



Tasmania

DEPARTMENT of
EDUCATION

3 March, 2000

Rewards and Challenges
**Report on the Review of the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities
in Regular Schools Policy.**

Rewards and Challenges is the report to the Minister following the Departmental review of policy and practice involving the inclusion of students with disabilities into regular schools, in Tasmania. *Rewards and Challenges* provides substantial analysis of the complex and sensitive issue of inclusion of students with disabilities in Tasmanian government schools.

The review was conducted between February and December 1999 and involved extensive consultation with parents, students, teachers and the broader community. The review was one of the most extensive ever undertaken by the Department of Education. It involved over 300 written submissions, focus group discussions in each district, visits to 50 schools, meetings with numerous community groups and four public forums.

The review was managed by a steering committee with the assistance of a comprehensive reference group representing key stakeholders. In addition, an external consultant, Professor Luanna Meyer, was employed to advise and assist with the review. Professor Meyer is Pro-Vice Chancellor of Massey University and formerly Professor of Education from Syracuse University, New York. She has specialised expertise in the field of developing inclusive education structures.

The report makes 43 draft recommendations that are now subject to comment and response before they are finalised.

Any member of the school and general community is invited to respond to the recommendations.

The closing date for responses is 20 April 2000.

RESPONSES MAY BE SENT TO:

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An electronic response form is also provided on the website at:
<http://www.doe.tased.edu.au/inclusionreview/>

Limited copies of this report are available from:

Office for Educational Review
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Level 2, 116 Bathurst Street
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Telephone: (03) 6233 7066

The report is available on the Departmental website at:
<http://www.doe.tased.edu.au/inclusionreview/>

I would like to thank all those who contributed to the report, in particular Mr Ralph Spaulding and Ms Rosemary Callingham from the Office for Educational Review, and invite responses to the recommendations



Dr. Martyn Forrest
Secretary

5 Recommendations

The following set of principal recommendations relate directly to the policy itself. Subsequent recommendations are presented under the headings provided by the Terms of Reference. A rationale is provided for each recommendation or group of recommendations.

5.1 Principal recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Department of Education affirms the principles of the policy for *The Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Regular Schools* (Inclusion Policy).

Recommendation 2

That the management and operation of the inclusion of students with disabilities, at both school and system level, is embedded in the broader concept of equity and not managed within the traditional frame of 'Special Education' and 'Special Schooling'.

Rationale

There was strong support for the principle of inclusion from all types of respondent in all parts of the State. The social justice and human rights arguments were well understood and accepted. This understanding should be recognised and acknowledged. The notion of inclusive education is a more encompassing idea than that of 'special' education, which comes from a separatist tradition. For further information see '4.6 Beliefs and understanding' on page 68 and '4.1.1 System performance' on page 28.

Recommendation 3

That the Department of Education updates the Inclusion Policy in the light of this review and the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Act, and that the updated policy is made widely available in a variety of formats, including Braille, large-print and on the Internet.

Rationale

Any implementation of the recommendations from this review will require some redrafting of the current policy to ensure that it is consistent with updated practice. Dissemination of the Inclusion Policy appeared to be limited, with many respondents knowing the title but only becoming familiar with the contents as a result of this review. A policy of such fundamental importance to people with disabilities, and those associated with them, deserves the widest possible audience. It should also be made available in a variety of formats, consistent with the Department's espousal of inclusive education. For further information see '4.5 Policy review' on page 66.

5.2 System and school performance**Recommendation 4**

That the Department of Education investigates means of collecting and using accurate data about the enrolments of students with significant disabilities and their educational outcomes. This information should be collected and recorded systematically over time.

Rationale

It was difficult to obtain accurate figures about the enrolment of students with significant disabilities over time and in different kinds of school. Unless accurate figures are consistently maintained, it is not possible to make definitive quantifiable statements about the numbers of such students in the system, or their educational outcomes. Information collected should provide details about matters such as reasons for placement on the Category A register, school enrolments (including changes of school), and the level of support required by the student. This information could then be used for planning, provision of targeted professional learning programs and policy development. For further information see 'Support for a range of student abilities and needs (Goal 2)' on page 30.

Recommendation 5

That the membership and functions of the central Special Education Committee are revised and expanded.

Rational

At present the Central Special Education Committee has a limited membership and meets only to consider funding arrangements. The *Disability Service Plan* clearly states

that parents of students with disabilities should be involved with decision-making, including funding decisions. Expanding the membership of this committee to include umbrella organisations for students with physical, sensory or intellectual disabilities is one way in which the outcomes of this plan could be met. In addition, this committee could provide central leadership and vision in matters such as professional development and identifying best practice. For further information see 'Students on the Category A register' on page 48.

Recommendation 6

That the Department of Education, in consultation with schools and districts, develops procedures to ensure consistency of provision for students with disabilities in all parts of the State and processes to monitor the implementation and performance of these consistent practices, and that the Department reports on these annually.

Rationale

There was considerable evidence that parents and teachers perceived that the differences in the ways in which provision was made for students with disabilities in different districts were inequitable and confusing. This was particularly so when a teacher or student transferred into another district. Although district support services should be locally responsive, there is a need to ensure that levels of provision are similar in each district, and that decisions about the support provided are made on consistent grounds. Monitoring and reporting on practice in a coherent and open manner will improve accountability at district and system level. For further information see 'Funding to District Support Services' on page 51 and 'Individual Education Plans' on page 43.

Recommendation 7

That the Department of Education works with service providers from other government agencies, and with the community and private sector, in order to develop protocols and standing arrangements for delivering a range of services to students with disabilities.

Rationale

Different providers are involved in service delivery to students with disabilities. Arrangements for service delivery are somewhat informal, and can create difficulties if there is some dispute about a service or its provision. Clear guidelines about the nature and extent of the different responsibilities are needed at chief executive officer level, in order to establish the principles of agreement. In addition, a series of working guidelines should be developed at implementation level to ensure equity of service provision.

Difficulties were reported when non-education professionals were involved in the provision of services to students with disabilities. Sometimes these difficulties were organisational, sometimes operational. This recommendation is intended to improve communications on a day-to-day basis through formal arrangements, rather than the less structured situations that exist currently. Non-government providers may need some form of independent management board or council to take responsibility for all budget and policy matters. This should include representatives of the Department of Education, teachers, parents, the umbrella organisation and the manager of each service. Where other government agencies are involved, liaison should be at the local implementation level, guided by a memorandum of understanding or heads of agency agreement. For further information see 'Material resources' on page 56 and 'Coordination of support' on page 32.

Recommendation 8

That the current *Disability Service Plan* is reviewed and updated, and that improved strategies for monitoring progress against the outcomes of this plan are developed. The outcomes of this monitoring process should be reported in the Department's Annual Report.

Rationale

The *Disability Service Plan* provides a useful framework for the continuing development of strategies to support the equity and inclusion policies. It needs to be updated in the light of the recommendations from this review and the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Act. In addition, with changes in organisational structures within the Department of Education, lines of responsibility for monitoring progress have become lost. Organisational arrangements are needed to ensure that monitoring is ongoing, regardless of changes to personnel and lines of communication.

The current plan includes the annual reporting requirement, but no clear statement about progress towards achievement of the outcomes could be found in published documents. For further information see 'Relationship with relevant legislation (Goal 4)' on page 35.

Recommendation 9

That the Department of Education develops a set of indicators of inclusive practice at system, district, school and classroom level in order to provide a consistent basis for ongoing monitoring of system performance. These indicators should be scaled and validated through empirical, independent research.

Rationale

No detailed performance indicators exist against which to measure progress towards the goals of either the Equity Policy or the Inclusion Policy at any level of the Department. At present, the only published indicator is the number of students enrolled in special schools. This is simplistic in that it does not provide information about the quality of provision in either special or regular schools, nor does it provide information about the performance of the districts or central office in relation to the goals. This indicator could be linked to other recommendations in this section. For more information see '4.1.1 System performance' on page 28 and '4.1.2 School performance' on page 36.

Recommendation 10

That the equity component of the Assisted School Self Review (ASSR) process is more clearly defined, and a framework for data collection and reporting at the school level is established.

Rationale

Schools are required to address issues relating to equity groups in their ASSR process. Information collected from schools' Partnership Agreements and Annual Reports indicates that not all schools address this area in depth. Few principals reported confidently about their equity outcomes from ASSR. The review of the ASSR process being undertaken during 2000 should provide the opportunity to reconsider the position of equity groups in school review processes. For further information see '4.1.6 School performance' on page 36 and 'Social outcomes' on page 44.

Recommendation 11

That special schools are reconceptualised as 'Centres for Inclusive Education' and become an integral part of District Support Services, in order to provide a specialist service that supports both the Equity Policy and the Inclusion Policy.

Recommendation 12

That the practice of formal dual enrolment ceases, and is replaced by flexible arrangements where regular schools take responsibility for the educational programs of students with disabilities.

Recommendation 13

That part of the role of the Centres for Inclusive Education is to provide full-time schooling for those students on the Category A register with very high support needs, if requested by parents.

Rationale

Staff in special schools have expertise that is not always recognised. This expertise should be further developed and acknowledged as valuable. It is possible to envisage such centres, for example, providing courses in Braille, Spalding Literacy, Behaviour Management, Management of Autistic Students in the Regular Classroom and so on. These could be for teachers or students, as appropriate.

There was strong support by parents and teachers for dual enrolment. Educationally, however, the reasons were less sound and there was some evidence that this practice was uncoordinated and poorly managed. While there could be benefits in having access to some specialist services that it is more efficient to cluster in one location, this needs to have clear educational intentions and to be managed and coordinated by the principal educational provider. Flexible arrangements within District Support Services should allow the needs of all students to be met.

A very small group of students, usually with multiple disabilities combined with serious health problems, may be better served in a setting where specialist therapy and medical provision is available. This is acknowledged and supported. Full-time schooling in such a setting may be for short periods of time, such as providing respite for the child and the regular school, or for extended periods. In general, long-term, full-time enrolment at such a centre should be restricted to those students who have extreme disabilities, and if the parents of these children so wish. For more information see 'Variety of provision' on page 33.

Recommendation 14

That clear and consistent processes for the enrolment and transition of students at different stages of schooling are developed and applied state-wide. These processes should be widely published and accessible to all interested parties, including parents and students.

Recommendation 15

That the Department of Education revises the *Grievance Procedure for the Resolution of Grievances on Placement for Students with Disabilities* and disseminates the revised

version to schools, parents of all students with disabilities and all other interested parties. The revision should allow for more balanced representation of parents, students and non-educational professionals at the grievance meeting.

Rationale

Parents had concerns about enrolment and transition and were uninformed about what to expect at each stage of schooling. Enrolment procedures did not appear to be well understood by parents or schools, and there was little evidence of the enrolment checklist being used.

Procedures to manage transition processes were not well documented and rarely published. Many schools reported no consistent practice when a student transferred from school to school. The success of transitions for students with disabilities appeared to hinge on the work of individuals, rather than being based on clear procedures.

The grievance procedure was not well known and rarely used. Publication of this process appears to have been left to the Australian Education Union, rather than being accepted as a responsibility of the Department of Education. It is a bureaucratic process and, as such, may intimidate some parents and teachers. The process could be made less formal and should also involve the students themselves, where appropriate. Processes such as those used by the Health Complaints Commissioner may provide appropriate models.

These revised procedures for enrolment and transition, and the resolution of grievances, should be part of any revision of the Inclusion Policy. For more information see 'Attendance at regular schools' on page 36 and '4.5 Policy review' on page 66.

5.3 Outcomes

Recommendation 16

That the Department of Education develops a standardised pro-forma for Individual Education Plans for students with disabilities, and mandates their use according to clearly articulated procedures. Increased emphasis should be given to addressing, monitoring and reporting the learning outcomes of students with disabilities. Student outcomes, as detailed in Individual Education Plans, should be reported annually at school and system level.

Recommendation 17

That existing curriculum documents and guidelines are used to develop appropriate learning outcomes for students with disabilities, and that these form the basis of learning outcomes in Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

Rationale

The use of IEPs varied across the State. Where they were most effective, they were developed using collaborative processes between parents, teachers, teacher aides, support staff and other service providers. The presence of effective and useful IEPs is essential for the ongoing monitoring of progress towards goals of students with disabilities.

At present there is little emphasis on the educational outcomes for these students. Some suitable learning outcomes have been developed, such as the 'Towards Level 1' outcomes in the national profiles, or the Early Number Framework from Count Me In Too. Where appropriate, these should be the basis on which to build IEP goals for learning. For further information see 'Individual Education Plans' on page 43 and 'Learning outcomes' on page 45.

Recommendation 18

That class placement with age peers is affirmed as the preferred option for students with disabilities, with emphasis on the identification of appropriate and equitable learning and social outcomes. Whole-school programs and practices should be identified that include students with disabilities in the full range of school activities and provide effective social outcomes for all students.

Rationale

There was some evidence that students with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, were not always promoted with their age peers. While schools had reasons for doing this, the practice led to difficulties later, particularly at puberty. If appropriate social and learning outcomes are identified, students can be successfully educated in the company of their age peers. Evidence gathered by the review supported this view. For further information see 'Social outcomes' on page 44 and 'Learning outcomes' on page 45.

Recommendation 19

That the longitudinal study of students with disabilities in regular schools is continued with a focus on the practices that lead to effective social and learning outcomes, and that an annual report of the progress of this study is published.

Rationale

Examples of 'best practice' in inclusive schooling are needed at a whole-school level, together with identification of those factors that lead to effective social and learning outcomes for all students, but particularly those with disabilities. Several different methods of identifying best practice could be used, including the current longitudinal study of selected students. An annual report of the findings from this study could provide some insights for schools into the most effective ways of managing students with disabilities in regular schools. For more information see '4.2.1 Access and participation' on page 40, 'Social outcomes' on page 44, and 'Learning outcomes' on page 45.

5.4 Resource management

Recommendation 20

That the education budget recognises and addresses the funding shortfall that has occurred in the last two years.

Rationale

Although it is recognised that demand is likely always to exceed the resource available, there is little doubt that the funding shortfall in the past two years has created increasing difficulties for schools and support services. Recognition of this shortfall and additional provision in the budget would go some way towards improving services for students with disabilities.

Recommendation 21

That the Department of Education establishes, publishes and distributes widely standard procedures and criteria against which to consider submissions for inclusion on the Category A register and to identify the support needs of students with disabilities.

Recommendation 22

That the practice of allocating resources to individual children is discontinued, and replaced by a school-based allocation, in recognition that schools are the most appropriate agents for deciding how resources are best used to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The present method of allocating resources in terms of nominal teacher aide hours should be discontinued, and replaced with additional funding in the School Resource Package (SRP).

Recommendation 23

That schools are expected to continue to contribute resources from the SRP to support specialist program provision for students with disabilities, in recognition of the fact that these students are important and valued members of the school community.

Rationale

Resourcing individual students led to situations, in some instances, where students with severe levels of disability were not regarded as 'included' because they did not attract funding. Not labelling students as 'included' is a desirable outcome, but the present practice of identifying individuals and allocating funds to some students has led to an 'exclusive' category of identified students included in regular schools. The Category A register provides a useful means for identifying levels of need of individual students, but the resource is more appropriately allocated to the school than to the individual student. These resources can be managed and allocated internally by the school according to its planned program of education delivery. The practice of a nominal allocation of teacher-aide hours has led to a situation where parents and teachers have an expectation that this is the only appropriate support. This denies other innovative approaches that schools may want to implement.

All students in schools are part of the school community. Some students require a greater level of support to participate fully in the life of the school. The needs of that small group of students requiring very high support are explicitly recognised through additional funding, and schools should have control over this. In this way, an individual student's needs can be met responsively and flexibly at the local level. Schools should also recognise the contribution that students with disabilities make to the school, by using SRP funding appropriately to support these students. For further information please see 'Overall funding allocation' on page 51, 'Support for a range of student abilities and needs (Goal 2)' on page 30, 'Students on the Category A register' on page 48, and '4.3.1 The mechanisms used to allocate special education funds' on page 47.

Recommendation 24

That the Department of Education replaces the annual funding submission for every student with a review of progress at appropriate intervals, acknowledging that the needs of each student may be different. Procedures for the identification of needs, appropriateness of funding arrangements and allocation of resources should involve collaborative decision-making processes that include parent and community representation of students with disabilities. This parent and community representation should be established at all levels of decision-making—system, district and school.

Rationale

The current process by which students are placed on the Category A register and then receive funding is not well understood by parents or teachers. The district moderation process for funding appears to be somewhat arbitrary and the central moderation process essentially ranks students according to the needs stated by the districts, rather than being tested against a set of outside standards or criteria.

The establishment and publication of criteria, both for placement on the Category A register and to determine support needs, would help to make the process more open and understood by parents and other stakeholders. One strategy identified in the *Disability Service Plan* is to include parents of students with disabilities and representatives of community groups in decision-making, including funding allocation. This involvement would also improve the transparency of the process, and ensure wider community understanding.

The frequency of having to make a submission for funding was very widely criticised. The process is time-consuming and many students with severe disabilities progress at a very slow rate, so that little growth may be seen annually. Replacing the annual review with a major review at appropriate intervals, or when there is a change in circumstances warranting a review, would allow a reappraisal of each student's needs as the school context changed. In addition, certainty of funding to the school from year to year would allow longer-term planning, and more flexibility of resource use, than is currently the case. For more information see 'Students on the Category A register' on page 48.

Recommendation 25

That the Department of Education investigates ways in which improved support can be provided to students who are classified with intellectual and learning disabilities, including dyslexia, and autism and psychiatric disabilities.

Rationale

The incidence of severe intellectual disability and autism appears to be increasing. Comments were also received about students who appeared to be severely disturbed, but who had no diagnosis of disability, or additional support. There is a lack of juvenile psychiatric facilities in the State for diagnosis and treatment. Learning disabilities, including dyslexia, are expressly recognised by the Disability Discrimination Act. However, there is little explicit support for students with these kinds of difficulties, and schools reported that these disabilities were the most difficult to manage in the classroom.

Many of these disabilities lead to disruptive behaviour that cannot be adequately addressed by the usual kinds of behaviour management strategies. Improved diagnosis and specialist support could help to reduce some incidences of disruptive behaviour and improve outcomes for students with these kinds of disability. For further information see page 'Support for a range of student abilities and needs (Goal 2)' on page 30.

Recommendation 26

That the provision of services for early special education, vision and hearing impairment continues to be coordinated by a State Support Service.

Recommendation 27

That the Department of Education increases support for students with autism within the government school system and provides this support more pro-actively.

Recommendation 28

That the role of all coordinators within the State Support Service is clarified, and that they work increasingly with District Support Services to provide planned professional development at all levels of the Department.

Rationale

The State Support Service was widely regarded as effective by parents and teachers. The clustering of students with specialised needs also appeared to be cost effective. However, in some instances, notably with autism, the coordinator was only able to work in a district if the local support service chose to use this facility. Since the people occupying these positions have specialised knowledge and expertise, it is a wasted resource not to allow this knowledge to be used pro-actively, to build capacity for inclusive education in

the system. State Support Coordinators should be working with professional development providers such as the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Principals Institute, in order to further understanding of these low-incidence disabilities, and their impact on students' educational outcomes. For more information see 'Students who are hearing or vision impaired' on page 49, 'Early special education' on page 50 and 'Support for a range of student abilities and needs (Goal 2)' on page 30.

Recommendation 29

That the role of District Support Services is refined and clarified, with a focus on providing specialist support, such as psychological testing and advice, speech pathology and social work, and that support teachers in District Support Services have clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the provision of specialised support for students with high needs, including behaviour management and specialised curriculum development.

Recommendation 30

That a special position description is developed for support teachers, focusing on their role in the provision of specialised classroom support to students with high needs. This position description should expect high levels of experience and expertise in specialised areas of curriculum provision and classroom management. These positions should be filled on a contract or secondment basis.

Recommendation 31

That the Department of Education investigates flexible employment conditions for all support staff, including support teachers, using appropriate consultative methods with all stakeholders.

Rationale

District Support Services are intended to be a source of specialist support to schools and teachers. In general, schools understood and appreciated the work of guidance officers, social workers and speech pathologists. However, schools reported that it was sometimes difficult to obtain timely support, or that frequent changes of personnel meant that provision was inconsistent. This was particularly the case with speech pathologists.

The role of support teachers, in contrast, was almost invisible in some districts, and classroom teachers sometimes criticised the kind of advice given. All support services described being very busy and unable to service all needs. Some improved efficiencies

could be achieved by more flexible employment conditions including using some school holidays for support staff meetings, planning and professional development. This time could also be used to provide parent support, as speech pathologists already do for example.

This change of conditions would ensure that there is constant refreshment of support staff, and a flow of expertise back into schools as support teachers move back into the school setting following completion of contracts. For more information see 'Funding to District Support Services' on page 51, 'Coordination of support' on page 32 and 'Time management' on page 59.

Recommendation 32

That schools recognise the conditions of employment of teacher aides, as laid down in the position description.

Recommendation 33

That schools do not allow teacher aides to undertake learning programs with students in a student's home.

Rationale

Teacher aides were widely regarded as a valuable resource. However, often these aides were confused about their responsibilities to the teacher and their line management. These matters are clearly defined in the teacher-aide position description and, where necessary, principals should ensure that these conditions are adhered to. In particular, clear lines of responsibility are needed between teacher aides and teachers. Teachers should direct program planning, classroom teaching, assessment and reporting, using the expertise of teacher aides where appropriate. In addition, allowing teacher aides to undertake their regular work in students' homes is placing them in an untenable position.

Time for planning with the classroom teacher would improve program delivery and outcomes for the student concerned. This was frequently commented upon throughout the review. For more information see '4.3.3 School management of resources' on page 60.

Recommendation 34

That schools provide effective leadership for teachers who are teaching students with disabilities by appointing coordinators to provide practical support. Such support could

include release time for teachers to attend case conferences, reduced playground duty load or some reduction in class size, as well as organisational support such as timetabling of teacher aides and liaising with District Support Services.

Rationale

In schools where students with disabilities were successfully working in regular classrooms, these strategies were commonplace. Senior staff would take the class while the teacher, and often the teacher aide as well, attended case conferences, for example. These schools also supported relief teachers by always ensuring full aide coverage for the period of time that the relief teacher was in the school. Appointing a coordinator who took a 'hands-on' leadership role, rather than a purely organisational role, provided tangible, and appreciated, leadership. For further information see 'Human resources' on page 53.

Recommendation 35

That the Department of Education collects data on workers' compensation and stress leave arising from the implementation of the Inclusion Policy for at least two years.

Rationale

Although there was considerable rhetoric about teacher stress as a result of inclusion, it was difficult to find hard evidence because the reasons for stress leave are generally kept confidential. There did appear to be some evidence of claims for back or other injuries. Unless consistent data are collected and maintained, the real effect of this policy on teachers and teacher aides will remain unknown. For more information see 'Material resources' on page 56.

5.5 Professional learning and development

Recommendation 36

That the Department of Education liaises with the University of Tasmania to develop a compulsory unit of work for pre-service teachers about teaching students with disabilities in regular classrooms.

Recommendation 37

That the Department of Education liaises with the University of Tasmania to ensure that all pre-service teachers have the opportunity to work with a student with a disability or high support needs in a regular classroom during their course, and that this is appropriately assessed and credited.

Rationale

As students with disabilities increasingly move into regular schools, all teachers are likely to teach such a student at some stage in their career. Even if teachers never have such a student in their classroom, they will have responsibility for students with disabilities in less formal situations such as when on playground duty, at sports carnivals or special events. There is value in all teachers having at least some experience of this nature during their training. This should be recognised by both the Department of Education and the University of Tasmania. Compulsory courses of this nature are often a requirement interstate. For further information see 'Pre-service' on page 62.

Recommendation 38

That the Department of Education develops a program of accredited professional learning for teachers.

Rationale

There is a shortage of teachers in Tasmania having expertise about the education of students with disabilities, and in particular having specialist knowledge about specific disabilities such as vision impairment. Since these disabilities are of low incidence there are few opportunities to develop expertise.

There are a number of institutions providing appropriate courses through open learning and this may be one strategy worth investigating further. Where appropriate, study leave or travel could be negotiated under particular conditions. For more information see 'General professional development' on page 64 and 'University based in-service' on page 63.

Recommendation 39

That all Individual Professional Learning Plans (IPLPs), as coordinated by principals, contain elements that develop the recognition of students' diverse learning needs, and the capacity for successful management of these.

Rationale

If equity issues are to be addressed adequately in schools, an essential element is the development of teachers' skills to recognise and understand diversity. For further information see 'Individual professional learning plans' on page 64.

Recommendation 40

That the Department of Education sets up a system of mentors or advocates for teachers and teacher aides of students with disabilities, and provides opportunities for regular networking. In addition, in each education district, support staff should work with parents of students with disabilities in an advocacy role.

Rationale

Many teachers and teacher aides of students with disabilities reported feeling isolated and uncertain about how well they were managing. A frequent comment was that they felt under-valued for the work they were doing. The provision of professional networks and mentoring would help to foster a culture of progress and improvement, and facilitate sharing of good practice.

The involvement of parents in a child's education is a recognised factor in successful educational outcomes. Some parents reported that they found dealing with the school very stressful and some of this stress was caused by a lack of knowledge about the education system and its workings. Provision of parent advocates in each district would help to bridge that gap, and ultimately improve educational outcomes for the students concerned. Advocacy expertise already exists in social workers and guidance officers, and should be developed in other support staff where needed. For more information see 'Human resources' on page 53.

Recommendation 41

That the Department of Education provides useful and easily accessible teaching materials for teachers and teacher aides of students with disabilities. This material should include both basic information about specific disabilities and practical, workable suggestions for use in the classroom. Classroom material should be linked explicitly to current curriculum guidelines, and cover all learning areas. Parents and organisations having expertise in particular disabilities should be consulted in the preparation of these resources. Materials should be available in a variety of forms, including the Internet.

Rationale

Teachers were not using existing materials. Many teachers did not realise that materials were available. The materials themselves are often in the form of case studies and descriptions of practice that may not be easily transferable to a different context or learning area. For example, teachers reported needing explicit guidelines for teaching a visual subject such as mathematics to children with vision impairment, or involving students with physical disabilities in practical subjects such as technology or art. Parents and organisations have practical expertise that can be utilised to make the resources relevant, current and useful. For further information see '4.4.3 Support materials' on page 66.

Recommendation 42

That the Department of Education works with the Tasmanian Principals Institute and the Department's Professional Learning Services Branch to develop professional learning programs that address the leadership qualities required to enable a school to build capacity for inclusive practice. These programs should include both theory and practice of inclusive education in all its forms. Parents and organisations having expertise in particular disabilities should be consulted in the preparation of these programs.

Rationale

The attitude and orientation of the principal and senior staff are crucial to the success of any program of inclusive education. In some schools, equity issues did not appear to be well understood by senior staff, and good practice seemed to come about fortuitously rather than in a planned and systematic way.

Any program of teacher development is likely to have limited success unless programs addressing leadership issues in equity accompany it. Existing structures and organisations would seem the most appropriate way of providing this. The use of practical expertise from parents and organisations would ensure that information presented was relevant, current and practical. For more information see 'Tasmanian Principals Institute' on page 63.

Recommendation 43

That the Department of Education develops an accredited, competency-based system of teacher aide training. Courses developed should build on the content of existing courses, but should be reworked to include a set of competency-based standards for assessment purposes. These courses should be provided at no cost to all new teacher aides.

Rationale

Teacher aide training was inconsistent and of uneven quality. Many respondents commented about its importance, given the role of teacher aides in supporting students with disabilities. In addition, there are health and safety issues, such as back care, which are also addressed inconsistently. The use of an existing national framework for the provision of accreditation would ensure quality control and transferable qualifications for this group of people. For further information see '4.4.2 Teacher aide training' on page 65.