

# Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities

## Response from Noah's Ark Inc.

Noah's Ark Inc. is a non-government organisation providing early childhood intervention (ECI) and inclusion support services to children with disabilities and other additional needs and their families and carers. We are the largest early childhood intervention and inclusion support service in Victoria operating from 17 centres in Melbourne and regional Victoria and in the Australian Capital Territory.

Noah's Ark welcomes the opportunity to provide comment in relation to the review of the program for students with disabilities.

While much of our service delivery responsibility is with children prior to school entry, we do have some responsibility for supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in Out of School Hours Care and Vacation Care Programs and have an overarching and abiding interest in the achievement of effective inclusive practice at all age levels.

## Background

### History of exclusion

Like early childhood settings, schools have evolved their models of service delivery from earlier times when children with disabilities were largely absent. The routine institutionalisation of children with disabilities during the first half of the twentieth century meant they were excluded from mainstream schools. In the 1970s, when institutionalisation ceased and new services were set up for children with disabilities they were established as segregated "special" services. As a consequence, the school and disability professions and sectors developed independently. This is apparent in the current approaches to the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools which remain embedded in a belief that children with disabilities are fundamentally different from other children; and in the lack of knowledge about the needs of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. This is regardless of four decades in the growth of our knowledge about children's development and learning, and the evidence that children with disabilities are far more similar to, than different from, their peers.

### What is Inclusion?

*Inclusion* is not just about 'having access to' or 'being present in' a particular setting or place. Rather, inclusion means that the child with a disability or developmental delay is participating in the full school program alongside their peers and that their learning and development are receiving the same priority and high expectations as other children. For some children this may mean that their educators and carers require additional skills to be able to support their learning. For others it may mean that staff need more time and/or the support of experts to be able to attend to more complex behaviours and needs or specialist equipment to allow them to participate. Some children with disabilities may need no additional assistance at all, rather just the understanding and support of their educators and carers.

## Importance of inclusion

For children with disabilities, as for all children, their school years are critical to their development, learning and wellbeing. Like all children, children with disabilities learn from adults with whom they have strong, positive relationships, and from each other. Like all children, children with disabilities need time to explore, play alongside others and practise new skills until they achieve mastery. In early childhood settings we know that children with disabilities particularly benefit from the opportunity to develop skills in the company of their typically developing peers<sup>1</sup>. When this happens they are more likely to use these skills in all aspects of their lives and to develop friendships and connections within their broader community<sup>2 3</sup>.

## Integration Aides

There is an expectation by parents and teachers, established by the current funding model and reflecting the history of exclusion, that children with disabilities require an additional educator or integration aide to support their inclusion. However, such an approach isolates the child from his or her peers and from the fully qualified educator in the classroom and diminishes the possibility that the child will reach their optimum learning and development outcomes. While some children may need additional assistance to participate this should not have the effect of isolating them from their peers or the most qualified educator.

## Our Submission

Our concern with the framework for the Program for Students with Disabilities, and other funding programs in use in Victoria to support inclusion, including the Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) program, is that the focus of the funding is on the 'difference' (deficits) presented by the individual child, rather than the capacity of the school or kindergarten to include them.

This review has also been framed in this way. The review team are being asked to investigate:

- The needs of children with a disability, in particular, children with autism and dyslexia
- How to improve the way the program enables schools to support students with disabilities
- The needs of children with a disability in the transition from primary to secondary schooling
- How the program can support schools to be more inclusive.

The starting point is that a child with a disability has needs which are different to other children; that their special needs can be collectively defined and that specific funding is needed to respond to the special needs of individual children. This is a deficit focused program where the deficit is seen to rest with the child.

---

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services, US Department of Education, 2015 Policy Statement on the Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs, September 14, 2015  
<http://www.nieer.org/news-events/early-education-news/ed-hhs-release-policy-statement-inclusion-early-childhood-programs>

<sup>2</sup> Buysse, V and Hollingsworth, H.L. (2009) Research Synthesis points on Early Childhood Inclusion. DEC journal, Young Exceptional Children, Monograph series 11.

<sup>3</sup> Odom, S. L. (Ed.). (2002) Widening the circle: Including children with disabilities in preschool programs. New York: Teachers College Press.

However, rather than the focus of the funding being on the incapacity of the child; it would be preferable for the funding to be directed towards building the capacity of the teacher, the classroom, and/or the school to be able to include and educate the full range of children that are seeking their support.

With the current funding model, eligibility is based on individual students' disabilities. In effect schools are arguing that they need to make individual adjustments to include a child every time a new student with a disability arrives. However, such an approach is directly contradictory to the capacity building approach.

A capacity building approach would see the deficits as being with the teacher, classroom, school or kindergarten and their ability to include or educate the full range of children that are entitled to their support. The focus of any funding program would then be on the gaps in skills, capacity, knowledge or resources within the school or kindergarten with funding levels determined by the extent of those capacity building needs. An individual child's disability and its severity would be irrelevant or at least secondary in the consideration of funding. What would be important is the evidence that the school has a significant deficit in its ability to accommodate the learning and support needs of all of the children in their care. Such an approach would not only move away from the need to rely on parents to 'prove' their children are in need of funding but also drive schools to start to address the most common issues or gaps they experience in a systematic way – i.e. through adjustments to curricula, pedagogy, classroom design, in-service training etc.

Under this model, individual funding may still be required to support the inclusion of some children with unusual or very severe conditions or with major medical needs – however these funding needs are likely to fall in to the funding responsibility of the National Disability Insurance Agency.

## **For Further Information**

Noah's Ark is happy to meet with Dr Innes or the Department to further explore the ideas in this submission. Please contact John Forster, CEO, Noah's Ark Inc. Tel: 03 8823 8610 or email: [john.forster@noahsarkinc.org.au](mailto:john.forster@noahsarkinc.org.au)

*Submitted by:*  
*Noah's Ark Inc.*  
*1283 Malvern Road*  
*Malvern 3144*