



Alternative school settings and home schooling

PERFORMANCE AUDIT | 25 SEPTEMBER 2025

NEW SOUTH WALES AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT

ROLE OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL

The roles and responsibilities of the Auditor-General and the Audit Office, are set out in the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983* and the *Local Government Act 1993*.

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In accordance with section 38EC of the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983*, I present a report titled '**Alternative school settings and home schooling**'.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Bola Oyetunji'.

Bola Oyetunji

Auditor-General for New South Wales
25 September 2025

RECONCILIATION STATEMENT

We pay our respects and recognise Aboriginal peoples as the traditional custodians of the land in NSW who have cared for and protected the environment, waterways, and sacred sites over many millennia. We honour and thank the traditional custodians of the land on which our office is located, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and the traditional custodians of all the lands on which our employees live and work. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and to the next generation of leaders.

We acknowledge that our long history of helping to foster accountability and transparency in the government and Parliament is also shared with the histories of colonisation and the resulting disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this state.

We embrace our role in holding government agencies to account for the delivery of effective services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We are committed to ensuring that our audits are culturally responsive, respectful and inclusive, and that we engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in a meaningful and collaborative way.

We recognise the ancestral tie of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to this land, and we acknowledge that we have much to learn from their wisdom, rich and diverse culture, languages, knowledge and practices.

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Section 1 –

Alternative school settings
and home schooling

1. Executive Summary

Context

Under the *Education Act 1990* (the Education Act), a key principle is that every child in New South Wales (NSW) has the right to receive an education. The Education Act states that, in enacting the legislation, Parliament had regard to principles including that:

- the education of a child¹ is primarily the responsibility of the child's parents²
- the State has a duty to ensure every child receives an education of the highest quality, principally through providing public education.

These legislative principles do not give rise to legally enforceable rights.

The Education Act requires that children of school age in NSW be enrolled at, and attending, a government school or registered non-government school, or be registered and receiving instruction as home schooling.³ In 2024 there were 780,336 full time equivalent enrolments in NSW public schools, 474,811 in NSW non-government schools and 12,762 home schooling registrations.

The NSW Department of Education (the Department) has long provided a range of alternative education options to students who may not be able to, or choose not to, receive an education through a mainstream school setting. These include:

- distance education schools
- hospital schools
- 'intensive learning support – behaviour' schools and 'intensive learning support – mental health' schools (formerly known as emotional disturbance/behaviour disorder (ED/BD) schools)
- youth justice centre schools.

From 5 May 2025, the Department has also been responsible for the regulation of home schooling. Before this, home schooling regulation was the responsibility of the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA).

Alternative school settings aim to provide education and sustain education continuity for students who would otherwise not be able to receive an education in mainstream settings – because they are in youth detention, hospital, remote areas or travelling, experiencing difficulties with behaviour and emotional regulation, or suffering severe anxiety or other mental health challenges. Home schooling means that the parent takes responsibility for educating the child, primarily in the child's home. NESA data shows that the two key reasons families chose to home school are for philosophical reasons or because their child has special learning needs.

While only enrolling or registering a small proportion of the State's primary and secondary students, alternative school settings and home schooling have a higher proportion of vulnerable students than mainstream schools. The availability, accessibility and quality of alternative school settings and home schooling are critical for these students in receiving an education.

¹ 'Child' is not specifically defined in the Education Act, but it states that compulsory school age is between the age of six years and the age at which the child completes Year 10, or the age of 17 (whichever occurs first). This report uses 'child' throughout in line with this definition.

² 'Parent' is defined in section 3 of the Education Act as including a guardian or other person having the custody or care of a child. This report uses 'parent(s)' throughout in accordance with this definition.

³ See footnote 1.

Audit objective

This audit assessed the effectiveness of the Department and NESa in supporting students to receive a quality education when delivered in alternative school settings and through registered home schooling.

For this audit, these settings are defined as distance education schools, hospital schools, intensive learning support (behaviour or mental health) schools, youth justice centre schools and registered home schooling. In making this assessment, the audit examined whether the Department and NESa (the agencies):

- provided alternative school settings or supported home schooling for students to ensure continuity of education, including by making these settings accessible and available in a timely way to students, and ensuring effective transitions
- effectively implemented quality assurance and safeguarding mechanisms for alternative school settings and home schooling.

Conclusion

The Department and NESa have not effectively supported eligible students to receive a quality education in alternative school settings and home schooling because they have not:

- defined the learning and wellbeing outcomes for students in these settings, or determined whether the settings are effective in achieving those outcomes
- monitored or responded to student demand for these settings to make sure they are available and accessible in a timely way
- supported transitions in and out of these settings so that continuity of education is maintained
- proactively sought feedback from students and families in alternative school settings and home schooling to understand whether their needs are being met.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant changes to education, technology and student needs. However, the Department has not evaluated or revised its approach to providing alternative school settings since they were first introduced, which ranges from around 30 to 130 years ago. While NESa instigated four reviews of home schooling operations in the last four years, it did not make changes to policy as a result of these reviews.

There is evidence that individual schools provide personalised support to students who need and can access these settings, and that home schooling allows parents to provide individual instruction tailored to the diverse learning needs of their children. However, the agencies do not know overall if these particular settings are effective and achieving positive outcomes for students in the unique way they deliver education.

Key findings

There are no specific policy frameworks, tailored roles and training, or dedicated quality assurance mechanisms for alternative school settings

Beyond the broad educational principles in the Education Act, the NSW Government has no specific policy objectives or expected outcomes for alternative school settings or home schooling. Most of the schools in these alternative school settings have no:

- clear evidence base on eligibility, distribution, location or accessibility
- articulation of how they operate differently from mainstream schools
- statement of what quality education looks like in the particular setting
- targeted position descriptions or setting-specific professional development for staff
- dedicated performance measures, monitoring or reporting.

There is no strategic, system-level policy framework for alternative school settings.

For home schooling, operational guidelines reflect the legislative provisions for registration, but there are no specific policy objectives or outcomes for home schooling or its regulation.

Despite the unique student cohort and operational contexts of the alternative school settings, the Department does not have tailored staff roles and performance agreements, professional learning or reflective practice communities for these schools. This misses the opportunity to foster a specialised workforce and educational delivery model for each type of alternative setting. It raises the risk that recruitment, staff development and practices in these settings are ad hoc, school-by-school processes instead of leveraging common needs, skills and approaches across the settings.

The Department applies the School Excellence Framework to alternative school settings in the same way it does to all public schools in NSW. The Department recognises that alternative school settings differ from mainstream schools and that this affects their targets and evidence in practice, but it has not tailored the statewide framework or developed a supplementary measurement mechanism in response. This means that the Department is missing meaningful performance information specific to these schools.

The Department cannot demonstrate that existing enrolment criteria and procedures for alternative school settings work to best target its resources to student need and enable access for eligible students

Different eligibility criteria apply for each setting, and sometimes for different schools within the same setting. The school enrolment processes for each setting create barriers to access for some students. School enrolment procedures for distance education are complicated, inconsistently applied and difficult to meet. Enrolment for intensive learning support schools is through a convoluted, administratively burdensome process that slows the access granted to class placements.

Although there have been changes to the population of both hospital schools and youth justice centre schools over the last decade – with fewer children staying for long periods in these settings – the Department has not supported the efforts of these schools to deliver education in new ways for students on short stays. This is despite commissioning a review of hospital schools in 2020 and a review of youth justice centre schools in 2021, each of which made suggestions about providing education to the increasing proportion of short-stay students in these settings. The Department has not implemented the recommendations.

Student access to hospital schools and intensive learning support schools is also limited by the geographical distribution of these particular settings, which are concentrated in major cities and inner regional areas of the State (including Wagga Wagga, Albury and Mittagong). These locations were chosen over the last 100 years (for hospital schools) and 20 years ago (for intensive learning support schools) and have not been reviewed based on contemporary evidence of student need or demand.

Recent changes to the needs and profiles of the student population, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic began, have not led to reviews or changes to the enrolment procedures for alternative school settings. The Department cannot demonstrate that these processes work to best target its resources to student need and to enable access for eligible students.

The agencies have not monitored whether student access to alternative school settings and home schooling is timely

Timely access to alternative school settings is important for early intervention and continuity of education. Typical disruptions for the student cohort of alternative school settings include learning and support needs that cannot be met by a mainstream school, severe mental health challenges, significant behaviour support needs, hospitalisation or youth centre detention. However, the Department does not track the time taken for eligible students to access alternative school settings once the specific enrolment criteria are met, and it cannot demonstrate whether students with identified needs and eligibility are reaching these settings in a timely way.

For home schooling, NESA sought and received adjustments to its budget from NSW Treasury and attempted to improve the efficiency of its relevant processes. However, staffing did not match demand and the time taken to make a decision on home schooling registrations grew by 63%, from 40 calendar days in 2019 to 65 calendar days in 2024, as the number of applications increased by approximately 125% over the same period.

Stakeholders advised that waiting for registration processing can be stressful for families who know they are potentially subject to child protection reports on the grounds of educational neglect, and prosecution for breach of the Education Act requirements for compulsory school-aged children to be in school or registered for home schooling.

Under the Department's 'Exemption from School' procedure, schools can exempt a student from enrolment and attendance if it has been clearly demonstrated that this is in the student's best interests and that alternatives (such as distance education) have been fully explored. However, the Department does not know if schools are consistently applying this exemption process for all eligible students.

The demand for alternative school settings and home schooling is not centrally monitored or forecast

The Department does not centrally monitor or forecast demand and supply for alternative school settings. Enrolment applications and decisions are mainly determined by the principals of individual schools who consider the recommendations of access request panels where relevant. Decisions are subject to limits on classroom and staffing capacity and the geographic distribution of existing schools. The specific eligibility criteria for each setting not only target the schools to students whose needs cannot be met in mainstream settings, they also manage the volume of applications made to available places. However, demand is unknown, and this application management is not transparent.

The Department does not analyse application or raw enrolment data for alternative school settings to understand how many students are seeking or achieving enrolment, the periods of time for which they are enrolled or their needs profile. It does not maintain a waitlist for available places. It has not conducted research or analysis to understand the drivers of demand for alternative school settings, and whether these can be addressed in ways other than increasing supply.

NESA was unable to forecast home schooling registration applications but analysed related data to measure the annual growth rate in applications and the geographical distribution of registrations.

Student transitions in and out of alternative school settings are managed by individual schools without departmental guidance or support, creating the risk of gaps in enrolment for individual students

Students in alternative school settings are usually enrolled for less than a school year and will generally experience more transitions between schools than students in mainstream settings.

The Department does not provide any specific guidance or support for students transitioning into or out of alternative school settings, and the resources developed and provided for other types of transitions are not directly applicable. This means that evidence-based good practices for alternative school setting transitions are not identified or shared with individual schools. Further, statewide system-level supports, like regional transition officers who might play a role in helping students move between settings, are not in place.

Parents must provide evidence of current enrolment or intent to register for home schooling before withdrawing a child from school, and schools tend not to unenrol students unless they can confirm a student is enrolled in (and attending) another school or registered for home schooling. However, individual schools lose sight of – and responsibility for – students once they are no longer enrolled.

The Department is legally responsible for ensuring that school-aged children are enrolled in and attending a registered school or are registered for home schooling. The Department has a long-running statewide program addressing student non-attendance through casework intervention. This is informed by referrals from school principals and fortnightly reports on the status of home schooling registrations. However, this program does not prioritise students aged over 14, and between one-third and one-half of the students in alternative school settings were aged 14–17 in the audit review period.

Schools provide individualised learning to meet the diverse needs of their students, while home schooling educational programs are checked as part of registration assessments

Alternative school settings tailor teaching to the needs of their students through, for example, individual assessment and personalised learning plans, small class sizes, school learning support officers, and specific program or intervention supports. School induction is expected to include a

check of each student's existing literacy and numeracy competencies, learning goals and needs from their previous school, strengths and areas for development.

Schools the audit team visited had a strong focus on personalising their teaching and support for individual students, and had developed particular resources and teaching materials for their unique setting. The schools also demonstrated that they regularly seek feedback from their students and families about their experiences. However, the Department does not systematically collect or report this feedback to determine whether their needs are being met. Nor does the Department analyse staff survey results in alternative school settings to identify systemic strengths or gaps in teaching and school administration.

In its assessment of home schooling registration renewal applications, NESA checked that registered home schooled children received instruction in line with its syllabuses, including that the parents' educational program was suitable to cater for the identified learning needs of the child. For initial home schooling registration applications, NESA assessed the proposed education program against the same requirements and the capacity of the applicant to comply with these should registration be granted. The NESA guidelines for home schooling registration allowed parents of children with disability and/or additional learning needs to adjust the educational program to meet their child's learning needs.

Processes were implemented to check that home schooled children received educational instruction, but this did not assess the quality of that instruction or children's learning progress

There is no independent assessment of the quality of home schooling instruction and student progress in NSW. This is in line with other Australian states and territories.

NESA checked that home schooled children received an education by assessing whether its requirements for home schooling registration were met. These requirements did not specify a standard or outcome target, but rather that instruction:

- aligned with the NESA syllabuses
- catered to the identified learning needs of the child, with adequate resources, time allocated and a suitable home learning environment
- was captured by an adequate system for planning and supervising, and recording teaching and learning experiences and the child's learning progress and achievement.

The requirement that parents demonstrate that their education program 'aligns with the NESA syllabuses' was a key mechanism for ensuring quality. These syllabuses represent a high standard of education and are designed to support educational standards across all learning environments, including home schooling. However, NESA considered that without a specific power or duty in the Education Act, it could not independently assess the quality of home schooled students' educational programs, or their learning progress and achievements.

Home schooled children in NSW can opt to sit the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests, and NESA contacted home schooling families each year to offer support with participation. However, over the past five academic years, less than two per cent of registered home schooling students participated in NAPLAN each year.

Increasingly, home schooling parents are purchasing services from commercial providers that offer education programs aligned with the Australian and NSW curricula and often include student assessment through exams, assignments and semester report cards. However, the responsibility for ensuring that home schooling registration requirements are met, and that a home schooled child receives an education, remains with the parent even where commercial programs are used.

The Department applies the same child safe standards and child protection protocols to all public schools, including those in alternative school settings

The Department has statewide policies, procedures and controls to align school and staff practices with relevant legislative requirements to protect child safety. However, despite identifying more complex needs for student cohorts in alternative school settings, it has not tailored statewide approaches to these settings.

Data from the Department indicates that reports made by staff in alternative school settings accounted for two to three per cent of all concerns appraised by its Child Wellbeing Unit across all NSW public schools in the past six years. This aligns with the proportion of NSW public schools that are alternative school settings. Although a small proportion of reports to this unit came from schools in alternative school settings, these reports were more frequently appraised by the unit as involving 'suspected risk of significant harm' and subsequently referred to the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) for additional assessment and potential statutory child protection action.

The Department considers that this could result from different factors, including the more complex needs of students in alternative school settings and the targeted role that these schools play in supporting high-risk cohorts. Concerns reported to the unit are not confined to what reporters witness in the school setting but can be risks manifested in the student's home and community, and so some students may already be involved with the DCJ.

All NSW public school principals annually attest to related matters, including that staff have completed mandatory training and an 'annual competency check'. This check includes knowledge of key child protection information such as the responsibilities of mandatory reporters to recognise, respond to and report suspected risk of harm to children, and the Department's centralised reporting system. Principals also confirm that there are processes in place for screening casual and temporary staff, contractors, visitors and volunteers to the school.

The Department does not systematically monitor or report data relating to the annual attestations, or whether staff complete mandatory child protection training in expected timeframes. The Department considers these are matters for individual directors to identify and address with relevant principals within agreed timeframes (the greater the risk, the shorter the timeframe). The Department has not explored whether the statewide approach to child safety is sufficient for the alternative school settings, despite identifying that these student cohorts are more vulnerable and have more complex needs than those in mainstream schools.

There were some child protection gaps in NESA's regulation of home schooling

Chapter 16A of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (Chapter 16A) authorises and requires agencies with responsibilities and services relating to the safety, welfare or wellbeing of children to provide and receive information from one another to promote those objectives. NESA is a prescribed body, as is the Department.

NESA responded to Chapter 16A requests for information and regularly provided information to the Department about home schooling registration applications and children registered for home schooling under the same statutory provisions. It also used Chapter 16A to proactively request information from other government agencies, including NSW Police and the DCJ if it thought there was a clear reason to do so based on the home schooling registration application or associated concerns. This information was used to inform its decisions on whether to proceed with an application, trigger a monitoring visit or consider cancelling an existing registration.

However, NESA did not use Chapter 16A to routinely seek information from the DCJ, the Department or other government agencies to check – for every registration application – whether any safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns had been raised in relation to the children whose parents were seeking home schooling registration.

NESA advised that the legislative framework limited its decision-making on home schooling registration applications to assessing whether the requirements (set out in the NESA guidelines) were met – for example, if the proposed educational program was inadequate or the home environment was unsuitable for home schooling. Wellbeing concerns that were not related to the home schooling requirements, on their own, were not a basis for refusing registration.

This gap means that NESA may have registered children for whom safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns had been raised. In doing so, and allowing the child to be home schooled, NESA removed the school-based options to support such students. For NSW public schools, such supports include referral to external services, assistance from the Department's 'Team Around a School' specialists, and ongoing monitoring of the student's safety and wellbeing.

The Department, in assuming responsibility for home schooling regulation, has advised that it recognises this gap and intends to address it. It appreciates that any change would require careful consideration, strong interagency support and potential legislative amendment. NESA advised it was actively seeking to strengthen data sharing protocols through ongoing engagement with the Department and the DCJ, and acknowledges that enhanced data and information sharing would be beneficial.

NESA had powers to conduct home visits as part of registration assessments but these were not child welfare checks

NSW is the only jurisdiction in Australia that mandates a home visit to be conducted as part of home schooling registration applications. These visits must include sighting the child and their home learning environment. The maximum period of home schooling registration allowed under the Education Act is two years, meaning that children registered for home schooling are sighted at least once every two years, or more frequently depending on the period of registration granted or if a monitoring visit is initiated. NESA rarely initiated monitoring visits.

Home schooling registration visits are not general child welfare checks. NESA's staff ('authorised persons') were limited to sighting the child and observing the home learning environment, in order to advise NESA on whether the home schooling registration requirements could be met and therefore whether an application should be approved or not.

While authorised persons are not child protection officers, they are – like other professionals who work with children – mandatory reporters under child protection legislation. That is, if they have reasonable grounds to suspect a child is at 'risk of significant harm' they have a duty to report this as soon as practicable. The audit sighted each mandatory report made by an authorised person during the audit review period. These were provided promptly to the DCJ.

The NESA Child Safe Action Plan and related actions, including the development of a child safe policy and training for NESA staff at induction and annually, applied to NESA home schooling staff and authorised persons. NESA communicated the child safety obligations and tested the knowledge and application of them through regular staff professional development sessions that included discussion of case studies tailored to the home schooling context.

The agencies do not monitor student outcomes and do not know if alternative school settings and home schooling are effective in the unique way they deliver education

The Department does not systematically monitor or analyse the learning or wellbeing outcomes data relating to students in alternative school settings. Existing statewide datasets that inform on student outcomes include attendance, suspension and expulsion, NAPLAN results, HSC results, annual student and parent experience surveys and an annual survey on post-school destinations. However, these either exclude students from alternative school settings from the data collection or definitions, have low uptake, or are not disaggregated and analysed according to the student's education setting.

This means that, at a system level, the Department does not know the student engagement, learning and wellbeing outcomes of students in alternative school settings. Nor does it know whether alternative school settings are effective and fulfilling their implicit purposes to deliver education to particular student cohorts in a distinct way.

NESA had not conducted or commissioned research into the learning outcomes of NSW home schooled children since 2015. Despite registrations for home schooling more than doubling through the COVID-19 pandemic, NESA did not evaluate its approach to regulating home schooling in NSW.

In 2024 NESA commissioned an environmental scan of different regulatory approaches in other Australian and overseas jurisdictions. However, it did not explore the options for reform that this work identified before the NSW Government decided to move the home schooling regulation function to the Department. NESA does not know if its approach to home schooling regulation was effective.

Recommendations

By September 2027, the Department of Education should:

1. Develop and commence implementation of a strategy for alternative school settings, based on evidence and in consultation with relevant agencies and other stakeholders, that
 - a) assesses current and future demand and supply for existing alternative school settings across NSW
 - b) enables access to existing settings with needs-based eligibility criteria and timeframes for access and enrolment periods, and clear processes
 - c) enhances departmental oversight and support for students transitioning into and out of these settings
 - d) recognises and systematises the specialised nature of these settings, including through improved role clarity, targeted professional learning and tailored communities of practice
 - e) considers relevant previous reviews and government responses to their recommendations to inform improvements
 - f) establishes relevant data, reporting and accountability mechanisms for each setting so the Department can monitor and drive quality practice, positive student engagement and other elements of effectiveness.
2. Work with the home schooling community on reforms to home schooling regulation, including consideration of
 - a) recommendations for improvement from previous reviews
 - b) expedited registration processing times to shorten transition periods
 - c) strengthened departmental oversight and support for students transitioning into and out of home schooling
 - d) quality assurance frameworks that take account of the unique form of education delivery inherent in home schooling.
3. Identify the child safety monitoring risks in alternative school settings and in home schooling regulation, and ensure fit-for-purpose mechanisms are in place to address these.

2. Introduction

2.1. Legal and policy framework

Under the *Education Act 1990* (the Education Act), a key principle is that every child in NSW has the right to receive an education. The Education Act states that, in enacting the legislation, Parliament had regard to principles including that:

- the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child's parents
- the State has a duty to ensure every child receives an education of the highest quality, principally through providing public education.

These legislative principles do not give rise to legally enforceable rights.

Compulsory school age is between the age of six and the age at which the child completes Year 10 of secondary education, or the age of 17, whichever occurs first. The Education Act requires a compulsory school-aged child to be:

- enrolled at, and attending, a government school or a registered non-government school, or
- registered and receiving instruction for home schooling.

It is an offence if a parent of a compulsory school-aged child does not ensure the child is enrolled and attending school or registered and receiving instruction for home schooling. The Education Act sets out various defences to a prosecution for this offence, including:

- if a child is participating in distance education provided by a school
- if a child who is unable to participate effectively in formal school education for social, cultural or other reasons is participating in an alternative education program approved by the Education Minister.

The NSW Department of Education (the Department) offers a range of alternative school options to students who may not be able to, or choose not to, receive an education through a mainstream public school setting. These include:

- distance education schools
- hospital schools
- intensive learning support – behaviour schools and intensive learning support – mental health schools
- youth justice centre schools.

In addition to these settings, parents can take responsibility for educating a child, primarily in the child's home via home schooling. Parents who home school a child are responsible for developing and implementing an educational program that caters for the identified needs of the child. The program must be based on and taught in accordance with the relevant NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) syllabuses. Until 5 May 2025, NESA was responsible for the regulation of home schooling. The regulation of home schooling is now undertaken by the Department.

These four alternative school settings and registered home schooling, and the effectiveness of the Department and NESA in supporting students using them, are the focus of this audit. In early 2025, the Department established two new directorates under a single executive director within its Public Schools Division, to better support these alternative school settings and home schooling for students unable to access mainstream education. The audit did not assess the effectiveness of this restructure, but recognises that this provides the Department with an opportunity to consider the audit findings and implement the audit recommendations coherently.

2.2. Overview of the settings

Our analysis of the Department’s administrative enrolment data shows that in the audit review period, from 2019–2024, a total of 33,579 unique students were enrolled for at least six days in a distance education school or an intensive learning support school, or at least one day for a hospital school or youth justice centre school (see Appendix 3 for the list of schools). The number of registrations for home schooling increased from 5,906 in 2019 to 12,762 in 2024 (see Appendix 4 for the geographical distribution of these registrations).

Full-time equivalent enrolments across all public schools in NSW, including in the alternative school settings, was 805,673 in 2019 and 780,336 in 2024.

An overview of the different purposes, student populations and other features of each of these settings is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Features of each alternative school setting and home schooling

Feature	Distance education	Hospital schools	Intensive learning support schools	Youth justice centre schools	Home schooling
Purpose	Serve students who are geographically isolated, unable to attend school on a regular basis due to special circumstances, or unable to access an appropriate curriculum at their local school.	Provide continuity of education for hospitalised students.	Provide specialised support to students with behavioural support needs or diagnosed mental health conditions.	Provide education to students in custody.	Enable a parent to take responsibility for educating their child, primarily in the child’s home.
Student population	Students with geographic, medical or personal challenges who meet specific enrolment eligibility criteria.	Students hospitalised or receiving medical treatments at a hospital, including, in specific cases, their siblings in specific cases.	Students with complex trauma, diagnosed mental health conditions or behaviours of concern who cannot be supported in a mainstream school.	Children in custody on remand or control orders in youth justice centres.	Students from diverse backgrounds, including those with additional learning needs.
Learning environment	Virtual and hybrid teaching and learning, including online, by correspondence, virtual live classes and one-to-one sessions with teachers, pre-recorded sessions, self-paced learning, sometimes with physical hubs for	Hospital classrooms, bedside, and (sometimes) outreach programs.	Trauma-responsive, intensive multi-disciplinary case management of high-risk behaviours through individualised learning and behaviour support plans and collaboration with allied health or child protection services.	Secure, controlled environments within youth justice centres.	Home-based, flexible, and varies based on each child’s needs.

Feature	Distance education	Hospital schools	Intensive learning support schools	Youth justice centre schools	Home schooling
	in-person attendance.				
Curriculum	NSW syllabuses and personalised learning and support plans to access the curriculum. Also assists students in other alternative school settings to access curriculum through single subject enrolments.	Personalised based on age, health, and needs, aligned with NSW syllabuses and program of learning set by local school.	Individualised learning plans aligned with NSW syllabuses.	Targeted education programs, NSW syllabuses including options for Life Skills, vocational pathways and a focus on literacy, numeracy and personal growth.	Educational program aligned with the NSW syllabuses and meets the minimum curriculum requirements set out in the Education Act. Tailored to student needs, interests and abilities.
Teaching methods	Blended learning with online lessons, study days and individual supports.	Hybrid models: face-to-face and virtual, differentiated for medical needs.	Individualised and trauma-informed, focusing on flexible learning plans tailored to each student's needs. Schools use small class sizes, therapeutic supports, and wellbeing and cultural programs to support engagement, emotional regulation and learning.	Structured, secure, individualised programs, with one-on-one focus when needed.	Flexible and parent-led, allowing parents to choose an educational approach or philosophy that best aligns with their child's and family's needs.
Supports	Access to learning hubs, teacher visits and virtual assemblies.	Collaboration with health professionals, allied services, and local schools.	Mental health support, counselling, school partnerships with families and agencies.	Multi-disciplinary approach, including centre counsellors, psychologists and health professionals.	Online resources available from NESA, home-schooling support groups.
Duration of enrolment	Temporary or long-term based on needs and eligibility.	Varies: short-term during hospital stays or outpatient programs.	Temporary, focusing on transition to mainstream schools.	Temporary during time in custody with high student turnover.	Flexible, dependent on parent and student needs, up to two years after the child's 18 th birthday (provided they continue to meet the requirements for registrations).

Feature	Distance education	Hospital schools	Intensive learning support schools	Youth justice centre schools	Home schooling
Goal	Foster access to quality education for students who are isolated or whose special circumstances prevent them from attending school on a regular basis. Reintegrate students into mainstream education or post-school pathways where appropriate to the category of enrolment.	Ensure continuity of education and smooth transitions back to local schools for students in hospital.	Reintegrate students into mainstream education and improve social-emotional skills.	Prepare students for reintegration into society with education and skills for living in the community.	Variable, depending on the values and beliefs of the family and specific needs of the child.

Source: Audit Office analysis of Department of Education data, 2024 public annual reports of schools in audit scope, and NESA Guidelines for Home Schooling Registration in NSW, December 2021.

2.3. Origins and rationale

Numerous population and longitudinal studies show that completing education is positively associated with better income, health, wellbeing and life satisfaction measures later in life. All governments in Australia have repeatedly committed to providing all young Australians with the opportunity to reach their full potential through education.

Alternative school settings were introduced in NSW over the past approximately 130 years, as outlined in Exhibit 1. They aim to provide education, and sustain education continuity, for students who would otherwise not be able to receive an education – because they are in youth detention, hospital, remote areas or away from schools, experiencing significant difficulties with behaviour and emotional regulation, or experiencing severe school-related anxiety or other mental health challenges.

The high ratios of adults (teachers/support staff/parents) to students, personalised learning approaches, trauma-informed practice and a strong focus on the particular interests and needs of the child in the practices of these alternative school settings, and in home schooling, provide a different way of delivering education that is more suitable for these student cohorts.

The availability, accessibility and quality of alternative school settings are critical for these students in receiving an education.

Exhibit 1: Origins and rationale for alternative school settings and home schooling

Distance education:

- Began in the late 19th century to provide access to education for regional and remote students across NSW. With advances in technology over recent decades, distance education has expanded to meet the needs of a wider range of students, including those with complex needs and disabilities.

Hospital schools:

- The first schools to provide education to students in hospitals were opened by the Department more than 100 years ago, in 1923.

Intensive learning support schools:

- NSW Health facilities for students with emotional disturbance (mental health disability) were established in the 1970s to operate on a psychotherapeutic model of intervention.
- Specialist behaviour programs and classes were later implemented under the 1989 Special Education Plan to provide alternative placements for students with a pattern of aggressive or defiant behaviour that interfered with the learning or safety of themselves, other students or staff, and who were not appropriate for referral to NSW Health facilities.
- In 2001–2002, the NSW Government created the first ‘behaviour schools’ in NSW with specialist teachers and support staff. Further schools, some with emotional disturbance classes, were established from 2005–2007.
- In April 2025, following consultations with key stakeholders—including principal groups, the Minister’s Student Council (DOVES), education support staff, and the Disability Strategy Reference Group—‘emotional disturbance and behaviour’ (ED/BD) schools were renamed to ‘intensive learning support (mental health)’ and ‘intensive learning support (behaviour)’ to better reflect their purpose. This did not change practice.

Youth justice centre schools:

- Youth justice centre schools were established concurrently with the opening of each centre to ensure compliance with the principles of the Education Act and relevant international laws, which state that all children (including those in detention) have a right to access education.

Home schooling:

- In 1990 the Education Act formally recognised home schooling as a legal option for parents to meet their obligation to provide an education to their children. It states that ‘the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child’s parents’.
- Prior legislation allowed home schooling only if the Education Minister granted a certificate of exemption from compulsory formal schooling to parents of children between the ages of six and 15.

Source: Audit Office analysis of public information on schools in alternative settings and home schooling.

2.4. Enrolment and registration

The Department’s schools policy and general enrolment procedures guide enrolments in NSW public schools, including the alternative school settings in the audit scope, except distance education which is guided by its own separate enrolment procedures.

All children of compulsory school age are entitled to enrol at their local public school and attend mainstream classes. The Department’s enrolment procedures state that a student should be enrolled in one school only – the ‘census’ (or home) school – which is usually a mainstream school. However, the procedures also recognise that a student may need to attend an additional school – a ‘host’ school – for a specific time or purpose. Host schools include the alternative school settings in the audit scope. Students who require intensive levels of support can be enrolled at an alternative school setting as their census school. Specific criteria apply for enrolment in each of the alternative school settings.

For home schooling, the Education Act requires that a child must be registered or the parent commits an offence under the compulsory schooling provisions. Until May 2025, NESA administered the relevant legislative provisions for home schooling registration. ‘Authorised persons’ contracted by NESA conducted a home visit for each home schooling registration application and advised NESA on whether the application met the NESA registration requirements, recommended whether registration should be given, and for what time period (to a maximum of two years). NESA, as the Education Minister’s delegate under the Education Act, was required to register or refuse to register a child as soon as practicable after receiving the authorised person’s recommendation.

Exhibit 2 outlines the specific requirements for enrolment in the alternative school settings and registration for home schooling.

Exhibit 2: Enrolment criteria for alternative school settings and home schooling registration requirements

Distance education schools:

- Available to students who are geographically isolated or whose special circumstances prevent them from attending a school or other appropriate educational provision.
- Full-time enrolment may be available for students from preschool through to Year 12.
 - Single course enrolment is also available for students in government or non-government schools who are unable to access the course in their home or ‘census’ school – this is outside the audit scope.
- For full-time enrolment, students need to meet set criteria under 12 different categories for full-time enrolment (individual subjects may also be undertaken by distance education where local schools in the public or independent systems do not offer them).
- Principals of distance education schools determine the category under which a student will be admitted, and the duration of enrolment, except for specific eligibility categories – relating to students with additional learning and support needs – which are determined through the Department’s broader access request process (see Exhibit 3).
- Distance education schools can provide curriculum support for other types of alternative school settings, including intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools.

Hospital schools:

- Aim to provide continuity of education for students (whether enrolled in government or registered non-government schools) within the NSW Health hospital system.
- School-aged students are generally eligible to enrol if they are enrolled in a government or registered non-government school and their anticipated admission in a paediatric hospital is for a minimum period of time (e.g. three or five days), or they are admitted on a regular basis, or they are referred under special needs. For smaller hospital schools, students are enrolled on the day they arrive in the hospital.
- Once an enrolment application from parents is processed by the school, a shared enrolment is set up between the hospital and the student’s main (‘census’) school.
- Access to hospital schools for home schooled students is unclear. Historically, the Department’s position was that home schooled students cannot access hospital schools – or other government schools – because these are department settings and the Education Act does not provide for dual enrolment. The 2014 Parliamentary inquiry into home schooling recommended that the Department review its policies to ensure that home schooled students can access and participate in hospital school programs, and the NSW Government accepted this recommendation. The Department committed to lead a review to ‘reaffirm procedures’ in its hospital schools to ensure all compulsory school-aged in-patient students had access to education.
- However, there is no evidence that such a review was conducted or that the Department’s relevant policies and procedures were amended or clarified. In the hospital schools the audit team visited, home schooled students were accepted but this was a matter of school practice determined by the principal rather than Department policy.

Intensive learning support schools:

- Supporting eligible students with behaviour support needs or diagnosed mental health conditions in dedicated schools for specific purposes (SSPs).
- Enrolment is determined through the Department's 'access request' process. This involves:
 - identifying that a child has significant support needs for a behaviour placement or meets the Department's disability criteria for a mental health placement, and that an intensive support school can meet their needs
 - the local school, in consultation with the parent, completing an application
 - a placement in an intensive learning support school that is geographically accessible to the student becoming available
 - a local support class panel – consisting of representatives from the Primary Principals' Association, Secondary Principals' Council and SSPs, plus specialist staff, including the senior psychologist and staff from 'Team Around a School' – reviewing the application and making a recommendation.
- For joint NSW Health and Department of Education mental health support classes in intensive learning support schools, a referral from NSW Health is also required.

Youth justice centre schools:

- Students are children detained in youth justice centres either on remand (i.e. waiting for a court appearance after being arrested and charged) or serving a 'control order' (meaning a sentence has been issued by a court).
- The Department does not control student intake into schools within youth justice centres, and there is no set enrolment period because, depending on their charge – remand period or sentence – students could be with the centre from one day to a number of years.
- Access to all curriculum options is dependent on student risk levels as assessed by Youth Justice NSW with input from the Department.

Home schooling registration:

- To be registered for home schooling, families must reside in NSW and parents must ensure that:
 - the child's educational program is based on and taught in accordance with the relevant NESA syllabuses as determined by the Act, that is, the minimum curriculum for primary education (Kindergarten to Year 6), the minimum curriculum for secondary education (Years 7 to 10) or the curriculum for senior secondary education (Years 11 and 12)
 - the educational program caters for the identified learning needs of the child
 - there is an adequate system for planning, supervising, and recording teaching and learning experiences
 - there is an adequate system for recording the child's progress and achievement
 - the time allocated to learning is sufficient to allow coverage of the curriculum
 - the home learning environment is suitable for effective home schooling
 - the identified resources are adequate to support the child's learning.

Source: Audit Office summary of material from NSW Department of Education and NESA.

The typical timeframes for enrolment in alternative school settings and home schooling are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Typical timeframes for alternative school settings and home schooling

Setting	Time limits
Distance education schools	- Up to 200 school days for most enrolment categories. - Up to two years for students with a medical condition that prevents their attendance at a mainstream school. - Annual reviews for some other enrolment categories. - No time limits on enrolment for students who meet geographic isolation criteria, or who are from families who are part of the National School for Travelling Show Children, or where enrolment has been directed by the secretary or delegate of the Department.
Hospital schools	- Available for the time that eligible children are in hospital (or, in some schools, as outpatients). - A 2020 review of hospital schools commissioned by the Department found that the overwhelming majority of school-aged children do not stay in hospital as in-patients for long periods of time. In the hospitals that had a hospital school, there was a greater proportion of episodes of care that comprised a stay of between one and three days (84%) compared to a stay requiring more than four days (16%).
Intensive learning support schools	- No set period of enrolment, but these schools aim to return the students to mainstream schools or support their transition to other education or employment opportunities, rather than provide a student's entire schooling. - The Department's guidelines state that generally students are placed in the intensive learning support school for a maximum of four school terms.
Youth justice centre schools	- Available for the time that children are in custody at the centre, subject to regular risk assessments. - Published Youth Justice NSW data shows that the median length of stay in custody on control orders was between 63 and 66 days for each financial year between 2019–2020 and 2023–2024, except for 2022–2023 when it was 76 days. The median length of stay in custody on remand over this same period was one day.
Home schooling	- The Education Act limits the duration of any one registration period for home schooling to a maximum of two-year periods but there is no limit to the number of times a parent can apply for registration, provided the child is of compulsory school age. Families can continue to apply for renewal throughout a child's entire education. - NESA's standard and published practice was to typically grant registration for a maximum of one year for initial applications, and up to two years for renewals, contingent on demonstrated compliance with the registration requirements. Shorter periods (e.g. six or three months) would typically be granted if applicants demonstrated a capacity to comply with all requirements but with many areas for improvement and only limited planning to sustain a longer period of registration - see Table 7. - NESA's data shows that from 2021–2024, between approximately 80% and 90% of all initial home schooling registration applications were approved for one year, and between approximately 80% and 85% of all renewal registration applications were approved for two years.

Source: Audit Office summary of information from the Department of Education, NESA and Youth Justice NSW.

2.5. Resourcing

The Department forecasts demand for all public schools one year ahead, on a year-to-year budget. It uses an established process with NSW Treasury to adjust agency funding requests to reflect overall student enrolment numbers. There can also be internal budget bids that may attract funding to particular areas within the Department or public education system.

The Department allocates different types of funding to public schools under its resource allocation model (RAM) which includes:

- Universal base school allocations as the bulk of the funding, with components for staffing, operational funding, initiative funding for specific programs and site-specific allocations.
- Equity loadings to address the additional learning needs of students and reduce the impact of disadvantage on student outcomes, informed by the profile of students at each school including:
 - socioeconomic background
 - Aboriginal background
 - English language proficiency
 - disability.
- Targeted funding for support to individual students, including refugees or students who are recent immigrants, and for students with disability who have a confirmed diagnosis recognised by the Department's disability criteria and in response to successful applications from the school.

The amount allocated to an individual school under these RAM components depends on the school's student enrolment numbers and class sizes, the profile of students at the school and the need for equity loadings, and school applications for targeted funding for individual students.

The Department classifies certain schools as SSPs if they provide specialist and intensive support in a dedicated setting for students with moderate to high learning and support needs. SSPs have higher teacher-to-student ratios than mainstream schools, with most classes ranging from six to ten students. Each class is allocated one full-time equivalent class teacher and one full-time equivalent school learning support officer, reflecting the greater need for individualised learning of these student cohorts.

Three of the alternative school settings examined in this audit – hospital schools, intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools – are generally treated as SSPs. They are allocated base funding (for core operational and staffing costs) and the equity loadings for additional student need outlined above, except:

- hospital schools do not receive equity loadings for Aboriginal identity or for English language proficiency
- youth justice centre schools do not receive the equity loading for English language proficiency.

There are also differences in the staffing methodology calculations for these alternative school settings compared to other types of SSPs.

In 2020 the Department introduced a 'SSP Supplementary Funding Program' to alleviate critical resource constraints for SSPs and provided \$37 million in additional funding to be shared between the 117 SSPs in the State over four years. Allocations to individual schools depended on factors including the number of classes and students and existing staffing, and SSPs could use the supplementary funding flexibly. This program was extended in 2025 and the Department expects a new funding model for SSPs to take effect from 2026. Hospital schools and youth justice schools have been excluded from the 2026 funding model.

Distance education schools are not classified as SSPs but also have a higher staffing-to-student ratio than mainstream school settings. Funding for distance education schools reflects this ratio, as well as enrolment numbers (although the timing of such enrolments differs from mainstream schools) and historical program funding.

The Department allocated a total of approximately \$1.32 billion to the four alternative school settings over the audit review period. Annually, this was approximately \$179 million in 2019, growing to \$246 million in 2024, across the four alternative school settings. Table 3 shows the total and average funding for each setting in this timeframe. Employee costs (salaries) made up the bulk of the schools' annual expenditure over the audit review period.

Table 3: Funding and staffing for alternative school settings, CY2019–2024

	Distance education	Hospital schools	Intensive learning support schools	Youth justice center schools
Number of schools	9 [#]	10	35	6
Total funding CY2019–2024	\$517,675,983	\$69,072,084	\$585,769,684	\$143,664,562
Average total funding per school, per year^{<}	\$8,627,933	\$1,151,201	\$2,789,379	\$3,990,682
Average full-time equivalent staffing entitlement, per year[^]	658.0	69.1	681.1	179.7

[#] Note: Camden Haven High School was excluded from the audit scope because it provides distance and face-to-face education that cannot be disaggregated in the relevant data. NSW School of Languages was excluded because it provides single-subject enrolments, not full-time schooling.

[<] Calculated by dividing total funding per setting per year by the number of schools in the audit scope. Actual funding allocations to each school will vary depending on the application of the Department's RAM (i.e. calculation of the universal base allocation and relevant equity loadings plus targeted funding sought by each school).

[^] Note: Full-time equivalent staffing entitlement includes executives, teachers, school administrative managers, student learning and support staff, and other support staff.

Source: Audit Office analysis of Department of Education's 2019-2024 data.

The NSW Government resources the regulation of home schooling, but does not provide any financial assistance to parents who home school their child. Some stakeholders who contributed to this audit's public mailbox highlighted that the lack of government financial assistance made it difficult for families to choose to home-school their child. This is because it usually requires one parent to forgo paid work to be able to deliver home schooling instruction, while educational resources and external supports like commercial home schooling programs can be costly. In contrast, NSW public education is free to access.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, funding for NESA to register students for home schooling was incorporated into the agency's operational budget and calculated on the basis of staff numbers needed to assess and process registration applications within a maximum 12-week period.

During the COVID-19 pandemic there was a surge in applications for home schooling registration. NESA received adjustments to its budget as part of a temporary process, which more than doubled the annual funding allocated for home schooling regulation in FY2021–2022 compared to the prior year – from \$2.1 million to \$5.6 million. Table 4 outlines the annual NESA expenditure and staffing for the home schooling regulation function over the audit review period.

Table 4: NESA annual expenses and staffing for home schooling regulation, FY2019–FY2024

Financial year	Expenditure	Ongoing staff (FTE)	Temporary staff (FTE)	Authorised persons (FTE)	Total staffing (FTE)
2019	\$1,605,819	10	2	23	35
2020	\$1,442,157	14	5	22	41
2021	\$2,151,778	12.5	4	20	36.5
2022	\$5,638,619	17	14	22	53
2023	\$6,902,768	18	14	26	58
2024	\$6,353,668	20.2	11	28	59.2

Source: NESA budget and staffing information. FTE = full-time equivalent.

NESA intended to annually adjust its budget for regulating home schooling in line with registration application rates. However, Treasury did not approve an adjustment in the 2024–2025 financial year, and the Department assumed responsibility for regulating home schooling towards the end of that financial year. Since it assumed responsibility for home schooling, the Department advises that it has identified significant cost and forecast inaccuracies that have operational and budgetary implications.

2.6. Students in these settings

During the audit review period, the Department’s administrative enrolment data shows that a total of 33,579 unique individual students were enrolled for at least six days in a distance education school or an intensive learning support school, or at least one day for a hospital school or youth justice centre school. Forty-six per cent of these students were female and 54% were male. The Department does not collect data on other student gender identities.

Most of these students were enrolled in hospital schools (48%), followed by distance education schools (33%), intensive learning support schools (13%) and youth justice centre schools (six per cent). Note that some students were enrolled in multiple settings and are double-counted in the data analysis.

Over the same period, the number of registered home schooled children in NSW more than doubled, from 5,906 children in 2019 to 12,762 in 2024. In 2019, 47% of these students were female and 53% were male (NESA did not collect data on other gender identities at that time). In 2024, 48% of these students were female and 51% were male, and for one per cent of students, gender was recorded as not identified or indeterminate/intersex/unspecified.

The Department’s administrative enrolment data shows that students in alternative school settings tend to be 13 and older, while NESA’s home schooling registration data shows that students tend to be aged nine to 15. The age ranges for students in alternative school settings and registered home schooling as at 2024 are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5: Age ranges for students in alternative school settings and registered home schooling, CY2024

Setting	6–8 years	9–12 years	13–15 years	16–17 years
Alternative school setting	18%	25%	30%	27%
Registered home schooling	22%	35%	33%	11%

Note: Totals may be more than the sum of components due to rounding.

Source: Audit Office analysis of Department and NESA data.

While enrolling or registering only a small proportion of primary and secondary students, alternative school settings and home schooling serve a higher proportion of vulnerable students than do mainstream schools.

Students of intensive support schools, hospital schools and youth justice centre schools are, by definition, vulnerable as their enrolment is contingent on requiring behavioural support or having a diagnosed mental health condition, admission to hospital, and contact with the criminal justice system respectively.

The enrolment criteria for distance education schools also include vulnerability factors such as geographic isolation, a medical condition that prevents a student's attendance at a mainstream or hospital school, additional learning and support needs (where all other departmental provisions have been exhausted) and significant support needs. Other criteria for distance education enrolment relate to a student's travel, elite sports or performing arts commitments that hinder or prevent mainstream schooling.)

Research based on data from a six-yearly Young People in Custody Health Survey conducted by Youth Justice NSW and the Justice Health & Forensic Mental Health Network also shows multiple levels of disadvantage experienced by young people in custody. These include, typically: a history of child

abuse and neglect and out-of-home-care placements, poorer physical and mental health, a history of alcohol and illicit drug use and dependence, disrupted education (including from suspensions and expulsions), poor literacy and low educational attainment.

The Department's census enrolment data captures student enrolment numbers at each NSW public school at a point in time – the annual census day. The Department's census enrolment data does not include students at hospital schools as they are reported under their main 'census' school of enrolment.

The audit's analysis of the Department's census enrolment data shows that the student population across NSW distance education schools, intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools is made up of more students from low or mid-low socio-educational advantage (SEA) families than those from mid-high or high SEA families. This recognises that students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to be educationally disadvantaged. The Department identifies the SEA quartile for students based on information about their parental background variables collected at enrolment, such as parents' school education, non-school education and occupation group.

Over the audit review period, the Department's census enrolment data shows that between 33% and 39% of students at distance education schools, intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools each year came from low SEA families and between 17% and 24% came from mid-low SEA families. Students from mid-high or high SEA families made up approximately 30% of the population each year (for between 12% and 14% of all students each year, no SEA data was recorded).

Aboriginal⁴ students are a priority 'equity cohort' under departmental policies as there is clear evidence of a learning gap compared to other student cohorts, and longstanding state and national commitments to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students given the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation. In 2024, Aboriginal students made up 9.7% of the full time equivalent student enrolments in NSW public schools. The Department's census enrolment data shows that in 2024, Aboriginal students accounted for:

- 57% of students in youth justice centre schools
- 26% of students in intensive learning support schools
- 16% of students in distance education schools.

NESA's application form for home schooling registration had a voluntary question about the main reason the applicant was home schooling. Options included 'philosophical', 'religious', 'special learning needs' and free-text answers under 'other'. The related data has some known limitations, including being incomplete (since the question was voluntary) and that if an applicant selected multiple reasons, only one was recorded and included in reporting. The Department notes that this likely resulted in skewed figures that do not fully reflect the diversity of motivations for home schooling.

Table 6 details the breakdown of these different reasons as a proportion of total home schooling registration applications made to NESA in each year from 2019–2024. Noting the caveats above, this data suggests a slight declining trend in families choosing to home school for philosophical reasons and a fluctuating trend in families home schooling because their child has special learning needs. Each of these reasons made up around one-fifth of the reasons given for the total number of applications each year.

Home schooling for religious reasons grew over the audit review period but continued to make up a small proportion of total numbers overall (between five and six per cent). There is no clear trend in bullying as the reason for home schooling, and it was generally one per cent or less of the total number of home schooling registration applications each year. While the miscellaneous category of 'other' has grown year-on-year, NESA advised that the free-text answers for this category were not readily coded into other themes apart from 'bullying', which was reported as a separate category.

⁴ In this document, the term Aboriginal people is used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Audit Office of NSW acknowledges the diversity of traditional Nations and Aboriginal language groups across the state of New South Wales.

Table 6: Reasons for seeking home schooling registration, 2019–2023

Reasons for home schooling	% of total applications in a calendar year					
	CY2019	CY2020	CY2021	CY2022	CY2023	CY2024
Philosophical	23.6%	23.1%	21.8%	21.9%	22.0%	20.0%
Religious	5.7%	4.9%	5.4%	5.6%	6.1%	6.2%
Special learning needs	25.4%	20.8%	17.7%	17.2%	21.4%	22.0%
Bullying	0.8%	0.2%	1.4%	0.7%	0.4%	0.5%
Other	27.6%	28.6%	28.5%	31.7%	33.4%	34.0%
Nil response	17.0%	22.4%	25.3%	22.9%	16.7%	17.4%

Note: the total number of applications for registration each year includes applications for exemption from registration. The table does not include extension of registration due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Certificates of Completion of Year 10, or change of address applications. Totals may be more than the sum of components due to rounding.

Source: Audit Office analysis of NESA's published data.

Before assuming responsibility for home schooling regulation in May 2025, in December 2024 the Department matched its public school enrolment data with NESA data on home schooling registrations. The analysis identified that 54% of the 13,227 children registered for home schooling at that time had previously attended a NSW public school. Based on the enrolment data for those home schooled children, the Department observed that over the period 2019–2024:

- the proportion with a disability had increased from approximately 35% in 2019 to an estimated 54% in 2024
- the proportion in the top two SEA quartiles declined from 55% to 37%, while the proportion in the bottom two SEA quartiles increased from 45% to 62%
- the proportion of Aboriginal children grew from five per cent in 2019 to 12% in 2024.

In addition to these specific factors, students across all of these alternative school settings and in home schooling share a common vulnerability to disrupted education if the settings are not accessible, timely, providing good quality education, ensuring child safety and effective in supporting transitions in and out of them. These factors are the focus areas of this audit.

2.7. About the audit

This audit assessed the effectiveness of the agencies in supporting students to receive a quality education when delivered through alternative school settings and registered home schooling. In this audit, these settings are defined as distance education schools, hospital schools, intensive learning support schools, youth justice centre schools and registered home schooling.

In making this assessment, the audit examined whether the agencies:

- provided alternative school settings or supported home schooling for students to ensure continuity of education, including by making these settings accessible and available in a timely way to students, and ensuring that transitions are effective
- effectively implemented quality assurance and safeguarding mechanisms for alternative school settings and home schooling.

While the Department's delivery of alternative school settings and NESA's regulation of home schooling are different activities with separate legislative provisions, the audit has identified some common performance issues and made some common findings. However, where there are distinct performance achievements or gaps between the agencies, this is made clear in the report.

For both agencies, the relevant provisions of the Education Act and any related policies or procedures were used as the benchmark against which performance was assessed. Where legislative provisions differed for each agency, the audit assessed the agency against the applicable provisions. The scope of the audit did not include an:

- assessment of policies and practices at Catholic and other non-government schools, early childhood education and outside school hours care services, or vocational education and training services
- assessment of SSPs catering for students with disability or support classes located in mainstream schools (these were considered in the Audit Office's 2024 [Supporting students with disability](#) audit)
- an assessment of other alternative school settings provided by the Department, such as selective high schools, intensive English centres and the Intensive English High School, suspension centres, tutorial centres and programs, environmental and zoo education centres, and the NSW Centre for Effective Reading
- in-depth examination of student behaviour management policies and practices (these are the focus of a separate audit topic on the Audit Office forward work program)
- assessment of the performance of individual schools, or of the quality of home schooling instruction
- examination of the merits of government policy objectives (see subsection 27B(6) of the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983*).

The main period of focus for this audit is the six calendar years from 2019–2024. However, where relevant to the audit scope, significant events before and after this date have been considered.

Between September 2024 and August 2025, the audit received 99 contributions from members of the public via an online mailbox on the Audit Office website or other contact. These were voluntary, sometimes anonymous, and shared people's relevant lived experiences about home schooling and alternative school settings. They helped inform the conduct of the audit and were considered in the context of audit evidence. The Audit Office would like to thank the people who took the time to share their experiences about alternative school settings and home schooling.

3. Access to education settings

3.1. Demand and enrolment processes

Distance education school enrolment procedures are complicated, inconsistently applied and difficult to meet

In Queensland, distance education is available to any student who is willing to contribute to the costs of its delivery, but this is not the case in NSW, where specific enrolment criteria must be met.

Of the 288 complaints made or escalated to the NSW Department of Education (the Department) about the alternative school settings in the audit review period, around half concerned distance education schools and most of these related to operational issues with the school – primarily enrolment.

The Department has not reviewed the distance education school enrolment procedures since 2013, and – unlike for other settings – it does not have real-time data to show why students are enrolled in these schools. This lack of data prevents the Department from assessing student need and demand in these settings.

The Department conducted a review of distance education in late 2024, which it publicly reported in April 2025. This review found that:

- each of the distance education schools interpreted the enrolment criteria differently
- over recent years, enrolment in distance education has grown for categories relating to complex student learning support needs
- current enrolment policies were inadvertently creating barriers to access to distance education, impacting equity and inclusivity for all students.

Related evidence assessed by the audit supports these findings.

The review recommended that the Department simplify and streamline distance education enrolment policies and procedures to enhance equitable access for all students. The Department advises that it has begun to explore how these policies and procedures can be adjusted.

The Department has not improved the ‘access request’ process that limits access to intensive learning support schools and some enrolment categories for distance education

For intensive learning support schools and some categories of distance education (relating to students with additional learning support needs), enrolment is contingent on a successful ‘access request’ application and an available place in the school (see Exhibit 3). Our 2024 [Supporting students with disability](#) audit report found that the access request process:

- was convoluted and administratively burdensome
- although not explicit, operated in a way that slows access to these supports.

The Department has not yet completed improvements to the access request process proposed in 2018 and commenced in 2022. It advises that a new access request system will be trialled in Term 3, 2025, with statewide implementation planned for 2026.

Exhibit 3: The Department's access request process

Enrolment in intensive learning support schools and distance education schools under categories 2.8, 2.9 and five of the enrolment in distance education procedures (for students with additional learning and support needs, and transition for students with significant support needs) is via the Department's 'access request' process.

Public schools make access request applications to the Department for students to receive targeted supports that the school cannot provide. The applications are developed by a school's learning and support team in consultation with school staff, specialist support teachers, school psychology and counselling services, as well as the parent(s) of the student concerned.

Access requests are decided by local departmental panels across the State in accordance with statewide operating procedures, except for dedicated panels convened to consider applications relating to distance education for students with intellectual disability.

Panels are made up of primary, secondary and schools for specific purposes (SSPs) principal representatives for the area, with a learning and wellbeing team member and a senior education psychologist (from the relevant Departmental Student Wellbeing Services directorate and the regional 'Team Around a School'). Panels meet seven times per year – twice a term in weeks three and seven (except in term one when they meet once). If an application is not supported by a panel, it may be resubmitted to the panel up to two more times before schools need to complete a new application for the student.

The Department tracks whether access request applications have been supported by the deciding panel, deferred for a future panel meeting, declined by the panel or withdrawn by the school. Applications may include three priorities for the supports sought for a student, and it is possible to have more than one priority supported by the panel.

Source: Audit Office analysis of information from the Department of Education, 2024.

Despite commissioning a review in 2020 that found significant changes to the hospital school population, the Department has not implemented any changes to how it delivers hospital school services

The Department commissioned a review into hospital schools in 2020 which observed that there had been significant changes to models of care within the health sector in the previous decade, with an increasing focus on outpatient and hospital-in-the-home models and shorter average lengths of stay in hospitals. This means that fewer children were admitted to hospital and remained as inpatients, and for shorter durations, than in the past. There has also been an increase in treatment sought for child and adolescent mental health challenges over the same timeframe.

However, NSW hospital schools generally do not provide education for children who are not in hospital but unable to attend school due to ongoing out-patient treatment, chronic physical or mental illness, rehabilitation or convalescence. Five years after commissioning the review, the Department has not implemented its suggested changes to the hospital school model to better cater to the needs of these students.

The Department does not support youth justice centre schools to deliver education to young people in custody on short stays, which is an increasing proportion of the population

Although the youth justice centre population is increasingly made up of young people on remand short stays, the Department does not support schools in these centres to adapt teaching and learning to this student cohort and it does not take a statewide approach to reaching these vulnerable young people and re-engaging them in education, training or pathways to employment.

Prospective students in youth justice centre schools can usually enrol 48 hours after they have been detained, subject to risk assessments, health and psychological screening, and an agreement to respect the school's values and rules. School principals can question an enrolment pending the development of appropriate strategies to manage the risks posed by a child.

The cohort of young people in youth justice centres has changed over the last five years. Increasingly, they are young people on remand short stays, i.e. waiting for court proceedings to be finalised rather than serving sentences (control orders). Published data from Youth Justice NSW shows that while overall numbers of young people in detention are falling, the number and proportion of young people in youth justice centres on remand has grown over the last five years, from an average daily number of 144 (57%) in 2019–2020 to an average daily number of 160 (75%) in 2023–2024. Correspondingly, the average daily number of young people serving custodial sentences has decreased from 107 (43%) in

2019–2020 to 52 (25%) in 2023–2024. The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research suggests that this is due to increases in the severity of court bail decisions.

The majority of young people in youth justice centres admitted on remand in 2023–2024 was of compulsory school age: 56% were younger than 16, while 42% were 16 to 17. For young people admitted to youth justice centres on control orders in 2023–2024, 27% were younger than 16 and 65% were 16 to 17. The legal school-leaving age is 17, but under the Education Act, it is also compulsory to have completed Year 10 (whether by school education, home schooling or an approved technical and further education (TAFE) course equivalent). In addition, school principals must verify that students have satisfied the statutory requirements for attendance and participation.

Research shows that very high proportions of the young people entering custody in NSW have histories of poor school attendance, low educational attainment, high rates of suspension and expulsion, and early leaving ages, which results in substantial gaps in their academic and social learning.

With the increase in the proportion of young people in custody on remand, they are more likely to be in youth justice centres for short periods of time. Youth Justice NSW published data indicates that the median length of stay in custody on remand for every financial year between 2019–2020 and 2023–2024 was one day. In contrast, the average length of stay for young people on control orders was 66 days in 2019–2020 and 63 days in 2023–2024. Detainees also have many demands on their time during the day that can compete with schooling, including transfers between youth justice centres, court attendance, and meeting with various specialists such as lawyers and psychologists.

Researchers note that short periods of stay complicate the delivery of educational programs in youth justice centres and make student completion of recognised qualifications unlikely. However, these schools can assist young people in detention to re-engage with education, which is crucial to successful reintegration into the community after leaving custody. The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People's 2019 report on consultations with children and young people in youth justice centres found that they benefited from attending school in these settings, and viewed these schools as positive learning environments characterised by supportive teachers, flexible individualised learning plans and smaller class sizes. Youth justice centre schools provide an opportunity to reach highly vulnerable young people, even those on short stays in the youth justice centre.

Other Australian jurisdictions, such as Victoria and Queensland, have an extended school year for youth justice centre schools to allow students to receive schooling on whatever day(s) they are in custody (including on weekends and school holidays). This capitalises on the time young people spend in detention, either learning or advancing their employability after release. The Parkville College model – operating through campuses at four youth justice centres in Victoria – has flexible student engagement strategies and a 52-week extended school year. An evaluation found that the model was responsive to student needs and the detention environment, and resulted in highly effective teaching and learning despite the students' short stays (with an average of less than two weeks).

In NSW, each youth justice school decides by annual staff vote if it will run an extended school year the following year. Those that do receive additional funding towards staff salaries, and must provide at least 15 days in extra teaching compared to the standard 40-week teaching year for mainstream schools. Historically in NSW the additional days of teaching are typically delivered during the two-week term holidays during the school year (reducing them to one week), rather than during the longer December/January school holiday period. There is no maximum number of additional teaching days the youth justice centre schools can elect. In Victoria, as noted, Parkville College operates 52 weeks of the year, including on weekends. In Queensland the extended school year in youth justice centre schools is 48 weeks long.

The Department advises that in NSW it tends to be the largest schools that take up the extended school year model, as they have the human and financial resources to make it viable. In 2024, Girrakool School in the Frank Baxter Youth Justice Centre and Putland School in the Cobham Youth Justice Centre operated an extended school year.

In 2021, the Department commissioned an academic review of the extended school year model in NSW youth justice centre schools. The review found that, between 2006 and 2021, the number of schools adopting the model had generally declined. The maximum number of additional teaching days provided in any one year by an individual school was 22 while most provided 15 (the minimum number under the model); and the number of additional days being taught had fallen over time.

The review also highlighted that youth justice centre school principals saw many benefits for having teachers on site engaging young people in education throughout the year. However, they said it was difficult to operationalise the model with staff leave and departmental administrative systems that assume a standard school year. They were also unable to know the impact of the NSW model on longer-term student learning, engagement and life outcomes after students had left custody and the school.

Youth justice centre schools the audit team visited said that managing the increased fluctuation in student enrolments and short stays was a challenge. They address this by developing specific personalised learning plans and delivering standalone lessons that are designed to meet the specific educational needs of the student, rather than using teaching approaches in mainstream settings with a series of lesson modules that build on one another over days or weeks.

However, this is practice developed by individual schools over time and has not been driven or supported by direction or guidance from the Department. The Department does not take a statewide approach to reach young people in youth justice centre schools and try to re-engage them in education, training or pathways to employment – such as by facilitating an extended school year across the centres, and developing a statewide framework with Youth Justice NSW for transitioning school-aged young people from detention centres into the community (as recommended in the Audit Office's 2016 report on [*Reintegrating young offenders into the community after detention*](#)).

NESA has not updated its guidelines for home schooling registration despite the profile and volume of home schooled students changing since the COVID-19 pandemic

The requirements for home schooling registration were specified by NESA in public guidelines during the audit review period. The guidelines were first published in 2017, replacing NESA's previous guidance (the 'Information Package'). NESA initiated an extensive consultative process with the home schooling community to update the guidelines in mid-2019 and publicly released the updated guidelines in December 2021. However, this review and update focused primarily on the clarity of information in the guidelines rather than the specific requirements for and timeframes of registration or the application assessment processes.

Although NESA has instigated four reviews of aspects of home schooling operations in the last four years, there have been no significant changes in relation to policy or process. This includes no update to the guidelines since 2021, despite the shift in the profile of home schooling students over the last six years, and the volume of registered home schoolers more than doubling with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

NESA advised that its work to review evidence-based research and develop options for legislative and policy reform, in response to the changed environment, was expected to provide updated policies and clearer stakeholder requirements regardless of whether reforms were implemented. This work was put on hold due to the NSW Government's 2024 decision to transfer regulatory oversight of homeschooling from NESA to the Department from 2025.

Dated guidelines do not seem to have affected access to home schooling. NESA approved a very high proportion of home schooling registration applications each year. NESA's data shows that its refusal rate was 1.8% in 2020, 2.4% in 2021 and around 5.5% in 2022 and 2023. For each of these years, the primary reason for the refusals was that the applicant was not available for assessment, followed by the child not being eligible (including where the child lived outside of NSW, the applicant was not a parent of the child or the application was incomplete). The proportion of all refusals that were made on the basis that the requirements of home schooling were not met were 0.3% or less in each year from 2020–2023.

However, a number of stakeholders the audit team heard from said they found NESA's information and guidance to support parents to register for home schooling complex and confusing. They thought the guidelines did not clearly or sufficiently describe the requirements of parents to home school in plain English. They also said that the varying periods of registration granted by NESA made home schooling registration more difficult in practice.

NESA took steps to encourage consistency in the assessment of home schooling registration applications, but had no formal avenue of appeal in relation to registration timeframes

NESA published guidelines for families on the requirements for home schooling registration, and practice advice for staff ('authorised persons') who conducted home visits to assess registration applications.

NESA's decisions about whether to grant or refuse a registration application, and differences in the length of time for which registration was granted, rested on a risk-based framework that assessed home schooling applications as set out in Table 7.

Table 7: Basis for different periods of home schooling registration

Elements demonstrated by applicant (examples)	Typical period of registration
- Compliance with all requirements of home schooling registration - Capacity to plan and provide for the educational needs of the child during the period of registration - Level of planning to sustain a period of up to two years of registration	Up to two years
- Compliance with all requirements of home schooling registration, with some areas for improvement - Capacity to address areas for improvement - Level of planning to sustain a one-year period of registration	One year
- Compliance with all requirements of home schooling registration, with many areas for improvement - Capacity to address areas for improvement - Limited planning to sustain a period of registration	Three to six months
- Failure to demonstrate compliance with one or more requirements of home schooling registration - Failure to address previously identified areas for improvement in relation to the requirements - Failure to demonstrate a capacity to comply with one or more requirements	Refusal

Source: NESA (2019) Registration for Home Schooling: Authorised Persons Handbook. Note: these are typical periods of registration, but other periods (e.g. nine months) may be recommended or approved.

NESA's data shows that from 2021–2024, between approximately 80% and 90% of all initial home schooling registration applications were approved for one year, and between 80% and 85% of all renewal registration applications were approved for two years.

Some home schooling stakeholders expressed frustration in correspondence to the Education Minister, in complaints and consultation feedback to NESA, and in submissions to the audit, about the varying registration lengths given by NESA to applicants. This included concerns that:

- different families and different children within one family received varied lengths of registration periods
- shorter registration periods (three months or less) were the same (or shorter) than NESA's maximum registration application processing time, meaning that families had to commence their next application for home schooling registration upon receiving a three-month or less registration period.

The audit saw evidence that authorised persons' advice to NESA on periods of registration focused on their assessment of the applicants' compliance, and capacity to comply, with the registration requirements as outlined in Table 7. The audit could not assess the consistency of registration periods granted, as these were based on the evidence sighted by authorised persons during individual home visits.

To determine whether there was sufficient evidence to demonstrate compliance or capacity to comply with registration requirements, authorised persons sometimes discussed their home visit observations with NESA home schooling regulation staff. However, they did not take copies of the relevant evidence – such as proposed educational programs or photographs of the proposed learning space – so it was not visible to any other NESA employee unless:

- a different authorised person conducted a home visit to the same family, for example, if the application was withdrawn and later resubmitted as part of a renewal registration application or as part of a monitoring visit, or
- an internal review was conducted.

NESA said that consistency in assessing applications for home schooling registration did not mean that all applications, or even all applications from the same family, would be granted the same registration period. NESA set expectations for, and provided support to, authorised persons to assess applications in the same way to encourage consistent judgement on the evidence provided by parents that they would or did meet registration requirements in relation to each child proposed for home schooling. The audit team sighted authorised persons' reports and training materials, and observed scenario discussions and other evidence of NESA's efforts to moderate the practice of authorised persons so that similar evidence would be assessed in a similar way by different staff.

NESA also provided an internal review process for an authorised person's recommendation that a home schooling registration application be refused, but not for applicants to seek a new decision about the length of time granted for home schooling registration. However, applicants could also withdraw their registration application and submit a new one, which NESA may have allocated to a different authorised person to assess, depending on caseloads. In practice, very few complaints, internal reviews and withdrawn applications were made each year (less than two per cent of the total number of applications).

The time taken by NESA to process registration applications is discussed below.

The geographical locations of hospital and intensive learning support schools limit access to students in some areas of the State

Student access to hospital and intensive learning support schools is limited by their geographical distribution.

There are 223 public hospitals in NSW and ten have a hospital school. Eight of these are located in Sydney, with the remaining two in inner regional areas (Wollongong and Newcastle). Some hospital schools provide outreach services to children based elsewhere if they are connected to the hospital in which the school is based.

In addition to the ten hospital schools, there are seven classes (sometimes referred to as 'learning centres') located in other hospitals that are typically staffed by a teacher and school learning support officer from a local public mainstream high school or SSP. Three of these are located in Sydney, and four are in regional NSW. The audit did not assess these classes.

Otherwise, students in hospital need to be supported by their local mainstream school to access education while they are in hospital.

The 2020 review of hospital schools commissioned by the Department revealed that there is a mismatch between the location of existing hospital schools and the location of hospitals where students aged five to 17 present. For example, in Sydney's south-western suburbs, hospital schools are located in hospitals that do not have the highest proportion of school-aged students. The Department recognises that the current distribution of hospital schools is a legacy of historical decisions that are not necessarily justified by the evidence.

There are 35 intensive learning support schools in NSW and, according to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), 28 (80%) are located in 'major cities'. Of the remainder:

- six (17%) are located in areas classified as 'inner regional' (that is, within a reasonable distance of major cities, with good access to a range of services) such as Albury, Dubbo and Wagga Wagga
- one school (three per cent) is located in an ASGS 'outer regional' area (Moree)
- none are in ASGS-classified 'remote or very remote' areas of the State.

Enrolment numbers in the 35 intensive learning support schools are capped to reflect classroom capacity, and no new intensive learning support schools have been established in the last 20 years (since funding was provided for eight new intensive learning support schools in the 2004–2005 state budget).

The Department advised that the establishment of any new intensive learning support schools would require clear evidence of need and positive impact on student outcomes. However, the Department has not conducted or commissioned evaluations to identify whether there is evidence that the existing intensive learning support schools meet current demand, address student needs or produce positive outcomes.

The Department does not centrally monitor or forecast demand for alternative school settings

The Department does not centrally monitor or forecast demand and supply for alternative school settings. It does not analyse the enrolment data for these schools beyond an annual point-in-time enrolment census data collection to understand:

- the volume and profile of students using the alternative school settings
- the periods of time for which they are enrolled
- whether and how often the students return to the same schools and/or same settings
- whether demand is being met by the existing supply of schools and settings or alternative provisions (such as support classes in mainstream schools).

Enrolment applications and decisions for alternative school settings are determined by the principal of each school (taking account of the recommendations of access request panels where relevant – see Exhibit 3). These decisions are subject to limits on enrolment (classroom and staffing) capacity and the geographic distribution of existing schools. The specific eligibility criteria for each setting target the schools to students whose needs cannot be met in mainstream settings, and also manage the volume of applications made to available places. However, demand is unknown and this application management is not transparent.

The Department does not maintain an internal or public waitlist for these schools and, until its 2024 internal review of distance education, had not considered changing the supply, distribution or access to existing alternative school settings. It has not conducted research or analysis to understand the drivers of demand for alternative school settings, and whether these can be addressed through means other than increasing supply of these schools (such as through its separate process to establish additional support classes in mainstream schools).

The Audit Office's 2024 [Supporting students with disability](#) audit found that the average annual growth rate in enrolment in SSPs – which included SSPs catering to students with disability as well as the alternative school settings in this audit scope – was almost double (1.9%) that of the general enrolment rate for public schools (one per cent).

That audit found that, in 2023:

- the Department had centralised oversight of support classes (including support classes in SSPs as well as in mainstream schools) at a statewide level and the Department reviewed and increased the distribution of these classes annually,
- however, the Department could not readily tell where demand outstripped the supply of support classes in specific schools or geographic locations at any point in time, and the process was not timely or effective in addressing supply constraints and unmet need.

This finding also applies to student access to intensive learning support schools and distance education schools for students with additional learning and support needs, transition needs, or significant support needs (which are each determined by the access request process).

A 2020 review of hospital schools commissioned by the Department found that it was not possible to determine whether the utilisation of those schools was appropriate or reflective of the actual number of students requiring an education service, nor whether all students requiring an education service were receiving it. The Department has not investigated the utilisation of hospital schools in the five years since this review.

Demand for attending a youth justice centre school is determined by the number of young people in the centre. Table 8 outlines the difference in the maximum capacity of the centre and the maximum enrolment number in the school. Differences in these numbers are due to some centres having capacity for young people who will not stay at the centre once processed by Youth Justice NSW.

Table 8: Capacity of Youth Justice NSW centres and related school enrolment ceilings

Youth Justice NSW Centre	Centre type	School/education training unit name	Centre capacity – detainees (2025)	Maximum school enrolments – students (2024)
Acmena Youth Justice Centre	For male detainees on control orders or remanded in custody	Induna	37	42
Cobham Youth Justice Centre	Principal remand centre for males aged 15–21	Putland	97	90
Frank Baxter Youth Justice Centre	For male detainees aged 16–21 on control orders	Girrakool	78	90
Orana Juvenile Justice Centre	For male detainees on control orders or remanded in custody	Lincoln	26	36
Reiby Youth Justice Centre	For male detainees aged under 16 and female detainees on control orders or remanded in custody There is also a pre-release unit (Waratah Unit) that accommodates up to ten detainees over the age of 16	Dorchester	54	55
Riverina Juvenile Justice Centre	For low-risk to medium-risk male detainees on control orders or remanded in custody	Shepherds Park	35	42

Note: Schools have an annual turnover higher than the maximum enrolments due to variability in the time young people are at the centre. Some centres cater to a higher number of young people on remand, and as a result will support a higher number of young people over the course of a year. Maximum enrolments may change over time.

Source: Audit Office summary of information from the Department of Education 2024 and Youth Justice NSW.

The responsibility for enabling student access to education in alternative school settings across geographical regions is shared between the Department, the DCJ and NSW Health, and should be addressed collaboratively.

The Department does not track whether eligible students can access alternative school settings in a timely way

The Department requires mainstream public schools to enrol students within a certain period of time after an eligible enrolment application is received, if there are not complications involved such as risk assessments or discussions about whether the mainstream school is the most suitable for the student concerned. However, the Department does not track the time taken for eligible students to access alternative school settings after they satisfy the specific enrolment criteria and follow the relevant procedures that apply to these settings.

Enrolment in intensive learning support schools and distance education schools for some enrolment categories is via the Department's access request process (see Exhibit 3). This audit analysed the Department's data on all the access request applications made from any NSW public school in the audit review period where the application sought an outcome relevant to the alternative school settings in the audit scope, specifically:

- a placement in an intensive learning support school for a student with behavioural support needs or diagnosed mental health condition
- enrolment in a distance education school for students with additional learning and support needs, including a confirmed disability (distance education enrolment category 2.8) where they cannot attend school regularly or there is no local mainstream provision to meet their learning needs, and all other departmental provisions have been exhausted
- temporary enrolment in distance education for students with significant support needs, when part of a managed transition strategy between the local mainstream school and distance education school (distance education enrolment category 2.9)
- enrolment in the Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School Distance Education Support Unit (DESU), which provides a specialised distance education mode of delivery for isolated students with a confirmed moderate to severe intellectual disability (DESU access requests are determined by a statewide, rather than local, panel).

During the audit review period, NSW public schools made 12,130 access request applications across these four types of application outcomes. Most (5,385 or 44%) nominated a placement in an intensive learning support school for a student with either a diagnosed mental health condition (3,226 or 27%) or behaviour support (2,159 or 17%) as 'priority one'. This was followed by applications nominating the enrolment in distance education of students with significant support needs for a transitional period (4,109 or 34%) and of students with additional learning and support needs (2,520 or 21%) as 'priority one'. A total of 116 (one per cent) applications sought enrolment for a student in the DESU as 'priority one'.

Table 9 outlines the median time taken for finalising such applications, which varied depending on the type of outcome sought.

Table 9: Median time taken for panel ‘supported’ decisions on specified access request outcomes, 2019–2024

Outcome category nominated as 'priority one' supported by panel	Median timeframe in days (2019–2024)	Median timeframe in days (2024 only)
Enrolment in intensive learning support school – behaviour	42	37
Enrolment in intensive learning support school – mental health	56	40
Distance education – students with additional learning and support needs	29	24
Distance education – students with significant support needs – transition	27	21
DESU	79	33

Source: Audit Office analysis of Department of Education’s access request data.

Across these particular outcome categories, the median timeframe for ‘supported’ panel decisions improved year on year in the audit review period. In 2019, the median timeframe for all of the four outcome categories analysed was 55 days; in 2021 it was 33 days and in 2024 it reduced further to 27 days. These timeframes relate to the access request panel process – they are not the time between a student’s need for these alternative school settings being identified and their being allocated a place in (or starting at) the school.

In response to a 2017 Parliamentary inquiry into the education of students with disability in NSW, the Department introduced a 28-day key performance indicator (KPI) on access request panel decisions to try to resolve access requests in a timely manner. This KPI applies from the date a school first submits an access request to when a panel decision is documented. However, these changes do not track the time taken for a place at the relevant school to be secured for eligible students. The Department does not monitor the time taken from first access request application to placement in a school. The Audit Office identified in the 2024 [Supporting students with disability](#) audit report that this was a key gap and a finding that had been made before in an earlier audit.

The Department does not measure the timeframes involved in enrolment applications for the other alternative school settings not covered by the access request process, and it cannot demonstrate whether the time taken for students with identified need – and eligibility – to access these settings is timely or not. For hospital and youth justice centre schools, access should usually be within a matter of days of arriving at a hospital or centre. This is monitored at the school level, not centrally by the Department.

NESA monitored the growth rate and locations of home schooling registrations – as well as its own efficiency in assessing applications – and secured increased resources to respond, but staffing did not match demand and processing times grew by 63% between 2019 and 2024

NESA monitored the annual growth rate of home schooling applications and the geographical distribution of home schooling registrations to try to anticipate application volumes in the year ahead, but longer-term estimates were challenging. Unlike public school enrolments, which can be forecast based on population growth and distribution, and trends in government school enrolment (given compulsory schooling law and policy), home schooling is optional and the number of families choosing it, as well as the reasons they are choosing it, vary from year to year.

With home schooling registrations more than doubling following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, NESA sought and received adjustments to its budget from NSW Treasury. This roughly trebled the funding allocated in 2024 compared to that in 2019, enabling a 69% increase to the complement of relevant staff responsible (see Table 4 in section 2.5).

NESA's data shows that the average number of days it took to process home schooling registration applications was 40 days in 2019, rising to 58 in 2021, and further increasing to 65 days in 2024. NESA attributes this 63% increase to the significant rise in application volumes; in this period, the number of applications increased 125%, from 5,872 in 2019 to 13,230 in 2024. This equated to an average of approximately 168 applications per staff member in 2019, growing to an average of around 223 applications per staff member in 2024. In terms of applications per authorised person (that is, NESA field staff conducting home visits to inform application assessments), in 2019 the number of applications per authorised person was approximately 255 and in 2024 it was approximately 473.

Variations in the time taken by NESA to process an application for home schooling registration depended on factors such as:

- whether the application form was complete
- the availability and readiness of the parent for application assessment visits
- the number of applications received by NESA at any one time.

In addition to increasing staff resources, NESA attempted to improve the efficiency of its application processing in a variety of ways, including by standardising process rules, developing templates and exploring agency-wide systems technology reforms to digitise and automate elements. However, ultimately staffing did not keep pace with demand, the technology reforms had not been settled or rolled out across NESA at the end of the audit review period, and the time taken for NESA to process home schooling applications continued to extend as demand for registration grew.

NESA did not liaise with the Department to understand whether unmet student need in the mainstream school system – or a lack of access to distance education – contributed to the uptake of home schooling. Nor did it examine whether there were other factors influencing demand that it could use to inform its forecasting and related resourcing.

Interagency relationships play a role in the operation of hospital schools, youth justice centre schools and some intensive learning support schools

Hospital schools, youth justice centre schools and some intensive learning support schools operate in specialised settings where education must be coordinated with other agencies. Effective interagency relationships are therefore necessary to ensure children have access to educational opportunities outside of the Department's school infrastructure.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Department and Youth Justice NSW on the youth justice centre schools expired in 2015. In 2021, the Department began collaborating with Youth Justice NSW to update the MOU, including by establishing a formal governance structure for developing, monitoring and evaluating the agreement. As of 2025, a new MOU has not yet been implemented.

The draft of the revised MOU states that school hours are managed by the Department (with youth justice centres not to remove students from class except if necessary), and formalises processes for joint activities, collaboration, transition planning and conflict resolution between agencies. The MOU also recognises the need to embed commitments to Closing the Gap and cultural safety by enhancing support for Aboriginal students, including by providing access to culturally appropriate resources and programs.

A 2021–2024 MOU between the Department and the NSW Ministry of Health establishes a high-level commitment for both agencies to collaborate and coordinate efforts aimed at supporting student health, wellbeing and educational outcomes. However, hospital and intensive learning support schools that benefit from NSW Health services – such as speech pathology, occupational therapy and mental health support – are not specifically referenced within the agreement. The lack of an explicit formal agreement about hospital and intensive learning support schools creates the risk of operational challenges, including unclear agency roles and responsibilities, resource allocation issues and limited practical collaboration.

Intensive learning support, hospital and youth justice centre schools reported to the audit team that collaboration with related agencies generally works 'on the ground', but can be challenging when education is not the primary focus.

3.2. Transitions into and out of education settings

The student cohort for alternative school settings experience more school transitions than other students

Students in alternative school settings are not expected to be enrolled for their entire schooling career (see typical timeframes for enrolment in Table 2, section 2.4). The audit's analysis of the Department's administrative enrolment data suggests that the median number of days that students were enrolled in an alternative school setting in a year was 119 days overall, but varied between the different settings, as set out in Table 10.

Table 10: Minimum, median and maximum number of days that students were enrolled in alternative school settings in a year (2019–2024)

Alternative school setting	Minimum (days)	Median (days)	Maximum (days)
Distance education schools	6	251	365
Hospital schools	1	2	365
Intensive learning support schools	6	306	365
Youth justice centre schools	1	63	365

Source: Audit Office analysis of Department of Education data.

This means that students in alternative school settings experience more transitions than other students, since they must transition into and out of the settings as well as between primary and secondary school, whereas most students of mainstream schools generally need to transition only once: from primary school to secondary school. Appendix 5 shows how one student transitioned between a intensive learning support school, a support class in a mainstream school and a youth justice centre school, as recorded in the Department's enrolment data.

2016 departmental analysis of its data about student enrolments found that changing schools can have detrimental impacts on educational outcomes (attainment, progress and school completion) over and above other risk factors and level of prior achievement. In particular, the data analysis indicated that:

- The more times students move schools, the greater the negative impact on outcomes
- Moves made during the year have a greater negative impact than moves made between years
- Mobility has an impact on both reading and numeracy.

This highlights the importance of supporting effective student transitions.

Student transitions into and out of alternative school settings are managed by individual schools

The Department recognises that effective transitions are important for the continuity of students' education and to optimise their learning and wellbeing outcomes. It expects transitions between different education settings to be facilitated between schools such as through a shared enrolment model, information sharing and individual student transition plans. It recognises that transition arrangements may vary in practice to reflect the individual needs of the student, learning adjustments and parent preference. The audit has seen examples of sound individual transition plans and arrangements between alternative school settings and mainstream schools.

Schools the audit team visited said that sometimes when students arrived in the alternative school setting, key student information and/or support from a student's previous (mainstream) school was lacking. Some schools reported that students often struggle to transition back to a mainstream school after time spent in an alternative school setting, because mainstream settings are unable to meet their needs and individualise their learning.

Some staff said they focus on transitioning students to other SSPs or support classes in mainstream schools where relevant, and on assisting older students to access vocational education and training or employment once they leave the alternative school setting, as these types of transitions are usually more successful.

The audit team heard about processes the schools had in place to support students in planning their transition back to their mainstream school or into the community (if legally leaving school for training or work), such as that featured in Exhibit 4. Staff also highlighted the lack of system-level oversight and support for students after they had left their setting.

Exhibit 4: One school's approach to facilitating student transitions

One intensive learning support school shared a data-driven model it had designed to facilitate the successful transition of its students back to their mainstream public school or into other educational settings. In this model, students begin by attending the alternative school setting five days a week for at least ten weeks. The enrolment is shared with their mainstream public school, allowing them to remain enrolled at both their original school and the intensive learning support school. This arrangement facilitates the transition back to the local school. It also allows students to remain connected to their local community through the local school.

While at the intensive learning support school, teachers, school learning and support officers, executive staff and other relevant staff can input data to an app detailing each student's attendance, behaviour and learning engagement within the alternative school setting. The app synthesises the data and can generate succinct reports broken down by class, day, term and year. These reports track each student's completion of classroom tasks and progress in demonstrating skills aligned with the school's values, using a points system.

The school considers a student eligible for transition out of the intensive learning support school if the data indicates that they have met a specified minimum point threshold and have maintained acceptable conduct with no suspensions during the school term. This model provides parents, teachers and principals with a clear visual representation and evidence of each student's development and readiness for transition.

After meeting transition requirements, students may start attending a mainstream school either gradually (starting with two hours per week and progressing to half days over several weeks) or quickly (moving from half days to full days within a term), building up to full-time enrolment. Students are supported to attend their local school by a learning and support officer from the alternative school setting. When a student has attended the mainstream school full-time for five weeks without additional support from the alternative school setting or significant issues as reported by the mainstream school, they are considered fully transitioned and the support from the alternative school setting ends.

The intensive learning support school principal said that this practice enables successful transitions because transitions only occur when the student is ready and proper supports are in place. The principal noted that the particular app and process had been developed by the school individually in the absence of a statewide or setting-specific approach.

Source: Interview with a principal of a NSW public school.

A lack of central departmental guidance or support for transitions into or out of alternative school settings creates the risk of gaps in enrolment for individual students

Unlike the Department's role in relation to student transitions in other contexts, there is no central guidance, agreed process, staff role, program or dedicated function to support students moving into or out of alternative school settings, creating the risk of gaps in enrolment for individual students.

The Department provides guidance and resources to schools and families for other types of transitions including: students moving between different stages of school (particularly starting kindergarten and leaving school); students returning to school after experiencing a significant event or stressor; student suspensions; and when students appear before the Children's Court. These resources include things like:

- dedicated staff roles, such as transition officers in the Department's regional teams (which focus on careers advice and post-school pathways) and Education Court Liaison Officers at Children's Courts
- information, including literature reviews and case studies on the evidence of 'what works' for successful transitions
- guidelines and procedures
- transition planning guides, tools, templates and transition practice checklists.

The Department has guidelines for the establishment and operation of intensive learning support schools. These include an expectation that students will stay temporarily (no more than four terms) and that the schools will conduct transition planning with the mainstream schools to which the students will return. However, there is no statewide transition process or mechanism for these students, and the audit team saw evidence that there were a number of different transition approaches being used by different intensive learning support schools.

The Department does not provide any specific guidance or support for students transitioning into or out of alternative school settings, and the resources developed for other types of transitions are not directly applicable. This means that evidence-based good practices for specific transitions are not identified or shared with individual schools, and that statewide system-level supports, like regional transition officers who might play a role in helping students move between settings, are not in place.

There is also a risk that inadequate or absent transition planning and support at the school level – whether from the alternative school setting or the receiving mainstream school – are not identified. For example, the 2016 audit on [Reintegrating young offenders into the community after detention](#) found that transitioning young people in custody in youth justice centres could be difficult because (among other things) some schools were reluctant to accept former detainees due to the stigma around being in detention. The 2016 audit recommended that the (then) Juvenile Justice NSW work with the Department to roll out a statewide framework for transitioning school-aged children from detention centres into the community. This has not been done.

This risk has larger consequences for these students than for students in mainstream schools, because the student cohorts in alternative school settings are already vulnerable to disengagement from education and unlikely to highlight issues they may experience with transitions.

While parents must provide evidence of current enrolment or intent to register for home schooling before withdrawing a child from school, and schools tend not to unenroll students unless they can confirm a student is enrolled in (and attending) another school or registered for home schooling, individual schools lose sight of (and responsibility for) students once they are no longer enrolled. The Department retains legal responsibility to ensure school-aged children are enrolled in and attending a registered school or are registered for home schooling.

The Department has a long-running statewide program aimed at addressing student non-attendance through casework intervention (the Home School Liaison Program), which is informed by referrals from school principals and fortnightly reports on the status of home schooling registrations. This includes cases where children of compulsory school age are not enrolled at any school or registered for home schooling, or whose whereabouts ('educational destinations') are unknown. Either the alternative school setting or the receiving mainstream school can refer a student to the program.

However, stakeholders told the audit that the program tends not to prioritise cases relating to the student cohorts from alternative school settings because they perceived that heavy caseloads mean caseworkers focus their efforts on students in primary school and other cases where intervention is earlier and more likely to make a difference to student engagement.

The audit's analysis of the Department's administrative enrolment data suggests that students in alternative school settings aged 14 to 17 made up one-half of the total number of students in those settings in 2019 and in 2024 (the beginning and end of the audit review period). An internal review of the Home School Liaison Program the Department conducted in 2024 found that many schools avoided applying to the program because of the administrative burden and perception that applications would be rejected due to the student's age and the program's limited caseload capacity. This review also found that there was no clear definition of the target student group and, in practice, few students older than 14 were accepted into the program.

There is no other system-level guidance or support for students transitioning into or out of these alternative school settings.

NESA did not facilitate home schooling students' transitions into or out of NSW public schools, but in recent years worked to improve transitions for home schooled students into TAFE NSW

NESA had no legislative responsibility for home schooled children before it registered them or after they stopped being registered, and did not facilitate student transitions into or out of home schooling from or to NSW public schools (such as through liaison with the Department or relevant principal).

NESA provided information to the Department fortnightly on the status of all home schooling registrations (including applications yet to be processed, applications that had been withdrawn and existing registrations that had been cancelled) to help the Department ensure that children of compulsory schooling age were in school or registered for home schooling. If home schooling registration was refused or cancelled, the families were directed to re-enrol in a school without delay.

NESA also created some optional resources for families to use to track home schooled children's educational progress, which it believed could help families transition children to formal school after home schooling if relevant.

NESA worked to help students access other pathways after home schooling including Year 10 equivalency, apprenticeships and other post-school options, for example, through a dedicated working group with TAFE NSW to improve coordination and make it easier for home schooled students to access these opportunities.

The agencies do not coordinate student transitions from formal schooling to home schooling, which take on average more than ten weeks

NESA's processing of home schooling registration applications usually took more than a school term. In addition, there were no suitable alternatives for students needing to leave mainstream schooling and start home schooling quickly.

Under the Education Act, a student cannot begin home schooling in NSW until they are registered. In the period during which a home schooling registration application is being assessed, the child is legally required to be enrolled in a school, if they are of compulsory school age. As noted above, NESA's latest data shows the average number of days it took to process registration applications was 40 calendar days in 2019 rising to 57 in 2022, and further increasing to 65 calendar days in 2024. This is equivalent to almost one school term.

In some other Australian jurisdictions, provisional registration is possible after an application for home schooling registration has been submitted. Provisional registration is temporary registration until the formal registration application can be assessed and approved. For example, in Queensland, provisional registration lasts for 60 days, during which time the applicant does not need to provide a summary of the child's educational program or report on their educational progress.

Several stakeholders to the audit, and to a 2014 Parliamentary inquiry into home schooling in NSW, advocated for provisional registration to be available in NSW. They argued that where a child cannot attend school (for example, due to severe mental health challenges) or is potentially harmed by attending school (for example, due to bullying), home schooling needs to start as soon as possible. Stakeholders advised that the delay in registration processing can cause stress for families who know they are potentially subject to child protection reports on the grounds of educational neglect, and prosecution for breach of the Education Act requirements for compulsory school-aged children to be in school or in registered home schooling.

Under the Department's Exemption from School procedure, schools have the authority to exempt a student from enrolment and attendance where it has been clearly demonstrated by the applicant that this is in the student's best interests in the short and long term, and that alternatives (such as distance education) have been fully explored. However, the Department does not know if schools are consistently applying this exemption process for all eligible students.

As noted above, the Department's Home School Liaison Program aims to address low student attendance through casework intervention. The Department has not provided practice guidance to program staff on how to triage or treat cases where students are not attending school because they are waiting for their home schooling registration application to be processed. The Department advises that, while no formal staff guidance is documented, in practice home school liaison officers tend to monitor the list of pending home schooling registration applications and generally do not take action if a valid application is in progress unless there has been a significant delay.

Where concerns arise about a child potentially not receiving an education, the DCJ often uses Chapter 16A of the *Child and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* to seek information from the Department (previously NESA) about whether the child is already registered for home schooling or has an application underway, to help inform their statutory child protection assessment and decisions about next steps.

4. Education programs

4.1. Meeting the needs of students

Alternative school settings have smaller class sizes and individualised learning approaches to meet the diverse needs of their students

Alternative school settings aim to tailor teaching to the diverse needs of their students through, for example, individual assessment and personalised learning plans, higher adult-to-student ratios than mainstream classes, and specific program or intervention supports.

The Department of Education (the Department) classifies classes in intensive learning support schools, hospital schools and youth justice centre schools as support classes that provide specialist and intensive support for eligible students. Across the State, every support class has fewer students than mainstream classes, and is allocated both a class teacher and a school learning support officer (SLSO). For the schools in the audit scope:

- classes in youth justice centre schools have a maximum of six students, except the classes in High-Risk Units, which have a maximum of three students
- Intensive learning support classes have a maximum of seven students
- classes in hospital schools have a maximum of 15 students, except in the mental health support classes in some hospital schools, which have a maximum of seven students
- distance education schools do not attract the staffing allocations for support classes, except for the Sir Eric Woodward Distance Education Support Unit, which provides distance education for students with intellectual disability.

Class teachers are responsible for planning personalised learning and support for each student. SLSOs are non-teaching roles supervised by classroom teachers that can assist students with school routines, classroom activities, social activities in the playground and (where specifically qualified) student health support.

For each of the four alternative school settings, induction to the school is expected to include a check of each student's existing literacy and numeracy competencies, learning goals and needs from their previous school, strengths, and areas for development. Personalised learning and support plans cover key short-term goals relating to social, academic and life skills development. Schools can also develop behaviour management plans and health management plans for individual students.

This audit sighted examples of such plans, which were comprehensive and individually tailored. The individualised approach targets students' learning and wellbeing needs. Departmental research involving student survey responses from across the NSW public school system has found that students experience a sense of belonging and wellbeing at school when they are recognised and nurtured as individuals.

Schools the audit team visited said that they collaborate with families and other relevant professionals, such as psychologists, counsellors, caseworkers, doctors and local mainstream school staff, to address the educational needs of each student. Schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students reported strong relationships with local Aboriginal communities, and offering cultural education programs to their students. Some schools also employ Aboriginal staff to support their students. The audit did not assess the cultural competency or cultural safety of the schools concerned.

Across the alternative school settings, individual learning plans for older students are targeted at improving trade and life skills, to help students transition to employment, vocational training or further education. Some schools considered that their ability to support students was limited by the transitory nature of their school setting and the short duration for which some students are enrolled.

In addition to individual learning plans, schools visited by the audit team had developed resources and teaching materials for their student cohort. For example, one hospital school uses a student-led learning model (based on project-based learning) that focuses on students' strengths and interests to engage them in education during their short stay in the hospital. And a distance education school talked about spending significant staff hours to create their own learning materials aligned to the new NSW curriculum but tailored for students who are learning at home with parental support.

Exhibit 5 includes the audit team's observations of the educational opportunities provided to students by the schools visited.

Exhibit 5: Examples of how alternative school settings work to meet the needs of individual students

The audit team visited a total of seven schools across the alternative school settings (distance education schools, hospital schools, intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools). These visits helped contextualise the documents and data provided by NESA and the Department; they were not to audit the schools concerned and did not comprise a representative sample.

On these visits, the audit team observed that principals and teachers were committed to supporting students' wellbeing and providing them with tailored education to meet their individual needs. For example, they talked about how they helped individual students identify their motivation to learn and meet their future career goals, and offered opportunities to access specialist teachers, programs and projects as well as supports such as paediatricians, speech and occupational therapists, doctors and social workers. Many schools reported using their resources to create infrastructure and programs specific to the diverse needs of their students. Examples included designing and adjusting education material for individual students, helping students to access cultural programs, assisting students with travel to job expositions run by external agencies, providing recreational and sport equipment in playgrounds tailored to the particular needs and interests of these student cohorts, and commissioning Aboriginal artwork for classrooms and school spaces.

The audit team did not meet with students during its visits to schools, but the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) consulted with students in youth justice centres in 2019 and 2020. The ACYP found that these students had positive experiences across all centres. Students spoke about being able to access education opportunities that were unavailable to them in the community, such as technical and further education (TAFE) courses, school qualifications and distance education. They said that schools offered positive learning environments because of the level of teacher support, flexible individualised learning plans and smaller class sizes. They also valued the cultural programs and pre-release programs that taught life skills for reintegration into the community.

Source: Audit Office observations of visited schools, submissions to the audit public mailbox and summary of ACYP consultations.

Teacher shortages impact alternative school settings

Teacher shortages were an operational challenge for all NSW public schools in the audit review period (2019–2024). Since 2023, the NSW Government has implemented a number of strategies to address teacher shortages and it reports there was a 24% decrease in vacant positions across the State at the start of Term 3, 2024 when compared with the same time in the previous year. None of these initiatives specifically target alternative school settings, although some would be applicable to teachers in these settings and elsewhere, such as tertiary scholarships for inclusive education teachers, and for Aboriginal and rural and remote teachers.

Teacher shortages hinder the ability of any school to provide high-quality education to students. However, the Department is not able to tell from its data whether a difference in the value of full-time equivalent staffing funding for a school (its 'entitlement') and the full-time equivalent value of staffing in place at a school (its 'establishment') signals a vacancy or not, because temporary and casual staff engaged directly by schools are not clearly flagged. Whether or not staff recruitment generally, and teacher shortages in particular, are more significant issues for the alternative school settings than other types of schools is unclear to the Department.

Most of the alternative school settings the audit team visited said that recruiting capable staff is challenging. They explained that the Department's recruitment process does not allow them to specifically target staff with the required skills to teach in their unique setting. Owing to the extensive induction requirements of staff to work in alternative school settings, schools cannot rely on the general pool of casual teaching staff, which makes it difficult to cover staff on leave and to support

staff to access professional learning. Schools reported that staffing challenges often result in merging of classrooms and other workarounds, which are disruptive to the learning and support needs of students.

Teachers in alternative school settings reported feeling satisfied with their job, which supports quality teaching

The audit analysed the de-identified data relating to the responses of departmental employees in alternative school settings to the People Matters Employee Survey (PMES), which is conducted across the NSW public sector annually. The responses of staff in alternative school settings to certain questions in the annual PMES provide a way to understand how they feel about their role, including whether employees:

- feel satisfied with their job
- feel motivated to contribute more than what is normally required at work
- gain a feeling of personal accomplishment from their job
- consider that their workgroup is able to demonstrate outcomes from their work.

Across the audit review period, the average annual number of staff survey respondents to these questions was 1,113 from intensive learning support schools, 1,124 from distance education schools, 65 from hospital schools and 317 from youth justice schools.

The highest proportion of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with these four questions was in relation to being able to demonstrate outcomes, with 91% of intensive learning support school respondents, 82% of distance education school respondents, 79% of youth justice centre school respondents and 71% of hospital school respondents feeling their workgroup could demonstrate outcomes.

Over 80% of respondents from intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools were satisfied with their job, felt motivated to contribute more than what is normally required at work, and gained personal accomplishment from their role. This is despite 35% of respondents from intensive learning support schools also indicating that they had been threatened with or actually physically harmed at work in the previous 12 months. Around 70% of respondents from distance education schools agreed or strongly agreed with these three statements. Only 59% of hospital school staff respondents reported feeling satisfied with their job and motivated to contribute more; while 69% said they had a sense of personal accomplishment.

Some international studies have identified a positive association not only between teacher job satisfaction and retention (which helps to address teacher shortages), but also with the quality of instruction provided to students by teachers.

NESA checked that home schooling educational programs were appropriate to meet the diverse learning needs of students

NESA supported alternative education delivery that met the diverse learning needs of students by enabling home schooling and requiring that parents demonstrate how they would cater for the identified learning needs of the child. The NESA guidelines for home schooling registration requirements also allowed parents of children with disability and/or additional learning needs to adjust the educational program to meet their child's learning needs.

NESA checked that home schooled children received instruction in line with the NESA syllabuses through home visits conducted by authorised persons for registration applications. For renewal registration applications, the authorised person assessed the parent's evidence of having met home schooling registration requirements in the previous period of approved registration. This included checking that the educational program had catered to the identified learning needs of the child, and that the resources were adequate to support the child's learning. It also involved assessing the proposed educational program for the next period of registration. For initial registration applications, the authorised person assessed whether the parent had developed a proposed education program that aligned with NESA syllabuses, catered to the identified needs of the child, and included appropriate planning, supervision and systems for tracking learning.

If authorised persons identified gaps in a parent's proposed home schooling education program, they were able to recommend a shorter period of registration, and note that the application was compliant with the requirements but had areas for improvement which would be reviewed after the period of registration was complete if home schooling was sought again.

Authorised persons could also recommend that NESA refuse home schooling registration if an application did not comply with the requirements, including if it did not cater to the identified learning needs of the child. This did not happen often; NESA's data indicates that less than one per cent of applications for home schooling registration renewal were refused annually from 2020–2023.

NESA received a small number of complaints about authorised persons (49 in total) over the audit review period. Seven of these complaints said that the authorised person assessing the application did not understand the individual learning needs of the child, for example they:

- did not appreciate the progress made by the child through home schooling compared to their educational engagement and learning knowledge before it
- did not understand the impact the child's learning difficulties, disability or mental health challenges had on the educational program they were able to complete
- insisted on certain subjects, resources and work being demonstrated without taking into account the particular abilities and learning needs of the child.

NESA used complaints to inform the professional development of authorised persons, and had previously facilitated reflective practice discussions at quarterly briefing sessions with authorised persons about identifying the needs of the child, understanding adjustments for students with disability, and assessing how the child's needs would be met by the parent through home schooling.

Many parents from the NSW home schooling community find home schooling to be an essential method of education for meeting the learning needs of their children (see Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6: Audit observations on contributions from home schooling parents and authorised persons

The audit team spoke to home schooling parents and authorised persons who assess home schooling registration applications through home visits. Many gave examples of the positive impact of home schooling on students. For example, authorised persons highlighted the efforts and accomplishments of families whose children, due to significant disabilities or severe mental health challenges, were unable to learn in mainstream schools. Parents talked positively about the ability to tailor education to the strengths and interests of their children, whether their children were struggling with learning difficulties, or demonstrating high potential or gifted and talented traits. This included by drawing on external experts and resources in inclusive education, vocational training and specialist subject matters. Some home schooling parents told the audit that they would have welcomed support and constructive feedback on their educational program from authorised persons (many of whom were former teachers and/or school principals) but this was not usually forthcoming given NESA's formal regulatory role.

Source: Audit Office summary of positive aspects of home schooling included in contributions to the audit public mailbox from home schooling parents, and audit team consultations with authorised persons.

Guidance from the agencies on how schools and authorised persons should support diverse student cohorts in alternative school settings and home schooling could be improved

As outlined in section 2.4, the Department's enrolment data shows that the student population in alternative school settings, when compared with students in all NSW public schools, is more likely to be Aboriginal and from low or mid-low socio-educational advantage (SEA) families. The Department's analysis of enrolment data for home schooled children who had previously been in a NSW public school identified a similar profile, and that they were more likely to have a disability.

Part of meeting the diverse learning needs of students involves addressing additional learning needs and reducing the impact of disadvantage that can come from a student's low socioeconomic background, Aboriginal background, low English language proficiency, rural or regional location, and/or disability. The Department has four types of equity loadings on school funding allocations for these student cohorts. Hospital schools do not receive equity loadings for students' Aboriginal background or English language proficiency, and youth justice centre schools do not receive the equity loading for English language proficiency. Schools can combine the different equity loadings they receive and use other parts of their school budget to meet the needs of their students each year.

The audit team's analysis of the Department's funding data found that equity loadings for students with low socioeconomic backgrounds made up most of this type of funding for the alternative school settings, followed by the equity loading for students of Aboriginal background and the equity loading for disability. In their annual public reports, alternative school settings reported using their equity loadings to:

- employ additional and specialist staff to deliver personalised support for diverse student cohorts, including Aboriginal students and students with disability
- deliver support programs in literacy, numeracy and student wellbeing
- track relevant data to develop evidence-based interventions and remediation.

Some also reported implementing strategies specific to their alternative school setting, like distance education schools conducting field visits to help students with additional learning and support needs; creating dedicated roles and teams within the school to focus on Aboriginal education; and commissioning services from specific Aboriginal culture education providers.

However, these approaches are school-by-school and the Department does not monitor whether schools use equity loadings in line with the funding objectives or check whether such expenditure has improved the experiences or outcomes of relevant student cohorts.

NESA's quarterly briefing sessions for authorised persons covered a range of topics, including strategies to support students with disability like training on the use of Life Skills syllabuses and how to incorporate therapies and supports into home schooling; as well as more tailored sessions on mental health, autism and learner diversity. The NESA home schooling regulation team also included staff with expertise in inclusive education who offered on-demand support to authorised persons, including case-specific guidance.

Some of these professional learning sessions for authorised persons focused on NESA's equity principles that promote inclusive education for all students regardless of disability, ethnicity, cultural background, socioeconomic status, language, gender, sexual orientation or beliefs. In 2025, NESA planned to provide professional learning on Aboriginal cultural responsiveness and the audit sighted evidence that similar training was provided to authorised persons in 2024, but not in previous years.

However, over the audit period, neither agency:

- required qualified or experienced inclusive education teachers for students with disability in the alternative school settings, or mandated that authorised persons have such qualifications or experience in assessing home schooling registration applications
- had dedicated Aboriginal-identified teaching/learning support roles in these schools or in the NESA home schooling unit; linked the Department's Aboriginal policy and program areas to the alternative school settings; or built and tested the cultural competency of authorised person staff
- guided schools or authorised persons on how to apply particular approaches to support low SEA students in these settings (the Department has produced a practice guide on identifying and supporting low SEA students, but it assumes that the context is a mainstream school).

The Department is not effectively seeking feedback from students and families to understand whether their needs are being met

Feedback from teachers, students and families could provide insight into whether student needs are being met in alternative school settings. However, the Department is not effectively seeking feedback from families and students in these settings.

While the audit team saw evidence that individual schools in alternative school settings proactively seek feedback from their students and families about their experiences of teaching and learning at the school, the Department does not systematically collect or report feedback from these groups independently of the schools, to understand whether their needs are being met.

From 2013–2024, the Department ran annual surveys of students, parents and teachers called Tell Them From Me (TTFM), which captured perceptions of school experiences by these groups, including on teaching and learning. The Department expects schools to include the results of the TTFM surveys

in evidence reviewed and continuous improvement activity undertaken as part of the School Excellence Framework (see section 4.2).

However, very low numbers of students, parents and teachers from alternative school settings completed the TTFM surveys in the audit review period. For example, parents from only 12 of the 62 schools participated in at least one year and provided more than five responses to the survey over the audit review period.

While the Department provides resources on 'student voice' to encourage students to actively participate in decision-making at school, and facilitates a dedicated Minister's Student Council, these are not channels for students in alternative school settings to provide feedback to the Department.

The Department advised during the 2024 [Supporting students with disability](#) audit that it uses complaints data to inform responses to inquiries, the development and review of policy and procedures, and the development of professional learning and resources for school staff on engaging with the community. It expected that planned changes to the way these issues of concern and outcomes of complaints are captured and reported in its complaint handling system would assist its understanding of issues that impact parents and children.

However, there were very few complaints made or escalated to the Department relating to alternative school settings (288 out of a total of 46,526 in the audit review period, or 0.62%). This may be because families and students were satisfied with the alternative school settings and did not have complaints; that the alternative school settings were adequately resolving complaints directly at the school level; or that there were barriers to making a complaint. Unless the Department seeks and facilitates feedback from these students and their families, it will not know.

Mechanisms to seek feedback from the home schooling community could be improved

In response to a recommendation from the 2014 Parliamentary inquiry into home schooling, NESA established the Home Schooling Consultative Group in 2016. An executive director from NESA chaired the group and under the terms of reference, membership comprised at least four home schooling parents and four NESA nominees. The consultative group generally met quarterly during the audit review period, and NESA published minutes from the meeting on its website.

In line with the Parliamentary inquiry recommendation, the consultative group was responsible for:

- overseeing consultation between NESA and the home schooling population
- providing input to and reviewing the design and implementation of home schooling policies and procedures
- providing ongoing advice and assistance to NESA.

Over the audit review period, the group considered and advised on matters including: ways to engage the home schooling community (such as through periodic surveys and options to request a call from NESA staff at registration); development of an online platform for registration; and support for home schooling families with recent statewide reforms to the NSW curriculum.

However, many home schooling stakeholders told the audit that the group's members were not representative of the home schooling community; and some previous members of the group said that NESA did not adequately consult or involve it in key decisions about home schooling regulation.

In addition to convening the group, NESA engaged with representatives from various home schooling associations throughout the audit period. However, NESA's consultations with these associations were infrequent and usually in response to requests from the association concerned, rather than proactively initiated by NESA.

NESA sought feedback from the home schooling community, including the associations, about home visits during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and updating the home schooling registration guidelines after these, but it did not conduct much other engagement over the audit period, particularly once the guidelines were updated in 2021. NESA did not run surveys or otherwise try to reach families not connected with home schooling associations or the consultative group, to understand their experiences and invite feedback on NESA's regulation.

The Department has continued to convene meetings of the Home Schooling Consultative Group since it assumed responsibility for regulating home schooling in May 2025, and advised the audit team that it intends to make the group more representative of the broad home schooling community in NSW.

4.2. Quality assurance

The Department does not have a specific policy framework, tailored roles and training, or dedicated communities of practice in place for alternative school settings

Despite the unique student cohort and operational contexts of alternative school settings, the Department does not have specific policy frameworks, staff roles and performance agreements, professional learning, or strategic objectives and related measurement particular to these schools.

This misses opportunities to foster a specialised workforce and educational delivery model for each type of alternative setting. It raises the risk that recruitment, staff development and practices in these settings are ad hoc, school-by-school processes, instead of leveraging common skills, resources and approaches across the settings.

Apart from intensive learning support schools, which can require teachers and other staff to have behavioural support expertise and trauma-informed practice knowledge, alternative school settings must use statewide policies and processes to recruit staff. Many consider this to be inefficient because it involves trial and error in finding candidates who fit the particular context, and means they have to spend more time learning how to effectively perform the role on the job.

Staff in some schools have formed their own community of practice with staff in other similar schools, and identified their own professional development needs, which they usually meet through independently sourcing training at the school level. Many said that learning on the job was the primary means by which they gained the competencies needed to work in alternative school settings.

During school visits, the audit team found that educators had developed school-specific resources and teaching materials tailored to the distinctive learning needs of their student cohorts at the individual school. Some schools also collaborate to share resources with other schools operating within the same type of alternative school setting. However, the Department does not centrally coordinate or manage the creation of tailored professional learning, communities of practice or resource banks for wider distribution across schools in similar contexts.

The Department does not have tailored quality assurance mechanisms to specifically assess the effectiveness of each alternative school setting

The Department introduced the School Excellence Framework in 2015 to help NSW public schools monitor and report on their overall performance and quality practice in three domains of education: learning, teaching and leading. The framework provides a description of quality practice across those domains, based on evidence of what works.

Schools annually self-assess their practices against the framework to inform the development of individual four-year Strategic Improvement Plans (now known as School Excellence Plans) and their public annual reports. The Department expects that schools involve their school community in developing School Excellence Plans.

Once during the four-year school excellence cycle, each school will undertake an external validation of their school self-assessment evidence. The Department describes this as an opportunity for schools to discuss their judgements about the school's practice, and the evidence that underpins them, with a panel of peers.

The external validation panel consists of two principals: a lead panellist (principal, school leadership – a regional role that supports the professional learning, wellbeing and leadership capabilities of principals) and a peer principal (an experienced, substantive principal from another school). The panel's role is to determine whether the school's evidence, including data provided directly to the panel, supports the judgements made by the school in self-assessment against the School Excellence Framework.

If the self-assessment, external validation process or observation of the relevant departmental director for educational leadership and principal identify that a school needs significant assistance 'in its pursuit of excellence', a school development review may be undertaken to enable appropriate intervention and targeted support.

The School Excellence Framework applies to alternative school settings in the same way it does to all NSW public schools; it provides information to principals and the Department about an individual school's performance and strategic objectives in relation to learning, teaching and leading.

The Department advised that it recognises that the evidence used by alternative school settings to demonstrate their self-assessment, and the targets set for improvement, may be different to those typically used in mainstream schools. For example, guidance for alternative school settings on which reading and numeracy measures to include in their School Excellence Plans may be to 'improve the reading/numeracy outcomes of the students in the school' rather than specific student cohort results in the NAPLAN or HSC assessments. The Department said it has also made adjustments to the external validation process in recent years to include one person on the panel with experience of a comparable school to that being considered through the external validation process.

However, these practices are not documented and there are no related procedures or guidance for the alternative school settings about performance in their particular model of educational delivery. The Department is missing meaningful performance information specific to these schools.

The Department also checks school compliance with the NSW curriculum and nominated policy areas through the Curriculum and Policy Monitoring (CPM) process under the School Excellence Framework. CPM meetings focus on a specific curriculum key learning area and a small number of policy areas selected each year, as outlined in the Framework for NSW Department of Education Reporting. As of 2025, CPM meetings are held annually between paired schools, together with relevant directors, on a four-year cycle (that is, every NSW public school will go through CPM once every four years).

The Department is in the process of customising the CPM for alternative school settings, as each type of setting participates in CPM (intensive learning support schools – from 2023; distance education schools – from 2024; hospital schools and youth justice centre schools – planned from 2026).

The Department advised that it had, or expected to, adjust the process for the alternative setting schools by:

- consulting with school representatives to identify how CPM could be adapted to be fit-for-purpose in these settings, for example by adjusting curriculum and/or policy requirements and expectations to reflect the short-term or transient nature of enrolments, while still aligning to the NESA NSW Government School System Manual
- requiring expanded or different evidence from these schools that is specific to their contexts (for example, evidence focused on highly individualised programs for small cohorts of students rather than traditional whole-class teaching programs and class structures; or evidence on distance education procedures relating to school-parent communication or virtual methods of monitoring and supporting student wellbeing)
- providing training sessions explaining CPM expectations for these schools.

Self-assessed performance of alternative school settings increased over the audit period

The audit team analysed the School Excellence Framework data relating to self-assessment and, where undertaken, external validation ratings for the alternative school settings from 2019–2023. The framework has 14 elements across three domains (learning, teaching and leading) and – until 2024 – included four possible ratings (lowest to highest):

- Working towards delivering
- Delivering
- Sustaining and growing
- Excelling.

The self-assessment ratings of all 60 schools in the audit scope improved over the audit review period. Most of the alternative school settings rated themselves as 'sustaining and growing' for 11 of the elements. For two elements – data skills and use, and student performance measures – most schools rated themselves as 'delivering'. These elements were also the ones most likely to be rated as 'working towards delivering' by the alternative setting schools. The schools considered their strongest performance to be in relation to wellbeing, with most rating themselves as 'excelling' for this element.

Most teaching staff in alternative school settings are 'proficient' and key quality practices are in place

The majority of teaching staff in alternative school settings are classified as 'proficient', and survey responses indicate that they understand their role and have received appropriate training and development to do their job well.

Most teaching staff (90%) in alternative school settings are classified as 'proficient', that is, they have taught for at least two years, completed a NESA-endorsed degree, compiled evidence demonstrating their practice meets the Australian professional standards for teachers, and had their performance assessed by a supervisor. The Department was not able to provide the precise number of years of teaching experience for the teaching staff at the schools in scope, or how that compares to the teaching staff across NSW public schools.

The audit analysed the de-identified data relating to the responses of the Department's employees in alternative school settings to the annual People Matters Employee Survey (PMES) conducted across the NSW public sector. While not tailored to the public education sector as the Department's TTFM surveys were, the PMES asks questions that provide insight into elements of quality assurance in practice.

Across the audit review period, the average annual number of survey respondents to these questions was 1,865 staff from intensive learning support schools, 1,708 staff from distance education schools, 95 staff from hospital schools and 539 staff from youth justice schools.

A high proportion of respondents in each of the alternative school settings reported having a current personal development plan with individual objectives, and an understanding of what is expected of them to do well in their role. A large majority of respondents – apart from those in hospital schools – also agreed or strongly agreed that they had received appropriate training and development to do their job well, and that their manager encouraged people in their workgroup to keep improving the work they do. These are key elements of quality practice.

A majority of the intensive learning support and youth justice centre school respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their performance was assessed against clear criteria, while distance education and hospital school staff tended to disagree. The lowest proportion of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, across the four settings, was in relation to a question on whether they considered that managers deal appropriately with employees who perform poorly.

The audit did not compare the PMES results for the alternative school settings with those for mainstream schools, and it is not known whether the former are reflective of broader trends in staff experiences in the NSW public school system. However, they may point the Department to policy and practice that should be sustained where they are working, or addressed where they are not, as part of supporting and assuring quality in alternative school settings.

Processes were implemented to check that home schooled children received educational instruction, but this did not assess the quality of that instruction or children's learning progress

There is no independent assessment of the quality of home schooling instruction and student progress in NSW.

NESA checked that registered home schooled children received an education in line with NESA syllabuses by assessing whether the requirements for home schooling registration were met in renewal applications. For initial registration applications, NESA assessed whether the parent had a proposed education program aligned with NESA syllabuses and other requirements for home schooling registration.

The home schooling registration requirements do not specify outcome targets or how student learning should be measured, but require evidence that there is (or will be) instruction that:

- is based on and taught in accordance with NESA syllabuses
- caters to the identified learning needs of the child, with adequate resources and time allocated, in a home learning environment that is suitable for effective home schooling
- includes an adequate system for planning, supervising and recording teaching and learning experiences, and the child's progress and achievement.

The agencies advised that the requirement for parents to demonstrate that their educational program 'aligns with the NESA syllabuses' was a key mechanism for ensuring quality. These syllabuses represent a high standard of education and are designed to support educational standards across all learning environments, including home schooling. However, NESA stated that, without a specific power or duty in the Education Act, it could not independently assess the quality of home schooled students' educational programs, or their learning progress and achievements.

NESA's published Guidelines for Home Schooling Registration provided its policies for administering the relevant provisions of the Education Act. The guidelines were not a legislative instrument in themselves, but were framed by NESA's legislative power to make rules about the exercise of its functions, which could not be inconsistent with the education and teaching legislation, and had to be approved by the Education Minister to take effect.

There is no legislative bar in the Education Act for government to assess the quality of home schooling instruction or student learning progress and achievement, but nor is there a specific power or duty to do so. Ministerial approval would have been required for NESA to amend its guidelines for home schooling registration and conduct quality assurance.

Most stakeholders, including some authorised persons, said that a key strength of home schooling is its ability to provide individualised instruction tailored to each student's learning needs. Others observed that this did not, in itself, ensure quality and that it was difficult to determine the quality of home schooling education because of:

- the flexibility allowed in how parents may demonstrate meeting the requirements
- the infrequency of home visits conducted as part of assessing home schooling registration applications (usually once a year for initial registrations then once every two years)
- the limited time that authorised persons have in home visits to assess the educational programs and evidence of instruction occurring.

Increasingly, home schooling parents are purchasing services from commercial providers that offer education programs aligned with the Australian and NSW curricula and often include student assessment through exams, assignments and semester report cards. However, under the Education Act and the guidelines for home schooling, the responsibility for ensuring that home schooling registration requirements are met, and that a home schooled child receives an education, remains with the parent even where commercial programs are used. The NESA website stated this. In line with its regulatory role, NESA did not provide public guidance on using the services of commercial providers nor did it endorse any commercial providers.

In an environmental scan of home schooling regulation conducted for NESA in 2024, consultants identified that no Australian jurisdiction required standardised assessment of a home schooled child's progress or achievement, and only some required evidence that parents had assessed their child's progress. Internationally, the scan reported that most jurisdictions maintained a flexible approach to the assessment and monitoring of children's educational outcomes.

Home schooled children in NSW may opt to sit NAPLAN, and NESA contacted home schooling families each year to offer support with participation. NESA's latest data shows that in 2023 approximately 220 home schooled children (or 1.8% of all those registered) participated in NAPLAN, the highest number in the preceding five years. Home schooled children cannot receive the HSC as this is a school-based credential that requires internal assessment and engagement with a structured program delivered by an accredited provider. However, home schooled children can complete an HSC alternative (such as through TAFE) and receive an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) for university entry.

In 2015, NESA conducted some research on NAPLAN and HSC-equivalent results for children who had been registered for one or more periods of home schooling registration. The analysis found above-average results for the children. However, the results are not considered to be representative because:

- only a small number of home schooling parents choose for their children to participate in NAPLAN; the population is too small for any generalised conclusions to be drawn
- home schooled children may sit NAPLAN at home and not under test conditions
- registered children are not eligible for the HSC meaning that HSC outcomes are at least partially attributable to school attendance rather than home schooling registration alone
- the data did not account for the portion of a child's schooling undertaken by home schooling versus school attendance.

Sharing educational resources and enabling partial enrolment in mainstream schools could improve quality assurance for home schooling education

An environmental scan of home schooling regulation commissioned by NESA in 2024 found that partial enrolment in public school, while a child is primarily home schooled, is allowed in different forms across Australia, and in some overseas jurisdictions, but not in NSW. Partial enrolment enables children to attend selected subjects or activities, such as art, science, languages and sport, with mainstream school approval. This could provide access to educational resources outside the home, more oversight of home schooled children's wellbeing and learning progress, and a pathway to full-time school enrolment if that is the parent's goal.

The home schooling community in NSW has sought this option with NESA and the Department a number of times in the past. Stakeholders have called for NSW to adopt the Victorian and Queensland approaches, which offer blended enrolment and school-based opportunities for home schooled children to ensure that education systems support diverse needs without forcing children out of the system.

To date, and based on the view that section 22 of the Education Act does not allow such simultaneous enrolment, the Department has not implemented this option in NSW. Legislative amendments would be required to enable registered home schooled children to also enrol part-time in NSW public schools. The Department has also noted that such a move could have implications for school student enrolment numbers (with related staffing and other resourcing calculations), work health and safety requirements, and accountabilities for child wellbeing and learning outcomes.

Since it assumed responsibility for home schooling regulation in 2025, the Department can consider different options and approaches that are used in other jurisdictions to assist home schooling families to provide quality instruction, such as by:

- sharing departmental curriculum and wellbeing resources with home schooling families
- providing connections for home schooling families to NSW public schools
- facilitating and encouraging greater participation of home schooled children in existing learning assessments and qualifications like NAPLAN and TAFE-delivered HSC or HSC alternatives.

5. Promoting student outcomes

5.1. Child safety and wellbeing

The Department of Education's data suggests that students in alternative school settings are more vulnerable in terms of child wellbeing concerns

Department of Education (the Department) employees, including school-based staff, are 'mandatory reporters' under the key legislation for child protection in NSW, the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (Care and Protection Act). A mandatory reporter must make a report to the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) Child Protection Helpline when they have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is at risk of significant harm, and those grounds arise in the course of, or from, their work or role. Reports received by the DCJ are assessed by practitioners to determine whether the information meets the risk of significant harm threshold and relevant further action if it does.

Risk of significant harm is defined in the Care and Protection Act, and includes situations where, to a significant extent: the child's basic physical or psychological needs are not being met; there is physical or sexual abuse or ill-treatment; necessary medical care is not being arranged; there is domestic violence in the household; and/or there is a risk of these occurring. Educational neglect is a specific ground for a child to be considered at risk of significant harm. It is where the parent of a child of compulsory school age has not arranged for the child to receive an education in accordance with the Education Act (that is, they have not enrolled the child at a school or registered them for home schooling, or the child is habitually absent from school such as for 30 days within the last 100 school days); and they are unable or unwilling to do so.

Department employees can – but are not required to – ask the Department's Child Wellbeing Unit for advice when they have child safety concerns. This unit is responsible for advising, supporting and educating principals and workplace managers to determine whether their concerns about the safety, welfare or wellbeing of children reach the threshold for making a mandatory report to the DCJ. The unit can be contacted by mandatory reporters to obtain information about a child to assist in service coordination or provision (with such information exchange authorised by Chapter 16A of the Care and Protection Act). It can also assist in identifying and implementing appropriate local responses to support the child and their family where the threshold of suspected risk of significant harm is not met but there are concerns for the safety, welfare or wellbeing of the child. This may result in early intervention referrals to external services, collaboration with the Department's student support services (Team Around a School) or other suitable actions to safeguard or promote safety, welfare and wellbeing.

Using the DCJ Mandatory Reporter Guide tool, the unit appraises concerns about a child reported to it by Department employees to determine the level of risk to a child. Child Wellbeing Unit appraisals capture instances where a specific concern is reported about a child. The same child may be appraised on more than one occasion – that is, the number of appraisals is not equivalent to the number of unique children reported.

The audit team's analysis of data relating to the number of Child Wellbeing Unit appraisals over the audit review period (2019–2024) identified the following:

- The number of Child Wellbeing Unit appraisals of concerns sent by NSW public schools to the unit more than doubled, from approximately 21,000 in 2019 to around 50,000 in 2024. In this time, the proportion of the unit's appraisals relating to concerns reported by an alternative school setting remained relatively consistent, at approximately two to three per cent of all appraisals (around 450 in 2019 and 1,400 in 2024). This aligns with the proportion of NSW public schools that are alternative school settings.
- The proportion of Child Wellbeing Unit appraisals resulting in the unit categorising a reported concern as a suspected risk of significant harm, and referring it to the DCJ for further assessment, was greater for concerns reported by an alternative school setting than for concerns reported by all NSW public schools in each year of the audit review period, except for 2024.
- A total of 5,936 concerns relating to alternative school settings were appraised by the Department's unit over the audit review period. The five most common risk categories for suspected risk of significant harm identified were, in order:
 - the child is a danger to themselves or others (2,559 or 43%)
 - educational neglect on the basis of habitual absence (912 or 15%)
 - sexual abuse of the child (473 or eight per cent)
 - physical abuse of the child (343 or six per cent)
 - child exhibits problematic sexual behaviours (341 or six per cent).

These mirror the type and order of the five most common categories of risk for the unit's appraisals of concerns from all NSW schools across the audit review period.

The greater proportion of Child Wellbeing Unit appraisals that were referred to the DCJ relating to reports from an alternative school setting compared to those from other public schools could have resulted from different factors, including:

- the heightened complexity of student needs in alternative school settings and the targeted role that alternative school settings play in supporting high-risk cohorts and, given this,
- that mainstream school reporters may more commonly contact the unit for guidance at lower thresholds of risk than alternative school setting reporters.

Concerns reported to the unit (or to the DCJ directly) are not confined to what reporters witness in the school setting but can be risks manifested in the student's home and community, and so some students may already be involved with the DCJ.

The Department applies the same child safe standards and child protection protocols to alternative school settings, despite identifying that the student cohorts in those settings have a heightened complexity of needs

The Department has statewide policies, procedures and controls in place to align school and staff practices with relevant legislative requirements to protect child safety. Despite identifying a heightened complexity of needs for student cohorts in alternative school settings, which includes factors of vulnerability (see section 2.6) and may include greater vulnerability in terms of child safety (see previous finding), it does not tailor its statewide approaches to these specific contexts.

The Department has a statewide child protection policy that is publicly available. It checks school-level compliance with this policy through a broader process known as Policy Monitoring. This involves annual attestation by school principals and confirmation by their line manager – the director educational leadership – that their schools comply with the select policies and that they hold supporting evidence of this.

Child protection is included in Policy Monitoring each year, and principals' annual attestations cover related matters, including that staff have completed mandatory training and an 'annual competency check'. The latter check includes knowledge of key child protection information such as the responsibilities of mandatory reporters and the Department's centralised reporting system. Principals

also attest that there are processes in place for screening all casual and temporary teaching and non-teaching staff, contractors, visitors and volunteers to the school.

The Department also checks compliance with the child protection policy through the curriculum and policy monitoring (CPM) process under the School Excellence Framework discussed in section 4.2, when child protection aligns with the Framework for NSW Department of Education reporting.

The director educational leadership is expected to attend the CPM meetings between schools, contribute advice when required and note any identified areas requiring follow-up. The director should then work with schools to address any recommendations identified in the CPM report within agreed timeframes. Ten of the 60 schools in the audit scope had participated in CPM during the audit review period. These were a mix of some intensive learning support schools and distance education schools, but not hospital schools or youth justice centre schools.

The Department does not systematically monitor or report data relating to the annual attestations or schools' meetings in relation to child protection policies in these settings, nor on whether staff have completed mandatory child protection training within expected timeframes. The Department stated that these were matters for individual directors to identify and address with relevant principals within agreed timeframes (with the greater the risk, the shorter the timeframe).

Our analysis of the Department's data showed that almost all staff who have ever worked at alternative school settings between 2019 and 2024 had completed some form of child protection training; but this data does not include whether the training was completed on time or refreshed at expected intervals.

These statewide policies and procedures on child protection apply to alternative school settings in the same way as they do to mainstream schools, with some adjustments for distance education schools as follows:

- prior to accepting a distance education enrolment, principals are expected to ensure that the home learning environment is suitable for effective distance education provision
- for students with additional learning and wellbeing needs, applications to enrol in distance education schools include an attestation from the principal that there are no known child protection concerns.

It is sufficient for a principal to attest that they are not personally aware of any child protection concerns. The process does not require principals to seek additional confirmation from the Child Wellbeing Unit, but the unit is available as a resource to support principals in their attestation if they believe it is necessary in a particular case.

For other alternative school settings apart from distance education schools, the Department has not explored whether the statewide approach to child safety is sufficient, despite identifying the vulnerable nature of student cohorts in these settings.

There were some child protection gaps in NESA's regulation of home schooling

As noted, under Chapter 16A of the Care and Protection Act, certain agencies (prescribed bodies) that have responsibilities and services relating to the safety, welfare or wellbeing of children, are authorised and required to provide and receive information from one another to promote child safety.

NESA is a prescribed body, as is the Department. NESA responded to Chapter 16A requests for information made to it and provided information to the Department on home schooling registration applications and children registered for home schooling under the same statutory provisions. It also proactively requested information from the Department, the DCJ, NSW Health and NSW Police, among others, in circumstances where there was a clear reason to do so, based on the details of the application or associated concerns. Such information was used to inform decisions on whether to proceed with an application, trigger a monitoring visit, or consider cancelling an existing registration.

However, NESA did not use Chapter 16A to routinely seek information from the Department or other prescribed bodies to check – for every registration application – whether any safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns had been raised in relation to the children whose parents were seeking home schooling registration.

NESA said that the legislative framework limited its decision-making on home schooling registration applications to assessing whether the requirements (set out in the NESA guidelines) were met – for example, if the proposed educational program was inadequate or the home environment was unsuitable for effective home schooling. Wellbeing concerns that were not related to the home schooling requirements, on their own, were not a basis for refusing registration.

This gap means that NESA may have registered children for whom safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns had been raised, removing the school-based options to support such students. For NSW public schools, such options include referral to external services, assistance from the Department's Team Around a School specialists, and ongoing monitoring of the child's safety and wellbeing.

The Department, in assuming responsibility for home schooling regulation, has advised that it recognises this gap and intends to address it. It appreciates that any change would require careful consideration, strong interagency support and potential legislative amendment. NESA advised that it had been actively seeking to strengthen data sharing protocols through ongoing engagement with the Department and the DCJ, and acknowledged that enhanced data and information sharing would be beneficial.

NESA provided regular child protection training for staff conducting home visits

The NESA Child Safe Action Plan, developed under the national Child Safe Standards, was released in November 2023. Actions included the development of a Child Safe Policy, and child safe training for NESA staff at induction and annually.

NESA ensured that its home schooling staff who worked with children (authorised persons) understood their child safety obligations through the terms of their contracts, the published Authorised Person's Handbook, periodic administrative updates and annual child protection training, which was often delivered by a subject matter expert. Authorised persons – like Department staff and other professionals who work with children – are mandatory reporters, required to report a child if they suspect the child is at risk of significant harm.

NESA tested authorised persons' knowledge and application of their child protection obligations through regular professional development sessions that included discussion of case studies tailored to the home schooling context. These efforts could have been complemented by regular formal competency checks and attestations, as used by the Department for its staff.

The audit sighted each mandatory report that was made by an authorised person during the audit review period. There were around 50 reports for the six-year period, with no reports made between 2020 and 2022 due to the suspension of home visits during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These reports were provided promptly to the DCJ. The grounds for concern varied; they were not predominantly about potential educational neglect. The audit team also saw examples of NESA considering whether to refuse or limit a period of home schooling registration where child safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns did not amount to a suspected risk of significant harm.

NESA had powers to conduct home visits as part of registration assessments but they were not child welfare checks

NSW is the only jurisdiction in Australia that mandates a home visit to be conducted in assessing home schooling registration applications. Other states and territories identify home visits as the default expectation but allow for alternative arrangements (such as meeting the family and child at another location or in a registrar's office).

These home visits must include sighting the child as well as their home learning environment. The maximum period of home schooling registration allowed under the Education Act is two years, so that children registered for home schooling will be sighted at least once every two years, or more frequently depending on the period of registration granted.

NESA suspended home visits during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, assessing home schooling registration applications on the basis of documentation and virtual meetings with applicants. Home visits resumed in April 2023 for renewals, Year 10s and site visits, and in April 2024 for initial applications. NSW public schools resumed face to face learning in October 2021.

NESA home schooling registration home visits were not general child welfare checks. NESA's relevant staff (authorised persons) were limited to sighting the child and observing the home learning environment in order to advise NESA on whether the home schooling registration requirements could be met, and therefore whether an application should be approved or not. Authorised persons could not conduct broader child welfare risk assessments, interview the child or family members in terms of child protection concerns, or take other steps to investigate concerns or reports about the child or family raised by others.

If a child was not sighted during the scheduled visit, NESA expected authorised persons to recommend a refusal of home schooling registration. If a child were to say to an authorised person during a home visit that they did not want to be home schooled, this would not necessarily constitute grounds – alone – for the authorised person to recommend the home schooling registration application be refused. NESA advised that such a situation would be addressed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account relevant contextual information and risk factors. It did not collect specific data on such circumstances and could not advise the audit whether this had ever happened in the past.

NESA could conduct monitoring visits to registered home schooling families, but few were actually conducted

In addition to a home visit conducted as part of assessing a home schooling registration application, NESA could send authorised persons to conduct monitoring visits within a period of approved registration if there was credible information suggesting that the home schooling registration requirements were not being met. Monitoring visits were similar to initial or renewal registration application visits, except that:

- the authorised person did not assess the parent's educational program for the future, but rather what had been done to date and whether it met the requirements for home schooling registration
- authorised persons could recommend either that the existing registration be continued or cancelled – they were not able to recommend a shortened period of registration.

If the concerns raised with NESA did not relate to home schooling registration requirements, they would not trigger a monitoring visit and instead the agency would pass the information to the relevant government agency for action (for example, the NSW Police Force, the DCJ or the Department).

In practice, NESA conducted very few monitoring visits. Twelve were made to registered families in 2024 – representing 0.09% of the 12,762 students registered for home schooling that year. NESA said that, without credible information that a parent may not have been meeting the home schooling registration requirements, it was legally unable to conduct monitoring visits on its own motion or at random.

It is not clear from the terms of the relevant legislation that such action was prohibited, or if there was a specific power to conduct 'spot checks' of existing home schoolers (whether random or pre-notified). Introducing such a practice would have been possible without amending the existing legislation, but it would have had implications for NESA's stakeholder relationships with the home schooling community as well as its staff resourcing.

NESA briefed the Education Minister that if the scope of authorised person home visits were to expand to assessing child welfare, changes to multiple pieces of legislation would be required. Legislative amendment was not pursued.

5.2. Monitoring student outcomes

The Department does not monitor student outcomes and does not know if alternative school settings are effective in the unique way they deliver education

The Department does not systematically monitor or analyse learning or wellbeing outcomes data relating to students in alternative school settings. Existing statewide datasets that could inform on student outcomes – including attendance, suspension and expulsion, NAPLAN results, HSC results, annual Tell Them From Me surveys (or NSW Public Schools Surveys from 2025) and an annual survey on post-school destinations and experiences – either exclude alternative school setting students from the data collection or definitions, have low uptake, or are not disaggregated and analysed according to the student's education setting.

This means that, at a system level, the Department does not know whether students in these alternative school settings are engaged in education, or their learning and wellbeing outcomes; nor whether alternative school settings are effective and fulfilling their implicit purposes to deliver education to particular student cohorts in a distinct way.

Individual schools in alternative school settings track how each student is progressing in relation to a personalised learning plan. Schools will use informal and formal assessment, such as the Department's 'check-in assessments', to determine each student's literacy and numeracy levels:

- when they arrive at the alternative school setting to inform the development of individualised learning plans and teaching practices
- while students are with the school (such as through weekly or fortnightly assessments)
- when they leave the school, to help identify the progress made while at the school and to inform the next educational setting (if the student is going to another public school or to technical and further education (TAFE)).

This may also include information from statewide assessments such as NAPLAN and the HSC if the students and school opt for participation and are eligible (that is, they are completing an approved program of study in secondary school to qualify for the HSC). Students in distance education and hospital schools tend to participate in NAPLAN testing and the HSC, while students in intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools tend not to, although there are exceptions. Students can be supported to complete NAPLAN and the HSC, including through access to distance education subject delivery, in intensive learning support and youth justice centre schools.

Once a student leaves the alternative school setting, they are no longer visible to that school. If they are still of compulsory school age, monitoring their attendance and outcomes becomes the responsibility of the local census (main) school (if they are enrolled at one). However, as discussed in section 3.2, there is a risk that inadequate or absent transition planning and support at the school level is not identified, and that non-attendance will not be followed up for this student cohort.

No research has been conducted or commissioned by the NSW Government on the learning outcomes of home schooled children since 2015

The 2014 Parliamentary inquiry into home schooling in NSW was concerned about how the quality of education delivered to home schooled children could be assured (see section 4.2). The inquiry made a range of relevant recommendations to NESA, including to:

- undertake further research into the outcomes of home schooling
- explore opportunities and barriers with respect to home schooled students' optional participation in NAPLAN and HSC-equivalent assessments
- develop additional resources that assist home schoolers in providing quality educational programs.

These recommendations were not supported by the then NSW Government on the basis that NESA had already made free curriculum support materials available to assist home schooled children, and encouraged their participation in NAPLAN, and that the agency did not have the statutory responsibility or the resources to do more.

Consistent with the policy position of the then NSW Government, NESA did not undertake the actions recommended by the Parliamentary inquiry. However, with the NSW Curriculum Reform being rolled out across the state from 2024, NESA funded, in 2023–2024, two temporary curriculum officer roles dedicated to supporting home schooling parents in developing educational programs aligned with the new NESA syllabuses. Several supporting resources were developed, with some still pending publication. These positions were time-limited and are no longer funded.

An environmental scan of home schooling regulation commissioned by NESA in 2024 identified other options for monitoring home schooling instruction from other jurisdictions including:

- requiring regular evidence that the child’s learning has been assessed, or evidence of educational progress
- allowing partial enrolment in mainstream schools or distance education alongside home schooling
- providing some funding to families to assist with the costs of educational materials, with a concomitant expectation that the relevant authority would be more involved in developing a system for monitoring learning progress.

However, NESA did not explore these options – some of which would likely require amendments to the Education Act – before the current NSW Government decided to move the home schooling regulation function from NESA to the Department.

The Department may need to consider other means to assure the quality of home schooling education, given the legislative principles in the Education Act include that it is the duty of the State to ensure every child receives an education of the highest quality, principally – but not exclusively – through the provision of public education. This should be undertaken in close consultation with the home schooling community and underpinned by evidence.

For example, the 2023 national Disability Royal Commission report recommended that state and territory authorities require parents registering children with disability for home schooling to submit standardised information about their child’s educational, social and behavioural progress (as well as their support needs). Some home schooling stakeholders told the audit team that they were concerned that if this recommendation was adopted, it would remove the flexibility to tailor education to their child’s diverse needs and track their child’s learning progress in ways that relate specifically to the individual child.

Failure to meaningfully consult with the home schooling community in designing mechanisms to assure quality home schooling education and track student outcomes may lead to families not registering for home schooling at all. Current estimates on the numbers missing altogether from schooling and home schooling vary.

6. Recent reforms

Previous reviews have identified areas for improvement in alternative school settings and home schooling but many of these are yet to be implemented

Alternative school settings and the regulation of home schooling have been in place for a number of decades (see section 2.3). Although each has been subject to at least one internal or external review, the Department of Education (the Department) and the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) (the agencies) have not actioned the resulting suggestions for improvement.

Relevant reviews of alternative school settings and home schooling include the following:

- **Distance education schools:** The Department published its review of distance education schools in April 2025 (prior to this, distance education was reviewed 16 years ago, in 2009). The 2025 review found that the eligibility criteria for enrolment in distance education schools is restrictive and complex, resulting in barriers for students and inequitable access to education. It also highlighted inconsistencies between the different distance education schools in teaching, marking attendance and monitoring student outcomes, as well as outdated staffing and funding models that do not reflect the complexities of students who require distance education. At the time of writing the Department's response was under development.
- **Hospital schools:** The Department commissioned a review of hospital schools in 2020. The review found that the Department lacks sufficient data to assess if hospital schools meet the educational needs of all students in hospitals. Additionally, the review found that the location of hospital schools does not always align with the number of students in hospital.
- **Intensive learning support schools:** The Department's learning and wellbeing unit has previously reviewed the '4:1' model for student attendance at intensive learning support schools (where students attend the support school for four days and their census (main) school for the remaining day). The Department could not locate this review report to provide it to the audit. However, staff and schools told the audit team that the review had found the 4:1 attendance model may be unsuitable for students in intensive learning support schools, as it makes it hard for students to connect to the mainstream school community, and may not address the challenges these students face in mainstream settings.
- **Youth justice centre schools:** The Audit Office's 2016 audit on [Reintegrating young offenders into the community after detention](#) recommended that the (then) Juvenile Justice NSW work with the Department to roll out a statewide framework for transitioning school-aged young people from detention centres into the community. This was not done. A separate report from the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People on its consultations with young people in youth justice centres between 2015 and 2019 highlighted the importance of supporting children with education in youth justice centre schools, and identified that children leaving custody found it hard to re-engage in a school that catered to their needs.
- **Home schooling:** A Parliamentary inquiry into home schooling practices in NSW reported in 2014. It concluded that the regulatory approach could be enhanced to maximise educational opportunities for home schooled children and better support the unique educational pathway of home schooling. The inquiry made 24 recommendations to address issues related to consultation with the home schooling community, the home schooling registration process, the regulatory body's staff roles and training, unregistered home schoolers, child protection and wellbeing, quality assurance, resources and support for home schoolers, and data collection. The NSW Government supported 15 of these recommendations and NESA subsequently briefed the Education Minister on options to strengthen its powers to oversee home schooling practice after this inquiry, but these were not progressed. NESA also instigated four reviews into aspects of home schooling operations between 2020 and 2024, but they did not lead to any substantive changes to policy or process.

An Australian Senate inquiry into ‘school refusal’ – attendance difficulties associated with a level of emotional distress that means students may have trouble going to school or even leaving the house – reported in 2023. This recommended that state and territory education authorities investigate ways to increase the flexibility of education delivery, including by:

- identifying ways to enhance flexibility in mainstream school settings for children experiencing school refusal
- facilitating easier access to distance education and home schooling
- providing more alternative and specialist school settings.

The NSW Government has not provided a formal response to this inquiry.

The Department considered the benefits and implications of transferring the regulation of home schooling from NESA

Following a request from the Minister for Education and Early Learning, the Department explored the implications, benefits and risks of transferring the home schooling regulatory function from NESA to the Department. This included considering the potential impact on home schooling stakeholders, relevant staff, the Department's resourcing, and opportunities to address child protection gaps and better support home schooling families with departmental educational resources. The Department briefed the Minister on these aspects.

The Department concluded that it has more resources than NESA to support and regulate the significant increase in the number of home schooled children over the last six years. It also observed that home schooling is regulated by the Department of Education in most other Australian jurisdictions.

The Department did not consult with the home schooling community before this change to regulatory responsibilities. On 20 March 2025, the Minister announced that the regulation of home schooling would move from NESA to the Department effective from 5 May 2025.

A number of stakeholders expressed concern to the audit about the decision. Many felt this would reduce flexibility, increase stress and hamper support for home schooling families. They were worried about potentially losing the flexibility to tailor education to their individual child's needs and about home schooling becoming less accessible, because the Department was used to providing formal schooling. Stakeholders observed that families choose home schooling because the Department's mainstream school system does not meet their needs.

The Department did not make any immediate changes to the way home schooling is regulated when it assumed responsibility from NESA. Possible areas of future reform it identified included enhancing connections between home schooling and tertiary or vocational education pathways.

The Department has created a new organisational structure to better utilise and support alternative school settings for students who cannot access mainstream schools

As detailed in the preceding chapters, the Department has administered alternative school settings as if they were mainstream schools, without recognising or supporting their tailored approaches for students unable to receive education in mainstream settings. The Department has also not identified the potential commonalities between the different types of alternative school settings and home schooling in terms of student needs, staff capabilities, or teaching and learning approaches.

Within each setting type, individual schools also largely operate in silos, with limited opportunities for school leaders or staff to connect and share similar experiences, challenges and good practices. In turn, these alternative school settings are disconnected from registered home schooling, with no understanding of the student movements between them.

In early 2025 the Department established two new directorates under a single executive director within its Public Schools Division to bring together most of the alternative school settings (distance education schools, hospital schools and youth justice centre schools) in one; and the regulation of home schooling in the other. Intensive learning support schools are not included under either directorate as they are considered schools for specific purposes (SSPs) along with SSPs that support students with disability. The Department is maintaining a strict separation of staff and functions between the two directorates, in recognition of the unique nature of home schooling and that regulating it is unlike the provision of public schools.

The aim of the new directorates is to better utilise and support alternative school settings to provide comprehensive public education to children who are unable to attend a mainstream school. This audit has identified gaps in the Department's provision and management of alternative school settings, as well as in NESA's regulation of home schooling. These include a lack of data and forecasting of demand, barriers to access, siloed operations, limited system-level support for student transitions and insufficient monitoring of student outcomes. These gaps will need to be addressed for the Department to achieve the new directorates' reform objectives.

Section 2 –

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Response from entities

Response from Department of Education

NSW Department of Education



Ref: DGL25/754
19 September 2025

Mr Bola Oyetunji
Auditor-General for New South Wales
Audit Office for New South Wales
GPO Box 12
SYDNEY NSW 2001

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Dear Mr Oyetunji,

Thank you for your correspondence of 22 August 2025, sharing the final report of the performance audit *Alternative school settings and home schooling* (previously titled *Education in alternative settings*).

After careful consideration by the Department of Education, I am pleased to advise the department supports the majority of the recommendations in full, while others are supported in principle or subject to operational detail. This decision will ensure that implementation is practical, legally sound, and safeguards child safety.

We are committed to completing these reforms by September 2027, consistent with the Auditor-General's timeframe.

I would like to thank the Audit Office of NSW for its professional and collaborative approach to conducting this performance audit, which has involved working with officers across the department. The outcomes of this process will strengthen how the department can continue to effectively support the needs of students and staff in our alternative settings schools, and ensure it undertakes its responsibilities as the regulator for home schooling in NSW.

Sincerely,

Murat Dizdar
SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Agency response

NSW Department of Education, September 2025

Alternative school settings and home schooling performance audit

Phone: 1300 679 332 | Darug Country | 105 Phillip Street, Parramatta NSW 2150 | GPO Box 33 Sydney NSW 2001 | education.nsw.gov.au

Agency response – Alternative Settings and Home Schooling | 2

Agency response

By September 2027, the Department of Education should:

Audit recommendations	Department response	Comment
1. Develop and commence implementation of a strategy for the alternative school settings based on evidence and in consultation with relevant agencies and other stakeholders which		
a) assesses current and future demand and supply for existing alternative school settings across NSW	Alternative Settings: Supported subject to operational detail	The department will develop a strategic framework for the alternative school settings that is aligned with Our Plan for NSW Public Education and the department's School Excellence Framework. It will be a shared strategic framework across alternative school settings, with tailored aspects for each alternative school setting to recognise their different needs and contexts. The alternative school settings comprise unique settings including distance education, hospital schools, and schools in youth justice centres, as well as schools with Intensive Learning Support (Behaviour) (formerly Behaviour Disorder) and Intensive Learning Support (Mental Health) (formerly Emotional Disturbance) support classes under the framework of Schools for Specific Purposes. The department supports parts a, c, d, e and f subject to operational detail, and supports part b in principle. This is consistent with the department's
b) enables access to existing settings with needs-based eligibility criteria and timeframes for access and enrolment periods; and clear processes	Alternative Settings: Supported in principle	
c) enhances departmental oversight and support for students transitioning into and out of these settings	Alternative Settings: Supported subject to operational detail	
d) recognises and systematises the specialised nature of these settings including through improved role clarity, targeted professional learning and tailored communities of practice	Alternative Settings: Supported subject to operational detail	

e) considers relevant previous reviews and government responses to their recommendations to inform improvements	Alternative Settings: Supported subject to operational detail	response to the NSW Auditor-General's 2024 report on supporting students with disability, where work is underway to review the allocation of disability-specific funding in accordance with need as identified by the school through NCCD.
f) establishes relevant data, reporting and accountability mechanisms for each setting so the Department can monitor and drive quality practice, positive student engagement and other elements of effectiveness.	Alternative Settings: Supported subject to operational detail	The department notes collaboration with other agencies such as the NSW Department of Health and the NSW Department of Communities and Justice is key to implementing this recommendation.
2. Work with the home schooling community on reforms to home schooling regulation, including consideration of:		
2a) recommendations for improvement from previous reviews	Home Schooling: Supported subject to operational detail	The department will review and, where relevant and achievable, incorporate past recommendations in consultation with the home schooling.
2b) expedited registration processing times to shorten transition periods	Home Schooling: Supported in principle	The department supports reducing transition times but will prioritise building a stronger evidence base, assessing demand and resourcing implications, and exploring provisional registration options. Any changes will be guided by child safety and legislative requirements.



2c) strengthened departmental oversight and support for students transitioning into and out of home schooling	Home Schooling: Supported in full	The department will replace the current guidelines with a clear policy and procedures, supported by plain-English guidance for families.
2d) quality assurance frameworks which take account of the unique form of education delivery inherent in home schooling.	Home Schooling: Supported in full	The department will co-design a proportionate quality assurance framework with families, pilot and refine it based on feedback, and provide staff training and guidance.
3. Identify the child safety monitoring risks in the alternative school settings and in home schooling regulation and ensure fit-for-purpose mechanisms are in place to address these.	Alternative Settings: Supported subject to operational detail	The safety of children in education is paramount, and the department is committed to continuous improvement to ensure their ongoing safety. The department has processes in place to monitor child wellbeing and safety risks in alternative school settings. The department will continue to assess child safety actions and processes, and ensure mechanisms to monitor child safety risks are fit-for-purpose.
	Home Schooling: Supported in full	The department is committed to strengthening child safety in home schooling regulation. This includes embedding child safety provisions in policy and procedures, strengthening Chapter 16A information-sharing with DCJ and other agencies, adopting a risk-based approach to assessments, and delivering targeted training so staff can identify and act on concerns.



Response from NSW Education Standards Authority



NSW Education Standards Authority

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GPO Box 5300 Sydney NSW 2001, Australia
T +61 2 9367 8111
educationstandards.nsw.edu.au

Mr Bola Oyetunji
Auditor-General for New South Wales
GPO Box 12
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Email: mail@audit.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Oyetunji

Thank you for your correspondence of 22 August 2025 and the opportunity to respond to the performance audit 'Alternative school settings and home schooling'.

I accept the findings of the report in relation to the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) and its regulatory role during the audit period. I note that while some preliminary work had commenced to address the increase in demand and contemporary needs of home schooling families, further consideration is necessary to strengthen educational resources and support to meet the diverse needs and expectations of home schooling families, as well as ensuring appropriate safety and quality measures are in place.

I have confidence in the NSW Department of Education (the department) to expand on these opportunities, while continuing to support the rights of parents to educate their child at home, acknowledging the significant role parents play in shaping their child's learning and recognising the individual needs of each child. I look forward to seeing future progress with this work as the department considers the recommendations and next steps.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Audit Office of NSW for working with NESA on such an important topic and acknowledge that all children and young people in NSW deserve to be provided fair and equitable access to quality education.

Should you wish to discuss this matter further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Martin'.

Paul Martin
Chief Executive Officer
19/09/2025

Appendix 2 – About performance audits

What are performance audits?

Performance audits assess whether the activities of state or local government entities are being carried out effectively, economically, efficiently and in compliance with relevant laws.

The activities examined by a performance audit may include a government program, all or part of an audited entity, or more than one entity. A performance audit can also consider particular issues that affect the whole public sector and/or the whole local government sector. They cannot question the merits of government policy objectives.

The Auditor-General's mandate to undertake audits is set out in the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983* for state government entities, and in the *Local Government Act 1993* for local government entities. This mandate includes audit of non-government sector entities where these entities have received money or other resources (whether directly or indirectly) from, or on behalf of, a government entity for a particular purpose (follow-the-dollar).

Why are performance audits conducted?

Performance audits provide independent assurance to the NSW Parliament and the public.

Through their recommendations, performance audits seek to improve the value for money the community receives from government services.

Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General who seeks input from parliamentarians, state and local government entities, other interested stakeholders and Audit Office research.

How are performance audits selected?

When selecting and scoping topics, the Audit Office aims to choose topics that reflect the interests of Parliament in holding the government to account. Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General based on the Audit Office's own research, suggestions from the public, and in consultation with parliamentarians, agency heads and key government stakeholders. The three-year performance audit program is published on the website and is reviewed annually to ensure it continues to address significant issues of interest to Parliament, aligns with government priorities and reflects contemporary thinking on public sector management. The audit program is sufficiently flexible to allow ready response to any emerging issues.

What happens during the phases of a performance audit?

Performance audits have three key phases: planning, fieldwork and report writing.

During the planning phase, the audit team develops an understanding of the audit topic and responsible entities and defines the objective and scope of the audit.

The planning phase also identifies the audit criteria. These are standards of performance against which the audited entity, program or activities are assessed. Criteria may be based on relevant legislation, internal policies and procedures, industry standards, best practice, government targets, benchmarks or published guidelines.

During the fieldwork phase, audit teams will require access to books, records or any documentation deemed necessary in the conduct of the audit, including confidential information that is either Cabinet information within the meaning of the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* or information that could be subject to a claim of privilege by the State or a public official in a court of law. Confidential information will not be disclosed, unless authorised by the Auditor-General.

At the completion of fieldwork, the audit team meets with management representatives to discuss all significant matters arising from the audit. Following this, a draft performance audit report is prepared.

The audit team then meets with management representatives to check that facts presented in the draft report are accurate and to seek input into developing practical recommendations on areas of improvement.

A final report is then provided to the accountable authority of the audited entity(ies), which will be invited to formally respond to the report. If the audit includes a follow-the-dollar component, the final report will also be provided to the governing body of the relevant entity. The report presented to the NSW Parliament includes any response from the accountable authority of the audited entity. The relevant Minister and the Treasurer are also provided with a copy of the final report for state government entities. For local government entities, the Secretary of the Department of Planning and Environment, the Minister for Local Government and other responsible Ministers will also be provided with a copy of the report. In performance audits that involve multiple entities, there may be responses from more than one audited entity or from a nominated coordinating entity.

Who checks to see if recommendations have been implemented?

After the report is presented to the NSW Parliament, it is usual for the entity's Audit and Risk Committee/Audit Risk and Improvement Committee to monitor progress with the implementation of recommendations.

In addition, it is the practice of NSW Parliament's Public Accounts Committee to conduct reviews or hold inquiries into matters raised in performance audit reports. The reviews and inquiries are usually held 12 months after the report is received by the NSW Parliament. These reports are available on the NSW Parliament website.

Who audits the auditors?

The performance audits are subject to internal and external quality reviews against relevant Australian standards.

The Public Accounts Committee appoints an independent reviewer to report on compliance with auditing practices and standards every four years. The reviewer's report is presented to the NSW Parliament and is available on its website.

Periodic peer reviews by other Australian audit offices test the Audit Office of NSW's activities against relevant standards and better practice.

Each audit is subject to internal review prior to its release.

Who pays for performance audits?

No fee is charged to entities for performance audits. Performance audit services are funded by the NSW Parliament.

Further information and copies of reports

For further information, including copies of performance audit reports and a list of audits currently in-progress, please see the Audit Office of NSW's website www.audit.nsw.gov.au or telephone 02 9275 7100.

Appendix 3 – About the audit

Audit objective

This audit assessed the effectiveness of the NSW Department of Education (the Department) and the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) in supporting students to receive a quality education when delivered in alternative school settings and through registered home schooling.

For this audit, these settings are defined as distance education schools, hospital schools, intensive learning support (behaviour or mental health) schools, youth justice centre schools and registered home schooling.

Audit criteria

We addressed the audit objective by examining whether the Department and NESA:

- provided alternative school settings or supported home schooling for students to ensure continuity of education, including by making these settings accessible and available in a timely way to students, and ensuring effective transitions
- effectively implemented quality assurance and safeguarding mechanisms for alternative school settings and home schooling.

Audit scope and focus

In assessing the audit criteria, we checked the following aspects:

1. Agencies provide or support alternative education settings for students to ensure continuity of education
 - a) Alternative settings are accessible and available in a timely way to students.
 - b) Transitions into and out of alternative settings support continuity of education.
2. Agencies are effectively implementing quality assurance and safeguarding mechanisms for alternative education settings
 - a) Agencies support students to receive a high quality education⁵ in alternative settings.
 - b) Education programs in alternative settings are appropriate to meet the diverse learning needs of students.
 - c) Agencies ensure that child safe standards and/or child protection protocols are applied as relevant.
 - d) The Department monitors outcomes for individual students in alternative settings. NESA checks that home schooled children are receiving instruction.

Audit exclusions

The audit did not assess:

- Policies and practices at:
 - non-government schools, early childhood education and outside school hours care services, or vocational education and training services
 - schools for specific purposes catering for students with disability (because these were considered in the 2024 *Supporting students with disability* audit).
 - support classes located in mainstream schools
 - suspension centres and tutorial centres or other types of alternative settings.

⁵ As defined in the *Education Act 1990*.

- Student behaviour management policies and practices
- The merits of Government policy objectives.

However, the audit did comment on these areas where they affected our findings or offered relevant context.

Audit approach

Our procedures included:

1. Interviewing Department and NESA staff across policy, corporate, data and delivery support roles to understand departmental operations, decision-making and policy implementation.
2. Interviewing external stakeholders to gather information about alternative education school settings and home schooling contexts, including perspectives from home schooling community representatives.
3. Analysing relevant datasets, including those relating to enrolments, home schooling registrations, 'access requests', complaints, child safety concerns, staff survey results, school self-reported performance assessments, funding and staffing for the audit review period (CY2019-2024).
4. Examining documents, including policies, strategies, operational procedures, implementation plans, management reports, executive briefs, initiative reviews, student learning plans, child protection mandatory reports and agency data analyses.
5. Considering the 99 contributions made to the public audit mailbox.
6. Visiting a non-representative targeted sample of schools to interview staff—including principals, executive teachers, support staff, counsellors/psychologists and learning support officers—and observe practices. We visited a total of seven schools across the four alternative education settings: distance education schools, intensive learning support (mental health and behaviour) schools, hospital schools and youth justice centre schools.

The audit approach was complemented by quality assurance processes within the Audit Office to ensure compliance with professional standards.

Audit methodology

Our performance audit methodology is designed to satisfy Australian Auditing Standard ASAE 3500 Performance Engagements and other professional standards. The standards require the audit team to comply with relevant ethical requirements and plan and perform the audit to obtain reasonable assurance and draw a conclusion on the audit objective. Our processes have also been designed to comply with requirements specified in the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983* (NSW) and the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW)

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the co-operation and support provided by the Department and NESA. We especially thank the liaison officers, agency staff and schools who facilitated our visits, participated in interviews, and contributed valuable information for the audit.

We also appreciate the thoughtful feedback from public contributors to the audit mailbox, the home schooling community, sector representatives, advocates, peak bodies and academics.

Audit cost

The estimated cost of this audit is \$540,850.

Appendix 4 – Alternative school settings

Alternative school settings included in the audit scope

School name	Department school code
Distance Education schools (9)[#]	
Sydney Distance Education High School	8587
Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School (Distance Education Support Unit)	5675
Dubbo School of Distance Education	4587
Finigan School of Distance Education	4661
Southern Cross School of Distance Education	4659
Bourke-Walgett School of Distance Education	4644
School of the Air (operates at two campuses, Broken Hill and Hay)	5302
North East Public School of Distance Education	4643
Sydney Distance Education Primary School	4586
Intensive learning support schools (35)	
Ajuga School	5748
Arndell School	5538
Bridge Road School	5540
Caldera School	5573
Campbell House School	5735
Canterbury Vale School	5759
Casuarina School	5574
Centennial Park School	5516
Cook School	5575
Edgeware School	5737
Fowler Road School	5562
Glenfield Park School	5401
Highlands School	5576
HopeTown School	5755
Kandeer School	5744
Karningul School	5581
Kotara School	5738
Lomandra School	5753
Mian School	5577
Naremburn School	5578
North Gosford Learning Centre	5760
Parry School	5580

School name	Department school code
Penrith Valley Learning Centre	5761
Plumpton House School	5754
Redbank School	5559
Rivendell School	5654
Barwon Learning Centre	5762
The Beach School	5579
The Bidgee School	5758
Coffs Harbour Learning Centre	5763
Woodberry Learning Centre	5764
Verona School	5583
Wakefield School	5582
Woniora Road School	5609
Yudi Gunyi School	5460
Hospital schools (10)	
St George Hospital School	5513
Royal Prince Alfred Hospital School	5543
Royal North Shore Hospital School	5544
Sydney Childrens' Hospital School	5545
Sutherland Hospital School	5546
Bankstown Hospital School	5548
Illawarra Hospital School	5551
John Hunter Hospital School	5558
The Childrens' Hospital School Westmead	5751
Liverpool Hospital School	5556
Youth justice centre schools (6)	
Putland School	5453
Girrakool School	5456
Lincoln School	5757
Dorchester School	5454
Shepherds Park School	5711
Induna School	5756

Note: Camden Haven High School was excluded from the audit scope because it provides distance and face-to-face education which cannot be disaggregated in the data. NSW School of Languages was excluded because it provides single subject enrolments, not full-time schooling.

Appendix 5 – Home schooling by area

Geographical region	% registrations 2019	% registrations 2020	% registrations 2021	% registrations 2022	% registrations 2023	% registrations 2024
Broken Hill	0.26%	0.49%	0.43%	0.44%	0.46%	0.57%
Canberra Region	3.66%	3.46%	3.14%	2.82%	2.90%	2.67%
Central Coast	8.11%	8.50%	9.01%	8.59%	8.83%	8.60%
Central West	0.39%	0.51%	0.38%	0.41%	0.44%	0.44%
Hunter Region	12.16%	11.68%	12.51%	13.60%	13.69%	14.34%
Mid North Coast	3.73%	3.41%	3.31%	3.60%	3.75%	3.67%
Murray Region	2.17%	2.15%	1.93%	2.51%	2.00%	2.13%
New England	3.30%	3.78%	3.88%	4.14%	4.24%	4.12%
Northern Rivers/North Coast	7.30%	7.14%	7.15%	7.11%	6.52%	6.44%
Riverina	3.00%	3.07%	2.30%	2.06%	1.86%	1.78%
South Coast	9.75%	9.29%	9.36%	8.64%	9.14%	9.36%
Sydney East (inc. CBD)	1.01%	0.90%	1.00%	1.14%	1.01%	0.92%
Sydney North	3.50%	3.72%	3.76%	3.92%	3.66%	3.32%
Sydney South	2.10%	2.33%	2.39%	2.43%	2.05%	1.94%
Sydney West	31.04%	31.24%	31.45%	31.36%	32.53%	32.57%
Western Plains	8.52%	8.33%	8.00%	7.23%	6.92%	7.13%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Audit Office summary of NESA's public home schooling data reports. Data shows the percentage of children registered for home schooling in geographical regions as of 31 December each year between 2019 and 2024. The number of children includes children who have exemption from registration under subdivision 6 of the *Education Act 1990*. Regional boundaries are based on Australia Post postcode regional divisions. Sydney West Region includes sections of the Blue Mountains and areas west of the CBD bordered by Ryde and Hornsby in the north and Hurstville and Heathcote in the south.

Appendix 6 – Illustration of student transitions

The following diagram, based on the Department of Education’s administrative enrolment data, illustrates one student’s journey into and out of alternative school settings during the audit review period (2019–2024). Each alternative school setting is shown in a different colour; white boxes indicate periods with no enrolment record for the student.

This case study is not representative but helps to demonstrate the multiple transitions between different schools and settings that some alternative school setting students make. Transitions are discussed in section 3.2 of the report.



Appendix 7 – Report snapshot

About this report

This audit assessed the performance of the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) and the NSW Department of Education in regulating home schooling and in providing alternative school settings, specifically: distance education schools, hospital schools, intensive learning support schools and youth justice centre schools. NESA regulated home schooling until 5 May 2025, when the function moved to the Department.

Findings

The Department and NESA have not effectively supported eligible students to receive a quality education in alternative school settings and home schooling. They have not:

- defined the learning and wellbeing outcomes for students in these particular settings, or evaluated whether these settings are effective in achieving those outcomes
- monitored or responded to demand for these settings, to make sure they are available and accessible in a timely way
- supported student transitions into and out of these settings, so that continuity of education is maintained
- proactively sought feedback from students and families to understand whether their needs are being met.

Recommendations

The audit makes three recommendations to the Department of Education, now responsible for regulating home schooling as well as for providing alternative school settings:

- develop and implement a strategy for alternative school settings that recognises their specialised nature and
 - addresses demand
 - enables timely access
 - enhances departmental support for student transitions
 - establishes data and accountability mechanisms.
- work with the home schooling community on reforms to regulation, including consideration of:
 - expedited registration processing
 - support for students' transitioning into and out of home schooling
 - quality assurance mechanisms that recognise the unique features of home schooling.
- identify the child safety monitoring risks in the alternative school settings and in home schooling regulation, and ensure fit-for-purpose mechanisms are in place to address these.

Fast facts

5,906

Number of home schooling registrations in 2019

12,762

Number of home schooling registrations in 2024

33,579

Number of students enrolled in alternative school settings between 2019 and 2024

54%

Proportion of home schooled children in 2024 who had previously attended a NSW public school

~50%

Proportion of students in alternative settings from low or mid-low socio-educational advantage backgrounds

\$246m

Total funding allocated across the alternative school settings in 2024

Tabled in NSW Parliament 25 September 2025

OUR VISION

Our insights inform and challenge government to improve outcomes for citizens.

OUR PURPOSE

To help Parliament hold government accountable for its use of public resources.

OUR VALUES

Pride in purpose

Curious and open-minded

Valuing people

Contagious integrity

Courage (even when it's uncomfortable)



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