

# Students with special needs



Many students with a wide range of special needs – including the gifted and talented, those with learning difficulties, disabilities, or behavioural problems – attend independent schools.

There are extra costs involved in meeting special needs, and this can be difficult for independent school communities.

## Gifted and talented students

Independent schools aim to extend and enrich the education of all students. They are also well-known for their development of gifted and talented students. Many have scholarship programmes for students who are gifted academically, musically, in sport, or in the performing arts.

To meet the special needs of these students, independent schools adopt a number of strategies including acceleration, extension programmes, and participation in university courses. Some state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) offer specialist camps for students of member schools and the wider community.



## Students with disabilities

Over the last decade there has been a trend to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, in recognition of the social and educational benefits for all involved. This trend is reflected in the steadily increasing numbers of such students enrolling in independent schools.

In 1995 independent schools had some 3,200 students with disabilities enrolled. By 2005 there were almost 9,000 students with disabilities enrolled in independent schools including independent Catholic schools. About 77 per cent of these students were enrolled in mainstream schools and 23 per cent were enrolled in special schools which represents an increase of nearly 180 per cent over the decade. The proportion of these students with higher level needs is also increasing.

Special schools provide alternative educational settings for students with high-level needs (**see Diverse school choices by parents across Australia, article on the Carter family, page 20**). These schools may cater for students with disabilities or disorders such as autism, as well as students who are at risk, do not 'fit' into mainstream schools, have behavioural difficulties, or are school 'refusers'.

Some mainstream independent schools incorporate a unit on campus to cater for students with special needs because of profound hearing loss, severe language disorders, social and emotional disorders, or intellectual disabilities.

## Special education teachers

Many independent schools employ specialist teachers to work with class teachers and parents to develop individual learning programmes for students with learning difficulties and to assist class teachers develop strategies and materials to meet the needs of such students. Some schools employ teacher aides to work with students in class, or withdraw students from class to work with specialist teachers.

Some independent schools also teach English as a Second Language. These programmes are aimed at students of non-English speaking background, including Indigenous students.



### Open-ended obligations on schools

There is a legal obligation on all schools to provide access to and meet the needs of students with disabilities. The federal *Disabilities Discrimination Act 1992* makes it unlawful for schools to discriminate against a person on the grounds of disability, except in those circumstances where the enrolment of a student with disabilities would impose an unjustifiable hardship on the school.

Unjustifiable hardship depends on the particular facts of each case and therefore independent schools face uncertainty as to their precise legal obligations. The legislation and its associated education standards place open-ended obligations on schools. While this is aimed at prohibiting discrimination against students with disabilities, it also potentially involves individual schools in very large resource costs for which there is currently limited public funding.

Generally, students with disabilities in independent schools are eligible for significantly less public funding for their special education needs than their counterparts in government schools. The gap in general recurrent funding can be over \$20,000 per annum per student. Once students with disabilities enrol in independent schools they may also lose free access to government services such as Brailleing.

Because funding for students with disabilities does not follow the child, irrespective of the school they attend, choice of school for these students is severely restricted. There is also serious concern about the impost on individual families and school communities of costs that would otherwise be borne by the wider community.

### Government funding inconsistent

Students with disabilities in independent schools are eligible for some funding from the federal government and their state or territory government, although state government funding varies widely. Some state and territory governments provide low levels of assistance while others make a more significant contribution. This problem is further compounded by inconsistency in the definition of disabilities that determines eligibility for funding support between federal and state/territory programmes.

Students with disabilities in independent schools receive the same Australian Government general recurrent funding as other students at their school (**see Government funding of independent schools, page 29**). In the case of students attending special schools, this is 70 per cent of Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC). For students enrolling in other schools it can be as little as 13.7 per cent of AGSRC. All students with disabilities in non-government schools also receive a per capita strategic assistance grant of \$743 per annum under the Australian Government's Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Programme. This programme also delivers targeted funding for students with disabilities that is allocated on a needs basis through AISs.

### New moves to address special needs

The inequity of resourcing for students with disabilities has been detailed by the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) and AISs in submissions to the 2002 Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities and the 2003 Productivity Commission Inquiry into the *Disability Discrimination Act*, and in representations to federal and state parliamentarians (links to these inquiries are listed below).

There is recognition by governments that more must be done to address the needs of these students. At the state level, the Queensland Government has moved to introduce a new ascertainment system for funding allocation to address educational disadvantage that is based on educational need and not according to a defined disability.



Nationally, two taskforces of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) are considering matters relating to students with disabilities. The Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce is developing a definition of students with disabilities for national reporting of comparable educational outcomes. The Schools Resourcing Taskforce is investigating future resources required by schools to meet their needs more effectively.

The Australian Government in the May 2006 Budget committed itself to looking at new and innovative ways of assisting schools with the costs of educating students with disabilities, particularly schools in the non-government sector which are struggling to cope with the significant growth in the number of students with disabilities. Ways to allow portability of funding for students with disabilities would support parental choice as it would provide flexibility regardless of which school the child attends.

**For further information:**

ISCA's submissions to the Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities, May 2002 and the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Disability Discrimination Act, May 2003 are available at: [www.isca.edu.au](http://www.isca.edu.au) Click through About ISCA/ISCA Submissions.

Further information on the inquiries can be found at:

[www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2002-04/ed\\_students\\_withdisabilities/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/completed_inquiries/2002-04/ed_students_withdisabilities/index.htm) (Senate inquiry) and: [www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/dda/index.html](http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/dda/index.html) (Productivity Commission inquiry).

For information on special education in Victoria: [www.ais.vic.edu.au/schools/gov-programs/special-education.htm](http://www.ais.vic.edu.au/schools/gov-programs/special-education.htm)

MCEETYA taskforces: [www.mceetya.edu.au/](http://www.mceetya.edu.au/)

National Independent Special Schools Association: [www.nissa.org.au/](http://www.nissa.org.au/)

