



QCEC Response - Towards an all Abilities Queensland

February 2017

Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides this submission on the consultation paper, *Towards an all abilities Queensland*, to inform the development of a new disability plan for Queensland.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan Catholic school authorities and 17 Religious Institutes and other incorporated bodies which, between them, operate a total of 302 Catholic schools that educate almost 147,000 students in Queensland.

QCEC understands that the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has prompted the review of priorities and strengthening of a commitment to building a more inclusive Queensland.

The consultation paper *Towards an all abilities Queensland* discusses five priority areas to build an all abilities Queensland. The five priority areas:

- Personal and community relationships
- Recreation and tourism
- Working and learning
- Key services
- Leadership and contribution.

This response has been informed by consultation between Catholic School Authorities and QCEC and will have a focus on Priority Area 3: Working and Learning.

It is important to note that QCEC does not own or operate Catholic schools and has no direct jurisdiction over Catholic schools, staff or students; that role sits firmly with the Catholic School Authorities. Individual schools and school authorities may choose to provide their own response to the consultation.

Background

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission's Inclusive Practices in Catholic Schools in Queensland position statement states:

Queensland Catholic schools have a strong commitment to social inclusion and student wellbeing, catering for students with a diverse range of personal characteristics and experiences. These characteristics and experiences may be attributable to physical, religious, cultural, personal health or wellbeing, intellectual, psychological, socio-economic or life experiences. This diverse range of personal characteristics and experiences enriches the communal life of schools.

Queensland Catholic Education Commission believes that the concept of inclusion is predicated on the intention to provide an educational environment that promotes the human dignity of each student within a supportive Christian community. The Queensland Catholic Education Commission advocates that Catholic school authorities commit to establishing policies and procedures that incorporate inclusive practices that are supportive of Church teaching and fundamental to the ethos of Catholic schools to meet the diverse needs of students.

Enrolments of students with disability in Catholic schools continues to grow, as does the complexity of these students' needs. Catholic education is committed to expanding access to all students with disability.

Priority 3: Working and Learning

Question 1: What has helped schools to be more inclusive of people with disability?

Students with disability are accessing Catholic schools in ever increasing numbers, as evidenced by the 260.6% rise from 2006 to 2016 in the number of verified students with disability in Queensland Catholic schools. Catholic schools incorporate inclusive practices in policies and procedures to promote the inclusion, access and attainment of students with disability. Catholic education views parents/caregivers as the first and primary educators of their children. In doing so, Catholic schools acknowledge that ongoing collaboration and partnership between parents, students, teachers, school leadership, and inclusive education representatives in the enrolment and education process are essential to successful school outcomes and educational attainment of students with disability.

The following strategies and opportunities provide an overview of the ways Catholic School Authorities are more inclusive of students with disability:

- establishing transparent and accountable school procedures for the enrolment of students with disability to enable the best fit between student needs and school capacity
- supporting close collaboration between all participants in the education process (parents, students, teachers, school leadership, and inclusive education representatives) as partners sharing the responsibility for successful outcomes for students with disability
- making connections and working collaboratively with a range of external support agencies. The type of agency used is determined by the disability areas and the support needs of the student in an educational setting (e.g. Autism Qld, Montrose, Vision Australia, Cerebral Palsy League)
- providing professional development opportunities and support for staff to: build knowledge and understanding of different types of disability; implement strategies for assisting and developing educational programs for students with disability; providing access to online training opportunities across school communities
- providing resources, including personnel, to address specific learning needs (therapy staff /psychologists in schools), specialised equipment, programs.

Question 2: What barriers have schools faced?

Whilst Catholic school authorities provide a number of services to support students with disability the following barriers have been identified:

- less than optimal access to customised digital assistive technologies for students with disability as disability support funding does not adequately cover such costs and access to assistive technology resources by students requires further resourcing in professional development for teachers to build their knowledge and skills.
- exceedingly long waiting lists to access many medical specialists in the public health system. High costs in the private sector preclude access to swifter services for many parents. The reports from medical specialists help to inform the types of support students need to access the curriculum.
- a constant employment challenge in developing relevant expertise and experience of new teacher graduates in catering for the needs of students with disability

- access and availability of skilled teaching staff with disability specific expertise (e.g. in Braille, Orientation and Mobility, teaching deaf/hearing impaired students, specialist teachers/allied health professionals for Communication Impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disability, Motor Co-ordination Disorder). Providing ongoing professional development to build teacher capacity is essential.
- annual nature of funding makes future planning difficult, e.g. keeping qualified specialists and consistent programming.

In addition to the barriers mentioned above, Catholic School Authorities with schools in rural and remote areas identified the following:

- rural and remote areas experience ongoing difficulty in attracting and retaining staff with appropriate experience and training. This, and high staff turnover, results in schools having to continually update and deliver professional development and disrupts the learning and support programs for students
- small numbers of students with disability are spread across a large geographic area, which means there is little capacity to group or cluster students to provide a level of efficiency in delivery of school services
- specialist support services are not readily available in rural and remote areas and services are significantly impacted (whether therapists/counsellors are employed or services are purchased) by extensive travel distances and costs, and limited time to provide services
- for some families, a specialist appointment is a three day undertaking and encompasses costs for travel, accommodation and medical fees as well as the three days the student is absent from school
- high turnover of allied health staff in rural areas impacts on the consistency of the service as time is needed to rebuild the relationship between schools and these services.

Question 3: What else can schools do to improve access for people with disability to education and/or work?

Catholic School Authorities suggested the following strategies to improve access for people with disability to education, work experience and transitional pathways post-school, noting that in implementing some of these strategies, schools may require additional support:

- The Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement and the Queensland Certificate of Education provide the framework to appropriately recognise a student's learning. However, it is essential that appropriate resourcing is available for staff support of students in effectively transitioning from school to long term post school pathways
- increase collaboration and enhance positive working relationships with agencies (e.g. HELP enterprises, EPIC Employment, etc.) in the transition from school to future pathways
- build stronger links with businesses and community organisations to increase understanding and support for work experience opportunities and career pathways for students with disability
- promote self-advocacy of students with disability to build confidence to approach employers and present themselves for employment
- improve access to information for families and students of inclusive practices in the world of work
- foster and promote communications between school authorities and allied health services to create a multi-disciplinary team approach
- recognise that students with disability are enrolled in government and non-government sectors and regardless of the parent's choice of school, there should be equitable resourcing and service provision across all geographical locations (regional, remote, metropolitan)
- provide pre-service and ongoing teacher education to develop understandings of the Disability Standards for Education, levels of adjustment and how to support students with disability in the classroom
- implement a coordinated services approach (e.g. Deadly Kids Deadly Futures, Prep Vision Screening) to address availability issues (e.g. when approached by schools for support, Deadly

Kids Deadly Futures team were unable to accommodate requests for support because they were already fully booked)

- ensure appropriate levels of capital funding to support facilities adjustments necessary for specific needs of students with a disability, e.g. disabled toilets with room for a hoist, hearing loop systems.

Final Question: What does a Queensland that provides better learning and work opportunities for people with disabilities look like?

The consultation paper identified three ways that would lead to a 'Queensland that provides better learning and work opportunities for people with disability' (p. 21):

1. better access to schools, training organisations, universities and workplaces;
2. achieve similar education levels to people without disability;
3. increased rate of employment for Queenslanders with disability.

The following points have been identified as areas for consideration to achieve these goals:

- demand for services often exceeds supply, regardless of geographical location, but can be exacerbated in rural and remote areas. Improving these services e.g. access to community screening and intervention programs across all education sectors and geographical locations, would better prepare students for access and attainment in the school system
- addressing issues faced by rural and remote communities where there are multiple forms of disadvantage experienced by students in accessing specialist and allied health support services
- integrating services to support students to successfully transition to school through collaborating between settings (e.g. establishing networks and connections between prior to school settings and schools to enable sharing of effective early intervention strategies)
- providing improved access to allied health services within the school context, where appropriate, would provide an education support service for students and families, particularly in regional and remote areas. With the roll-out of the NDIS in Queensland it is important that the NDIS and Catholic schools engage in collaborative discussions to provide the best services to meet the needs of students with disability in schools
- personal care in schools encompasses the provision of one to one assistance with self-care activities provided by school staff to students with disability, to ensure their participation in education on the same basis as their peers. Responsibilities of schools and/or the NDIS in relation to personal care for students with disability need to be carefully considered and will require close consultation between the Catholic school sector and the NDIS
- provision of support and services to the families of students with disability beyond the school and in the community as envisaged by the NDIS
- It is essential that the profile of people with disabilities continues to be raised within the wider community so all are aware of people with disability and their employment, health status and ability to live a quality life.

Conclusion

QCEC thanks the Queensland Government for the opportunity to provide input to this consultation. QCEC recognises the very aspirational nature of the draft consultation document, Towards an All Abilities Queensland, but suggests that the vision of the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020 of an *'inclusive Australian society that enables people with disability to fulfil their potential as equal citizens'* (p.22) is a statement more sensitive to the potential of each individual than that indicated in the Queensland vision of "people with a disability living 'the life they choose'".



Dr Lee-Anne Perry AM
Executive Director