Achieving a more inclusive education system



By Natalie Blewitt
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Last month, the Minister for Education, Sabine Winton, released the final report of the review of the *School Education Act 1999* (WA).

An independent review was commissioned by the state government in December 2023 and was led by an expert panel chaired by Professor Andrew Whitehouse, deputy director (research) and professor of autism research Angela Wright Bennett from The Kids Research Institute Australia, in collaboration with the Developmental Disability WA Advisory Council.

Engaging with advocacy organisations, individuals with lived experience of disability and members of the wider community, the panel received more than 200 formal submissions and heard from stakeholders at over 30 public consultation and information sessions held across the state.

The review identified a range of barriers experienced by students with disability within Western Australia's education system. In response, the government has identified first steps to be taken as part of a long-term disability reform plan.

As outlined by the minister, these include:

- Aligning the definition of "disability" in the Act with the social model of disability.
- Changing the Act to enable the formation of a single panel to consider a student with disability's context holistically in discipline-related matters.
- Undertaking a review of enrolment-related regulations, policies, procedures and guidance to ensure all students are treated fairly in relation to enrolment.
- Developing a framework to guide equitable access to quality education for students with disability, including relevant definitions, principles and objectives that will empower all students to learn, participate and thrive.

Throughout the consultation process, numerous stakeholders highlighted existing challenges within the education system that could hinder the successful implementation of any legislative reforms.

"These barriers were often grounded in matters relating to resourcing, funding, class sizes and a disconnect between legislation or policy, and practices, often attributed to a lack of understanding, cultural attitudes regarding disability and education, and insufficient access to useful and appropriate information and professional development opportunities," the report noted.

As stated by SSTUWA President Matt Jarman earlier, the union remains steadfast in its belief that every child has a right to access a quality education and our public schools have a long-standing and proven commitment of inclusion for all.

The recommendations outlined in this report are regarded as a vital step towards achieving a more inclusive education system in Western Australia, but it needs funding and practical support to deliver results.

Study finds early career support is key

Education experts say that to address teacher shortages, Australia must develop stronger government policies focused on the retention and career development of early career teachers, particularly those in casual and short-term contract roles.

In a new study – conducted in partnership with the University of South Australia, Western Sydney University, Griffith University, RMIT and Monash University – researchers examined education induction policies for casual and contract early career teachers from 2016 and 2023, finding that while progress had been made, significant gaps and inequities remained.

UniSA's Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion chief researcher Professor Anna Sullivan said government policy makers and schools had to improve induction procedures for all teacher cohorts.

"Current teacher induction guidelines mainly cater for teachers with secure employment, creating systemic inequities for those in casual or contract roles," she said.

"More than half of early career teachers are employed in casual or on short-term contracts. If we don't appropriately support new teachers entering the profession, retention issues will continue."

The full paper can be found here.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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