Inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in school

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families – August 2015

Senate Education
and Employment
References
Committee

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Inquiry into Current Levels of Access and Attainment for Students with Disability in the School System, and the Impact on Students and Families Associated with Inadequate Levels of Support
We would like to thank UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families staff who participated in consultations and made other contributions as part of the preparation of this submission.

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UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UnitingCare CYPF) is a service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT. Our concerns, for social justice and the needs of children, young people and families who are disadvantaged, inform the way we serve and represent people and communities. The Service Group is comprised of UnitingCare Burnside, UnitingCare Unifam Counselling and Mediation, UnitingCare Disability and UnitingCare Children’s Services. Together these organisations form one of the largest providers of services to support children and families in NSW. Our purpose is to provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects vulnerable children, young people, individuals and families.

This submission draws primarily on the experience of UnitingCare Disability.

UnitingCare Disability

UnitingCare Disability plays a lead role in the provision and development of services for people with disabilities and their families, as part of the UnitingCare CYPF service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT.

UnitingCare Disability services focus on enabling people with disability and their families to participate in their communities. To achieve this we work with local communities to build their capacity to include people with disabilities.

The majority of our clients have an intellectual disability, however we offer assistance to people with a range of primary disabilities. These include autism, hearing and vision impairments, acquired brain injury, physical disabilities and learning disabilities.

Our services provide accommodation support, assistance with employment and education, financial support, respite care and crisis support. We offer practical support in skill development such as social skills. Our services also include intensive short-to-medium term case management services for people with disability and their families who are experiencing difficulties with their current support arrangements.
The UnitingCare Stay Connected program provides support for young people in Years 5 to 10 with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or intellectual disability with challenging behaviour and who are at risk of school suspension or expulsion. This is achieved through a combination of case management, transition support for students, their families and schools and facilitating groups focused on social skills development, friendships and self-esteem.

*Extended Family Support* is a case management service which supports children and young people with disabilities and their families for up to 12 months. Caseworkers help families identify the services and supports they need and work with families to build their capacity to address issues as they arise. Priority is given to families who are under extreme stress and at risk of relinquishing the care of their child or young person with a disability.

*Intensive Family Support Options* provides intensive casework support over 8-12 weeks for families with a child or young person with a disability. It targets families who are under high levels of stress or in crisis, and who may be at risk of out of home placement. Caseworkers help families resolve immediate difficulties and create a stable home environment, develop and expand support options and coordinate supports which enhance the family’s capacity to provide ongoing support.
Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1

That state and territory governments strengthen the collection, monitoring and public reporting on school suspension and expulsion data. This should include collecting and publishing data on the number of students with a disability who are suspended and the incidence of repeat suspensions.

Recommendation 2

That state and territory governments review policies and practices relating to school suspension (and implementation of the policies), with a focus on reducing the incidence and duration of suspension. This should include particular attention to ensuring there are processes in place to support children with disabilities, strategies are put in place to manage challenging behaviour and that suspension is used as a rare and last resort.

Recommendation 3

That the Australian and state and territory governments work with the tertiary education sector to ensure that all teacher training courses include a greater focus on developing an understanding of students with disabilities and how to manage challenging behaviour.

Recommendation 4

That the Australian Government review the Positive Partnerships program and explore ways of achieving broader coverage of the program. The review should also examine whether the existing model of providing training to one teacher and one school leader in a school is effective in changing school practices and culture in working with students with disabilities.

Recommendation 5

That state and territory governments develop strategies to strengthen provision of ongoing professional development for teachers on working with students with disabilities and managing challenging behaviours.
**Recommendation 6**

That the Senate Education and Employment References Committee provide advice to state and territory governments and encourage them to shift their policies to make greater use of in-school suspension with increased student support (where suspension is deemed absolutely necessary).

**Recommendation 7**

That state and territory governments develop policy frameworks to support the transition to school and move to high school, which include:

- the development of a transition statement for all children starting school and all students in Year 6
- processes to ensure additional support is provided for children with disabilities, based on an assessment of the individual needs of the child and family
- strong monitoring and accountability of how schools provide support to children and families in the transition to school and move to high school.

**Recommendation 8**

That the Australian and state and territory governments review current information sharing practices and develop an electronic record which facilitates sharing of information about students with disabilities between early childhood providers, primary and high schools. The record should include the student’s transition statement/s (referred to in Recommendation 7).

**Recommendation 9**

The state and territory governments review the operation of support programs for children with disabilities to improve continuity of support across ECEC, primary and high school.
**Recommendation 10**

The state and territory governments develop a systematic process for identifying students who may be at risk in the transition to high school and provide effective support to those students. This should include a focus on providing continuity of support from primary to high school for students with disabilities.

**Recommendation 11**

That state and territory governments replicate the *Stay Connected* model in other areas in Australia. This should include expanding the model to other areas of NSW, with priority given to socio-economically disadvantaged areas and areas that have high numbers of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Consideration should also be given to adapting the model to include students with disabilities of various ages, particularly for students who are transitioning to post-compulsory education, training or work.

**Recommendation 12**

The Education and Employment References Committee encourage the Australian and state and territory governments to pay closer attention to ensuring the ongoing viability of effective programs such as *Stay Connected*, *Extended Family Support* and *Intensive Family Support Options* which do not fit well with the NDIS individualised funding model.
1. Introduction

UnitingCare CYPF welcomes the Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.

The right to education is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. ¹ Further, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides that people with disabilities have the right to education and that the education system should be inclusive.² This includes ensuring that children with disabilities:

- are not excluded from the general education system
- have equal access to an inclusive, quality education
- receive the support required to facilitate their effective education
- are provided with effective individualised support measures in environments that maximise academic and social development.

However for many students with disabilities the right to inclusive education has not been realised due to inadequate levels of support. Such support is vital because:

> Education is not simply about making school available…It is about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion.³

UnitingCare CYPF is strongly committed to the importance of education as a pathway out of disadvantage and has a long history of supporting service users to engage with education. Our experience as a disability service provider gives us insight into the factors that can lead to poor educational outcomes for students with disability and how these students can be supported more effectively.

UnitingCare CYPF is deeply concerned about the use of suspension and exclusion by schools to manage the behaviour of students with disability. These students often experience a repeated pattern of school suspension, which intensifies academic difficulties and disengagement from school. Teachers need to be equipped with more effective strategies for managing
challenging behaviour and suspension should only be used as a rare and last resort.

Research shows the importance of supporting children with disability and their families through key transitions, such as starting primary school and moving from primary to high school. Without effective support during these critical transitions, students with disabilities are at risk of falling behind and becoming disengaged from learning.

The submission also includes a discussion of our Stay Connected program as an example of a successful approach to providing support for students with disabilities. The program assists students and their families during the transition to high school and has been effective in reducing school suspensions and helping students with disabilities remain engaged in education. However, Stay Connected is a unique model which is only available in two areas of NSW – the Central Coast and South West Sydney. Also, we are concerned about the ongoing viability of the program in the context of the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

The submission addresses issues which impact all students with disabilities and their families, however there is a particular focus on the experiences of students with ASD and/or intellectual disability with challenging behaviour. It draws on the findings of a literature review commissioned by UnitingCare CYPF which explores effective approaches to supporting these students and their families.4
2. Exclusion from school

School suspension

Exclusion from school is a significant factor impacting on the education and wellbeing of students with disabilities. Our practitioners are particularly concerned about the lack of appropriate educational supports for children and young people with disabilities and the impact this has on their learning and later life. They report that children and young people with disabilities are often repeatedly suspended from school. This is affecting students across all age groups including the early years of Kindergarten and early primary school.

Case study

The Extended Family Support service is working with the family of a 15 year old girl, Nicola*. Nicola goes to a special school for children and young people with challenging behaviours.

Nicola has a history of suspensions for aggressive behaviour towards her teachers. The school has previously indicated that she would be removed from the school if another incident occurred. If this were to happen, Nicola’s options may be limited to home schooling and her mother would be unable to work.

Nicola attends school for just one period (lasting 40 minutes) three mornings a week. At school, she is isolated from her peers. She sits in a hallway to do her work and is not allowed to enter a classroom environment or other places where students congregate. She is prohibited from entering the full school grounds and therefore accesses the school using a side door.

Following a recent incident at school, Nicola was suspended for 20 days. She has missed school for much longer than this while the Education Department has been waiting for a Work, Health and Safety panel to review whether she can return to school and under what circumstances. There has been little communication with Nicola’s family to update them on the progress of the suspension review.

School work has been mailed to Nicola’s home during this period, but no support has been provided to help Nicola learn the content she has missed.

* Name has been changed

Over the past few years, the UnitingCare CYPF Centre for Research, Innovation and Advocacy (previously called the Social Justice Unit) has undertaken a body of research and policy work on the issue of school suspension. This research confirms that the rate of school suspension is increasing in most Australian states and territories.
For example, NSW Department of Education (formerly the Department of Education and Communities) data shows that the rate of long school suspensions (which last between 5 and 20 days) has increased significantly in NSW over the past nine years. For example, between 2009 and 2013, the total number of long suspensions increased by 18% from 14,887 to 17,531. In 2013, the average length of suspension was 11.5 school days.

The use of suspension impacts disproportionately on vulnerable children and young people including children with disabilities. Unfortunately, the Department does not publish data on the number of students with disabilities who are suspended from school. However, anecdotally, reports from our practitioners, parents and other service providers indicate that there are high rates of suspension of children with disabilities, particularly students with ASD.

**Recommendation 1:**

That state and territory governments strengthen the collection, monitoring and public reporting on school suspension and expulsion data. This should include collecting and publishing data on the number of students with a disability who are suspended and the incidence of repeat suspensions.

**Impacts of school suspension on students with disability**

Research shows that suspension is not effective in changing students’ behaviour because it does not address the underlying issues that lead to challenging behaviour. Suspension has serious unintended consequences for the suspended student and their family. Multiple incidents of suspension intensify academic difficulties and disengagement from learning. Students who are repeatedly suspended are also at substantially greater risk of dropping out early.

Further, several Australian studies have shown that school suspension increases the likelihood of the student engaging in antisocial and violent behaviour (the studies controlled for other risk factors such as previous violent behaviour or spending time with violent peers).
School suspension also has significant negative impacts on the student’s family. It puts increased pressure on their relationships with their parents or carers, as well as other family members. If a student is suspended, parents are required to assume responsibility for their child during school hours. As illustrated by the case study in Appendix A, this makes it extremely difficult for parents of students who are continually suspended to enter or remain in the workforce.

Addressing high rates of suspension of students with disability

Review school suspension policies and practices

School suspension policy and procedures are governed by policies in each state and territory. The requirements for suspension and expulsion of students from schools in New South Wales are found in the Suspension and Expulsion of School Students – Procedures 2011. The procedures set out general principles which principals must follow when deciding whether to suspend a student, factors they must consider and certain steps that must be taken, such as notifying the student’s parents.

The procedures include a number of provisions designed to prevent students with disabilities being disadvantaged. For example, in implementing the procedures principals must ensure that no student is discriminated against on the ground of disability and take into account any disability and the developmental level of students. Further, consideration must be given to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (NSW) when dealing with students with disability. These require, among other things, reasonable adjustments to support students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students.

Despite these apparent safeguards, students with disabilities are vulnerable to suspension due to the way school suspension policy is implemented.

For example, before suspension is imposed the principal is required to:

- ensure appropriate personalised learning and support strategies and discipline options have been applied and documented
- ensure appropriate support personnel have been involved both within the school system and externally
- ensure discussion has occurred with the student and their parents
• develop specific personalised learning and support to assist the student to manage inappropriate behaviour.  

However, in our experience, the extent to which schools adhere to these requirements varies considerably and is affected by factors such as the school culture, the attitudes of the principal and resources. UnitingCare CYPF is concerned that some schools implement suspension in a way which is not consistent with the policy. Other disability service providers and advocacy organisations have raised similar concerns. For example, Disability Advocacy NSW receives many complaints about inappropriate suspensions of students with disability and has said:

Schools don’t seem to follow the proper suspension procedures. We have clients whose children have been suspended and the parents haven’t even been given a letter providing the reasons for the suspension.

Recommendation 2:

That state and territory governments review policies and practices relating to school suspension (and implementation of the policies), with a focus on reducing the incidence and duration of suspension. This should include particular attention to ensuring there are processes in place to support children with disabilities, strategies are put in place to manage challenging behaviour and that suspension is used as a rare and last resort.

Strengthen training and professional development for teachers in working with students with disability

Students may be suspended because teachers do not have an adequate understanding and skills to manage the behaviour of students with disabilities. Initial teaching degrees contain limited content about disability and strategies for managing challenging behaviour. This means that teachers with students with disabilities in their class may not know how to deal with their behaviour. Teachers may not even recognise when student misbehaviour is occurring because, for example, the student is on the autism spectrum (particularly if the disability has not yet been formally diagnosed). It is essential that this gap is addressed, as concentrating on initial teacher training in inclusive education is regarded as the most effective way to ensure students receive an effective education.
Stay Connected caseworkers try to address this gap by helping teachers develop skills in managing challenging behaviour. This includes, for example, teaching them to recognise signs that a student is going to have a ‘meltdown’ and about strategies that can be used to prevent the situation from escalating (see section 4 for further discussion of Stay Connected).

Our practitioners have observed that although some teachers attend training on disabilities such as ASD or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), generally participation is voluntary and is limited to one or two sessions. Such training is inadequate because, as the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders has asserted, "ad-hoc or one off professional development does not result in meaningful change". To be effective, ongoing training needs to be provided to all teachers to equip them to work with students with disabilities and manage challenging behaviour.

We are aware that the Australian Government funds the Positive Partnerships: supporting school age students on the autism spectrum initiative. Positive Partnerships is delivered by the Partnerships between Education and the Autism Community (PEAC) consortium, comprising Autism Spectrum Australia, Autism Queensland, Autism SA and Flinders University. It provides professional development for teachers and other school staff who are working with students with ASD (in both government and non-government sectors). Locations are decided in consultation with education sectors with one teacher and one school leader being invited to attend from each participating school. Participants establish a professional network and have access to local expertise following the training course.

The intention of this approach is that it is based on a whole-school approach where the school leader and teacher bring back what they have learned to the school and lead changes within the school. Alongside the professional development for teachers, Positive Partnerships also provides information sessions for parents and carers to help them develop positive relationships with teachers and schools and to form a network with other parents.

An independent evaluation of the professional development component of Positive Partnerships from 2008 to 2011 found that the program was successful in building the skills, knowledge and confidence of teachers and other school staff in supporting students with ASD.
The evaluation found evidence that *Positive Partnerships* has had some success in fostering an ‘autism friendly culture’ in schools. This was most likely to occur where there is a whole-school approach, including engagement of the school principal and the ability of a special needs coordinator (or similar) to implement good practice strategies.

While UnitingCare CYPF supports the general approach and principles underlying *Positive Partnerships*, from our experience, it is clear that it is not yet reaching enough schools or teachers. It is also unclear whether providing training to just one teacher and school leader in a school is sufficient to result in changes to school practices and culture in working with students with autism.

**Recommendation 3:**

That the Australian and state and territory governments work with the tertiary education sector to ensure that all teacher training courses include a greater focus on developing an understanding of students with disabilities and how to manage challenging behaviour.

**Recommendation 4:**

That the Australian Government review the *Positive Partnerships* program and explore ways of achieving broader coverage of the program. The review should also examine whether the existing model of providing training to one teacher and one school leader in a school is effective in changing school practices and culture in working with students with disabilities.

**Recommendation 5:**

That state and territory governments develop strategies to strengthen provision of ongoing professional development for teachers on working with students with disabilities and managing challenging behaviours.

**Increasing options for in-school suspension**

While suspension must be a last resort, the practitioners with our *Extended Family Support* service commented that there is one school in their area that uses in-school suspension and this has worked well for one of their clients.
This is consistent with research evidence which indicates that in-school suspensions are an effective alternative to out-of-school suspension, particularly when combined with increased support to address the behavioural and emotional issues which led to the suspension. Under this approach, students are not relieved of the consequences of their behaviour, but remain at school where they are supervised and receive support to address the behavioural problems that led to the suspension. In-school suspension also reduces strain on parents and carers. However, to be effective, in-school suspension programs must be appropriately resourced and students must not be isolated from other students for long periods. In-school suspensions are more widely used in this way in the United States.

**Recommendation 6:**

That the Senate Education and Employment References Committee provide advice to state and territory governments and encourage them to shift their policies to make greater use of in-school suspension with increased student support (where suspension is deemed absolutely necessary).
3. Transition support for students with a disability

Research on effective policy and program approaches to build student engagement highlights the importance of supporting children and families through key transitions. While this is important for all children and families, it is particularly critical for children and families with additional or complex needs.

Evidence shows that children who make a smooth transition and experience early school success are more likely to be socially competent and achieve better results throughout their schooling. Conversely, children who experience academic and social difficulties when they start school are likely to continue to have problems throughout their school careers, and often into adulthood.

Research consistently identifies the following features of policies and processes that facilitate positive transitions to school for children with additional needs and their families:

- focus on both the child and family
- actively involving and building relationships with families
- strong coordination between all services involved in providing support to the child and family, including school, early childhood services, health and other specialist services
- managing the transition process in a proactive way that creates a bridge from one setting to the other
- transition support needs to be viewed as a long-term process which extends over a considerable period rather than just a few months
- alignment of funding programs across the transition to provide continuity in support.

Level of support for transition to starting primary and moving to high school is highly variable

The adequacy of support for children and young people with disabilities should be considered within the context of the support that schools provide for transition for all students. Our staff’s experience is that the nature and level of support provided to children in transitions in education is highly variable.
The extent of support for students during the transition to school depends on local decision making and whether the school leadership team consider it a priority. Schools also vary in the extent to which they have formed effective linkages with services in the early childhood sector. Strong collaborative relationships are essential in supporting positive transitions for children moving from early childhood services and schools.\(^{24}\) This is especially important for children with disabilities and their families.

The approach taken by schools to support transition from primary to high school is also highly variable. This is consistent with the findings of a recent study which examined transition processes for students with developmental disabilities at government primary and high schools in New South Wales.\(^{25}\) Some high schools have established effective programs to support students in the transition process, such as peer mentoring and processes for effective transfer of information from primary to high schools. In other schools, transition processes consist only of an orientation session in the term prior to starting school. As with the transition to primary school, transition planning for students moving to high school depends on local decision making and whether the school leadership team considers it a priority. It also depends on the relationship between the high school and local feeder primary schools.

Notably, in 2012 the NSW Legislative Standing Committee on Social Issues recommended the introduction of legislation mandating transition planning for students with additional or complex needs.\(^{26}\) The NSW Government did not support this recommendation on the basis that all students have transition needs in education and that there are practical difficulties with a mandated approach to provisions for some students and not others.\(^{27}\)

However, as discussed above, our experience is that the level and nature of transition support varies considerably between schools. A policy framework should be developed to support all students during key transitions, including the transition to formal schooling and moving from primary to high school. As transition support is particularly critical for students with disabilities, special attention should be paid to any additional needs these students may have during transitions and how these can be met.
Information sharing

The policy framework should also include a focus on improving transfer of information between early childhood services, primary and high schools. In its 2003 Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties, the NSW Legislative Standing Committee on Social Issues recommended that guidelines be developed on information sharing between preschools, schools and other early childhood service providers. More recently, the Committee recommended that the NSW Government should create an ongoing electronic record of the strengths, abilities and supports required for students with additional or complex needs which can be accessed by relevant providers. It suggested that the Department of Education adopt a tool similar to the Victorian Transition Learning and Development Statement (see Appendix B) to facilitate sharing of information about students. Despite these recommendations, the issue remains unresolved.

Recommendation 7:

That state and territory governments develop policy frameworks to support the transition to school and move to high school, which include:

- the development of a transition statement for all children starting school and all students in Year 6
- processes to ensure additional support is provided for children with disabilities, based on an assessment of the individual needs of the child and family
- strong monitoring and accountability of how schools provide support to children and families in the transition to school and move to high school.

Recommendation 8:

That the Australian and state and territory governments review current information sharing practices and develop an electronic record which facilitates sharing of information about students with disabilities between early childhood providers, primary and high schools. The record should include the student’s transition statement/s (referred to in Recommendation 7).
Lack of additional support for students with disability

Generally, in the experience of our staff, there is little or no extra support provided for children with disabilities during key transitions. Families who are not using any formal early childhood services often don’t know about school transition programs and miss out on the transition support or orientation activities run by schools. Vulnerable families often don’t start thinking about their child starting school until after Christmas, and by then have missed out on transition activities. Similarly, our experience is that generally students with disabilities and their families receive little or no additional support from school in the process of transition from primary to high school.

Lack of continuity

Some children who receive additional support in early childhood education and care (ECEC), under programs such as the NSW Preschool Disability Support Program, do not qualify for such assistance when they start school. This is consistent with research which explored the experiences of families with complex support needs around the transition to school. For the families involved in the study, support ceased around the time children started school.31

Different models of funding, different criteria for funded support and the different nature of available support often meant that families experienced a major gap in support across the transition to school. For some families, this gap widened over time, as support was unavailable in the changed context of school.32

Lack of continuity in support for students with disabilities is also an issue as they move from primary to high school. For example, children who have a teacher’s aide in primary school may no longer be eligible for that support in high school.

Recommendation 9:

The state and territory governments review the operation of support programs for children with disabilities to improve continuity of support across ECEC, primary and high school.
Students with additional needs are not being flagged as needing extra support

One reason students with additional needs may not receive the necessary support as they transition to high school is because they have not been flagged. Students must be identified by their primary school teacher or a school counsellor to get extra support from the high school. This may not happen for a range of reasons, such as the amount of work involved or because the student is going well by the time they reach Year 6. Consequently, students with disability may transition to high school without the appropriate support, with serious negative implications for their learning experience.

This is a particular issue for students with ASD, who often do not cope well with changes in environment or routine. For example, a teacher may not flag a student with Asperger’s because the child is settled and doing well by Year 6. However, when the student moves to high school they are likely to struggle with this transition and their heightened anxiety may result in challenging behaviours, such as aggressive behaviour. This can set in train a cycle of repeated suspension and exclusion from the school.

While these issues can be foreseen, our experience is that students with additional needs are not always flagged as needing additional support prior to moving to high school. Consequently, these students only become eligible to receive additional support once it is evident that they have struggled with the transition. Our caseworkers are deeply concerned that this effectively means these students must fail before they can get the support they need. This highlights the need for a more systematic process to be developed to identify students who may be at risk in the transition to high school and ensure effective strategies are put in place to address this.

Recommendation 10:

The state and territory governments develop a systematic process for identifying students who may be at risk in the transition to high school and provide effective support to those students. This should include a focus on providing continuity of support from primary to high school for students with disabilities.
The school enrolment process

For children with disabilities and their families, the primary school enrolment process is complex and difficult to navigate without support. A further concern is the delay that often occurs in the confirmation of a child’s enrolment at a particular school, especially for out-of-zone enrolments. This is unsettling for families and hinders the process of preparing the child for going to school, as they miss out on opportunities to participate in school-based orientation programs.

Delays in enrolment are also a significant barrier to transition planning during the transition to high school. In NSW, the placement panel that places students with special needs does not advise which high school a student will be attending until Term 3. This means the high school cannot be involved in the planning process until a very late stage. It also reduces the period of time in which strategies can be implemented to help the student become familiar with their new school, such as visits to the student’s future high school.

Case study

UnitingCare CYPF’s out-of-home care service in Western NSW worked with a 12 year old boy, Jack*. He has an intellectual disability, difficult behaviours and is in care. When he was in Year 6 there was concern that moving to high school would be a difficult transition for him, as he does not handle changes to his routine or environment well.

The UnitingCare CYPF caseworker worked with several other agencies to develop a collaborative transition support strategy. They had regular meetings with the primary school teacher, out-of-home-care teacher, (private) psychologist and NSW Ageing, Disability and Home Care behaviour specialist.

The placement panel that places students with special needs does not advise which high school the boy will be attending until some time in Term 3. As a result, the high school could not be involved in the planning process earlier than this. Also, the caseworker could not arrange for Jack to visit and become familiar with his new school until the panel advised which high school he would be attending.

* Name has been changed

Late decisions regarding enrolment also create stress and uncertainty for students’ families. For example, UnitingCare CYPF’s Extended Family Support service in Campbelltown is currently working with the family of a child with challenging behaviour. The family has sold their home and moved to a different area to try to access a school where she can be allocated a supported classroom environment. The child is currently in a supported
classroom, however the family is awaiting a placement panel decision. If the panel decides the application was unsuccessful, she may have to move to another school.

This issue was recognised by the NSW Legislative Standing Committee on Social Issues, which recommended that the Department of Education introduce a policy that standard placement panel decisions should be made by the beginning of Term 3 of the year prior to school entry. The NSW Government has not acted on this recommendation.

Need for stronger focus on working with parents

Effective transition programs need to include a strong focus on developing relationships with parents and carers. Building positive relationships between schools and families is important at all times, but particularly so at points of transition when patterns of interaction are established.

The transition to high school is a time when parents often have heightened concern about their children’s lives and interest in how they are faring at school. However, the high school environment is much bigger and less personal than primary schools. Many parents lack confidence in engaging with high schools, particularly if they have had negative or limited experiences of education. Additionally, some parents may have disabilities which make interacting with school staff challenging. For example, parents of students with ASD may also be on the spectrum themselves.

Our experience is that school programs to support transition to high school generally don’t involve parents. A key concern for UnitingCare CYPF is that when issues such as disruptive behaviours start to emerge, many schools do not communicate with the child’s family. This means that families may not have any contact with schools until issues escalate to the point of school suspension.

The importance of working with parents was recognised by the NSW Legislative Standing Committee on Social Issues, which recommended that the Department of Education implement a flexible, family-centred approach to transition planning and support for students with additional or complex needs. The NSW Government supported this recommendation in principle but it is unclear what action has been taken to address this.
4. *Stay Connected* – a successful approach to providing support for students with disability

**About Stay Connected**

*Stay Connected* was established in 2009, initially as a two-year pilot program funded by NSW Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC). It is operated by UnitingCare CYPF in the Central Coast and South West Sydney. In 2011, ADHC provided UnitingCare CYPF with recurrent funding to enable continuation of the program in these areas.

*Stay Connected* targets children in Years 5 to 10, with diagnosed or suspected ASD or intellectual disability, who are at risk of school suspension, expulsion or prematurely leaving school because of their challenging behaviour. Priority is given to young people in Years 6 and 7, as moving from primary to high school is a critical transition period for children and their families.\(^{36}\) Research indicates that the ‘middle years’ is the time when disengagement from school escalates and suspensions increase.\(^{37}\) Students who do not have positive learning experiences in the middle years are at risk of becoming disinterested in school and learning in general.

The program uses a collaborative casework approach working across home and school to support students to remain engaged at school. *Stay Connected* also encourages young people to build community connections and reduce social isolation.

**Support provided by the program**

*Stay Connected* provides holistic support for students with disabilities, families and schools. The supports provided to a student are determined by their individual needs. Examples of these supports include:

- support for Year 6 students with the transition to high school (e.g. arranging school visits or accompanying them to orientation days)
- groups which focus on social skills, friendships and self-esteem
- additional learning support for students in the classroom, similar to the role of a teacher’s aide
- school holiday activities
• fostering interest of the young people in pursuing recreational activities and hobbies
• advocacy to address issues arising in the school such as attending school suspension meetings and welfare meetings
• funding for brokerage of clinical therapy services, such as speech pathology.

Collaboration with parents is another key aspect of Stay Connected. As children move from primary to high school, often parents don’t know what to expect, what support is available or who to speak to about their concerns. When parents have a query, they can contact Stay Connected staff who will help them deal with any issues. As a learning and support teacher explained, “the caseworkers act as a link with the school” and “save parents a lot of stress and anxiety”. The program supports parents to develop the skills and confidence to be involved in the school and discuss issues affecting their child’s education. Parents learn to advocate for their children in a way which is constructive (rather than attacking the teachers). A number of schools have commented on communication with parents being more open as a result of Stay Connected involvement with families (rather than only contacting the school when something bad happens).

Stay Connected caseworkers also conduct home visits, support families with strategies for managing challenging behaviour and make referrals to other support agencies such as clinical therapy and recreation programs.

Stay Connected staff work closely with teachers to determine the supports students need to be able to achieve at school. They liaise with the school to work out the most suitable classroom environment for each student and may conduct classroom observations. This enables caseworkers to identify reasons why a student may be struggling in class. They then discuss the issue with the teacher, negotiate how it can be addressed and monitor the student’s progress.

For example, a boy in Year 6 could only read to Year 3 level and it was clear that the boy needed to go into a special support class. However, the family needed the caseworker’s support to arrange for this to occur, as the mother did not know how to go about this (and the child’s needs had not been flagged by the primary school).
Stay Connected staff also help teachers develop a better understanding of ASD and strategies they can use to manage challenging behaviour. As one of our caseworkers commented:

I see our role as ‘teaching the teachers’ so that we can then pull out. Now for young people in Year 8, we are finding that the teachers are able to manage their behaviour using strategies like time out and other ways of helping them to calm down such as listening to music. And being able to recognise the indicators that may lead to a ‘meltdown’.

Stay Connected works collaboratively with schools to reduce the use and duration of suspension. For example, if an incident involving a student from the program occurs, the school will contact a Stay Connected caseworker prior to suspension. Depending on the situation, the caseworker may be able to work with the school to come up with consequences for the student’s behaviour other than suspension which are more likely to be effective in addressing the behavioural issue. Alternatively, Stay Connected staff may be able to negotiate suspension for a shorter period to minimise disruption to the student’s learning.

Over time, this has changed the culture in some schools. As a member of the learning support team at one high school commented, now rather than suspending students, teachers will try different ways to address the behavioural issues.

Outcomes of Stay Connected

Feedback from students, parents and teachers is positive and indicates that Stay Connected is an effective way of delivering support for students with challenging behaviour. Reported outcomes of the program for students include better emotional regulation and improved social skills. Notably, school staff have observed that the program has helped students with limited social skills “mix with other kids, make new friends and initiate conversations”. By developing students’ social skills, the program also helps them achieve educational outcomes. As a learning support teacher explained, students with ASD often misbehave because they do not understand social queues. Developing their social skills makes these students more settled and creates a setting in which students can realise their academic potential.
Stay Connected staff work with parents and teachers to build skills in using positive behaviour management techniques. These strategies have resulted in less frequent and less intense outbursts by students. Tellingly, many students’ risk of suspension is ‘normal’ by the time they exit the program (or similar to their peers who do not have a disability). The impact of the Stay Connected program on improving student behaviour is illustrated by the case study in Appendix C. Without the support of the program, it is likely that for many of these students the behavioural issues would have escalated to the point where the students would be expelled. And, from our experience, once these young people become disconnected from school there is also a high risk that they would become involved in the juvenile justice system.

In 2011, ADHC commissioned an evaluation of the Stay Connected pilot program.\textsuperscript{38} The evaluation found that Stay Connected is an effective way of supporting young people with challenging behaviours to modify their behaviour and stay in the school community. The incidence or duration of suspensions also reduced during the pilot stage. This is reflected in feedback from school staff, who report that Stay Connected has reduced the amount of behavioural problems the school deals with and has made a big difference for suspension and expulsion rates.

**Extending the Stay Connected model**

Stay Connected is a promising approach in supporting students with disabilities to remain engaged at school and reduce their risk of suspension.

However, Stay Connected currently only services two districts, the Central Coast and South West Sydney. The program should be expanded to other areas of NSW and potentially adopted by other states and territories.

Currently, the program has capacity to support forty children and young people per year, but the waiting list is always extensive.

Further, under the current funding model, students can only be supported by Stay Connected for up to two years. Some students with higher levels of disability may not make significant progress within two years and would benefit from support over a longer period. Also, some students who do well at school while supported by the program may struggle when they exit. As the case study in Appendix D illustrates, the prospect of effective support ceasing
can be distressing for parents, as well as concerning for the school.

**Recommendation 11:**

That state and territory governments replicate the *Stay Connected* model in other areas in Australia. This should include expanding the model to other areas of NSW, with priority given to socio-economically disadvantaged areas and areas that have high numbers of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Consideration should also be given to adapting the model to include students with disabilities of various ages, particularly for students who are transitioning to post-compulsory education, training or work.

**Ensuring continued funding for *Stay Connected* in the context of the introduction of the NDIS**

The implementation of the NDIS will see current programs and services funded under block funding, transition to individualised plans and funding packages, and allocated to eligible people.

We are concerned that there has been little attention by the Australian or state and territory governments to ensuring the viability of successful programs which do not fit well with the NDIS model of individualised funding packages.

In undertaking planning for the transition to the NDIS of UnitingCare Disability services, it is becoming apparent that some of our programs will face inherent difficulties in transitioning to the NDIS. These are discussed below in relation to *Stay Connected*, but are also likely to affect our *Intensive Family Support Options* and *Extended Family Support* services. These services support children with disabilities and their families to resolve immediate issues, build their capacity to manage future crises and ensure they have access to services. As illustrated by the case studies included in this submission (on pp. 8, 20 and 31), this often involves working closely with teachers and other school staff to address issues that arise in the school setting and help students with disabilities remain engaged with learning.

*Stay Connected* does not align well with the current NDIS funding model which provides short-term supports and at a lower level of intensity. The NDIS pricing structure does not cater for the expenses involved in delivering more intensive support.
Stay Connected caseworkers must be degree qualified to ensure they have the skills required to support our clients and build strong relationships with schools. The NDIS pricing structure does not accommodate the additional costs incurred by employing these staff. Further, to be able to attract, retain and fund qualified professional staff, organisations need to be guaranteed client flow in a way that establishes a sustainable business model. We are concerned that some organisations in the Barwon trial site have already been forced to withdraw services due to viability issues.

A further concern is that the NDIS is targeted at individuals in receipt of their funds based on their needs, goals and aspirations. By contrast, our approach in Stay Connected is holistic, working with all family members and the school as well as the child or young person with a disability. The intent of the individualised NDIS funding model and our intensive child and family programs like Stay Connected are therefore at odds. Under the NDIS, for example, if you are a parent and have a child with autism who is having difficulties with school, it is very unlikely that you would go to a National Disability Insurance Agency planner and say “I'm having difficulty coping with my child and there are problems at school”. Indeed, it is often the school that flags behavioural issues and makes the referral to Stay Connected.

Another issue is that Extended Family Support and Intensive Family Support Options provide support during crises. The need for such support generally cannot be predicted ahead of time. We are therefore concerned about how families would ‘plan’ for the support needed to work through times of intensive stressors.

Programs like Stay Connected can provide a long-term return on investment to governments from ongoing school engagement and reduced criminal behaviour (thus reducing the costs associated with the criminal justice system). This is not conceptualised within the NDIS system.

Due to the difficulties of transitioning Stay Connected, Extended Family Support and Intensive Family Services Options to the NDIS, these programs may need to be funded through an alternate source which recognises the interrelationship between child wellbeing, engagement in education and disability.
Recommendation 12:

The Education and Employment References Committee encourage the Australian and state and territory governments to pay closer attention to ensuring the ongoing viability of effective programs such as Stay Connected, Extended Family Support and Intensive Family Support Options which do not fit well with the NDIS individualised funding model.
References

4 The literature review is not publicly available but can be provided to the Committee upon request.
6 Ibid.
8 See UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, Addressing high rates of school suspension, policy paper, 2012.
12 Ibid 4.4; 4.5.
14 Ibid 6.1.2.
16 Centre for Disability Studies, Supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and challenging behaviour within school settings, literature review, July 2014, p. 38.
23 Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC), Literature Review - Transition: a positive start to school, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2008; H. Famian and A. Dunlop, Outcomes of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school, background paper, UNESCO, 2006; S. Dockett, B. Perry, E.
Kearney, A. Hampshire, J. Mason and V. Schmied, Facilitating children’s transition to school from families with complex support needs, Charles Sturt University, Mission Australia, University of Western Sydney, 2011.

24 Ibid.

26 Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, Transition support for students with complex needs and their families, Report 45, 2012, Recommendation 23, p. 137.


29 Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, op. cit., Recommendation 3, p. 41.
31 Dockett et al, op. cit.
33 Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, op. cit., Recommendation 6, p. 56.

34 Falbo et al, op. cit.
35 Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, op. cit., Recommendation 21, p. 129.

38 The evaluation report is not publicly available. UnitingCare CYPF suggests that the Senate Education and Employment References Committee seek a copy of the evaluation from ADHC.
Appendix A

This case study illustrates the strain that repeated suspensions can put on family relationships and how they impact a parent or carer’s capacity to work. It also highlights the importance of students being able to access appropriate support in school, particularly during critical transitions.

Case study

Extended Family Support worked with a 12 year old boy, John*. John has Down Syndrome and attended a special needs school. He lives with his mother, Sarah*, who is John’s sole carer. The family is experiencing financial hardship as Sarah is unable to work full time due to John’s challenging behaviours.

The family was referred to the service as John had made an unsettled transition from primary to high school. His behaviour had escalated dramatically and John’s verbal and physical assaults towards his mother had increased. Sarah no longer felt that she could care for him without intensive support.

When the caseworker started working with the family, John had been suspended for aggressive behaviour. This meant that Sarah could not work and added to her concerns about her capacity to provide ongoing care for her son.

Meetings were held with Sarah, the principal, teaching staff, the ADHC case manager, ADHC behaviour clinician and the Extended Family Support caseworker and team leader. It became apparent that the teaching staff and principal felt they did not have adequate resources to support John returning to school full time. As the special needs school had behaviour management strategies in place, they declined the support of an ADHC behaviour clinician who had worked with John and understood his needs. Extended Family Support met with Sarah and ADHC to explore what support could be provided.
While John was suspended, *Extended Family Support* provided respite staff for John so that Sarah could continue working. The ADHC behaviour clinician supported the staff and provided training on how to manage John’s behaviour. John developed a rapport with the respite staff and attended regular activities within the community. This helped build Sarah’s confidence about taking John into the community more often, as she had been fearful about doing this in the past due to the risk he would abscond. Sarah said she had learned to love her son again.

John’s school was still unwilling to allow him to return to school as it had been unable to get further resources (from within the Department of Education) to meet his needs. *Extended Family Support* and ADHC advocated for the school to explore options for transitioning John back to school. It was agreed that *Extended Family Support* would fund the respite staff that John had become familiar with to assist him to gradually transition back to school until the school identified someone to provide him with ongoing support. John was able to return to school with support three times a week for two hours and these hours slightly increased over time. However, there were challenges with the school finding staff so that *Extended Family Support* could transition out and Sarah felt the school was reluctant for John to return.

Following an incident with another pupil, John was suspended again and Sarah decided John should change school. *Extended Family Support* and ADHC advocated for a transition to a different school. John now attends a more suitable school and has made a smooth transition with the support of *Extended Family Support* and ADHC.

* Names have been changed
Appendix B

Transition to school support planning in Victoria – an example of good practice

The Transition: A Positive Start for School initiative in Victoria is an example of a policy framework which promotes a consistent and inclusive approach to support transition of all children and their families. The approach emphasises strong communication with and involvement of families.

A key component of the initiative is the introduction of a ‘Transition Learning and Development Statement’ (the Statement) – a tool to support the consistent transfer of information about a child’s learning and development to schools and families. The information in the Statement:

- summarises the strengths of a child’s learning and development
- identifies their individual approaches to learning and their interests
- indicates how the child can be supported to continue learning.

Since 2009, all early childhood services offering a preschool program in Victoria have been required to provide Statements for all children starting school the following year. The Statements are also available to other services such as early childhood intervention services.

School staff members are encouraged to work with families to complete the first part of the Statement for their child if they are enrolled without one (for example, if they are not using an early childhood education and care service). This enables families to provide information that will help the teacher support the child’s learning.

The Victorian framework for supporting school transition recognises that some children, including children who have disabilities or developmental delays, need extra support during the transition period.

For children with additional support needs, the Kindergarten teacher meets with families and early childhood educators to discuss the Statement and identify additional transition program activities that may be required.
It is notable that in Victoria, student pathways and transitions are one of three key student outcomes that schools and regions are accountable for under the School and Network Accountability and Improvement framework (alongside student learning and student engagement).
Appendix C

The following case study illustrates the diverse supports Stay Connected provides for students with additional or complex needs and their families. It also highlights the importance of working with both families and teachers to address issues impacting on a student’s education and/or wellbeing.

Case study

Stay Connected worked with a Year 8 student, Fiona*. She has been diagnosed with ASD, ADHD and a moderate intellectual disability.

Fiona has lived with a foster family since a very young age. She has five siblings who are placed with other foster carers. Her foster father passed away a few months before she started the Stay Connected program.

Fiona attended the support unit at her high school. She was referred to Stay Connected for several reasons, including that she:

- was making limited progress at school due to frequent suspensions
- had rapid mood changes in class and often left the room, hid or absconded
- displayed aggressive behaviour and swore at teachers – sometimes she became so aggressive Community Services had to take her home
- could be controlling with other students
- and did not have any firm friendships.

Fiona’s carer was concerned about her difficulty settling in at school and that teachers were not being sensitive enough to her needs. She was also concerned that Fiona had been suspended for four months (cumulatively over a year), including a suspension for an entire term. Although Fiona had technically been suspended for 20 days, she was unable to return to school for the remainder of the term as the school felt it was ill-equipped to manage her behaviour without extra supports.

Stay Connected worked with Fiona, the family and school to develop strategies to address these concerns. The caseworker provided one-on-one support; classroom observation; linked Fiona into a social skills group; and worked with teachers to help them develop skills in managing Fiona’s
behaviour. *Stay Connected* also commissioned SAL Consulting to complete a Behaviour Intervention Plan. The psychologist who wrote the plan provided strategies for managing Fiona’s behaviour which were outlined to her carer so that there was a consistent approach across home and school.

*Stay Connected* staff also ran a training session for all teachers at the high school to help them understand Fiona’s behaviours and know how to address them. They provided ongoing support for teachers who have regular interaction with Fiona.

At the time she exited *Stay Connected*, Fiona’s school reported that she had settled at school and her outbursts had become far less frequent. She had not been suspended for 12 months due to a significant decrease in negative behaviours and was now at ‘normal’ risk of suspension. While she still had difficulty recognising and engaging in appropriate relationships with her peers, there had been a noticeable improvement in this area.

Fiona’s outbursts at home had also become less frequent and less intense. Having been provided with resources and strategies for managing Fiona’s behaviour, her family said that they now felt much better equipped for outbursts in future.

* Name has been changed
Appendix D

This case study demonstrates the range of supports offered by Stay Connected and the outcomes of the program. It also highlights the concerns that can arise when support is going to cease.

Case study

Stay Connected worked with Daniel*, a 15 year old with high functioning autism. Daniel was referred to the program by his mother with the support of his high school.

The main reasons for referral included that he was only attending school for two periods a week and had been suspended multiple times, including a 20 day suspension. These were generally due to aggressive and violent outbursts targeting teachers and other students. Daniel also had limited social skills and few friends.

Stay Connected caseworkers provided regular one-on-one mentoring for Daniel at home and at school. They conducted classroom observation and provided classroom support. The caseworkers helped foster Daniel’s interest in pursuing hobbies and he participated in several school holiday activities. Caseworkers supported Daniel’s mother in advocating for him during school meetings. They also provided information and support about alternative educational options.

Daniel now completes most of his school work at home through Sydney Distance Education High School, which has proven to be an ideal setting for his education. He is doing work experience and has joined a sign language club.

Daniel showed great improvement during the casework period. He made marked progress in social interactions, emotional regulation and self-esteem. His risk of suspension was ‘normal’ when he exited the program. His mother had also been equipped with the skills needed to manage difficult situations.

Both Daniel’s mother and the principal of his high school expressed concern when they became aware his caseworker would be ending work with him. The
support provided by *Stay Connected* was described as invaluable. Daniel was beginning to make improvements in his social skills and academic performance and they were worried that ceasing this support would limit Daniel's progress. They requested that the decision to exit Daniel from the program be re-considered so that support could continue during the transition to work stage of his schooling. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the constraints of the program guidelines (see discussion on p. 25).

* Name has been changed