



# SAME CLASSROOM SAME OPPORTUNITIES

*family*  
ADVOCACY

Strengthening authentic inclusive education in NSW

## BRIEFING **PAPER**

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## Who are we

Family Advocacy is an independent and impartial organisation that works with families across NSW to promote and defend the rights and interests of people who have developmental disability<sup>1</sup>.

## Our Vision

Our vision for inclusive education is that children learn and belong with their peers, in the same classroom, with the same teacher, working on the same curriculum. Inclusive education is where there is only one option for learning and that is all children together in the same classroom. Just being in the same place isn't enough. Our teachers need to be able to educate and support the needs of each and every student.

An inclusive education means having practices within a school where every child feels respected, confident and safe so he or she can learn and develop his or her full learning potential. It is based on a system of values and beliefs centred on the best interests of the student, which promotes social cohesion, belonging, active participation in learning, a complete school experience, and positive interactions with peers and others in the community. Not only does this benefit all children but it lays the foundation for strong communities that value diversity and can interact and prosper with a wide range of people.

We can make NSW a place where disability doesn't mean exclusion and segregation. We can create a NSW where each and every child and young person are educated together, as equals, in their local community. A society where every child knows that they belong to their local neighbourhood school, they deserve to be there, and have a right to be there alongside their peers.

## The Current Situation

Despite a policy that is in favour of inclusion, the NSW Government's approach to education for children and young people with disability is often preventing them from attending their local school in a regular classroom and steering them to a special school or support unit. This segregation sends a very clear message to that child that they are different, to be placed "over there" and of lesser value than a child without a disability. In addition, this exclusion from the local school for children with disability is in conflict with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability*.

Many parents have little choice but to enrol their children in a segregated setting and the current parallel system of education for students with disability strongly reinforces segregation. The 2016 Auditor General's report found that 25% of parents had been told by school staff that there was no place for their child at their local school. Some of the most common reasons given to families when being rejected from their local school are that their child would have inadequate support, that they would be excluded from broader activities, and that the special school would be better for them. Many families have also been told that an

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<sup>1</sup> Developmental disability is a disability that occurs in the developmental period of a person's life (in the period from conception to adulthood) and includes but is not limited to: autism, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and any combination of physical, intellectual or sensory disability.



inclusive education will be a detriment to both their child and other learners in the classroom. There is no research to prove this and, in fact, the evidence indicates the opposite.

Our analysis of NSW Department of Education (DoE) enrolment statistics indicates that special schools in NSW have had a 19.4% increase in enrolment (1609 students) between 2010 and 2016 whilst regular school enrolments only increased by 4.6% over that time period. Further, the four-year period from 2012 to 2016 saw a 21% increase in the number of support units.

This contradicts all of the evidence from across Australia and internationally for over four decades, which shows that, children with a disability do better on all measures in inclusive settings rather than disability-specific settings (Hehir 2016, Cologon 2013, Jackson 2008). In addition, outcomes for all children are the same or better in settings inclusive of children with a disability. More importantly, for the typical students in the classroom, inclusion teaches acceptance, compassion and empathy. It teaches all of our children to look at difference and say, "You belong here. We are all the same. We are all different".

NSW is lagging behind other jurisdictions around the world in their education and treatment of students with disability. For example, Italy and New Brunswick, Canada, are two such jurisdictions that have created educational reform to ensure that no child is in a segregated setting and that all children are given the best opportunity to learn and develop normatively in these formative years, together.

## Solutions

Removing our current parallel system and create a singular system for all students will involve an extensive reform. Ensuring inclusion in the local school will require multi-layered strategies such as ensuring an attitude within a school that is welcoming to a child with a disability and their family, increasing the inclusive practice capacity of teachers, and providing adequate systems and resources to implement quality inclusive education. To do this, NSW can move teaching expertise from segregated settings to the local school, to work together with the local teacher to educate every child. There are schemes that already exist that build a whole system—state, district, school, and community – with capacity to provide academic and behavioural support to improve outcomes for all students. In many cases, the wheel does not need to be recreated but modified to our NSW system.

The starting point for this reform will be a commitment from NSW government to end segregation and exclusionary practices and to undertake development of a comprehensive plan to revolutionise our system.



### What can the NSW Government do?

Family Advocacy recommends the following to the NSW Government:

1. Commit to a reform of the education system to enable genuine inclusion for all students by 2030. This requires the presumption that a child, including a child with disability, is to be educated in the same classroom, with the same teacher, with the same curriculum as their peers in their local school by 2030. NSW will then be consistent with upholding Australia's commitment towards the 2030: Sustainable Development Goal, to "Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all."
2. Set a target that 90% of children with a disability attend the regular classroom in their local school by 2022.
3. Cease building new special school infrastructure similar to the NSW Government's decision to cease building and utilising institutions for people with disability from 2019.
4. Cease creating new support classes in mainstream schools from 2019.
5. Commit to a pilot project in 2019 adopting a scheme that provides schools with the inclusive capacity to equip academic and behavioural support to improve outcomes for all students.