

Hearing Student Voices Project Report

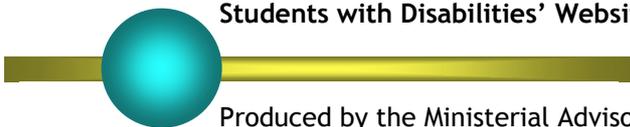
Students
with
disabilities
in
South
Australia

November
2003



Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities

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Students with Disabilities' Website at www.macswd.sa.gov.au



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Foreword

For several years, the Ministerial Advisory Committee has sought to ensure the participation of students with disabilities as members of the Standing Committee and various project groups. In 2003, for the first time, the Committee undertook a project that directly sought the views of these students on a range of issues regarding their educational experience in South Australian schools. This project was undertaken in the recognition that, firstly, students with disabilities deserve to be heard and should be respected for their ideas and perspectives and, secondly, rather than standing and speaking for students, we need to stand with students speaking for themselves.

The students were asked about their experiences at school, their aspirations for the future, and how to better facilitate the contribution of young people in the development of education policy and decision-making in this State. The project investigated existing opportunities for youth inclusion, both in a general sense and within the disability area specifically, and considered how to ensure students with disabilities have a voice in current youth initiatives, forums and decision-making processes.

The Task Group that managed this project included representatives from the government and non-government education sectors, as well as two secondary school students and a parent of a child with a disability. I wish to thank all members of the Task Group for their contribution in guiding the direction of this project and for their enthusiasm and commitment to hearing student voices.

I would like to acknowledge the staff of the Ministerial Advisory Committee's Secretariat for their work and support. Margaret McColl (Executive Officer), Rosanne DeBats, Luisa Pirone, Jo Shearer (Project Officers) and Lyn Kohl (Executive Secretary) collaborated to conduct interviews, analyse data and produce the final report.

Finally, I would like to extend a special thank you to the 52 students from the ten discussion groups who participated in this project. I particularly would like to acknowledge the time given by these students in telling their stories and thank them for their openness in sharing their ideas with members of the Task Group. My experience with these students has left me with optimism about the potential of students with disabilities in this State. Given the responsibility to exercise meaningful participation, dignity and respect for their views, these students are capable of the exceptional.

Tricia Spargo
Chairperson
Hearing Student Voices Task Group



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Executive Summary

The Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)* has led to many changes in the opportunities that are available to people with disabilities. State and Territory legislation has prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities and this has supported an increase in their rights. Higher expectations and greater aspirations for people with disabilities have emerged, and it has become increasingly important to seek and consider their views on all aspects of their lives. This includes young people with disabilities, who have a fundamental right to participate in decisions that impact on their lives in general and their schooling in particular.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities provides policy advice to the South Australian Minister for Education and Children's Services by undertaking research projects related to the education of students with disabilities. In 2003, the Minister approved a project that sought the opinions of school students with disabilities. The Task Group formed to oversee the project (see Appendix 1) determined the two-fold focus of the study, ie to investigate the students' experiences of schooling, as well as their participation in decision-making structures on education policy in this State. (See Appendix 2 for Terms of Reference.)

Information was collected from a total of 52 students attending ten discussion groups. Students with physical, hearing, vision, intellectual, communication and language impairment, from the range of educational settings (mainstream, special class, special unit and special school) contributed to this project. (See Appendix 3 for list of participating schools.) All students were presented with a Certificate of Appreciation for their participation in the discussion groups.

▶ The following major issues emerged from the data (see Section 3.1).

Harassment or bullying was identified as a major issue for most students with disabilities. Several explained that one of the reasons they had changed schools was due to harassment received at their previous school. Special school students appeared to experience little harassment and reported that, if required, support was readily available from teachers. Some students made specific mention of those teachers who did not consider bullying to be a serious issue. These students felt that additional training was important for all staff, so that the elimination of bullying became a whole-of-school responsibility.

Students reported that **support from teaching staff** was greatly valued and several described teachers as their friends. In addition, most students highly valued the support they received from teacher assistants.¹ However, students believed that a few teachers, at all levels of schooling, were still unwilling to provide the necessary support for students with disabilities. Some students would have appreciated greater support, particularly in primary school, and while making choices related to post-school options.

Several accommodations to **teaching and learning** were identified by the students. These included modifications to teaching methodology (eg visual-spatial and hands-on practice), smaller class sizes where learning occurred in teams, up-to-date computer technology, and more flexible curriculum (particularly to enhance post-school options).

The support of friends was important to students and **peer support** programs were highly valued. Many students found it easier to work with peers with the same disability and for this reason, some had moved to a new school to achieve a greater level of acceptance. In some instances, this entailed moving from a mainstream to a specialist setting.

¹ In this report, 'teacher assistants' refer to School Services Officers in government schools and Education Support Officers in non-government schools.

Many students had a **perception of self** that differed from the professionals' view of disability. They were more likely to describe themselves in terms of specific learning difficulties (eg reading, writing) rather than with a diagnostic label. Several students indicated that initially they had experienced difficulties in **seeking support**, because they did not wish to openly disclose their disability. Over time, however, students acquired the ability to communicate their needs and this had led to increases in support.

Students' thoughts on **transition from school** varied. Younger students foresaw their successful completion of school, whereas older students discussed personal goals such as obtaining a driver's licence, travelling to new places, and becoming more independent. Some had aspirations for tertiary study and others for employment. Overall, work experience was highly valued and students expressed a desire for a greater number of placements across a wider range of settings. Students criticised the lack of choice within the school curriculum. They preferred a range of topics that were not always available at their school site, and subjects that included hands-on experience to support career goals. Students mentioned the value of special programs such as work skill courses.

- The following considerations relate to initiatives in youth inclusion, both in general and in the disability area (see Section 3.2).

Existing youth organisations and forums provide a potential opportunity for students with disabilities to raise issues and contribute to decision-making—if these students are assisted to develop the skills required, and selection processes are open and well publicised. Separate youth and disability forums (associated with existing initiatives) may provide a mechanism for student input on issues relating to disability and education.

The Australasian Network of Students with Disabilities (ANSWD) provides a useful online exchange of information and views for students in the tertiary education system. A similar on-line network for secondary school students could be piloted to provide links between students who do not have this type of contact.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Minister for Education and Children's Services approve the forwarding of this report to the:

1. Chief Executives of the three education sectors in South Australia

for consideration of the following issues in relation to students with disabilities:

- ▶ The need for greater support in implementing school-based harassment policies, with mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing their effectiveness. All staff should be trained and equipped with effective skills to address issues of harassment or bullying.
- ▶ Strategies to increase the number of skilled teacher assistants available for students with disabilities, particularly at primary school level.
- ▶ Modifications to teaching methodology, smaller class sizes where learning occurs in teams, up-to-date computer technology, and more flexible curriculum that enhances post-school options.
- ▶ The value of peer support for students with disabilities that is often achieved in specialist settings.
- ▶ Support and training to enable students with disabilities to communicate their needs in order to receive appropriate school-based support.
- ▶ The desire for work experience placements across a wider range of settings, linked to a more flexible curriculum where programs undertaken support career goals.
- ▶ The development of resource materials and training workshops, to assist students with disabilities to deal confidently with communication at a range of levels. This may include involvement in decision-making structures and processes, and the development of advocacy skills.
- ▶ The provision of information to students with disabilities about existing youth inclusion initiatives and support for them to participate.

2. Disability organisations in South Australia

A register of young people, available for appointment to decision-making committees concerned with issues of disability, could be developed and publicised by these organisations.

3. Office for Youth and Disability Services Office, Department of Human Services

These two offices (within the Department of Human Services) could consider the value of a Youth and Disability Forum, as a cross-sector initiative, for young people with disabilities to meet and discuss issues of common interest.

4. The Social Inclusion Unit, Department of the Premier and Cabinet

The Social Inclusion Unit could consider the findings of this report as part of the School Retention Reference.

5. Australasian Network of Students with Disabilities (ANSWD)

ANSWD could consider the establishment of a trial online network for students, focused on issues related to the secondary level of schooling, with a view to extending this to primary level students in the future.

1.1 Background

The Ministerial Advisory Committee's *Hearing Student Voices* project investigated issues of importance to students with disabilities. This included their experiences of schooling and their participation in decision-making, not only in relation to themselves but also the broader environment of school and community.

Students participating in the project were invited to look back at their school experiences (reflecting on what had been important to them) and look forward to their future (their expectations for post-school options in training and work). The project also examined how the participation of students with disabilities could be increased in a variety of forums and leadership roles, to ensure their voice is included in broad policy decisions, in particular, those related to education.

1.2 Literature Review

The Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)* has led to many changes in the opportunities that are available to people with disabilities. Disability is described by the World Health Organisation (2001) as a dynamic state of restricted function affected by the interaction of:

- ▶ the person (and their health condition including impairment)
- ▶ the activities in which they wish to participate (and any difficulties they have in carrying these out), and
- ▶ environmental and personal factors (restrictions on participating in the community such as physical access, discriminatory attitudes, or the particular background of an individual's life).

State and Territory legislation has prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities and this has supported an increase in their rights. Higher expectations and greater aspirations for people with disabilities have emerged, and it has become increasingly important to seek and consider their views on all aspects of their lives.

There is a rich body of literature available on 'student voice'. This documents and describes processes and programs for increasing students' self-determination, self-advocacy, and involvement in their own negotiated education plans and transition planning.

Self-determination refers to the attitudes and abilities students need to make choices and decisions about their lives and to assume greater responsibility for their quality of life. Many students with disabilities benefit from systematic instruction in self-determination, self-advocacy and leadership skills (Crawford et al, 1999). According to Wehmeyer (2002):

Self-determined people are causal agents; they make things happen in their lives. They are goal oriented and apply problem-solving and decision-making skills to guide their actions. They know what they do well and where they need assistance. Self-determined people are actors in their own lives instead of being acted upon by others. The skills leading to enhanced self-determination, like goal setting, problem-solving, and decision-making, enable students to assume greater responsibility and control. (p 1)

Self-determination, therefore, is linked to the skills required for self-advocacy. There are a number of programs designed to help students understand their disability and describe it to others and, in so doing, advocate for their needs. By identifying their abilities, as well as the impact of their disability, these students can gain knowledge of appropriate adaptations and accommodations that may be available to provide support. By understanding and being able to talk about their disability, these students can be more assertive in communicating with others, and gain the strength and courage to request the support they need in order to succeed (Lehmann et al, 2000).

Self-advocacy skills such as articulating ideas, expressing needs, and acquiring leadership skills require direct teaching and learning, which is reinforced through application. Teachers, support staff and parents have an important role in fostering the development of these skills (Lehmann et al, 1999). According to Kling (2000):

The opportunity to practice self-advocacy increases as the inclusion of people with disabilities occurs in the classroom, on the job site, and in society. Inclusion makes self-advocacy a necessity, as people participating in activities in these settings ... strive for as much control as possible over their lives. (p 70)

For students, an opportunity to practice these skills arises through active participation in negotiated education plans and transition planning. In South Australian schools, students are increasingly being included in the planning meetings that formerly involved school staff, professionals and parents. A number of studies have been published that provide information and advice on the conduct of 'student-led' education planning meetings (McGahee-Kovac et al, 2001; Barrie and McDonald, 2002). "Nothing about me without me" is the catch-phrase for the involvement of students in decision-making about their own lives. It is often stated that both students and teachers need training to participate effectively in such processes. In particular, there is a need to clarify the educator's role in facilitating active student participation.

It is encouraging that young people are being recognised as having a fundamental right to participate in decisions that impact on their lives. An inquiry into student experience in the United States emphasised that:

By empowering young people to participate more fully in society and its decision-making processes, young people become engaged as partners in shaping the world they will inherit and pass on to future generations.

(Youth Representatives, 56th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 2001, p 1).

In addition to student voice and participation in activities that relate to their personal well-being and development, a number of initiatives have been introduced to seek the views of young people in relation to government policy. The current South Australian Minister for Youth has established the Minister's Youth Council to provide advice on issues that affect young people. The Department of Human Services' Office for Youth has developed the 'MAZE' website that provides information and links on many Statewide initiatives (see Appendix 5 for examples of these initiatives and websites). However, as most have been developed for and refer to youth in general, it is important that students with disabilities have information about such initiatives, as well as access to participation.

2.1 Aims

There were two distinct aims for the project. The first was to canvass the views of students with disabilities attending middle and secondary schools across the three education sectors in South Australia. This was achieved through small group discussions with students at their school site. The second involved investigating ways in which the views of students with disabilities could continue to contribute to education policy in this State and, in particular, to the work of the Ministerial Advisory Committee and/or decisions made by the three education sectors.

2.2 Methodology

Student Views

Careful thought was given to the most effective way to canvass the views of students with disabilities. It was important to develop a balance between a method that encouraged students to provide their views on a range of education related topics, without 'leading' them into issues of concern to their teachers, parents, support workers, or members of the project Task Group.

It was also necessary to consider the possibility of 'acquiescence', or the disposition for some people with intellectual disability to simply respond 'yes'. Studies report this group of people may provide little information when answering open questions and are inclined to respond 'yes' to closed questions. People with intellectual disability are often eager to please authority figures and the tendency to answer 'yes' is increased for interviewers such as teachers or disability coordinators (Heal and Sigelman, 1995; Finlay and Lyons, 2002). Recommendations from these researchers were considered when preparing project questions and group format.

In order to put students at ease, it was decided to interview small groups of students attending the same school. Students were provided with a series of open questions prior to the group discussion, to allow them to think about the issues. They were encouraged to discuss the questions with a parent or teacher prior to the interview. (See Appendix 4 for list of questions.)

Eight schools were chosen to participate in the project. Those included students:

- ▶ from the three education sectors (State, Catholic and Independent)
- ▶ with a range of disability types (physical, hearing, vision, intellectual, communication and language)
- ▶ from Year 6 to Year 12
- ▶ from varying educational settings (mainstream, special class, special unit, special school)
- ▶ attending both metropolitan and country schools
- ▶ from different socio-economic backgrounds.²

² The Index of Disadvantage developed by the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) ranks government schools from 1 to 7 (1=high; 7=low Index of Disadvantage), based on Australian Bureau of Statistics area information on parental income, education and occupation, and school data on student body complexity including ethnicity, Aboriginality and transience. The participating DECS schools varied across this Index of Disadvantage.

Appendix 3 lists the participating schools. In addition, a social skills group associated with the Autism Association of South Australia used one of its regular group sessions to discuss the project questions.

The participating students were selected in consultation with the sectors' special education teachers and/or disability coordinators, the principal and other staff at each school. School staff arranged for letters and consent forms to be sent to parents, explaining the project and inviting their child's participation. Parents were encouraged to discuss the project questions with their child.

Group discussions occurred in a setting that was familiar to students and provided a relaxed atmosphere. Questions were open-ended with careful prompting to elicit answers without guiding responses. The first school visit provided evidence that having a person who was familiar to students and trusted by them was important when conducting the interviews. This person clearly enabled students to feel confident about sharing their views with the project team. Consequently, the interview team consisted of:

- a facilitator who was familiar to students (eg a disability coordinator, special education teacher), but not their classroom teacher
- at least one, and no more than two, researchers from the project Task Group.

Following group discussions, students were presented with a Certificate of Appreciation for their participation. All discussions were tape recorded and transcribed to extract themes.

Student Inclusion in Decision-Making

Information was gathered on various models for youth inclusion that had been developed or implemented through government and community organisations (see Appendix 5 for a descriptive summary). Suggestions to assist students with disabilities to be more involved in policy and decision-making processes, particularly those related to education, have been included in the recommendations of this report.

3.1 Student Views

In general, students were pleased to relate their experiences and enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the discussions. Data were collected from a total of 52 students attending ten groups from the three education sectors and the range of educational settings (mainstream, special class, special unit and special schools). Many of the students' comments were positive and supportive of staff, policies and programs experienced at their school. The following major issues emerged from the group discussions.

Harassment

The existence and harm of bullying or harassment was the most consistent issue raised in all discussion groups. Several students explained that one of the reasons they had changed schools was due to harassment received at their previous school. A few students reported physical harassment but most was verbal, with comments about their disability:

They call me wheelie boy. (student using a wheelchair)

I'd have guys at my old school picking on me because I wasn't pretty and not cool enough for them.

The psychological trauma experienced as a consequence of bullying was also mentioned. As one student stated:

Bullies don't make me feel safe.

Students explained that the school ethos regarding harassment varied. Some staff did not stop the harassment, while others actively intervened. In some cases, students made specific mention of teachers who did or did not consider harassment to be a serious issue. Students felt more teachers should be trained in how to deal with harassment, rather than the responsibility being placed on a selected few:

Here they take it fairly seriously but at [the previous school] they didn't really do much about it.

Special school students reported little harassment, finding there were many teachers they could talk to about these and other difficulties. They explained they felt comfortable at the school and had many friends:

We can really joke and laugh with each other but at my old school you couldn't because they didn't actually want you to be there.

One student explicitly described his frustration and anger at being the victim of bullying. Because his language skills were limited, he often resorted to aggression:

Other kids set you up to get into trouble. Sometimes when I get upset because people give me so much rubbish, I want to hit them. You are supposed to not fight but talk about it, but if you can't talk about it out loud, you use violence. I know it's wrong but sometimes you have to.

Support from Teaching Staff

Many students reported that assistance from teachers helped them most.³ Several students described teachers as their friends who made school more enjoyable. Students named individual teachers and counsellors, as those who had facilitated communication and understood their difficulties:

Teachers helped me find and understand the material and with some of the tests. And if I was upset, they'd help me.

If I muck up, he understands when I do something that I can't help. He just punishes me for the ones that I do on purpose, and he's not harsh on the ones when I can't control myself.

In contrast, some students found it difficult when they were reprimanded for 'mishaps' and sought more support and forgiveness. Others reported that, once gained, a reputation for misbehaviour was difficult to shed, as they were not listened to or believed on other issues.

Some teachers' attitudes made students feel they did not care, ie they were reluctant to help or provide the support necessary for students with disabilities. In addition, some teachers did not acknowledge the learning problems that had been identified. Students felt "they got left out and left behind". Other students explained:

My Mum got told in Year 3 that I would never be in Year 12 and that it would be a miracle that I even got to high school. So I'm going back at the end of the year to see that teacher. (Year 12 student)

Just because some kids don't have a visible disability, doesn't mean they don't need help. Teachers need to be more aware of the disabilities students have and understand how they can help them, and how to push the student.

Most students highly valued the support they received from teacher assistants. Many would have appreciated greater support, particularly in primary school. However, for some students with vision impairment, responding to both the classroom teacher and teacher assistant was described as complicated. One student had full time teaching assistance and explained it was too much because he "didn't get any breaks". As students became older, many preferred greater independence and direct negotiation with the classroom teacher. Some sought additional help in making choices related to post-school options. Others reported teachers having assisted them in the attainment of specific goals, eg applying for a position with the Australian army.

Teaching and Learning

Students spoke about how their learning improved if teachers used examples, demonstrations and hands-on practical work, rather than a lecturing style. As one student explained:

There's more kids in the class that would learn this way, with teachers explaining and using different ideas, not just talking and writing.

Many students preferred smaller class sizes; their learning improved when there were "not so many kids in the class". Students also stated the noise of a large class could be an issue. However, special programs and support, that withdrew them from class, could also result in them lagging behind their class peers. They enjoyed learning in teams, rather than by themselves. With a team project, they could get help from other students and did not have to do all the work alone. These students (in common with most) appreciated less homework, allowing them to engage in other activities after school. Difficult work and short deadlines were mentioned as problems. Students reported they needed more time to think their work through, eg to research, write a paper and seek help when needed.

Several students required up-to-date computing equipment and software. They became frustrated when the technology failed. For example, a laptop that was provided to one student was underpowered and she was unable to use it. Some students were interested in learning the latest technology, in order to seek employment using computers when they left school.

³ In South Australian schools, this assistance can include education and learning support, physical, emotional, social and personal care.

The school's appropriate response to the constraints of disability, was highly valued by students involved in this study. Those in wheelchairs mentioned the importance of having ramps and physical accommodations. Students with vision impairment welcomed equipment and resource materials, eg large print and Braille translations. Students with hearing impairment valued those teachers who were able to use Auslan, and believed more teachers should be able to sign. Several mentioned the importance of having access to a laptop in class time to assist with writing.

In relation to the physical school environment, students' responses varied. A few commented on the importance of a neat and organised physical environment. However, many stated that more sporting and leisure equipment should be made available for use during breaks. This equipment might require modification in response to individual student needs.

Peer Support

The support of friends was important to most students; not having friends was a significant problem. Peer Support programs were highly valued, with students reporting they enjoyed being involved. Many found it easier to work with peers with the same disability, eg students in wheelchairs, or with vision impairment. In fact, some students who had moved to a new school reported a greater level of acceptance because there were now more students "like us". Students in special units in mainstream schools appreciated the companionship of other students with disabilities. As one student explained:

Deaf people stick together. I'd like more deaf people coming here, to make a bigger community and have more people to talk to.

Some students stated that life improved when they moved from a mainstream to a specialised setting:

My teacher [from the previous school] talked about me behind my back and said I wasn't a good student. It has changed here, I feel accepted in this school.

I had a lot of trouble getting teacher support and enlargements, the last couple of years I was in a mainstream primary school. I wish I had gone to Townsend earlier.

Others felt it was difficult to get used to a mainstream school, after moving from a specialised setting:

Four days at [the special school] and one at a public school would have been better, because I would have got used to the criticism. I find it hard to adapt to a public school culture and the way the kids behave.

Some students reported that in primary school they had felt isolated, because students without disabilities would not partner them for activities. They felt their fellow students were immature and, in general, had received less support at this level of schooling. At high school, students felt their peer interactions improved. As several students recalled:

When I was in Year 6 the kids were horrible to me.

I didn't have many friends in primary school because they all thought it wasn't cool to hang around with people who were different. I'm getting friends here.

I don't get stared at as much as I did in primary school.

In addition, students found it easier to move from primary to secondary school, when others they knew were also making the transition and could provide additional explanation or support when required.

Several students with a vision impairment felt others misunderstood their disability, presuming that because they could not see, they could not hear or were mentally impaired. They resented being given unnecessary assistance from staff. As one student stated:

They try to do stuff for you that you're totally capable of doing yourself.

Perception of Self and Seeking Support

When asked about their disability, some students described this in different terms than those used by professionals. They tended to focus on specific learning difficulties (eg reading), rather than label themselves with a broader diagnostic term (eg intellectual disability). Some students reported no difficulties; they were “doing OK”.

Several students indicated that initially they had struggled to ask for help, because they did not wish to openly disclose their disability and be seen as different from others. One student reported she only wore her hearing aid some of the time, because she did not wish to draw attention to her hearing impairment. However, over time she resolved, “I just have to accept it”.

Most students experienced positive support from the school; a few reported little understanding or assistance. Some students were able to name individual staff members or counsellors in their school with whom they could share a problem. Others were less clear on how to access support, apart from talking with their friends. One student experiencing difficulties explained that once a few teachers were made aware of her needs, they would talk to others and support followed:

It is all much better now and they all really help me. You just have to let some things go and make people aware.

Another student learned to ask for help from her teachers and, in addition to receiving more support, described her personal development:

Last semester, I did a Work Skills course that helped me to be more assertive with how I speak to people, and how I get my message across is a lot stronger than it used to be. So that was good for me. I'm stronger now than I used to be and more confident.

Reflecting on earlier years of schooling, several students recognised their behaviour had caused problems. From the perspective of upper secondary school, they now wished they had behaved differently. Some students indicated they had learned to manage their anger by venting this energy more appropriately, eg through sport or against objects rather than people. As one student explained:

My anger, I couldn't control it! I used to get really angry but I don't now, I just walk out.

While many students had mixed feelings about involvement with their school's Student Representative Council (SRC), some had no awareness of its existence. Among those familiar with the SRC, there was general agreement that getting elected “was a popularity contest”; only the most popular students had a chance for success. This did not concern some students, who felt the SRC had insignificant impact on student issues. In contrast, one special school student, a member of the Student Leadership Team (similar to the SRC), expressed great satisfaction with the group's ability to address student concerns and instigate change. Other students expressed a desire to be on the SRC and felt they were “the right person for the job, but just didn't have the support”.

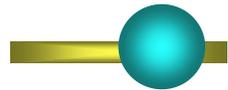
Transition from School

Some students had clear work and career goals and others had not yet given much thought to post-school options. Students discussed their aspirations for employment and several mentioned a desire to undertake TAFE or university courses. A few had the possibility of employment through a relative. Work experience was highly valued and students expressed a desire for a greater number of placements across a wider range of settings.

Aspirations for post-school options varied among students. Responses often reflected the students' age and level of schooling. Younger students foresaw their successful completion of school, whereas older students discussed personal goals such as obtaining a driver's licence, travelling to new places, and becoming more independent. While students often expressed the desire for a family and children, this was generally considered for some time in the future and not an immediate issue.

Some students criticised the lack of choice within the school curriculum. They preferred a range of topics that were not always available at their school site, and subjects that included hands-on experience to support career goals. Post-school planning did not always include appropriate program or subject choice.

Students mentioned the value of special programs such as the Hyde Street Program, the Link familiarisation programs offered through TAFE, and a Work Skills course offered by a counsellor for students having difficulties. Students also spoke favourably of the Community Bridging Service (CBS) work-skill course available at TAFE.



3.2 Student Inclusion in Decision-Making

In recent years, interest has increased in the participation of young people in society and the decision-making processes. This project investigated existing initiatives in youth inclusion, both in general and in the disability area. The programs and initiatives identified have been summarised in Appendix 5. It should be noted that most of these initiatives neither encourage nor discourage the participation of students with disabilities.

The following discussion has been included to provide insight when considering the support required by students with disabilities to be fully involved in these initiatives, forums and the decision-making processes in general.

Current Level of Participation

Many students do not wish to be identified as having a disability. It is not possible, therefore, to collect comprehensive data about the current level of participation of these students in the range of youth initiatives described in Appendix 5. As noted in much of the literature (see Section 1.2), participation is likely to relate to the degree of encouragement and support that is provided to the young people who seek involvement, as well as the selection processes that apply. Selection processes vary across youth initiatives, from being highly formal to informal. In some cases, participation requires nomination by an associated person. Participation at lower levels in the organisation can lead to nomination for higher-level positions.

Although it is important for students with disabilities to be encouraged and supported to participate in youth initiatives, some students believe earmarked positions focus on their disability (rather than their ability to contribute) by labelling them as a representative of a disadvantaged group.

Ensuring that Students with Disabilities have a Voice

Existing youth organisations and forums provide a potential opportunity for students with disabilities to raise issues and contribute to decision-making. To successfully participate in youth forums, it is important that students with disabilities are assisted to develop the skills required. The South Australian Office for Youth has recently published a *Youth Participation Handbook for Organisations* that provides a guide for organisations seeking to involve young people on boards and committees (Minister for Youth, 2003).

As an initial step, the more personal skills of self-awareness, confidence, self-determination and advocacy would prove advantageous. The Department of Education and Children's Services' *Student Voice Project* includes methods of teaching students self-determination and self-advocacy skills. A range of materials have been developed in areas such as personalised planning, emotional literacy, self-determination, self-advocacy, goal setting, and social competence (Department of Education and Children's Services, 2002).

Knowledge of the operations of organisational decision-making is also necessary. These prerequisites extend the role of teachers and disability support staff to ensure students with disabilities, who have a desire to participate in decision-making processes, are equipped with these skills.

Including the views of students in decision-making requires a commitment to do so. Students involved are often those who are already well-known and have a high profile within the organisation and community. Others who have the potential to provide valuable input are overlooked. It is important that selection processes are open and well publicised.

In addition, it is suggested that separate youth and disability forums (associated with existing initiatives), have the potential to provide opportunity for students with disabilities to discuss their experiences and ideas. These forums may also provide a mechanism for student input on issues relating to disability and education, as well as informing students of representative positions as they become available.

The Australasian Network of Students with Disabilities (ANSWD) already provides a useful online exchange of information and views for students in the tertiary education system. It is proposed that a similar on-line network for secondary school students would be effective to create links for students who would otherwise not have this type of contact.

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Appendix 1



Task Group Membership

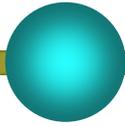
Ms Tricia Spargo— Chairperson	Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities
Ms Elizabeth Barber	Australian Association of Special Education
Ms Leonie Challans	Regional Disability Liaison Officer (SA)
Ms Christine Flynn	Parent
Mr Ben Galvin	Student
Ms Janette Miller	Catholic Education SA
Mr Ryan Neville	Student
Ms Pam Oyarzun	Association of Independent Schools of South Australia
Ms Joanna Seymour	Department of Education and Children’s Services



Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities

Ms Margaret McColl	Executive Officer
Ms Rosanne DeBats	Project Officer

Appendix 2

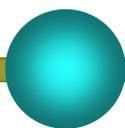


Terms of Reference

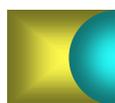
For several years, the Committee has discussed how the opinions of students with disabilities could contribute to policy-related decisions in education. This project would have two aims:

- ▶ *To canvass the views of students with disabilities attending middle and secondary schools across the three education sectors in South Australia.*
- ▶ *To investigate ways in which the views of students with disabilities can continue to contribute to the work of the Committee and/or the policy decisions undertaken by the three education sectors in South Australia.*

Appendix 3



Participating Schools



School/Group

Setting

Department of Education and Children's Services

Gepps Cross Senior School
Years 8-12

Special School
Intellectual disability

Paralowie School
Years R-12

Mainstream setting
Various disabilities

Seaview High School
Years 8-12

Mainstream setting
Link Program with Townsend School for
students with vision impairment

Unley High School
Years 8-12

Mainstream setting
Link Program with Regency Park for
students with physical disabilities

Windsor Gardens
Vocational College

Mainstream setting
Centre for students with
hearing impairment

Country

Nuriootpa High School
Years 8-12

Mainstream setting with special unit
Intellectual disability and other
impairments

Catholic Sector

Tenison Woods College
Mt Gambier

Mainstream setting
Range of impairments

Independent Sector

Tatachilla Lutheran College
McLaren Vale

Mainstream setting
Range of impairments

Other

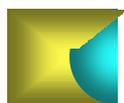
Autism Association of
South Australia

Social Skills Group
Communication impairments

Appendix 4



Project Questions



Questions

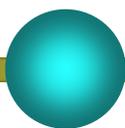
- ▶ As you think over your years of schooling, what are the things that helped you most?
- ▶ What are the most difficult problems that you faced?
- ▶ If you were going back in time, what would you change in your schooling?
- ▶ What are you looking forward to in the future?
- ▶ If there was something you wanted to change about your school, what would you do?
- ▶ If you had the Minister for Education [and Children's Services] sitting here listening to you, what would you say to her?
- ▶ Is there anything else you want to say?

Facilitator's Prompts

- Inclusion—school curriculum, activities
- Relationships—peers, teachers
- Co-curricular activities—sports, camps, ceremonies
- Being heard—leadership, SRC, decision-making
- NEP—involvement
- Curriculum—availability, flexibility
- School support provisions—what was made available
- Exclusion—school curriculum, activities
- Transitions—middle to secondary, school to post-school
- Relationships—bullying, isolation
- Co-curricular activities—sports, camps, ceremonies
- Being heard—leadership, SRC, decision-making
- NEP—involvement
- Curriculum—availability, flexibility
- School support—what was needed
- Inclusion
- Transitions
- Relationships
- Co-curricular activities
- Being heard
- NEP
- Curriculum
- Support provisions
- Schooling
- Post-school options
- Career/work
- Being heard

In seeking meaningful responses, encourage student participation by referring to their individual experiences, and the individual school context. Be aware of the balance that must be maintained between encouragement and leading answers.

Appendix 5



Initiatives for Youth Participation

The following information illustrates a range of initiatives for youth inclusion, based on examples of current practice in South Australia.

Advisory Committees and Reference Groups

Groups of young people are convened for the purpose of consultation on a variety of youth issues in the State. Members of the Reference Group may meet to discuss local issues or issues on a broader level. Some examples include:

Minister's Youth Council (South Australia) members provide advice to the State Minister for Youth on issues that affect young people. This Council comprises 14 young people aged between 12 and 25 years. It enables young South Australians to participate in Government decision-making and the planning, development and implementation of relevant policies and programs. Young people are selected on their ability to represent the views of their peers. The Council's membership is based on a mix of young people of various ages and life experiences.

Minister's Youth Council (Commonwealth) members provide advice to the Federal Minister for Youth about issues affecting young people. This Council was formed in 1999 (previously named Youth Plus) and comprises 15 young people aged 12 to 25 years. Youth are recruited annually, through public advertisement inviting them to apply for these positions. The Minister selects candidates and submits their names to Cabinet for approval.

The Youth Participation and Action Group (YPAG) is associated with the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA). The Youth Affairs Council of SA is the peak body representing the interests of young people, youth workers, organisations and networks across the non-government youth sector. The Youth Participation and Action Group (YPAG) provides youth input into the Council's direction, takes action on issues of importance to young people, and contributes to the broader debate on youth participation. YPAG Membership is open to any interested young person aged 12 to 25. Information about YPAG is disseminated via YACSA member organisations. Funds are allocated annually for training in areas such as managing the media, advocacy, and the meaning of policy.

Youth Advisory Committees (YACs), associated with local councils, have been operating since 2001. Currently, there are 1,200 young people involved in 67 committees across South Australia. The Youth Advisory Committee comprises young people between 12 and 25 years of age, who discuss youth issues and provide advice to their local council and others as required. An online forum has been created to link Youth Advisory Committees, to network, share ideas, coordinate activities and collectively provide advice to State Youth Groups. Each local council determines whether the Youth Advisory Committee is a formal or informal Council committee, and how members are chosen. The role of the local Council includes identifying the training needs of members and developing their knowledge, understanding and skills.

Student Representative Council (SRC) members meet regularly to discuss local school issues and make recommendations to the school principal. Students are nominated by their teachers and/or peers and selected by votes from the school population.

Youth Organisations with specific focus on Policy and Decision-Making

These organisations are managed for and by young people, to broaden their horizons and provide knowledge, skills and experience for thinking about and formulating policy in relation to community issues. Examples include:

Youth Parliament (South Australia) allows young people to learn about the process of government by researching and debating an issue, presenting it as a Bill in the Parliamentary chambers, and then making recommendations to the government for policy consideration. Teams of six work together over a year, which includes participation in a six-day residential camp. A team is usually nominated through a school, with the involvement of a school coordinator, and the requirement of a fee per student.

The United Nations Youth Association of Australia aims to broaden the horizons of school students and raise their awareness about the United Nations (UN) and international issues. Mock UN sessions provide speakers on a variety of topics and social events in order to develop both educational and social skills. The South Australian Division runs a variety of programs for students including two State conferences, a mock Security Council competition, a Schools Programme and Southern Vales Access Programme. Students aged 15 to 24 years may become a member. Members are chosen by their local group to attend State, National and International conferences.

Designated Committee Membership

Boards or committees may earmark one or more positions to be filled by a young person with a disability. For example:

The Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities earmarks a position for a student representative with a disability. In this instance, non-government disability organisations are invited to nominate a person for this role. This representative is then selected by the South Australian Minister for Education and Children's Services from a list of nominees.

Registers of Young People available for Committee Membership or Other Roles

Organisations seeking youth representation can consult various registers or data bases of young people who are interested in being involved in decision-making. Examples include:

The Youth Register of the South Australian Government's Office for Youth (Department of Human Services) matches young people with organisations who are looking to incorporate young people through their involvement on boards and committees. In addition, there is a grant program that provides funding to non-government organisations to support youth during their involvement (eg through training and development, travel assistance, sitting fees). Application is available through the MAZE website of the Office of Youth (at www.maze.sa.gov.au).

The youth register for Commonwealth Government boards and committees, Young Guns, is a data base of young people aged 15 to 30 years detailing their interests and skills. These young people can be matched to the requirements of boards, committees or taskforce groups seeking youth participation. Young people may submit an application, which may then be made available to interested organisations. Selection criteria include:

- ▶ *the ability to communicate effectively with others in formal and informal circumstances, both verbally and in writing*
- ▶ *demonstrated experience or knowledge of issues that impact on young people*
- ▶ *the ability to consult, network and reflect on the views of a broad spectrum of young people.*

Websites designed for Youth or People with Disabilities

These websites promote the sharing of information and interaction among young people, as well as facilitating links with related groups and activities. Examples include:

MAZE (www.maze.sa.gov.au) is a youth website sponsored by the South Australian Government and comprises sections on Careers and Study, Environment, Health, Housing, 'Legal Guff', Money, Relationships, Things to See and Do, and Transport and Travel.

*The Source (www.thesource.gov.au) is a youth website produced by the Commonwealth Government Department of Family and Community Services and includes information on a range of areas, as well as the online discussion group, *Talk It Up*. This forum allows the online exchange of views on a range of youth issues.*

YouthGas (www.youthgas.com) provides both young Australians and youth workers with access to a vast range of local, state, territory, national and international resources, information and opportunities.

Australasian Network of Students with Disabilities (ANSWD) (www.answd.com) is an active network of tertiary students with disabilities. An email list is available for students to discuss social and educational issues, as well as broader issues that currently affect the disability community.

EnableNet (www.enable.net.au) is a disability website sponsored by the Disability and Information Resource Centre of South Australia (DIRC). It provides extensive information on disability and related issues, but is a generic website. It does not specifically target young people with disabilities or their participation in decision-making forums.

