disability.

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<sup>41</sup> Wilson, E. & Campain, R. (2020) *Fostering employment for people with intellectual disability: The evidence to date*, Hawthorn, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology, p 23.

## Positive perspectives from parents/carers on SSPs

Results of the 'Tell Them From Me' parent survey (2021) demonstrate that parents of students enrolled in a School for Specific Purposes (SSPs) have marginally higher expectations for their child completing year 12 and attending University, compared to students with disability in mainstream settings.<sup>42</sup>

When asked if they expected their child would complete year 12, the percentage of parents that reported agreement were:

73% of parents with a child in an SSP.

67% of parents with a child in a primary school, where the parent had identified the child had a disability.

67% of parents with a child in a secondary school, where the parent had identified the child had a disability.

When asked if they expected their child would attend University, the percentage of parents that reported agreement were:

73% of parents with a child in an SSP.

67% of parents with a child in a primary school, where the parent had identified the child had a disability.

35% of parents with a child in a secondary school, where the parent had identified the child had a disability.

## Commitment to continuous improvement

In recent years the department has undertaken significant reform, in line with best practice and evidence, to improve outcomes for students with disability.

The department's 'Disability Strategy' (2019) sets out a comprehensive pathway for change including policy, practice, infrastructure, curriculum and behaviour management, as well as specific monitoring and reporting against student outcomes.

The department has also focused on changes to access pathways for additional supports, better targeting of supports, and shifting from a diagnostic assessment to a functional assessment model.

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<sup>42</sup> TTFM is not compulsory. Schools choose to run TTFM and have discretion over which students are offered the surveys. Parents can opt their children out of the surveys. Likewise, students do not have to complete the survey and may skip any question.

The department is committed to the continued improvement of educational, social, wellbeing, and employment outcomes for students with disability.

A number of key tools for teachers have been designed and tested in recent years and will be rolled-out for teachers through 2023 including:

- a set of comprehensive tools to better hear and respond to the voices of students with mild to severe intellectual disability and autism
- developing and refining assessment tools to understand and measure the progress of students with disability. The Assessment for Complex Learners project run by the department has developed, improved and trialled a number of assessment tools across approximately 300 schools
- practice guidance is being developed for a range of evidence-based practices identified in a literature review by the University of New South Wales (commissioned by the department).

The departments continued commitment to an inclusive learning experience for students with disability is also driving a number of current initiatives. The departments understanding of specialist infrastructure and learning environments is evolving informed by evidence. Several specialist environmental design projects are ongoing which have had proven success to date for students whose families choose a specialist setting.

The department is developing a set of guidelines to ensure that new school developments are designed as inclusive learning environments where, for example, support infrastructure is built into the foundations of the school. Student outcomes and the ability to measure them are key, with the ongoing development of a dedicated outcomes framework for students with disability.

Future work will continue to provide options that enable student and family choice regarding the settings and environment that best suit each individual student.