

15 March 2024

Ms Abigail Boyd MLC
Chair of the Committee
C/- The Secretary
Portfolio Committee 3, Legislative Council,
NSW Parliament House, 6 Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000

Submitted via email: portfoliocommittee3@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) appreciates the opportunity to contribute this submission to the New South Wales Government Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings.

Education is a vital tool in equipping and supporting young people for success in life. By adequately addressing disparities in educational success and ensuring timely interventions for those students with additional learning needs, including those with a disability, the New South Wales Government can establish the necessary foundations for the lifelong wellbeing and success of every child and young person.

Please find attached our comments and recommendations about the matters raised in a number of the inquiry Terms of Reference. We also recommend to the Committee our [APS Psychologists in Schools Position Statement](#) for further details about our call for more psychologists to be based in educational settings to coordinate and deliver learning, developmental and mental health and wellbeing supports to ensure that all children and young people, including those with disability, can thrive.

About the APS

The APS is the leading professional association for psychologists in Australia. We are dedicated to advancing the scientific discipline and ethical practice of psychology and work to realise the full human potential of individuals, organisations and their communities through the application of psychological science and knowledge. Our work is informed by a human rights approach and aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹. We advocate for a fair, inclusive and environmentally sustainable society, recognising the evidence that national and global prosperity now and in the future hinges on prioritising the health and wellbeing of people and the planet².

If any further information is required from the APS, I would be happy to be contacted through the national office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at z.burgess@psychology.org.au

Yours sincerely

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APS Submission to the Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings

The multi-layered and cascading impacts of inadequate levels of support for children and young people with disabilities in educational settings

The APS is a strong advocate for increased investment in the early years and educational settings to ensure optimal learning and development for all children and young people, including students with disability (see,³⁻⁷).

The evidence is clear that lifelong success is rooted in the early learning and school years, and investing in these formative periods yields substantial benefits for individuals, families, communities and national economies (e.g.,⁸⁻¹⁰). The Productivity Commission's 2020 *Mental Health Inquiry Report*¹¹ and the National Mental Health Commission's *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*¹² both emphasise the critical role of educational settings, in collaboration with family, community and the broader service system, in supporting the learning, wellbeing and mental health of all children and young people.

However, children and young people who experience educational challenges and inadequate support, including those with a disability, are often caught up in a cumulative downward spiral that undermines their learning, engagement, relationships, and psychosocial health. In turn, they fall even further behind their peers both academically and socially. Poor educational and social outcomes persist into adulthood and are associated with increased risks of under-employment or unemployment, poverty, poor physical and mental health and lower life expectancy (e.g.,^{13,14}). These cascading lifelong impacts of inadequate support for children and young people who need it are evident in early learning, primary and secondary school settings and impact families, other students and teachers as reported by our members (see **Box 1 and Box 2**).

BOX 1: Early childhood settings – APS member experiences of the cascading impacts of inadequate educational support for students with disabilities

Impacts in early learning settings

- With very limited supports provided in early years settings, access to timely evidence-based therapy and disability support from psychologists and other allied health professionals relies on family resources, posing challenges for many families without NDIS or other funded assistance. Cost and waiting list barriers are worse in rural and regional locations and economically disadvantaged areas.
- Lack of timely and adequate support negatively affects the inclusion, participation and success of young children with disabilities in early childhood settings.
- The absence of support for young children with disabilities impacts the entire early childhood setting, particularly when students with disabilities express distress through behaviours that disrupt, or even endanger, children and staff.

Poor transition to formal schooling

- Limited access to qualified and skilled psychologists and other allied health professionals for young children with disabilities results in long delays in early childhood assessments crucial for planning support for children's transition to formal schooling.
- Without assessments or plans to guide them, schools lack necessary resources and supports, hindering successful transitions to primary school and increasing distress for children and families, potentially leading to school refusal.

BOX 2: Formal schooling – APS member experiences of the cascading impacts of inadequate educational support for students with disabilities

Impacts on children, young people and families

- Unsupported learning, and emotional and behavioural difficulties within educational settings impede educational attendance and participation of students with disabilities (e.g., reduced/ partial enrolment as a coping mechanism, suspensions, attending external support and allied health appointments).
- Decreased time in school and classrooms hampers learning and attainment and can exacerbate social, emotional and wellbeing issues, and influence future academic and social choices (e.g., opting out of ATAR/university entry subjects in secondary school).
- Reduced school attendance affects parents' ability to work, leading to financial pressures and lack of respite for families, contributing to parent burnout and family breakdown, with subsequent impacts on the wellbeing of students with disabilities.

Impacts on students without disabilities and teachers

- Lack of support for students with disabilities can impact all students who have their classroom and playground environments disrupted.
- Students with milder concerns and low support needs and their families are not able to access a limited quantum of supports. Without early intervention, these problems may become more complex and chronic.
- Lack of adequate support contributes to teacher stress, burnout and leaving the profession.

What works

The APS advocates for investment in evidence-based frameworks and programs in education and early years settings that promote learning and wellness of all children and young people. Improved educational outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities, are associated with sustained whole-school approaches that have internally coordinated tiers of health promotion, targeted prevention, and early intervention support and the ability to connect with families, external and community support systems as and when needed^{15–18}. Whole-school approaches also prompt schools to address policies, procedures and practices that can be barriers or enablers for all learners in classrooms.

As part of a whole-school approach, there is acknowledgement that optimal learning and development for some students, including those with disabilities, can only be achieved with timely and sufficient access to experts and supports *within* the school community who have working knowledge of the particular educational environment. This promotes the capacity to work collaboratively with all key stakeholders in a child's life including teachers, family and community supports. It is essential, therefore, to provide sufficient funding and resources to enable the implementation of inclusive practices, personalised interventions, and support services that can set these students on the path to success, leading to improved academic outcomes, social-emotional development, long-term societal benefits, as well as compliance with legal and ethical obligations for inclusive education. Culturally safe early education and school-based approaches and supports should be prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (e.g.,^{19–21}).

The APS calls for the urgent resourcing necessary to fully implement evidence-based whole-school, multi-tiered approaches to addressing learning, developmental and mental health and wellbeing concerns. Robust systems of support, including access to psychologists and other allied health professionals, benefit the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities and other cohorts that have additional learning and developmental needs.

This includes students with emotional, behavioural and neurodevelopmental needs, culturally and linguistically diverse students, gifted and talented students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g.,^{22,23}).

Psychologists in educational settings are an investment in high-quality, safe support for all New South Wales children, their families and educators.

Psychologists, and especially educational and developmental psychologists, are experts in development and learning, and are an essential workforce to lead and coordinate safe and effective interventions and support for children with and without disabilities, families and teachers.

We acknowledge the complex role of teachers who must manage diverse classrooms with students of varying learning abilities and individual circumstances, catering to their unique needs while maintaining an inclusive learning environment, and deploying specialised strategies, accommodations, or modifications for students with additional learning needs, including those with disabilities.

It is important to recognise, however, that while teachers possess a wide range of skills and expertise, they can greatly benefit from the support and guidance of other on-site professionals, including psychologists. A recent report from the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) revealed that teachers inconsistently utilise evidence-based practices and sometimes employ unsupported teaching methods. However, increased collaboration, allocated time, and professional learning opportunities, including coaching, enhanced the adoption of evidence-based practices²⁴.

Psychologists are well placed to provide invaluable insights, resources, and training to help teachers effectively navigate the complexities of the classroom and further enhance their instructional practices, ultimately leading to better outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities and other at-risk students²⁵ (**see Box 3**).

Box 3: Psychologists – An essential workforce in educational settings

Psychologists are Ahpra-regulated professionals who must demonstrate competence in the delivery of safe, evidence-based care that spans prevention, assessment, diagnosis, intervention, planning and consultation.

Psychologists required competencies and standards are set by the Psychology Board of Australia for general psychologists and those with an Area of Practice Endorsement (AoPE) such as educational and developmental psychology.

Specifically, qualified and skilled psychologists are well placed to support children, their families and teachers by⁷:

- Rapidly identifying students with additional needs and contributing to their overall educational, behavioural, social and emotional support plans.
- Delivering targeted early intervention supports for students and families.
- Coordinating supports for students with more complex developmental and learning needs.
- Partnering with teachers to address the classroom impacts of student learning difficulties, behavioural problems, neurodevelopmental (e.g., ASD and ADHD) and mental health conditions.
- Providing expert advice to school leaders about evidence-based elements of whole-school programs and practices that are tailored to the school environment.

The importance of deploying sufficient numbers of trained psychology professionals in schools was recognised in the final report of the Federal Parliament's Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, which recommended a ratio of at least one full-time psychologist to every 500 students in public and independent schools²⁶.

Estimates are however that there is only about one school psychologist to every 1500 students, although this varies across jurisdictions, sectors and individual schools²⁷. This workforce ratio prevents many existing psychologists based in schools from working to their full scope of practice as described above. With high numbers of students to serve, school psychologists' often find themselves spending most of their time intervening with individual students with complex needs rather than also using their skills to work with school personnel on whole-school approaches that promote the learning and holistic development of every child, and early intervention for students who are struggling.

Our New South Wales APS members report that even where there are dedicated psychologist positions in educational settings, filling these positions is challenging, in part due to the large, complex and reactive workloads and subsequent increased risks of burnout. Psychologists in schools can also be isolated from their professional peers and supervision supports, particularly in rural areas where they may be the only psychologist in a large geographical area with limited or no other support providers. Our members have indicated there is a 40-60% vacancy rate for school psychologist positions in rural and remote areas. The APS confirms that the Australian psychological workforce is in increasingly short supply, particularly in regional and rural areas. Estimates are that Australia has only 35% of the required psychology workforce.

An opportunity for New South Wales to rapidly deploy and support more psychologists in early learning and school settings

The APS commends the New South Wales Government's recognition of the value of school psychologists and enabling supported pathways towards a school psychology career²⁸.

Our APS members in New South Wales members have expressed concerns, however, that there is an undersupply of psychologists in New South Wales schools and that additional fully qualified and experienced psychologists are required urgently to assist with the growing number of children and young people with additional disability support needs. Further, they have noted that in the absence of sufficient numbers of fully qualified and experienced school psychologists, other professions are being trained to conduct assessments but still require high levels of supervision and support from psychologists to ensure competence and validity of assessment results.

The APS has solutions for quickly growing and supporting the New South Wales school psychology workforce to ensure sufficient numbers of psychologists to support the needs of all students, including students with a disability. With judicious New South Wales government support, the number of fully trained psychologists available to work in schools could be scaled up within a short time frame of 2-3 years – with the right investment in psychologists, including supporting postgraduate university training places (e.g., for students of Masters of Professional Psychology programs and Educational and Developmental Psychology courses), sponsored school placements (particularly in rural and remote areas) and quality professional supervision.

More investment in graduate places for psychologists in schools can deliver immediate benefits for addressing the additional learning, behavioural and wellbeing needs of all students. It could also offer the opportunity to increase the psychologist to student ratio to enable psychologists to work to their full scope of practice and ensure future workforce supply of psychologists with school experience in early learning, primary and secondary school contexts⁷. As graduates transition to full registration, New South Wales schools would have a workforce pipeline of psychologists with contemporary experience who are ready, willing and able to continue in school-based roles.

The APS provides a Board-approved supervisor training program, and with the right funding, is in a position to train hundreds of psychology supervisors over a period of two years who could work in the education system to increase the psychology workforce pipeline. Thus, the APS can support the New South Wales Government by offering a centralised training infrastructure which can:

- Ensure that participants can deliver the services needed to the highest possible safety and quality standards,
- Provide supervision when needed, aligned with local requirements, and
- Board-approved resources, supervisor training and support structures.

The APS also highlights the need for ongoing acknowledgement of the complexity of the role for psychologists working in educational settings and the high levels of training, qualifications and skills that psychologists in schools bring to their work. We call for a clear workforce development plan that captures matters such as fair working conditions with clear and appropriate workload models, especially for early career psychologists, in addition to ongoing professional supervision and development.

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