

## Programs for Students with Special Learning Needs





VICTORIA

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Victorian  
Auditor-General

# Programs for Students with Special Learning Needs

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The Hon. Bruce Atkinson MLC  
President  
Legislative Council  
Parliament House  
Melbourne

The Hon. Ken Smith MP  
Speaker  
Legislative Assembly  
Parliament House  
Melbourne

Dear Presiding Officers

Under the provisions of section 16AB of the *Audit Act 1994*, I transmit my report on the audit *Programs for Students with Special Learning Needs*.

Yours faithfully



D D R PEARSON  
*Auditor-General*

29 August 2012



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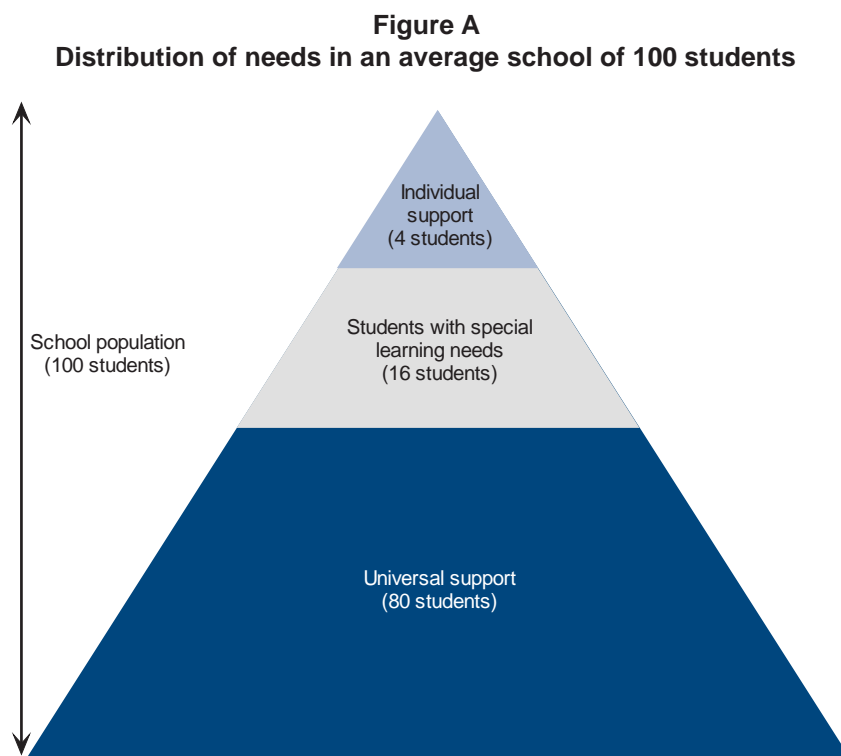


# Audit summary

Students with special learning needs have disabilities, difficulties or additional needs that make it harder for them to learn than their peers. Although the exact number of students with special learning needs in Victoria is not known, it is commonly accepted that about 20 out of every 100 students have additional needs of some sort. These needs vary significantly.

Four out of every 100 students have a specific identified need and receive individual support through the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD). However, the majority of students with special learning needs (16 out of every 100) have less significant needs that can be met by some form of adjustment or modification, targeted intervention or support.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) expects schools to support these students from within their school budget. Figure A shows an approximate breakdown of students in government schools.



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

Having systems in place to identify and support these students in a timely and equitable manner is critical to maximising their educational and life outcomes. This can be complex and challenging, requiring well defined strategies, strong leadership and effective governance.

Measuring outcomes for students with special learning needs is also difficult. Traditional methods such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards are of limited use for many of these students, and long-term individual measures of performance are required.

Schools are under growing pressure from increasing numbers of students with special learning needs. DEECD provides an outsourced assessment service for Intellectual Disability and Severe Language Disorder applications at no cost to schools. Despite this, schools are undertaking more assessments and preparing more funding applications than ever before. This has limited the direct support that Student Support Services Officers (SSSOs) can provide to students. It has also required teachers, integration aides and education support workers to manage an increasing numbers of students with complex needs.

DEECD's role is two-fold:

- to develop and deliver policy, guidance and support that enables schools to support students with special learning needs
- to monitor and oversee the performance of schools and determine whether the educational outcomes of students with special learning needs are being maximised.

The objective of the audit was to assess whether DEECD has effectively fulfilled these roles.

## Conclusions

DEECD has developed policies and guidance to help schools support students with special learning needs. It also provides funding to support students with the highest levels of need through the PSD. However, it does not monitor how schools use the funds nor does it adequately oversee the educational outcomes of students with special learning needs. Schools are not implementing DEECD's policies consistently or effectively. As a result, the quality and type of support provided to students with special learning needs is not equitable.

Since 2006, DEECD has distributed more than \$2.6 billion to schools through the PSD. However, DEECD does not have the information it needs to determine whether PSD funding is being used efficiently and effectively. Concerns raised about this by VAGO in 2007 still have not been adequately addressed and instead of having five years worth of high-quality data about the program, the department still knows very little about its impact on the educational outcomes of supported students.

DEECD has developed a comprehensive suite of tools to assist schools to identify students with special learning needs. It has also established clear guidelines and eligibility requirements for accessing additional funding through the PSD. As a result, students with the highest needs are being identified and supported through specifically funded programs.

More broadly, DEECD does not know how many students in Victoria have unfunded special learning needs. It cannot identify these students, nor can it determine if they are being adequately supported by schools. While DEECD is implementing new strategies that will better allow it to track students with special learning needs and monitor their performance, it is too early to judge their effectiveness.

## Findings

### Identifying students with special learning needs

DEECD has provided schools with the tools, assessments and staff that collectively should enable them to identify students with special learning needs. Despite this, students with similar needs are receiving very different levels and types of support across different schools.

DEECD's new Abilities Based Learning and Education Support program will help to bring more uniformity to the approaches of schools by enabling teachers to identify students' needs and develop effective learning programs that address these needs. Abilities Based Learning and Education Support has been used with over 6 500 students to date, but it is unclear how DEECD will assess the program and how wide reaching its impact will be.

Changes to the management of SSSOs should provide schools with more flexibility to use them to address local demand. However, there is a risk that schools that are not well organised or are less influential may not have equitable access to SSSOs.

### Support for students receiving additional funding

PSD funding is provided to schools to support students with recognised disabilities. In 2011, DEECD allocated \$533 million to schools to support 20 883 eligible students through the PSD. Total PSD funding has increased from \$359 million in 2006–07 and the number of students accessing PSD support has almost doubled since 2000.

The PSD application process requires schools to dedicate and coordinate considerable resources to address the PSD funding criteria. In 2011, 92 per cent of applications for PSD funding were successful. However, success rates vary considerably between categories of disabilities suggesting that DEECD could do more to clarify and/or simplify the eligibility criteria around some of the more complex conditions such as severe language disorders and autism spectrum disorders.

In 2010, 1 592 Year 6 students had their PSD funding reviewed. Of these, 15 per cent had their funding withdrawn, 31 per cent had their funding downgraded and a further 11 per cent had their funding level increased. Funding levels were maintained for the rest of the group. Analysis of these patterns suggests that schools are making better use of the higher levels of funding provided to students with more severe needs.

While schools can use PSD funding as they see fit, DEECD requires them to provide two specific types of support:

- **establish a Student Support Group (SSG)**—responsible for identifying the student's needs, planning their educational program and reviewing the student's progress
- **develop an Individual Learning Plan (ILP)**—used to identify and record the needs of students, their desired educational outcomes and strategies to support them.

While the intent and purpose of having SSGs is sound, not all audited schools used them in a manner that maximised their value. Similarly, few of the ILPs reviewed clearly detailed student needs or their educational goals and strategies. DEECD does not monitor the practices of SSGs or the quality of ILPs, even though these practices are potentially compromising the quality of support provided to PSD students.

## Support for students that are not eligible for additional funding

While the 92 per cent success rate for applications suggests that schools understand the process for applying for funding well, the resource intensive application process and limited availability of SSSOs are discouraging schools from applying on behalf of borderline students.

This was a great source of frustration to parents interviewed who had no other way to have their child assessed for additional funding short of enrolling them in a different school. Although none had been explicitly refused access to a school, many of the interviewed parents reported that they had been discouraged from enrolling in particular schools because the principal did not believe the child would be eligible for PSD funding.

DEECD does not monitor the support provided to students who have been refused PSD funding, nor does it monitor their long-term educational outcomes. It also does not know how many students with special learning needs are being supported in schools or how effective the support is.

DEECD has provided policies and guidelines to cover most areas of supporting students with special learning needs. However, these are not always specific enough to meet teachers' needs and are not being consistently implemented. Further, there is only a limited uptake in the small but growing number of teacher training opportunities to support students with special learning needs. DEECD has limited records of who or how many staff have undertaken training. Neither aides nor education support workers receive specific training to support students with special learning needs.

As a consequence, the quality of support can vary considerably from school to school. This is causing unnecessary confusion and stress among parents.

DEECD has taken steps to begin addressing skills issues in classrooms, by revising the delivery model for SSSOs, issuing new guidelines on specific issues and providing additional professional development opportunities around autism spectrum disorders, learning difficulties, dyslexia, speech and language disorders, and hearing impairments.

## Accountability and oversight

DEECD does not identify and monitor the achievement of educational and broader outcomes of students with special learning needs and therefore does not know how effectively its policy and resource commitment is working.

DEECD has not adequately addressed VAGO's 2007 audit report *Program for Students with Disabilities* which recommended that it establish performance indicators to monitor and evaluate the program's outcomes.

Complaints information should be able to be used to identify areas of concern. However, DEECD's complaints system is inadequate for this purpose.

## Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Page
	The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should:	
1.	develop processes to monitor and report on the learning and progress of students with special learning needs, including both funded and non-funded students	20
2.	monitor the effectiveness and impact of programs to support students with special learning needs including which schools are using them	20
3.	provide clearer guidance and training for teachers on how to get the most from Student Support Groups and how to develop and implement meaningful and effective Individual Learning Plans.	31

## Recommendations – *continued*

Number	Recommendation	Page
	The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should:	
4.	seek feedback from schools about the clarity and usefulness of critical policy and guidance material and act to address identified deficiencies. In particular it should focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• restraint and seclusion practices</li> <li>• parents paying for external support delivered in school</li> <li>• the circumstances in which full time access to school can be restricted</li> </ul>	31
5.	set and implement measurable performance indicators for the Program for Students with Disabilities.	31

## Submissions and comments received

In addition to progressive engagement during the course of the audit, in accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994* a copy of this report was provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with a request for submissions or comments.

Agency views have been considered in reaching our audit conclusions and are represented to the extent relevant and warranted in preparing this report. Their full section 16(3) submissions and comments are included in Appendix A.

# 1 Background

## 1.1 Introduction

---

Education prepares children and young people to participate fully in society as adults. Participation in school life gives them the opportunity to build their academic qualifications and to develop their social skills and awareness of boundaries and social rules.

Students with special learning needs are a particularly vulnerable group. They are at greater risk of disengaging from school as a result of their individual learning needs not being met. Identifying and supporting these children in a timely and equitable manner is critical to maximising their educational outcomes and therefore quality of life. Monitoring and reporting is needed to make sure that student outcomes are being identified and achieved.

### 1.1.1 Students with special learning needs

The term 'students with special learning needs' is a broad term that includes students with a range of disabilities, difficulties and additional needs that impact on their ability to learn. It includes students with moderate to severe disabilities who are eligible for individual funding from the state, and students that do not receive additional targeted support.

Although the exact number of these students is not known, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) estimates that about 1 in 5 students have some form of special learning need as a result of a range of circumstances including:

- minor reading and language difficulties
- mental health and wellbeing needs
- issues arising from homelessness
- substance abuse
- family breakdown or depression
- sensory disabilities
- physical impairments
- cognitive impairments.

DEECD advised that in England, where this data is collected and published by the Department of Education, 20 per cent (or 1.61 million out of 8.2 million) students were identified as having a special learning need in 2011.

There are about 859 000 students in Victorian schools. Applying this accepted ratio to Victoria means that there are likely to be about 171 000 students with special learning needs (according to enrolment breakdowns, some 108 000 in government schools and 63 000 in non-government schools). The needs of most of these students can be met by schools without major intervention. However, a lack of consistent identification processes in different jurisdictions makes determining an accurate population difficult.

The scope of this audit is much smaller than this broad cohort. This audit did not look at supports provided specifically to Koorie students, culturally and linguistically diverse students and students from low socio-economic and remote areas of the state.

DEECD estimates that this smaller group of students, that are the subject of this audit, represents between 6–10 per cent of the student population—between 50 000 and 85 000 students across all Victorian schools and between 32 000 and 54 000 in government schools.

### 1.1.2 Students with disabilities

In 2010, 29 704 students (3.5 per cent of Victoria's school student population) were identified as receiving support through targeted disability programs. The majority (68 per cent) of students with disabilities were educated in government schools. Figure 1A shows the distribution of students with disabilities across the Victorian school system.

**Figure 1A**  
**Students with a recorded disability attending Victorian schools, 2010**

	Government	Non-government	Total
Students (number)	540 914	312 207	853 121
Students with a disability (number)	20 269	9 435	29 704
Percentage of all students	3.7	3.0	3.5

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office based on information from *Australia's welfare 2011*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

In 2010, DEECD allocated \$501 million to schools to directly support 20 269 students (3.7 per cent of government school students) through the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD). In 2011, these figures rose to \$533 million to support 20 883 eligible students. Total PSD funding has increased significantly over the past five years, rising from \$359 million in 2006–07.



### 1.1.3 Supporting students with special learning needs

DEECD takes a tiered approach to supporting students with special learning needs. As explained previously, DEECD estimates that:

- eighty out of every 100 students require no specialised support to participate fully in mainstream schooling
- of the remaining 20 students, 16 will require some form of adjustment, modification, targeted intervention or support. Schools receive a provision within their annual school budget to accommodate this support which is commonly provided by teachers within the classroom, through specific early identification and intervention programs and through DEECD's Student Support Services program
- the remaining four students are those with disabilities and moderate to severe needs who require individual planning, provision and assistance. The needs of these students are supported via additional funding provided through the PSD.

The Student Support Services program cost \$66 million in 2011 and provided 627 full time equivalent Student Support Services Officers (SSSO). This equates to about one SSSO for every two schools. SSSOs include psychologists, guidance officers, speech pathologists, youth workers and social workers.

Schools receive PSD funding on the basis of the assessed needs of individual students. However, schools can use that funding as they see fit, including using the money to support other unfunded students with disabilities.

In order to access funding through the PSD, students must meet eligibility criteria in one of seven categories:

- intellectual disability (13 393 students or 64.1 per cent)
- autism spectrum disorder (4 396 or 21 per cent)
- severe behaviour disorder (1 141 or 5.5 per cent)
- physical disability (976 or 4.7 per cent)
- hearing impairment (608 or 2.9 per cent)
- severe language disorder with critical educational needs (263 or 1.3 per cent)
- visual impairment (107 or 0.5 per cent).

Once a student is deemed eligible for PSD funding their specific needs are assessed. Funding is allocated on the basis of this assessed level of need regardless of the category under which they applied. There are six levels of support based on the needs assessment.

In 2011, mainstream and specialist schools were allocated 99 per cent of the \$533 million PSD funding as described in Figure 1B. The remaining 1 per cent was used to administer the program.

**Figure 1B**  
**Program for Students with Disabilities funding levels in 2011**

		Funding per student (\$)	Total funding allocated 2011–12 (\$ million)	Expenditure (per cent)
<b>Funding to schools</b>				
<i>Student funding provided to regular and specialist schools:</i>	<i>Level 1</i>	5 894	14.2	3
	<i>Level 2</i>	13 632	120.8	23
	<i>Level 3</i>	21 519	126.8	24
	<i>Level 4</i>	29 368	60.3	11
	<i>Level 5</i>	37 158	32.7	6
	<i>Level 6</i>	44 991	22.5	4
<b>PSD Level 1–6 Total</b>			<b>377.2</b>	<b>71</b>
Funding for students attending specialist schools			53.3	10
Autism specific schools and deaf facilities			48.1	9
Language Support Program, Early Education and Medical Intervention Support			39.6	7
Complexity funding, size adjustment and school transport administration			9.7	2
<b>Total funding to schools</b>			<b>528.0</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Administrative costs</b>				
Statewide assessment services for schools			4.7	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>532.7</b>	<b>100</b>

*Note:* Totals may vary due to rounding.

*Source:* Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of Department of Education and Early Childhood Development data.

## 1.2 Policy and legislation

### 1.2.1 United Nations Convention and the National Disability Strategy

In July 2008, Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The purpose of the convention is to safeguard the human rights of all people with a disability, and to promote respect for their dignity. The principals of the convention are embedded in the National Disability Strategy endorsed by Council of Australian Governments in February 2011.

The National Disability Strategy sets out a ten-year national plan for improving life for Australians with a disability, their families and carers. There are six priority areas for action including improvement in learning and skills. This action area seeks to:

- make sure the educational outcomes of people with a disability match those of people without a disability
- allow people with a disability to have every opportunity to reach their full potential.

## 1.2.2 Legislation

The *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* sets the overarching legislative framework for education and training in Victoria. A key principle of the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* is that all Victorians should have access to a high-quality education. This includes students with special learning needs.

The *Victorian Disability Act 2006* recognises that people with a disability have the same rights as other members of the community including the right to an education.

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* protects people with a disability from harassment and being subject to discrimination in admission and access to education.

## 1.2.3 Disability Standards for Education

In 2005 the *Disability Standards for Education* came into effect. These standards link to the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. The standards set out the rights of students with a disability in the area of education. They also set out the obligations that schools must meet in order to support students with a disability. The standards cover enrolment, participation, curriculum development, student support services, harassment and victimisation.

The standards outline the requirement for schools to make reasonable adjustments to enable students with a disability to participate in education on the same basis as students without a disability, unless it would impose an unjustifiable hardship to do so.

The word 'disability' has been defined widely by legislation to include all students with a disability/impairment, regardless of whether they are eligible under PSD guidelines. As such, the law requires schools to make reasonable adjustments for a very broad group of students.

## 1.3 Roles and responsibilities

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### 1.3.1 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

DEECD manages, coordinates, implements and oversees government school education across Victoria. It is the key agency responsible for the delivery of educational outcomes in Victoria. It funds a range of programs and interventions designed to meet the individual learning needs of all students in government schools, including mainstream and specialist schools.

### 1.3.2 Schools

The delivery of educational services has been reformed over the past decade. Central to these reforms has been the increased autonomy of schools and principals. DEECD expects schools to respond to the needs of their local communities and deliver tailored solutions that cater for the range of students in their community.

Each school is responsible for deciding how to support students, including those with special learning needs. The principal determines which programs and interventions are suitable for their school.

Teachers, with the guidance of the Student Support Group, are responsible for modifying the curriculum to assist students with special learning needs. Student Support Groups are responsible for coordinating the PSD application process as well as deciding how to use PSD funding.

## 1.4 Audit objectives and scope

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The objective of the audit was to assess whether DEECD has effectively supported students with special learning needs and maximised their educational outcomes. The audit examined whether:

- students with special learning needs were able to access support
- PSD effectively supported students with special learning needs
- appropriate assistance was provided to students with special learning needs who did not receive PSD funding
- support for students with special learning needs has been monitored and improved.

The audit examined the appropriateness of DEECD funded support for students with special learning needs who attend government primary, secondary and specialist schools. The audit also examined the effectiveness of school-based support for students with special learning needs who are not eligible for the funded support through the PSD.

The audit did not examine issues associated with transport, issues solely attributable to cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds or disadvantaged backgrounds, issues attributable to early childhood development services, or students with special learning needs attending post-compulsory education.

The audit included:

- three DEECD regional offices
- principals and teachers from three autism specialist schools, one dual mode specialist school and one further specialist school
- principals, teachers and aides from six primary schools and three secondary schools
- focus group discussions including 26 parents of children with special needs.

It also assessed 103 Individual Learning Plans including 38 from five specialist schools and 65 from nine mainstream schools. Eleven of the plans from mainstream schools related to non-PSD funded students.

## 1.5 Audit cost

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The audit was completed in accordance with section 15 of the *Audit Act 1994* and the Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards. The cost of the audit was \$325 000.

## 1.6 Structure of the report

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This rest of this report is structured as follows:

- Part 2 examines how schools identify student needs and access additional support
  - Part 3 examines how schools support students.
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## 2 Identifying student needs and accessing support

### At a glance

#### Background

In order to effectively support students with special learning needs, schools have to be able to quickly and accurately identify their needs and provide any additional support that is required.

#### Conclusion

The number of students with special learning needs who qualify for additional funding is increasing. This is placing pressure on already constrained resources to conduct assessments, prepare applications and provide ongoing support. While the process for identifying students with special learning needs and applying for support through the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) is well understood by schools, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) does not monitor the performance of students with special learning needs and does not know how effectively the PSD and other supports are assisting students.

#### Findings

- There is still considerable variation in how schools identify and prioritise these students.
- Over 90 per cent of applications for PSD funding are successful. However, 'fringe' students who narrowly miss the criteria still have substantial needs that schools have to address with existing resources.
- DEECD does not know how many students with special learning needs are being supported in schools or how effective that support is.

#### Recommendations

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should:

- develop processes to monitor and report on the learning and progress of students with special learning needs, including both funded and non-funded students
- monitor the effectiveness and impact of programs to support students with special learning needs including which schools are using them.

## 2.1 Introduction

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Different teaching and curriculum approaches are necessary to help students with special learning needs to get the most from their time at school. However, to enable this to occur it is first necessary to identify these students and their specific needs.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has developed a range of guidance documents and curriculum modifications to help schools to identify and manage the different learning needs of students.

This part reviews how students with special learning needs are identified, the ease with which they can enrol in school, the process for applying for funding, and how unsuccessful applicants are supported. It also analyses the adequacy of outcome monitoring of students with special learning needs.

## 2.2 Conclusion

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Schools are being placed under pressure from notably increasing numbers of students with special learning needs. This means that they have to undertake more assessments and prepare more funding applications than ever before. This is stretching the Student Support Services Program and placing additional pressure on teaching staff.

DEECD provides schools with a comprehensive suite of tools to identify students with special learning needs and it has established clear guidelines and eligibility requirements for accessing additional funding through the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD).

Students with the highest needs are, therefore, generally being identified and supported with extra funding. However, DEECD does not know how many students in Victoria have unfunded special learning needs. It cannot identify these students or determine whether they are being adequately supported by schools.

DEECD has started to implement new strategies that will allow it to better track students with special learning needs and monitor their performance. However, it is too early to judge their effectiveness.

Developing a comprehensive understanding of the type, severity and prevalence of special learning needs in Victorian schools would allow DEECD to better target resources and more effectively support students with special learning needs.



## 2.3 Identifying students with special learning needs

### 2.3.1 Resources to assess and identify needs

Pre-school assessments are now identifying more students with special learning needs at earlier stages. This means that more students are arriving at school with defined needs and with support strategies already in place. Schools now also have more tools to help them to identify students with special learning needs and to fully understand their needs.

While more students are receiving PSD funding than ever before, this is also placing additional pressure on specialist resources such as Student Support Services Officers (SSSO) to complete the required testing and assessments. In a resource-constrained environment, schools are more likely to focus their efforts on students with the highest needs, potentially at the expense of students with less severe needs.

#### *Assessment standards and learning supports*

For students whose needs have not been identified before starting primary school, there are a number of mechanisms to help schools to identify their potential learning difficulties. However, as many students with special learning needs function at a level below national and state standards for their peer group, monitoring their progress requires a tool that is better suited to their particular developmental level.

For example, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) assesses student's literacy and numeracy skills against their peers in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. NAPLAN assessments include a minimum standard for each year. However, many students with special learning needs will not meet the NAPLAN minimum standards.

To address this gap, DEECD has developed a new tool, the Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES). ABLES helps teachers to develop effective learning programs for students who are working towards Level 1 of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards. These standards outline the critical skills students need to achieve from Prep to Year 10.

ABLES is currently being rolled out to schools and it has the potential to equip teachers with the resources they need to assess and engage students performing below these levels. ABLES has been used with over 6 573 students to date, but DEECD has decided to not make its use mandatory. DEECD has not indicated how it will measure the reach or impact of ABLES. It is therefore unclear how wide reaching its impact will be.

## Student Support Services Officers

SSSOs are school-focused professionals such as speech pathologists and psychologists who assist schools to identify student needs, prepare applications for PSD support and support students in schools.

DEECD estimates approximately one in five students will need to access the Student Support Services program at some stage of their schooling. In 2011, there were 627 full time equivalent SSSOs and 540 000 students in Victorian government schools. This equates to one SSSO per 172 students who are estimated to need access to the program.

DEECD provides an outsourced assessment service for Intellectual Disability and Severe Language Disorder applications at no cost to schools. Despite this, audited schools advised that their SSSOs are mainly used to complete PSD assessments and prepare PSD applications for students. Consequently, they have a limited ability to provide the type of ongoing identification and support services that schools would like.

In July 2012, DEECD moved the management of SSSOs from regional offices to school networks. This is intended to provide networks with the flexibility to determine and respond to specific local demand for services. The networks will be able to pool and share resources and will have greater autonomy to set budgets and priorities for more responsive service delivery.

However, there is a risk that schools who are not well organised or who are less influential may not have equitable access to SSSOs.

## 2.4 Accessing additional support through the Program for Students with Disabilities

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The number of students accessing PSD support has almost doubled since 2000. The increases, however, are not spread evenly across the seven PSD categories. From 2000 to 2011 the number of students eligible for intellectual disability support rose by 58 per cent.

Since 2000 the number of students qualifying for autism spectrum disorder support rose tenfold—from 325 to 4 396. Figure 2A shows that from 2008 to 2011 severe behaviour disorder grew by 38.5 per cent whereas physical disability decreased 9.7 per cent over the same period. Increases in the hearing and visual impairment categories were modest.

**Figure 2A**  
**Numbers of students funded by the Program for Students with Disabilities**  
**by funding category, 2008–11**

Disability category	2008	2009	2010	2011	Per cent of 2011 total	Per cent increase since 2008
Autism spectrum disorder	3 028	3 604	4 103	4 396	21.0	45.2
Hearing impairment	600	603	601	608	2.9	1.3
Intellectual disability	12 003	12 583	13 066	13 393	64.1	11.6
Physical disability	1 081	1 072	1 049	976	4.7	–9.7
Severe behaviour disorder	824	891	1 070	1 141	5.5	38.5
Severe language disorder	234	262	284	263	1.3	12.4
Visual impairment	101	101	97	107	0.5	5.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>17 871</b>	<b>19 116</b>	<b>20 270</b>	<b>20 883</b>	<b>100</b>	

*Note:* Totals may vary due to rounding.

*Source:* Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

The significant increases of students in the autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, and severe behaviour disorder categories have placed considerable pressure on teachers to have the skills and capacity to competently manage their needs, and on schools to provide an appropriate learning environment and tailored Individual Learning Plans.

Obtaining the professional assessments needed to access additional funding can be costly and time consuming. Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder remarked on the time taken—in some cases assessments were not completed in time for the application deadline. DEECD only allows applications to be reconsidered on an exceptional basis such as when students move to a new school. Delays can therefore result in students and their teachers remaining unsupported for an additional year.

Some free assessments are provided—intellectual, speech and autism spectrum disorder assessments are provided by a psychologist; speech and language assessments by a speech pathologist; and vision assessments by an ophthalmologist. Exceptions include assessments for physical disability or autism spectrum disorder conducted by an audiologist or paediatrician. Many parents interviewed as part of the audit stated they had incurred significant out of pocket expenses (ranging from \$600 to \$1 000) during the application process. It is unclear if this was due to poor advice from schools or concern that SSSOs could not complete assessments before the application deadline. This can place undue financial strain on families, particularly for those with more than one child with special learning needs.

School principals reported that they generally adopt a conservative approach to applying for support—only applying for students they consider to have a high probability of meeting the funding criteria. While the 92 per cent success rate for applications suggests schools understand the process well, the resource intensive application process and limited availability of SSSOs is discouraging schools from applying on behalf of borderline students.

SSSOs possess a broad range of skills to support students with special learning needs. They are commonly used to manage the PSD application process but also perform a critical support role in schools. Principals should use them strategically to identify the needs of borderline students, not just in the hope of obtaining funding but to inform better teaching practices and interventions.

This was a great source of frustration to interviewed parents who had no other way to have their child assessed for additional funding short of enrolling them in a different school. DEECD advised that PSD accepts students with slightly higher IQ than the normal cut-off for intellectual disability. As such, more students are funded under this category than are traditionally recognised as having an intellectual disability.

### 2.4.1 The Program for Students with Disabilities application process

DEECD has established clear guidelines on how to access funding, including clear instructions on what tests are required and the process that needs to be followed. These are set out in Figure 2B.

**Figure 2B**  
**The Program for Students with Disabilities application process**

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8
<b>Student enrolls</b> Printed information about school program and PSD provided to parents	<b>Student Support Group (SSG) established</b> Existing documentation examined	<b>Further assessment occurs if necessary</b> (Lewis and Lewis undertakes eligibility assessment for ID and SLD categories)	<b>SSG meets to check eligibility criteria</b> SSG completes Educational Needs Questionnaire (ENQ) Documentation supporting eligibility and ENQ indicators collated	<b>Application submitted online and in hard copy</b>	<b>Resources Coordination Group ensures eligibility criteria met</b> Level of funding determined School receives notification	<b>SSG meets to make recommendations to the Principal on the resources required to implement the educational plan for student</b> Funding begins at start of new school year	<b>Student Review occurs at Year 6–7 transition</b>
SSG meets regularly to develop and oversee educational plan for student							

Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Once a student has been assessed as eligible for PSD their specific needs are assessed. Funding is allocated based on the level of need rather than the category of application.

PSD funding levels are determined by the level of need identified in the Educational Needs Questionnaire which is completed by the Student Support Group (SSG). This process should include parents, but few of the interviewed parents indicated they had participated in their child's Educational Needs Questionnaire.

Applications are also required to include goals and strategies to address the student's additional educational needs.

## Funding categories

Students who have more than one disorder can only apply for PSD funding under a single category. While unsuccessful students can later apply under a second category, few elect to do so. DEECD does not know why this happens, but the high success rates of students that reapply under a different category suggest that it should be more common.

It is up to the SSG to determine the most appropriate category to apply under. DEECD has Regional Disabilities Coordinators in place to support schools making PSD applications. Their main role is to help schools to provide the right documentation, but they are also encouraged to assist in determining the correct category of application where possible. For example, in the autism spectrum disorder category, 15 per cent of students (574) applying were denied support in 2010. Of these 574 students, 26 subsequently applied for funding under the severe behaviour disorder category and 21 were granted funding under this second category. While this represents a positive outcome for these students, the process of being refused funding and having to reapply is stressful and time consuming. It is unclear how the remaining 548 students were supported in their schools and the reasons why they did not reapply under a different category.

The guidelines for the severe behaviour disorder category require that the behaviour cannot be accounted for by another category of disability (such as autism spectrum disorder). This appears to discourage applications from students with multiple disorders, yet the previous example shows that it is possible to get funding for severe behaviour disorder while displaying autism spectrum disorder behaviours.

Principals from audited schools also observed that they have difficulty meeting the needs of students on the 'fringe' of having a recognised intellectual disability and believed the PSD process should be more flexible to enable funding support for these students. As no data is collected on how many students do not get funding because they do not meet the intellectual disability criteria, it is difficult to quantify the additional load this represents for schools.

## 2.4.2 Eligibility for the Program for Students with Disabilities

The PSD application process requires that schools dedicate and coordinate considerable resources to address the PSD funding criteria. In 2011, 92 per cent of applications for PSD funding were successful.

There was a great degree of variability between individual categories. For example, applications under the intellectual disability category had a success rate of 93 per cent, however, autism spectrum disorder—the second most common category of applications—had a success rate of only 78 per cent. Severe language disorder was the most frequently rejected category, with almost half of all applications in this category being unsuccessful.

Figure 2C shows the number of applications considered eligible or ineligible following submission to DEECD in 2010.

**Figure 2C**  
**New Program for Students with Disabilities applications, 2010**

Outcome	Data	Disability category							Total
		ID	ASD	SBD	PD	HI	SLD	VI	
Eligible	Number	1 946	650	300	160	94	42	16	3 208
	Percentage	93	78	86	78	98	53	94	87
Ineligible	Number	155	180	49	46	2	37	1	470
	Percentage	7	22	14	22	2	47	6	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>2 101</b>	<b>830</b>	<b>349</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>3 678</b>
	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	

*Note:* Table definitions: Intellectual Disability (ID), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Severe Behaviour Disorder (SBD), Physical Disability (PD), Hearing Impairment (HI), Severe Language Disorder with critical educational needs (SLD), Visual Impairment (VI).

Totals may vary due to rounding.

*Source:* Victorian Auditor-General's Office based on data from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

These varying success rates suggest that DEECD could do more to clarify and/or simplify the eligibility criteria around some of the more complex conditions such as severe language disorders and autism spectrum disorders.

## 2.4.3 Reviews of funding and support

When students receiving PSD funding transition from primary to secondary school, DEECD requires schools to conduct a 'Year 6–7 review' to determine the student's ongoing funding needs. Firstly an assessment is made of the eligibility of the student for continued access to funding, and then of their ongoing level of need, on which funding is based.

In 2010, 1 592 Year 6 students had their PSD funding reviewed. Of these, 15 per cent had their funding withdrawn. While this loss of funding could pose challenges to these students at a time of great stress as they move from primary to secondary school, this is a positive result that suggests that the PSD funding has made an effective contribution to those students. Teachers at audited specialist schools suggested that this resulted in some students being pushed out of the specialist school system and into mainstream schooling regardless of their readiness for this move.

For those who remained eligible for funding, the 'Year 6–7 review' often resulted in a decrease in funding, as was the case for 31 per cent of students in 2010. Both secondary school principals and parents indicated that this placed additional pressure on students at a critical and challenging stage of their schooling.

Figure 2D shows the changes in funding following the 'Year 6–7 reviews' in 2010. Most noticeably, 41 per cent of students at Level 1 had their funding increased. Students at this level are more than four times more likely to have their funding increased than other levels, suggesting that their level of need has risen and the original funding was insufficient. Meanwhile more than half of the Level 3 (55 per cent) and Level 4 (69 per cent) students had their funding cut. It appears that schools had a greater impact when they could access increased funding levels available to students with higher needs, better enabling these students to cope within the school environment over time.

**Figure 2D**  
**Funding changes following the 2010 'Year 6–7 review'**

Pre review level of funding	Funding increased (per cent)	No change (per cent)	Funding decreased (per cent)	No longer eligible (per cent)
Level 1	41	39	–	20
Level 2	10	62	13	16
Level 3	2	29	55	14
Level 4	5	21	69	6
<b>Overall</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>15</b>

*Note:* Funding levels are determined based on how much support a student is assessed as needing, not their category of funding.

There are six levels of funding (see Figure 1B). In 2010, 'Year 6–7 reviews' were conducted for 1 592 students receiving Level 1 to Level 4 support.

Totals may vary due to rounding.

*Source:* Victorian Auditor-General's Office based on data from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.



## 2.5 Identifying and supporting students who do not receive additional targeted funding

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### 2.5.1 Equitable access to schools

Although none had been explicitly refused access to a school, many of the interviewed parents reported that they had been discouraged from enrolling in particular schools because the principal did not believe the child would be eligible for PSD funding.

The audit found no further evidence of this practice. However, principals from audited schools with high numbers of students with special learning needs and strong reputations for supporting these students stated that parents were seeking them out. They advised that this was disproportionately increasing their load of students with special learning needs. If significant numbers of these students do not qualify for additional funding, it places considerable strain on school resources and risks a negative impact on the student population at those schools.

Some of the interviewed parents also reported that they moved schools a number of times, trying to find a school that they believed appropriately supported their child's needs. They reported that this involved going from school to school to find a principal who was willing to take on their child. They had the impression, correct or not, that schools wanted to limit the number of special needs students they enrol, particularly unfunded students.

While it is not clear to what extent this practice exists within schools, legislation does not permit schools to pick and choose which students they will accept. While DEECD has made this clear to schools through policy and guidance, it was unable to provide assurance that this practice was not happening.

### 2.5.2 Understanding the prevalence of students with special learning needs

DEECD does not know how many students with special learning needs are being supported in schools or how effective that support is. DEECD also has no way to identify the needs of students who schools do not submit for PSD funding.

In 2011, almost 300 PSD applications were assessed as not meeting the relevant PSD criteria and the applications were rejected. DEECD does not record which criteria were not met and does not identify or track unsuccessful students.

It is not clear how schools support those students who were either unsuccessful in receiving PSD funding or for whom no application was undertaken. Some schools identify these students as 'fringe kids' or 'students with additional needs' and manage their support in a similar manner to PSD students. However, many audited schools did not actively identify or monitor the progress of these students.



School principals also noted that student assessment outcomes are not routinely passed on to new teachers or schools. This can result in an important student resource being lost. One school incorrectly noted that they believed that privacy issues prevented them from sharing assessments between teachers.

DEECD needs to define a 'students with special needs' cohort so that it can regularly and systemically measure and report on their learning and progress. The chosen cohort should include both PSD funded students and students with high levels of need who do not receive PSD funding. In defining the appropriate cohort, DEECD should consider including:

- all students who have an SSG and/or an ILP
- groups, such as children with autism spectrum disorder, where numbers are increasing rapidly or where there are a large number of unfunded students.

### Students who are ineligible for Program for Students with Disabilities funding

An analysis of unsuccessful applications by category in 2010 indicated that almost half the applications under the severe language disorder category were ineligible. Both the autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability categories recorded over 150 ineligible applications (22 and 7 per cent of total applications respectively). This may be due to the criteria being poorly understood or it may demonstrate the rigidity of the criteria. It also gives an indication of the incidence of 'fringe' students—such as those who have an IQ on the borderline of eligibility.

Given the potentially uneven distribution of students with special learning needs across schools, and the heavy additional load that supporting these students can present, it is imperative that DEECD understand fully where these students are located, how they are being supported, and where additional funding or support may be required.

### Monitoring outcomes, measuring impacts

The use of PSD funding for individual students is at the discretion of the school administration. DEECD does not ask schools to account for how funds are utilised.

Ideally the SSG should jointly determine how funds are spent and DEECD states that schools can consider using PSD funding for:

- specialist staff (e.g. special needs coordinators, occupational therapists, speech pathologists)
- teacher professional development
- specialist equipment or materials
- education support staff.

Individual school approaches to curriculum and budget priorities greatly affect the support provided to students with learning difficulties. However, DEECD does not provide detailed advice to schools on the most appropriate strategies to address a specific learning need, instead preferring that schools use local support to do this.

Schools have the flexibility to use funding according to the particular challenges of the school environment—such as the skills and knowledge of teaching staff. DEECD lacks the means to determine if this is a good use of resources and whether it has improved student performance or capabilities. It also cannot identify how funding has contributed to the broader demands of ‘fringe kids’.

Audited schools which appeared to be providing the most effective support to their students with special learning needs had individual profiles for these students that were available to all of their teachers. These profiles, included simple strategies for support, were updated regularly, and formed part of the planning process from year to year. A coordinator was appointed to manage the collection and updating of information.

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## Recommendations

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should:

1. develop processes to monitor and report on the learning and progress of students with special learning needs, including both funded and non-funded students
  2. monitor the effectiveness and impact of programs to support students with special learning needs including which schools are using them.
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# 3 Supporting students in schools

## At a glance

### Background

Supporting students with special learning needs is complex and requires a mix of teacher skills, definitive policies and clear guidelines. While schools are responsible for identifying and supporting students, they require sound guidance and leadership from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to be able to support students most effectively.

### Conclusion

DEECD has established evidence-based policies and guidelines to enable schools to support students with special learning needs. However, many teachers receive little training to support students with special learning needs and schools and regions are not consistently and effectively administering DEECD's guidelines.

### Findings

- Schools are not implementing effective Student Support Groups (SSGs) or developing consistent, high-quality Individual Learning Plans (ILPs).
- Many teachers, integration aides and education support workers receive limited or no training to support and manage students with special learning needs.
- DEECD policy and guidance documents assist schools to support students with special learning needs, however, gaps remain in critical areas such as restraint, seclusion and parents paying for additional support for their child.
- DEECD does not identify and monitor the progress of individual students with special learning needs so is not informed of their educational outcomes.

### Recommendations

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should:

- provide clearer guidance and training for teachers on how to get the most from SSGs and how to develop and implement meaningful and effective ILPs
- seek feedback from schools about the clarity and usefulness of critical policy and guidance material and act to address identified deficiencies
- set and implement measurable performance indicators for the Program for Students with Disabilities.

## 3.1 Introduction

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The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provides regions and schools with policy and guidance documents to assist their work with students with special needs. Assessment standards and tests are set so that schools and DEECD can identify weaknesses and trends.

This part reviews the breadth of teaching skills and aide support available to students with special needs and considers how schools interpret and implement policy.

The mechanisms to document and monitor student progress in schools are also examined along with an analysis of the systems available to identify students with special learning needs.

## 3.2 Conclusion

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The quality and type of support provided to students with special learning needs varies between schools. The experiences of students depend highly on:

- the commitment by the school leadership team to support students with special learning needs
- how schools interpret DEECD's policy and guidance
- the skills of the teachers and classroom assistants.

Teachers, integration aides and education support workers receive little training to support students with special learning needs. The lack of professional development in this area increases the importance of having clear and well understood policies and guidelines. DEECD has not delivered clear or well understood policy and guidance.

As a result, different schools—and often different staff within the same school—are using very different approaches to support students with similar needs. Key strategies to support students and monitor their progress such as Individual Learning Plans (ILP) are being poorly implemented and parents are becoming confused and frustrated with a system that lacks transparency.

DEECD is not adequately fulfilling its oversight responsibilities. It cannot track the progress of students with special learning needs and cannot provide assurance that its schools are supporting them efficiently and effectively. It is missing critical data about students with special learning needs and does not know what impact its funding, programs and strategies are having.

### 3.3 Teacher and aide skills and experience

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Teacher knowledge and understanding significantly affect whether appropriate support is provided to students with special learning needs. Teachers and aides have to address a wide range of learning needs and complex behavioural issues for which they receive limited training.

#### 3.3.1 Teacher skills and training

Neither DEECD nor any other agency collects statewide data on teacher training for students with special learning needs. One of DEECD's regional offices has attempted to address this information gap and its data shows that only half of the teachers in the region had received any training in this area and only 3 per cent had a graduate diploma in special education.

DEECD acknowledges that many schools and teachers do not feel equipped with the knowledge and skills to make sure that students with autism spectrum disorder are supported and integrated in mainstream settings.

A small but growing number of teachers are participating in DEECD training on teaching students with autism spectrum disorder and promoting autism spectrum disorder friendly environments in schools. Programs available through the Commonwealth-supported *More Support for Students with Disabilities National Partnership* include online training about:

- autism spectrum disorder
- dyslexia
- speech and language disorders
- hearing impairments
- autism inclusion support programs and coordinators.

These initiatives will begin to address the growing demand for skills in special learning, but should be further promoted to teachers in regional areas to ensure students in more remote areas can also benefit.

Audited specialist schools had more teachers who had undertaken specialist training than audited mainstream schools. However, approaches to professional learning varied in quality and effectiveness even between specialist schools. For example, one specialist school had developed structured procedures so that teachers could access up-to-date information on supporting and managing students with special learning needs and keep their skills up-to-date.

Another of the audited specialist schools relied only on internal professional development and historical knowledge to educate its teachers. This approach increases the risk that teachers are not up to date with the latest evidence-based practice for supporting students.

### 3.3.2 Aide skills and experience

The sole qualification for an integration aide or education support worker is a working with children check. Most principals reported that they selected aides based firstly on 'personality fit' and then experience.

A senate inquiry into the education of students with disabilities in December 2002 concluded that most teacher aides have no specialist training in teaching for disabilities and a great many lack even basic training.

The report recommended that, within a reasonable period, all teacher aides should be qualified in special education from an accredited teacher aide training course. A decade on, the issue of unqualified aides remains unresolved. This is compounded by broad role definitions, which in some cases result in aides taking on teaching responsibilities for students with special learning needs.

## 3.4 Policy, guidance and support from DEECD

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DEECD requires schools to develop their own student engagement policies that recognise the difficulties and challenges faced by students with special learning needs.

However, policy and guidance material in some key areas, such as restraint, seclusion and parents paying for additional in-school support is either missing or inadequate. As a consequence, DEECD's regional offices and schools are interpreting these issues in different and often contradictory ways.

### 3.4.1 Policy effectiveness

DEECD does not have sufficiently detailed, clear and well understood policies and guidance to assist teachers to support students with special learning needs. Gaps remain in critical areas such as restraint, seclusion and parents paying for specialist support for their child, and important practices such as SSGs and ILPs are not implemented consistently.

Policy and guidelines around funding applications and accessing student support services are transparent and well understood, as are curriculum and assessment frameworks such as Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), Abilities Based Learning and Education Support and the e5 Instructional Model.

However, policy or guidance in some critical areas is underdeveloped and being interpreted in very different ways in schools with very serious potential outcomes for students with special learning needs.

Figure 3A compares a selection of policies and guidelines for managing and supporting students with special learning needs.

**Figure 3A**  
**Effectiveness of selected policies and guidance to support students with special learning needs**

Area of policy/guidance	Comprehensive	Well understood by schools and regions	Consistently implemented by schools and regions
Applying for Program for Students with Disabilities funding	✓	✓	✓
Accessing student support services	✓	✓	✓
Establishing student support groups and outlining members roles and responsibilities	✓	✗	✗
Developing and using Individual Learning Plans	✓	✗	✗
Full time enrolment requirements	✓	✗	✗
Complaints	✓	✗	✗
Restraint and seclusion practices	✗	✗	✗
Parent payment for additional support	✗	✗	✗

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

### Student Support Groups

While the intent and purpose of having SSGs is sound, parents advised that meetings did not occur unless they initiated them, were often not documented, and student outcomes were often not identified. Parental awareness of SSG processes was generally poor.

Effective planning for students with special learning needs should involve parents, teachers, Student Support Services Officers and students (as appropriate). Planning should identify the strengths and weaknesses of the student, the support mechanisms needed to assist the student, who is responsible for providing the support, and how progress is to be measured.

DEECD recommends that schools establish an SSG for any student with additional learning needs and requires it for students receiving Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) funding. SSGs are responsible for identifying the student's needs, planning their educational program and reviewing the student's progress.

While SSGs had been established for PSD funded students in audited schools there was no evidence to suggest SSGs were routinely carried out for students with special learning needs who did not receive PSD funding. To help schools get the most from SSGs, DEECD needs to set clearer expectations around their role in planning for and monitoring student outcomes and engaging parents.

## Individual Learning Plans

The educational outcomes of students with special learning needs are potentially being compromised by inconsistent, poor quality ILPs.

ILPs are one of the most important tools at a school's disposal to identify and record the needs of their students, their desired educational outcomes and the strategies to support them. DEECD requires an ILP for all students receiving PSD funding and for all students with autism spectrum disorder.

The purpose of an ILP is to set educational goals and describe a set of strategies to address the particular educational needs of the child. However, the quality of assessed ILPs was poor and most did not set appropriate, measurable goals. DEECD does not monitor the quality of ILPs and therefore cannot provide feedback to schools on the quality of student ILPs.

From the 103 mainstream and specialist school ILPs analysed, 93 per cent of the plans had information relating to academic performance and 77 per cent recognised interpersonal development as an area that needed attention, however, only:

- 23 per cent clearly established the needs of the students
- 22 per cent clearly defined the educational goals and strategies for the student.

In almost three-quarters of the ILPs examined, the process for determining the success of a goal and how this was to be evaluated was not clear. This was particularly prevalent for interpersonal and personal goals.

Figure 3B shows that in many instances, the ILPs are of limited value for new teachers because the ILPs do not clearly outline the strategies to be implemented and how their effectiveness will be monitored.



**Figure 3B**  
**Usefulness of an Individual Learning Plan**  
**as a tool to understand student needs**

Does the ILP clearly explain:		Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Who the student is	100	–
2	What their educational challenges are	72	28
3	What it is aiming to achieve	68	32
4	What the strategies are	44	56
5	How to know if the strategies are working	24	76
6	Who to speak to if the strategies aren't working	9	91
7	The process for reviewing and amending the ILP	78	22

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

The lack of clear strategies and measures for their success, along with a failure to identify the relevant support person for advice and guidance, severely limit the usefulness of the ILPs. More comprehensive training on how to prepare and implement ILPs would increase the value of this important process.

### Restraint and seclusion practices

Audited schools used a variety of practices to restrain and seclude students, including indoors and outdoors 'time out' areas, but rarely had documented policies for their use. DEECD developed and released clear guidance around the use of restraint in May 2012 but has not developed guidance for schools on appropriate seclusion practices.

Restraint is any method or device used to restrict freedom of movement, such as physically holding a student. Seclusion refers to restricting the voluntary movement of a student, such as using a 'time out' area. The *Education and Training Reform Regulations 2007* allow staff to take any reasonable action that is immediately required to restrain a student from behaviour that is dangerous to the member of staff, the student or any other person.

Schools and regional offices were keen that specific guidance be provided on restraint and seclusion so that they understood very clearly what constituted acceptable and unacceptable practice. DEECD's new guidance provides further clarity but may not be specific enough to meet the needs of schools and regions.

There is still no policy on appropriate seclusion practices.

One region had attempted to address the perceived policy gap by employing a visiting teaching officer to advise schools on safe restraint methods and seclusion practices. This practice was not adopted in any other region visited.

### Parent payment for additional support

There was confusion among interviewed parents of students with special learning needs about whether they could or should pay for external professionals to support their child in class.

DEECD's website states that 'schools all have policies that ensure students are not treated differently, denied access to the 'standard curriculum program', or refused instruction on the basis of payments not being made for essential education items, optional extras or voluntary financial contributions'. When questioned, DEECD advised that the practice of parents paying an external professional to support a child in class would contravene this policy.

Audited regional offices provided clear and consistent advice that parents must not pay for aides. However, their approach towards private therapists was less consistent. Interviewed parents also advised that they had paid for the allied health assessments required to complete PSD applications, and also to meet ongoing needs such as speech therapy and aide support during school hours. Others were told that this was not permitted even if the parent was willing to pay.

The lack of consistency and clarity is a significant source of frustration to parents and is potentially having a severe impact on the quality of education being provided to parents unable to pay for these additional supports.

### Lack of access to full time schooling

Part time enrolments are not permitted in Victorian schools, yet parents report that their students are being denied access to full time schooling.

The *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* requires parents of children aged between six and 17 to enrol the child at a registered school and to make sure the child attends the school at all times when the school is open for the child's instruction. In order to achieve this, parents must be provided with an appropriate full time schooling option for their child.

Parents of students with special learning needs reported that their children were being denied access to full time schooling despite wanting them to be in school full time. They reported that schools reduced attendance hours to match the hours of available aide support and that, on occasion, they agreed to a reduced school day in order for their child to receive aide support during lunchtime.

Mainstream schools and regional offices reported that they encourage part time attendance for some students through what they term 'flexible learning'. In these cases, students were not given any alternative educational provision for the time they were not present at school.

Some parents also reported that their child's school consistently required them to collect the child from school early because staff were unable to manage their behaviour. Sixteen per cent of 'special needs' or 'PSD related' complaints recorded on DEECD's complaints management system identified these practices.

DEECD should further investigate these complaints so that students are not being denied their legal rights to a full time education and determine whether these schools are adequately equipped to support these students and manage their impact on other students.

## Complaints

In lieu of comprehensive and reliable performance information, complaints information should be able to identify areas of parental concern. However, DEECD's complaints system is inadequate for this purpose.

Under DEECD's complaints procedures, if parent's complaints are not addressed by the school, they can be escalated to the regional office and then to the central office. DEECD has developed a computer-based complaints management system to record complaints made to central and regional offices.

While the complaints management system has been rolled out and well communicated to regions, it is not well used. Very few complaints are recorded on the system and when they are, the data is poorly classified, making it difficult to use with any confidence. Reporting functions are not developed and data is difficult to extract and analyse. This makes it unsuitable to use for continuous improvement.

One of the smallest regions recorded that a third of the complaints in their complaints management system were coded as special needs or student welfare. There is no reason to expect that this region has a higher incidence of issues with special needs student compared with other regions. It is more likely that the region is utilising the complaints management system effectively.

It is also highly improbable that only 15 complaints about PSD and special needs have been received by three of the largest metropolitan regions in Victoria, which collectively provide education to over half the student population in Victoria. The data suggests these regions do not record all of their complaints in this system.

Interviewed parents were generally reluctant to make complaints, expressing concern about repercussion from the schools. Most parents were not aware of DEECD's complaints policy.

### 3.5 DEECD's oversight role and school accountability

DEECD is not well informed about the educational outcomes of students with special learning needs because it cannot identify and monitor student progress. DEECD does not monitor the outcomes of students with special learning needs, primarily because it lacks the ability to individually identify these students.

In lieu of having individual identifiers it relies on school performance reports and generic testing such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and VELS. These measures indicate when a student is having difficulty in a particular area which can prompt intervention from DEECD. However, the usefulness of this information in this context is restricted by the fact that many students with special learning needs cannot be assessed against VELS. Most students receiving PSD funding are either exempted from NAPLAN tests or their parents elect to withdraw them.

Figure 3C shows the number of students in each year group withdrawn or exempted from sitting the NAPLAN tests in 2011. It includes those with a low level of English and students newly arrived from overseas. DEECD has advised that in future data will be available on specific numbers of students exempted based on significant intellectual disability and/or conditions limiting their capacity to participate.

**Figure 3C**  
**Students exempt from sitting the National Assessment Program –**  
**Literacy and Numeracy tests in Victorian government schools**

NAPLAN year level	Number of students	Number of exempt students	Percentage of exempt students
3	222 755	7 945	3.6
5	220 085	7 937	3.6
7	186 530	5885	3.2
9	199 240	6 221	3.1

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from Department of Education and Early Childhood Development data.

The Victorian Student Number (VSN) and Victorian Student Registry were established in 2009 by amendments to the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*. The VSN provides a unique identifier for each student in Victoria. While they are not currently fully integrated into the required systems, over time the VSN combined with better identification of students with special learning needs should allow DEECD to monitor all student outcomes more effectively.

## DEECD's response to VAGO's audit report *Program for Students with Disabilities*

DEECD has not adequately addressed the recommendations in the 2007 audit report *Program for Students with Disabilities* which included that it establish performance indicators to monitor and evaluate the program's outcomes.

The report found that DEECD had yet to identify performance indicators to progressively monitor and evaluate program outcomes on the effectiveness of PSD. The report recommended that performance indicators be established. However, over the past five years, DEECD has not established appropriate performance indicators to monitor outcomes for PSD that are measurable and auditable.

DEECD presented the audit team with 10 performance measures that were intended to address this recommendation. Of these, three are not yet being used. A further five rely on schools reporting the progress of their students against the goals outlined in ILPs. However, the lack of consistency in the preparation of ILPs makes it unlikely that they will provide reliable or useful information on the progress of students.

Measureable performance indicators should be developed and implemented as a matter of priority.

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## Recommendations

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should:

3. provide clearer guidance and training for teachers on how to get the most from Student Support Groups and how to develop and implement meaningful and effective Individual Learning Plans
  4. seek feedback from schools about the clarity and usefulness of critical policy and guidance material and act to address identified deficiencies. In particular it should focus on:
    - restraint and seclusion practices
    - parents paying for external support delivered in school
    - the circumstances in which full time access to school can be restricted
  5. set and implement measurable performance indicators for the Program for Students with Disabilities.
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## Appendix A.

# *Audit Act 1994* section 16— submissions and comments

### Introduction

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In accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994* a copy of this report was provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with a request for submissions or comments.

The submission and comments provided are not subject to audit nor the evidentiary standards required to reach an audit conclusion. Responsibility for the accuracy, fairness and balance of those comments rests solely with the agency head.

**RESPONSE provided by the Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development**



**Department of Education and  
Early Childhood Development**

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SEC BRI 122073

Mr. Des Pearson  
Auditor-General  
Victorian Auditor-General's Office  
Level 24/35 Collins Street  
MELBOURNE VIC 3000



Dear Mr. Pearson

**Re: AUDIT ACT 1994 Section 16(3) – PROPOSED AUDIT REPORT –  
PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment, under section 16(3) of the Audit Act 1994, on the Proposed Draft Audit Report on *Programs for Students with Special Learning Needs*. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has reviewed the report and a response is enclosed. I request that this response is published in full.

The Department accepts the recommendations in the report and will implement them within the context of available resources, Government policies and the devolved environment in which government schools operate.

Should you wish to discuss the content of this response further, please do not hesitate to contact Mr. James Kelly, Executive Director, Audit and Risk on (03) 9637 3158.

Yours sincerely

**Richard Bolt**  
Secretary

18/8/2012

Enc: The Department of Education and Early Childhood's response to recommendations contained in the report.



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**RESPONSE provided by the Secretary, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – continued**

**VAGO Audit  
Programs for Students with Special Learning Needs 2012**

The Department welcomes the opportunity to comment on the audit report and accepts the recommendations. The Department's specific management response for each recommendation is outlined below.

Number	Recommendations
	The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should:
1	develop processes to monitor and report on the learning and progress of students with special learning needs, including both funded and non-funded students,  DEECD Response: Accept
2	monitor the effectiveness and impact of programs to support students with special learning needs including which schools are using them,  DEECD Response: Accept
3	provide clearer guidance and training for teachers on how to get the most from Student Support Groups and how to develop and implement meaningful and effective Individual Learning Plans,  DEECD Response: Accept
4	seek feedback from schools about the clarity and usefulness of critical policy and guidance material and act to address identified deficiencies. In particular it should focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• restraint and seclusion practices</li> <li>• parents paying for external support delivered in school</li> <li>• the circumstances in which full time access to school can be restricted,</li> </ul> DEECD Response: Accept
5	set and implement measurable performance indicators for the Program for Students with Disabilities.  DEECD Response: Accept  Comment: The current performance indicators will be reviewed and necessary actions will be taken to improve them.



# Auditor-General's reports

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## Reports tabled during 2012–13

Report title	Date tabled
Carer Support Programs (2012–13:1)	August 2012
Investment Attraction (2012–13:2)	August 2012
Fare Evasion on Public Transport (2012–13:3)	August 2012

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